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UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SUPERMARKET BEST PRACTICE MODELS: RESPONDING TO FOOD INSECURITY IN THE NEPHU CATCHMENT AND BEYOND

A DESKTOP REVIEW



NEPHU

NORTH EASTERN
PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NEPHU acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, live and play.

We pay our deepest respects to their Elders, past and present. We recognise and honour the enduring connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to this land, water and Community.

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ACRONYMS

NCD: Non-communicable disease

NEPHU: North Eastern Public Health Unit

NFP: Not-for-profit

RQ: Research question

SSB: Sugar-sweetened beverages

SSM: Social Supermarket

TCG: The Community Grocer

TFC: The Food Centre

UPFs: Ultra-processed foods

VPHS: Victorian Population Health Survey

GLOSSARY

Food bank: A charitable organisation that solicits, receives, inventories and distributes donated food and grocery products pursuant to appropriate industry and regulatory standards. The products are distributed to charitable human service agencies (e.g. food pantries), which provide the products directly to clients through various programs (3, p14).

Food insecurity: A situation when the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain (4, p1575-1576).

Food pantry: A charitable distribution agency that provides clients with food and grocery products for home preparation and consumption (3, p14).

Food security: A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (5).

Surplus food: Food originally intended for sale in the mainstream market which remains edible but is 'unsellable' due to a variety of reasons: mislabelling, damaged or old packaging, discontinuation, packaging errors, excess stock from supply errors, sudden change in consumer demand (e.g. weather change), food deemed aesthetically unacceptable (e.g. blemished, misshaped), and near or past sell by or best before date (6, p9).

Social enterprise: An organisation that derives income from trade or exchange of foods and services, and reinvests revenue to fulfill the organisation's social mission (7, p1307, 8).

Soup kitchen: A charitable program whose primary purpose is to provide prepared meals, served in the kitchen, to clients in need (3, p14).



1. INTRODUCTION

The North Eastern Public Health Unit (NEPHU) is one of nine local public health units in Victoria, serving 12 local government areas in northeast Melbourne. In partnership with the Victorian Department of Health, NEPHU works collaboratively to improve the health and wellbeing of over 1.8 million residents through health promotion, prevention and protection activities (9). Guided by their vision of “*healthy people, healthy places and a healthier tomorrow*”(10, p2), NEPHU is engaged in several projects to improve healthy eating in the catchment, a key priority area identified in the 2023-25 NEPHU Population Health Catchment Plan (9). A pressing issue within this priority area is the growing prevalence of food insecurity within the catchment.

Food insecurity has become a significant public health concern in Australia (11), with an estimated 3.7 million households experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity in 2023 (12). Emergency food relief services, such as foodbanks and soup kitchens (7,13), have increased in number, however food insecurity rates continue to grow (14), an issue likely exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic and current cost-of-living crisis (12,15,16). Additionally, several barriers, such as embarrassment, shame and stigma, are preventing food-insecure individuals from accessing these services (12,17).

Internationally, ‘Social Supermarkets’ (SSM) have emerged as an alternative food relief model to that provides a more dignified, empowering experience for food-insecure individuals (3,6,7,18). This alternative model has proliferated across Europe (3), and more recently in the United Kingdom (UK) (6), however, it has yet to spread across Australia (7,13,19,20). To date, there have been very few SSM initiatives in Australia (7,13,20), leaving a sizable knowledge gap in current research and evaluation in the Australian context.

Earlier this year, the Whittlesea Food Collective, an organisation NEPHU is currently working with, expressed an interest in understanding more about SSMS, as it was a model they were considering implementing. This report aims to begin addressing this knowledge gap by conducting a desktop review, comprising of a literature review and a web-based search, to provide insights on SSMS in international and Australian contexts, thus supporting stakeholders in evaluating alternative food relief options.



2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Food insecurity: impacts & at-risk populations

Access to adequate food and being food secure has been recognised as a fundamental human right (21,22). The concept of food security is multi-dimensional, encompassing food availability, food accessibility, food utilisation, stability, agency and sustainability (23,24). A deficit in any of these dimensions can lead to **food insecurity**, which can range in severity (Figure 1) (24).

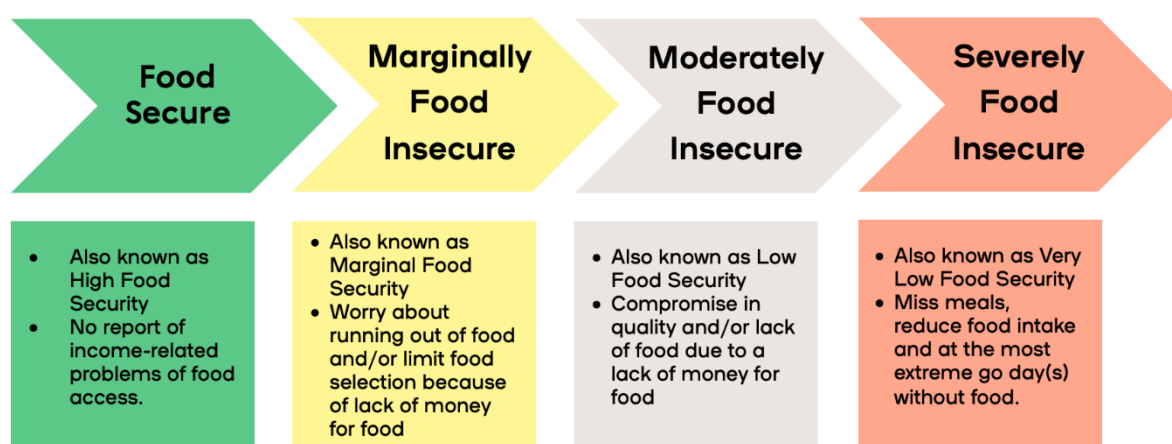


Figure 1: The spectrum of severity of food insecurity. Adapted from the Household Food Security Data Consensus Statement (24)

Food insecurity is commonly associated with lower consumption of vegetables and wholegrains, and higher consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) and ultra-processed foods (UPFs) (25–27). Poor quality diets, such as those high in SSBs and UPFs, are now one of the leading risk factors associated with the rising burden of overweight and obesity, and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (28–30).

The repercussions of food insecurity on physical and mental health are far-reaching (5,22). At an individual level, food insecurity can impact physical health by increasing the risk of malnutrition, weight loss or gain, diet-related NCDs, such as diabetes and hypertension, and developmental delays in children (15,26,31). Food insecurity can also impact mental health by causing high levels of stress and anxiety, and contributing to social isolation (15,26,31). Population groups in Australia at an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity and its impacts include individuals facing financial hardship, single-parent families, people

experiencing homelessness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and culturally and linguistically diverse groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers (11). Furthermore, at a societal level, food insecurity can result in reduced workforce productivity, increased healthcare costs and in extreme situations, civil and political turmoil (22,32).

2.2. Prevalence of food insecurity

In Australia, food insecurity is neither consistently nor frequently measured (24). Research suggests current prevalence estimates, ranging between 4% to 13% nationally, likely underestimate the issue (11,24). Furthermore, available data is limited as it does not fully capture varying levels of food insecurity severity (marginal, moderate, severe) nor the duration (acute, chronic) of food insecurity, often relying on one to two questions in surveys (24).

In Victoria, food insecurity data is captured by the Victorian Population Health Survey (VPHS) which defines severe food insecurity as the 'proportion of adults who ran out of money to buy food in the last 12 months' (14). The most recent data from 2022 indicate a notable increase in the proportion of Victorian adults experiencing severe food insecurity, from 5.9% in 2020 to 8.1% in 2022 (a 37% rise). This upward trend (Figure 2) paints an alarming picture of severe food insecurity, with the rate more than doubling between 2014 (3.6%) and 2022 (8.1%).

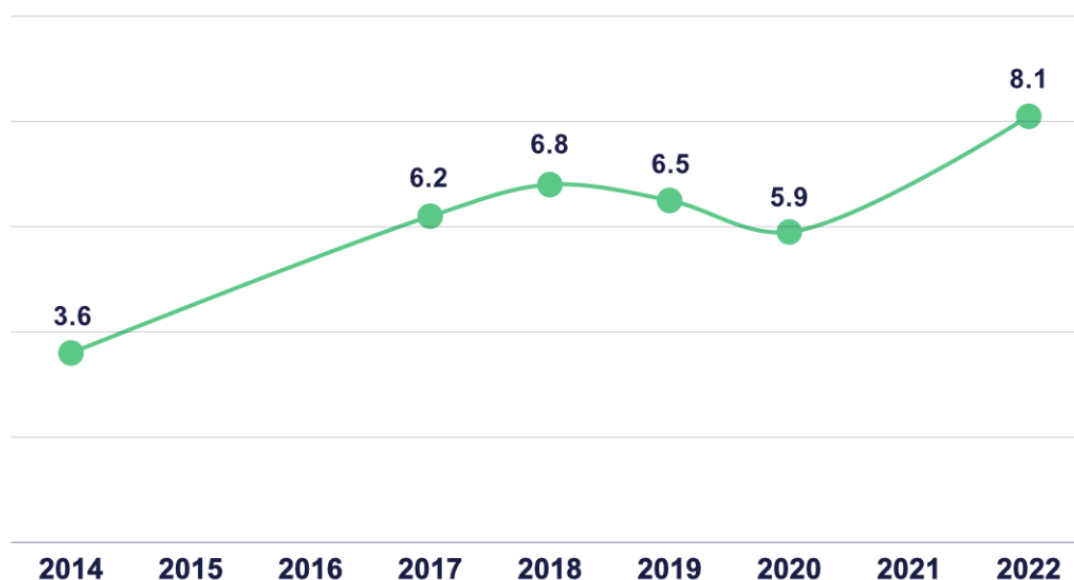


Figure 2: Prevalence of severe food insecurity (%) in Victoria from 2014-2022. Adapted from the VPHS (14)

In 2022, the prevalence of severe food insecurity in the NEPHU catchment (8.2%) was similar to overall Victorian average (8.1%). However, the most recent data available at the LGA level, obtained in 2020, suggests significant variation between LGAs within the NEPHU catchment. The proportion of adults experiencing severe food insecurity ranged from 3.1% in the LGA of Whitehorse compared to up to 10.0% in the LGA of Whittlesea. 2023 VPHS data will provide a more up-to-date picture of food insecurity in LGAs across the NEPHU catchment and is expected to be available early in 2025.

2.3. Drivers of food insecurity

Several factors are driving the rise of food insecurity in Australia. Although inadequate income is generally understood as the primary underlying cause (11), recent conditions have exacerbated this public health issue in Australia (11,33). Inadequate welfare payments (34), inflation and the rising cost of essential items (35), including food and energy, are pushing more Australians into food poverty (11,36). For instance, between March 2022 and March 2023, the cost of food rose by as much as 14.5%, in the case of dairy products (37). Simultaneously, energy and rent costs also rose substantially, with house gas prices seeing a record annual increase of 26.2% (37). As a result, food is increasingly becoming a discretionary expense in many household budgets, causing consumers to look for ways to save money, often at the expense of nutritional quality (12,38,39). One coping strategy for food-insecure households is to buy fewer fresh fruits, vegetables and protein, often substituting these items with cheaper canned or frozen alternatives (12).

While inflation and supply chain disruptions due to pandemics and extreme climate events have contributed to the increased cost of food (16,40), a recent senate inquiry established that supermarket duopoly, Coles and Woolworths, have also played a role by engaging in price gouging (41).

2.4. Dominant response to food insecurity

The dominant response to food insecurity, in Australia and other high-income countries, has traditionally been direct food provision of surplus food by charitable or voluntary agencies through emergency food relief services (7,13,42). These services, most commonly in the form of a food bank or soup kitchen, generally provide free food to eligible individuals and households (3). Whilst this has taken the main form of food relief in Australia, there is increasing awareness that accessing these services can be an undignified, disempowering experience (6,7,17,18). Research commissioned by Foodbank revealed a large group of

people are unwilling to access support due to perceived barriers of embarrassment, shame and stigma (12).

2.5. Social supermarkets: An alternative model

Within the food relief sector, there are increasing calls to provide a more dignified, empowering experience to food insecure individuals, by implementing a ‘consumer culture’ to combat social exclusion in a consumerist society (7,43–46). One model that addresses this need through its incorporation of choice and the act of ‘paying’ is the social supermarket (SSM) model. This report will examine this model in both the international and Australian contexts to establish initial insights regarding its suitability for implementation in the NEPHU catchment.

3. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1. Aim

To support stakeholders in their consideration of alternative food relief models, by providing an up-to-date snapshot of the available evidence on SSMs.

3.2. Research questions

To better understand this alternative food relief model, the research within this report was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

1. What does published literature tell us about the emergence of SSMs and approaches taken in different countries?
2. What definitions of SSMs exist, and what is the most suitable definition for this report?
3. What initiatives currently operating in Australia align with this report definition?
4. How do SSMs operate? I.e. what characteristics do they share or how do they differ?
5. What initial insights can this review offer about the impact of SSM models and the feasibility of this model in the NEPHU catchment?

4. METHODS

4.1. Desktop review

To answer the research questions, a desktop review with two main components was conducted. Following an initial preliminary search, a literature review and a web-based search were conducted. Furthermore, input from a stakeholder (Whittlesea Food Collective), was obtained at the beginning and the mid-point of the project to optimise the relevance and usefulness of the review for this stakeholder.

4.2. Literature review

4.2.1. Preliminary search

Firstly, a preliminary search was conducted to identify additional search terms used to describe SSM models. This list of synonymous terms (Figure 3) was subsequently used for the literature review and web-based search.

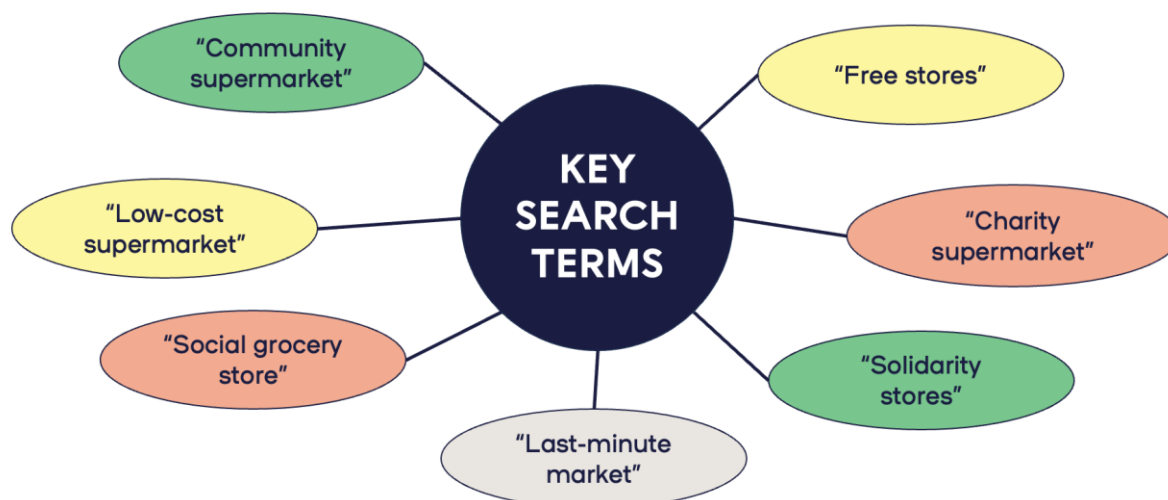


Figure 3: Synonymous search terms for SSMs

This was followed by a literature search to identify relevant international and Australian research literature on SSMs. The search aimed to find peer-reviewed articles that analyse SSMs such as country-specific analyses, model evaluations, feasibility studies and historical overviews, as well as identify any models in Australia.

4.2.2. Literature search strategy

The search involved a structured exploration using the list of synonymous SSM terms in several search engines: Google Scholar, Pub Med, Taylor and Francis and ScienceDirect. Titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance (see Appendix 1). The reference lists of key sources were also reviewed and subsequently assessed for relevance. Relevant articles, studies and websites were collated using Mendeley reference manager for later review.

4.3. Web-based search for Australian initiatives

Very few Australian initiatives were identified during the literature review portion of the desktop review. Therefore, a systematic web-based search was conducted to identify any additional SSM models currently operating in Australia.

Several combinations of phrases including SSM synonymous terms and different locations within Australia, were explored utilising Google search engine. The synonymous terms were used to identify any initiatives that aligned with the project definition (section 6.2) but did not self-identify as a SSM.

Initiatives identified were subsequently assessed for their alignment with the project definition, using the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

INCLUSION CRITERIA:

- Low-cost groceries/food in retail-like environment
- Social element – informal/formal provision, referral of support services, social connection etc.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA:

- No social element (e.g. only low-cost groceries)
- Only free food (no ‘paying’ component)
- Not currently operating

Following this assessment, SSM initiatives were further researched by gathering information from various online sources including grey literature, news articles, social media and organisation websites.

5. FINDINGS

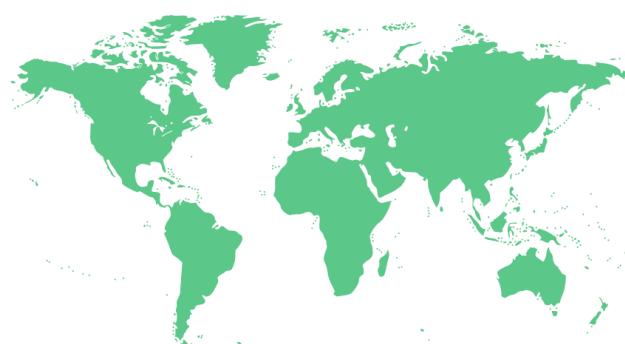
The desktop review identified and included 20 published literature sources, which included peer-reviewed articles and technical papers (Appendix 1), and 23 web-based sources (Appendix 2). Findings from these sources are summarised in the following four sub-sections (5.1-5.4), answering RQ1-4, while RQ5 is addressed in the discussion (section 6).

5.1. International evidence

The following section will provide an overview of the international evidence available, by outlining the emergence of SSMS and describing some key findings, similarities and differences, both between and within countries and regions, to answer RQ1.

5.1.1. The emergence of social supermarkets

The 'social supermarket' concept is first known to have emerged in France during the late 1980s (47). Unlike food banks and soup kitchens, this novel concept did not distribute free food, and instead allowed clients to choose their purchases, charging a small monetary contribution (3). The concept soon spread across Europe, with similar models emerging in Switzerland (1992), Germany (1996), and Austria (1999), along with several other European countries (3,48). By 2013, it was estimated more than 1,000 SSMS were operating across the region (3). SSMS were embraced as a "social innovation" (3, p4) addressing "unfulfilled social needs" (47,49) and promoted as a 'win-win-win' solution (50) – providing social, environmental and economic benefits (3,6,47). Following the success and spread of SSMS across Europe, the model was soon replicated in several other countries.



5.1.2. Social supermarkets in Europe

As the origin of SSMS, Europe is home to the largest number of SSMS, with approximately 700 operating in France alone (3). Within the region, SSMS share many similarities, but also differ in several ways.

SIMILARITIES AMONGST EUROPEAN SOCIAL SUPERMARKETS

European SSMs generally take a controlled approach to access, and target low-income individuals and households through eligibility assessments and memberships (3). Most focus on food waste prevention by stocking food predominantly donated surplus food (also termed ‘rescue food’) and selling it at low or symbolic prices (3). Many SSMs also aim to reduce social isolation through on-site cafés and kitchens, providing affordable, nutritious food, social connection and cooking educational lessons, alongside links to local social services (3). Typically, European SSMs operate as not-for-profit (NFP) social enterprises run by charities and operate under ‘umbrella’ networks in several countries (3). The workforce is largely volunteer-driven and many initiatives also offer work brokerage or reintegration services for unemployed users (3).

DIFFERENCES AMONGST EUROPEAN SOCIAL SUPERMARKETS

SSMs in Europe can vary considerably in regards to terminology used, funding sources, and style of retail environment. Initiatives use different terms across countries: Germany has social markets (sozialmärkte) (3); France features both social stores (épiceries sociales) and solidarity stores (3); and Italy refers to them as ‘last minute markets’ (49). Financial support and sources also differ from country to country. For example, in Austria and Germany, SSMs are mainly government-funded, whereas Swiss SSMs rely on sales revenue, donations, and receive minimal government aid (3). Meanwhile in France, social stores are public-funded, but solidarity stores are run by groups of individuals or associations (3). Another difference can be the SSM style and environment – some mimic mainstream supermarkets, allowing customers to freely browse and are open several days a week, while others use serving counters or mobile markets. Serving counters (termed ‘ausgabestelle’ in Germany) allow customers to take a basket and move along counters of different product groups where volunteers offer products (often restricting the number of items taken), and may only be open once a week (3). Mobile SSMs are able to reach rural areas, generally with a smaller assortment of products, operating either directly from mobile bus or other small in-house locations (3).

INFLUENCING FACTORS IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Several policy elements have played a significant role in shaping the operation and function of SSMs in Europe, including a ban on landfilling untreated organic waste and fiscal incentives for food donation and volunteering (3). For instance, Austria has banned landfilling untreated organic waste since 2004 (3), creating a strong incentive for food suppliers to donate excess food to avoid processing costs. Multiple European countries also

offer fiscal incentives for food donation, most notably France, where companies benefit from a tax break of 60% of the donation (capped at 0.5% of annual company turnover) (3). The tax break also applies to companies delivering and storing donated food, benefiting SSMs and other surplus food redistributors, that often lack adequate transportation and storage infrastructure (3). Furthermore, Germany's national volunteering scheme offers significant benefits to full-time volunteers, providing up to 423 Euro per month (as of 2022) and social insurance for volunteers working with approved organisations (51). While they make up a small percentage of total volunteers in SSMs across Germany, this scheme presents a valuable manpower source and provides an opportunity for individuals who want to help but cannot afford to do so on an unpaid basis (3).

5.1.3. Social supermarkets in the UK

The UK's first SSM opened in late 2013 (6). Several SSM chains and franchises have since emerged and expanded across the region, transforming the urban foodscape (6). SSMs are located within the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, where residents often face limited access to fresh produce and are surrounded by the ubiquitous availability of unhealthy food (food swamps) (6). These areas are also home to many low-income and government-supported households (6). Unlike their European counterparts, British SSMs typically source food surplus at reduced prices directly from redistributors or suppliers, rather than relying on donations (6). Many British SSMs have also taken a different approach to eligibility (3,6), with four out of seven of the UK's SSM chains or franchises opting for an 'open access' model (6).

5.1.4. Social supermarkets in North America (USA and Canada)

The SSM model is also relatively new to North America. One initiative in the USA, described as a 'client-choice food pantry', goes beyond the traditional food pantry model, by providing one-on-one social support services to its members (52). Several SSMs-type models offering 'choice' have also emerged in Canada in response to increased demand for emergency food provision (53). Of note, two SSMs have opted for a 'pay what you can/feel' pricing strategy (54,55).

5.1.5. Social supermarkets in New Zealand

The emergence of SSMs in New Zealand (NZ) was driven by the desire to offer greater choice and a more dignified experience to food relief recipients (56). NZ's first SSM opened in 2021 through a partnership between Wellington City Mission (WCM) and Foodstuffs (North Island), a NZ grocery company that controls ~53% of the country's grocery market and owning several supermarket franchises (e.g. Four Square, New World and Pak'nSave) (56). To date, Foodstuffs has opened 11 SSMs in the North Island (57). A recent feasibility study for a proposed SSM identified several NZ SSM models, interviewed key representatives and highlighted different eligibility approaches, partnerships with supermarket chains and the importance of co-design (56).

SSMs in NZ adopt various eligibility approaches. Some are universally accessible, arguing that “anytime there is criteria, there’s always the chance someone misses out who may... be genuinely in need” (56, p14). Other initiatives maintain controlled access, however one SSM employs a more relaxed, middle-ground approach, allowing customers to access the store freely initially, followed by a deeper conversation about their support needs after a few visits (58).

In NZ, several initiatives partner with supermarket chains like Foodstuffs in addition to local ‘buddy supermarkets’ such as New World (56). These partnerships facilitate food sourcing and provide funding to purchase foods at cost for the SSMs (56). Foodstuffs has also installed point-of-sale systems, enabling the collection of scan data to understand customer preferences and stock items according to their needs (56).

In collaboration with Auckland council, one organisation co-designed a SSM with the local community. The process highlighted key success factors like community leadership, reliable food sources, connection with a supportive community hub and integration into a wider food systems approach (56).

5.2. Defining social supermarkets

This section presents a report definition based on a review of international evidence and existing literature to address RQ2.

Various SSM definitions exist in published literature, however none are universally accepted (6,48). Existing definitions can be limited, often excluding newer models such as open-access or food-purchasing SSMs (see Appendix 3). To encompass these approaches, this report proposes a definition that includes essential elements: choice, low-cost food, a retail-like environment, and a social component. Each element's rationale is detailed in Table 1.



5.2.1. Report definition

Social supermarkets allow customers to choose and purchase low-cost food and other goods in a retail-like environment. They also go beyond simple food provision, by providing some form of 'social element'.

This definition deliberately omits references to food sources, target populations, or eligibility criteria, allowing it to capture initiatives that, for example, purchase rather than rely on donated food, or those open to all users rather than restricted groups. Consequently, this inclusive definition can encompass initiatives that may differ from traditional European SSMs with controlled access and exclusive reliance on donated food, yet still align with the core principles underpinning the SSM concept.

Table 1: Key elements of SSMs and their rationale

ELEMENT	RATIONALE
Choice	The provision of choice differentiates SSMs from traditional food relief services, and offers dignity to users (6). Rather than being given a pre-packed food parcel or hot meal that doesn't meet their needs, customers are able to choose food that aligns with their own dietary and/or cultural preferences.
Low-cost food	Like choice, the 'act of paying' for food (albeit small or symbolic amounts) helps maintain the dignity of customers and enhances their sense of agency (3). In contrast, when individuals receive food for free (through traditional food relief services) they act as 'receivers' rather than customers, causing a sense of social exclusion in a consumerist society (6). Additionally, cost savings can be put towards other household expenses or to purchase items from mainstream supermarkets not available in the SSM.
Retail-like environment	A retail-like environment may come in different forms (e.g. store front, roaming market) but ultimately aims to mimic the layout, feel and function of mainstream supermarkets to make the experience more 'normal' and less confronting (56), particularly for food-insecure customers accessing services for the first time. Research indicates this element, in addition to choice can create a 'consumer culture' (6,7,56)
Social element	Providing a social element aims to tackle the underlying causes of food insecurity more directly. Provision of support services, like financial or legal advice, and provision of a welcoming space for food-insecure individuals to socially connect with service providers and community members, can battle social isolation and empower users (3,6).

5.3. Australian social supermarkets

Due to the relatively new emergence of SSMs in Australia, the desktop review only identified five Australian initiatives (Figure 4) that align with the SSM report definition. To answer RQ3, these initiatives are described in the following section, and organisational and model characteristics of each initiative are summarised in tables 2,3,4 and 5. Four published literature sources identified in the literature search, as well as, 23 web-based sources informed this section (see Appendix 2).

Two additional initiatives were identified during the desktop review, however, were excluded from further research as they lacked certain elements of the report definition or were not currently operating (further information in Appendix 4).

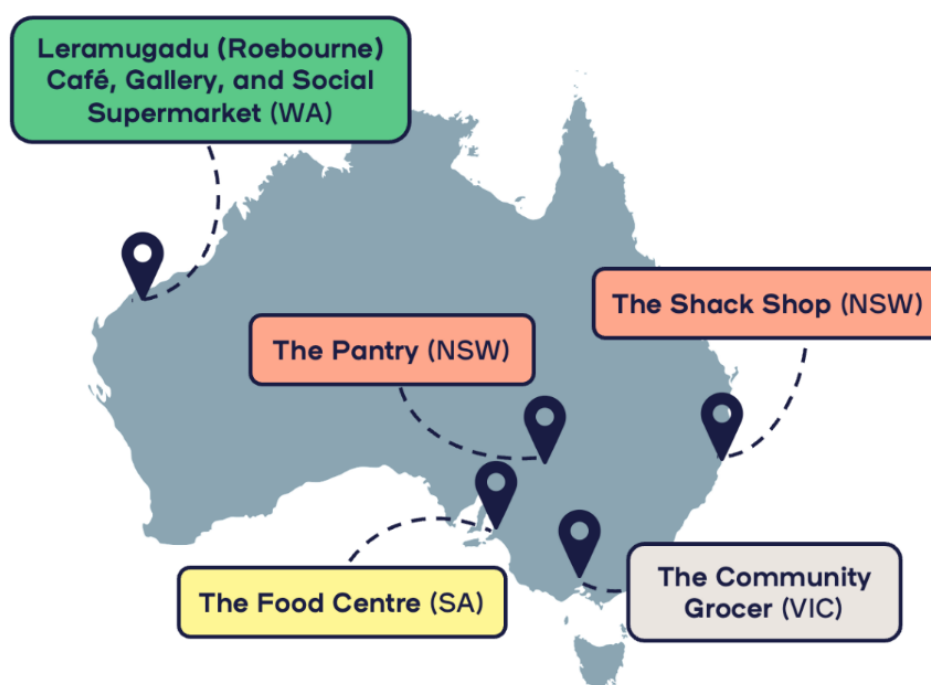


Figure 4: SSMs in Australia

5.3.1. The Food Centre (SA)

The Food Centre (TFC) piloted one of Australia's first SSM models in 2020 (7), guided by local research with food relief users who indicated a preference for models that blended access to affordable, nutritious food with social elements such as social connection opportunities and support services (59). The pilot built upon the organisations existing offerings and opted for an open access model, to prioritise dignified service and 'customer culture', to counter the potential stigma associated with eligibility assessments when accessing food relief (7,43).

5.3.2. Leramugadu Café, Gallery, and Social Supermarket (WA)

The Leramugadu Café, Gallery and Social Supermarket is 100% owned by Indigenous traditional landowners serves the predominantly Indigenous community of Ngarluma people and Yindjibarndi people living in the remote town of Roebourne, WA (60–62). The store is open to the entire community, however to access heavily discounted (and some free) groceries, food insecure residents are able to sign up as members.

5.3.3. The Shack Shop and The Pantry (NSW)

Home in Place has developed two community pantries to serve social housing tenants and local community members struggling with food insecurity. Following the success of The Shack Shop in Tumby Umbi (63), the organisation launched a similar initiative, The Pantry, in their Broken Hill social housing estate (64,65). Both initiatives are located within community hubs, enabling access to social, informational and educational services.

5.3.4. The Community Grocer (VIC)

The Community Grocer (TCG) strives to offer choice and affordable, culturally appropriate fresh food in a dignified setting through weekly pop-up fresh fruit and vegetable markets across Melbourne (66). The initiative targets at-risk communities but also welcomes all shoppers as this helps TCG purchase from wholesalers at scale, reducing costs (67). TCG also has a ‘pay it forward’ grocery gift card program for food-insecure individuals to use at the markets, and believe this this solution offers greater choice and dignity compared to emergency food relief (67).

Table 2: Australian SSM examples: terms used, launch date, location and opening hours

STATE	NAME	TERM USED	LAUNCH DATE	ADDRESS	LOCATION CONTEXT	OPENING HOURS
SA	The Food Centre	Social supermarket	SSM piloted in 2020 (Organisation founded in 1990 as community food centre)(68)	Shop 5, 580 Main North Road, Gepps Cross, SA 5094 & Various pop-up locations		Monday-Friday 8:30am-5pm
WA	Leramugadu Café, Gallery, and Social Supermarket	Social supermarket	Reopened December 2021 (after closing in 2019 due to high transport costs)(62)	44 Roe St, Roebourne WA 6718	• Remote town located 1,500km away from nearest major city (61) • Rural and remote towns experience difficulty accessing affordable groceries due to transport issues and inconsistent supply (62) • Predominantly Indigenous community (62)	Monday-Friday 9am-3pm
NSW	The Shack Shop	Community pantry	-	1 Northumberland Way, Tumby Umbi, NSW	Situated within 'The Meeting Place,' a community hub located in the Home in Place social housing estate in Tumby Umbi (63)	Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays 10am-2pm
	The Pantry		April 2024	123 Creedon Street, Broken Hill, NSW	Situated within the '123 Community Hub' in the Home in Place's Broken Hill social housing estate (64)	Thursday 10am-2pm
VIC	The Community Grocer	Pop-up fresh fruit and vegetable market	2014	Pop-up markets in Fitzroy, Pakenham, Carlton and Flemington in Melbourne, VIC	Markets located in public housing estates and community centres across Melbourne	• Fitzroy (Tuesday, 9am-1pm), • Pakenham (Thursday 9am – 1pm), • Carlton (Friday 8am-12pm), • Flemington (8.30am-12.30pm)



Table 3: Australian SSM examples: organisations, partners and funding sources

STATE	NAME	CONNECTED ORGANISATION	PARTNERS	FUNDING SOURCES	
SA	The Food Centre	The Food Centre – A community-based NFP registered charity organisation (68,69)	- Centre for Social Impact - Flinders University (researchers) (70) - SA Government – Wellbeing SA and Department of Human Services SA (7)	- Wellbeing SA - Department of Human Services SA	
WA	Leramugadu Café, Gallery, and Social Supermarket	Foundation Food - an arm of the NFP social enterprise Garlbagu, Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation Limited (62)	- City of Karratha, Horizon Power, Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, Mineral Resources, Yaandina, Brindle Group, Minbaringu Services, Woodside (61) - Secondbite (61) - Sodexo (60)	Sponsors and donations	
NSW	The Shack Shop	Home in Place - NFP social enterprise that provides secure and affordable social housing (previously named Compass)	- Foodbank - SecondBite - OzHarvest (63)	Home in Place	
	The Pantry		Foodbank (71)	123 Creedon Street, Broken Hill, NSW	
VIC	The Community Grocer	The Community Grocer - NFP social enterprise	- Cardinia Shire Council - City of Melbourne - Cohealth - Inner North Community Fund - Windermere (67)	- Andrews Foundation - Bennelong Foundation - Cardinia Park Hotel - Cardinia Shire Council - City of Melbourne - City of Yarra - Department of Jobs, Regions and Precincts	- Inner North Community Foundation - Nelson Alexander Foundation - Milford Community Fund - Open Food Network - Pakenham Racing Club - And several more (72)

Table 4: Australian SSM examples: eligibility criteria, target community, workforce composition and social element

STATE	NAME	ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA	TARGET COMMUNITY	COMPOSITION OF WORKFORCE	NATURE OF SOCIAL ELEMENT	
SA	The Food Centre	Open access	-	Mostly volunteers (4 employees, ~80 volunteers)(69)	• Wrap-around services – community hub and warm referrals to local social services • Pop-up servicers e.g. financial counseling, legal assistance • No Interest loan scheme (NILS) • Op shop and coffee shop • Community kitchen – healthy food and cooking education • Skill building programs – volunteers to re-enter the workforce (68)	
WA	Leramugadu Café, Gallery, and Social Supermarket	Open to all within the community (membership to access heavily discounted and some free groceries)(61)	Indigenous community and locals experiencing food insecurity	Mix of paid staff and volunteers	• Café – communal eating • Gallery – displays local Aboriginal art • Place-based, culturally safe job opportunities – take on local trainees to build retail and hospitality skills (61,62)	
NSW	The Shack Shop The Pantry	Tenants and others in the community “doing it tough”(65)	Social housing tenants and local community members struggling with food insecurity	Mostly volunteers	• Co-located with community hub that offers local residents a range of outreach services and participate in activities that build individuals skills and strengthen the capacity of community members (63,71) • Enables access to social, informational and educational services that help to build life and employment skills • Op shop (63)	
VIC	The Community Grocer	Open access	Communities at risk of food insecurity – particularly those living in public housing estates	Mostly volunteers	• Connecting communities to reduce social exclusion • Community meals – a chance for community connection (shared meals and recipe swapping) • Training and employment pathways	• Wrap around services (health services, housing services) in partnership with other organisations e.g. Health services run an informational stall • Other enterprises such as free coffee encourages people to stay at the market and engage socially (67)

Table 5: Australian SSM examples: food type, source and pricing strategy

STATE	NAME	TYPE OF FOOD	SOURCE OF FOOD	PRICING STRATEGY
SA	The Food Centre	- Fresh fruit and vegetables, fresh meat, dairy produce, and a wide range of locally sourced essential household items - Sell affordable and nutritious meal packs 'Easy Feast' (73)	Surplus food supply	- Low cost - Food vouchers provided by emergency food relief can be used
WA	Leramugadu Café, Gallery, and Social Supermarket	Wide range of groceries, fresh fruit and vegetables (62)	- Donations - Plans to grow own seasonal produce in greenhouse at the back of the store to help ensure steady supply of fresh and local produce (62)	Residents can sign up to become members of the store to access products at low or no cost
NSW	The Shack Shop	Staple foods, frozen goods and other low-cost personal hygiene, washing and cleaning products (74)	- Donated free bakery items (SecondBite) - Fruit and vegetables from SecondBite and OzHarvest - Staple and frozen foods from Foodbank (63)	- Low cost - Sometimes free seasonal fruit and vegetables
	The Pantry		Provided by Foodbank (71)	
VIC	The Community Grocer	- Fresh fruit and vegetables - Fruit and veggie boxes - Partners with multicultural enterprises to offer freshly baked goods e.g. handmade bread, and home-made community meals (66,67)	Purchased from wholesalers	- Low cost (35% cheaper than surrounding fresh food outlets, 50% cheaper than supermarkets) - Grocer gift card program – pay it forward campaign (similar experience to anyone else accessing markets)



5.4. Social Supermarket Characteristics

Upon analysis of both international and Australian SSM examples, four key characteristic areas emerged: eligibility; food type, source and pricing strategy; social element; and operations (Figure 5). Answering RQ4, the following section summarises various approaches taken regarding SSM model characteristics and may act as a guide for stakeholders considering implementing an SSM model during community consultation, planning and implementation phases.

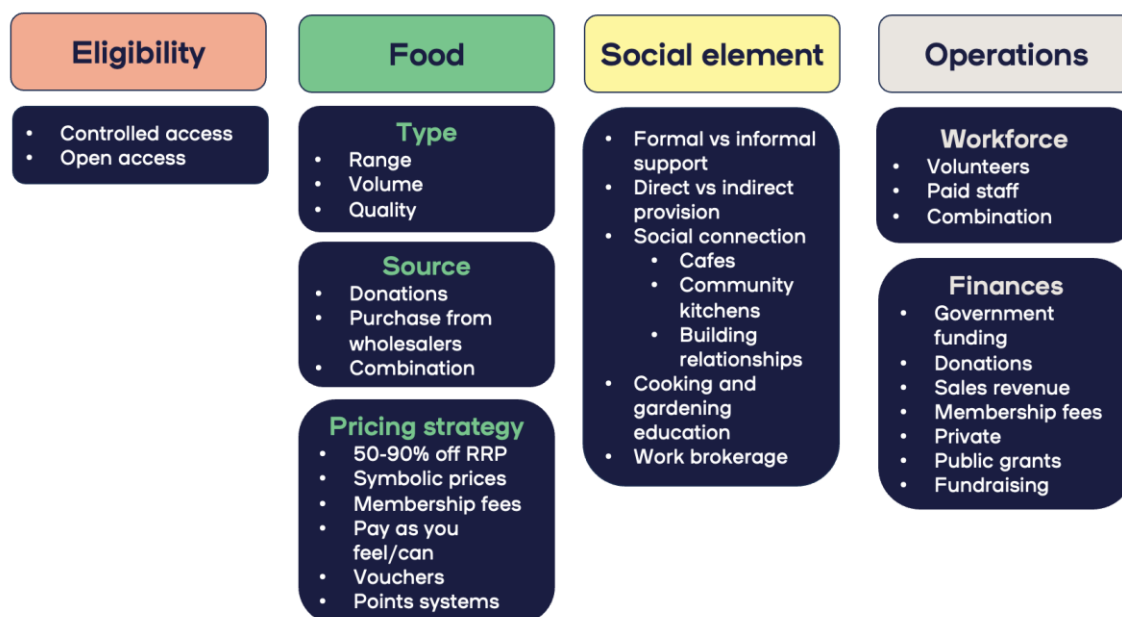


Figure 5: Variations within four key characteristic areas: eligibility, food, social element and operations

5.4.1. Eligibility

Eligibility requirements represent one of the most crucial differences among various SSM models. Most SSMs globally target food-insecure populations through controlled access (otherwise known as a ‘targeted approach’). This approach, which generally takes the form of a membership-based system, uses eligibility assessments and often time-restricts memberships or requires members to engage with support service providers as a condition of membership. While this method ensures support for those in need, it can involve intrusive questions, potentially impacting user dignity (75), agency (6), and self-esteem (45) and can create feelings of stigma (44).

In contrast, open-access models allow anyone to shop. Research has established this format is preferred by some food relief recipients (59), and can provide a more dignified,

‘normal’ experience (46,75). This model can foster social interaction among staff, volunteers and customers, reduce administrative burdens associated with monitoring memberships and may also enhance financial viability due to increased customer bases and the subsidisation of low-income users. Alternatively, some SSMS adopt a ‘middle-road’ approach, balancing need with reduced stigma, by only asking questions after the first few visits (56,58).

5.4.2. Food

TYPE

Due to the unpredictable nature of surplus food, which many SSMS rely on, the range, volume and quality of food available can differ weekly and seasonally. Several other factors, like the initiative's goals, types of food sources, and capacity to store it (i.e. refrigeration and freezer facilities) can also impact offerings (3,6). As a result, range from limited options—lacking meat, dairy, or frozen products—to broad selections including fresh produce (6). Some focus on nutrition, stocking fresh and minimally processed foods, while others accept whatever donations are available (6). Trader-driven SSMS, and those with limited storage capacity, tend to stock more tinned, processed, and long-life foods, and less fresh produce (6).

SOURCE

Traditionally, most SSMS source food from donated surplus, through partnerships with manufacturers, suppliers, mainstream supermarkets, food redistributors and even locally from farms, community gardens and community members (3,6,56). However, due to the unpredictable nature of surplus food, several emerging initiatives are opting to improve the quality, variety and consistency of their stock by supplementing or exclusively purchasing food from wholesalers, local markets and retailers (6). The number and geographic distribution of sources can also vary, with some initiatives relying on a single redistributor and others sourcing food locally, nationally, or internationally (6). For example, The Community Shop, a social supermarket in the UK, sources its stock primarily from its sister company, The Company Shop, the largest commercial redistributor of surplus foods and goods in the country (6). This relationship enables The Community Shop to maintain a wide and consistent range of food and other goods, something that can be challenging for other social supermarkets (6). Whereas, The Community Grocer, based in Melbourne VIC, bulk-buys its stock from a range of sources, such as wholesalers, and does not rely upon surplus food donations (19).

PRICING STRATEGY

SSMs typically price food and other items 50-90% below retail price, however the format in which they do so varies. Pricing strategies include symbolic pricing (i.e 1 Swiss franc (0.82 Euro) per purchase), point systems, 'pay-as-you-can', voucher systems and membership systems which may charge a joining or subscription fee (3,6,56). Regardless of the pricing approach, there are often limits on purchase quantities to ensure fair distribution and deter black market resale (6).

5.4.3. Social elements

SSMs incorporate various social elements that differ across initiatives. Some initiatives aim to reduce social isolation by offering on-site cafés and community kitchens (3,6). These spaces may offer affordable, nutritious meals, enable social connection, and host cooking and gardening education activities to improve healthy food literacy, introduce culturally appropriate ingredients, and boost confidence in cooking with fresh produce (6). Many initiatives also work to unite diverse cultural groups by sharing recipes or organising events like 'feast days' to foster community interaction and empower individuals to reconnect with food in new and positive ways (6).

While some social elements are informal and focused on social connection, others aim address the root causes of food insecurity more directly. Structured support can include financial, career, and legal advice, as well as skill-building through volunteer and work brokerage programs, delivered on-site (i.e. within a community hub) or through warm referrals to local services (3,6,56).

5.4.4. Operations

WORKFORCE

SSMs generally operate with a combination of paid staff and volunteers. In most models, there tends to be fewer paid staff, who may undertake roles such as managers and supervisors, chefs and mentoring staff (6). For example, The Food Centre (SA), employs four staff members and has approximately 80 volunteers (69).

Meanwhile, volunteers compose much of the workforce and can be sourced from the local community, corporate volunteering programs, and SSM users (3,6). Volunteering also enables some volunteers, such as those from disadvantaged groups (e.g. people with disabilities or learning difficulties, those previously incarcerated or long-term unemployed), to develop work-related skills, potentially leading to future paid employment (6,56).



FINANCES

While the SSM concept aims to be self-sustaining in nature (6), most initiatives rely on funding from external funding sources, including government support, grants, donations, and fundraising, alongside revenue from sales and membership fees (3,6,56). To build revenue streams, some also undertake additional commercial activities, like cafes and op shops (6). Main expenses include rent, infrastructure, and staff wages, though some initiatives benefit from discounted rent on council properties or partnerships with commercial entities to reduce costs (6,56), like the Leramugadu store's partnership with Sodexo to upgrade infrastructure and reduce transport costs (60). Available financial data on initiatives is limited, however one SSM in Switzerland reported its 2013 income of 2.1 million Euro was comprised of the following sources: 53% charitable foundations, 25% companies, 9% symbolic prices from clients, 7% additional sponsoring, and 6% private funding (3).

6. INITIAL INSIGHTS ABOUT THE FEASIBILITY OF SOCIAL SUPERMARKETS

To answer RQ5, the following section discusses enablers, common challenges and limitations of SSMs to provide some initial insights about the feasibility of this model. This section also comments on evaluation of SSM models to date.

6.1. Enablers

Key enablers supporting the proliferation and operation of SSMs identified in the literature include umbrella networks, policy tools, community involvement, effective partnerships and harnessing community support.

In Europe, umbrella networks support SSMs by sharing resources, providing staff training, securing funding, and fostering food industry partnerships (3). These benefits however, may be less relevant to the Australian context as there are currently few SSMs and no franchises or chains operating nationally.

Policy tools incentivising food donations and volunteering are another European enabler (3), but Australia may soon follow in the case of food donations. This year, the Senate Economics Legislation Committee is reviewing tax legislation to incentivise food donations to charitable organisations (76). During the inquiry, food insecurity expert Dr. Rebecca Lindberg (Deakin University) highlighted the need for safeguards that ensure fiscal incentives are limited to the donation of healthy foods, such as fruit, vegetables, grains, meat and dairy only, to prevent the influx of highly-processed, energy dense foods to food relief organisations (77).

Community involvement and engagement are important at all stages of SSM design, including planning, implementation, operation and evaluation phases. It can ensure initiatives meet local needs and gain community support. For instance, one NZ SSM developed additional services to respond to community needs, such as grocery delivery, meal kits for those struggling with meal preparation and offering pet food for those struggling to feed their pets (56,58).

Another universal enabler is effective partnerships with food suppliers to source low-cost products in appropriate quantities (6). Surplus food also often has a short shelf life remaining, thus timely communication and transportation are essential (78).

One aspect less explored within the literature is support from food secure customers. One SSM described patronage from eco-conscious customers, stating this group “[doesn’t] want to go to supermarkets”, they instead “want to support the project” and prevent food waste (6, p28). While this user group is primarily motivated by environmental reasons, SSMs may also be able to capitalise on support from food secure users motivated by other reasons, such as a preference to support independent retailers and social enterprise rather than major supermarkets. (79). This motivation could further boost public support for SSMs, enabling SSMs to increase scale, bring down costs, subsidise low-income users and thus improve financial sustainability (6,56).

6.2. Common challenges

SSMs face daily operational challenges like dependency on volunteers, unpredictable food donations, and limited infrastructure.

Training, coordinating and managing the availability of volunteers, especially during certain times of year, such as holiday periods, presents a logistical challenge (6). One UK initiative highlighted volunteer recruitment and retention as one of their biggest challenges, other than stock (6, p45).

Relying on surplus food, which fluctuates due to factors like weather and demand, can make maintaining consistent stock levels and meeting customer needs difficult (3,6). SSMs have described the fluctuating supply of surplus food as a “major challenge” and an “uphill battle” due to the constant changes and lack of guarantees (6, p43). In response, some SSMs have partnered with local farms or grow their own fresh produce to diversify their food sources, ensure a steady supply and improve nutritional quality (3,6).

Limited infrastructure, such as insufficient cooling and transportation, further hampers food storage and logistics, making storing perishable items (i.e. fresh produce) difficult (78). One survey revealed only half of Austrian SSMs had cooling and freezing storage, and some lacked their own vehicle (3). Consequently, many SSMs rely on donors or suppliers for transport and storage support (3,56). This challenge is especially pronounced for those with diverse sources, as the collection and storage of goods require significant labour and time spent on contacting suppliers and coordinating pickups and deliveries. Conversely, initiatives that primarily source from a single redistributor benefit from established infrastructure and logistics, mitigating these challenges.

6.3. Model limitations

In addition to day-to-day challenges, several model limitations have the potential to undermine the potential benefits of social SSMS, such as short opening hours, limited nutritional quality of stocked food, a lack of financial sustainability, failure to address the root causes of food insecurity and limited evaluation evidence.

While not a limitation of all social supermarkets, some have short opening hours and may only be open during business days (weekdays) for a couple of hours, meaning employed users may struggle to access their services.

Due to a reliance on food surplus donations, the ability of SSMS to provide nutritious food can be constrained (6). Surplus food donations often consist of highly-processed and energy-dense shelf-stable foods, and enabling access to these can worsen health inequalities among vulnerable communities (80). While some SSMS attempt to source fresh produce, this practice is not universal, and some even list “soft drinks” and “sweets”(3, p14) as essentials, highlighting inconsistent nutrition standards.

Financial instability is another limitation and major threat to the sustainability of SSMS, with few achieving economic balance (3,6,56). Many rely on external funding to pay for rent, infrastructure, and staff costs. One initiative described being “on the verge of going under” (6, p46) multiple times due to financial struggles. Another had to relocate to a less accessible area due to rent increases (6).

Critics argue that, like traditional food relief, SSMS do not address the root causes of food insecurity, and may inadvertently mask the need for greater systemic action (6,46,81). These food relief models may shift responsibility from governments and the food industry to charities, weakening the push for improved social policies (6,82). Furthermore, mainstream supermarkets which donate surplus food benefit reputationally while avoiding responsibility for food waste and overproduction (6,82). As a result, SSMS may divert focus from more effective, upstream solutions to food insecurity and inequality (33,82), such as adequate support payments, controls on price gouging and changes to food systems that support more circular, sustainable systems.

A final limitation is that a comprehensive body of performance and impact evaluation data and evidence is currently lacking. This may be due to factors such as the limited evaluation capacity of SSM organisations and the desire of many SSMS to enable users to shop with anonymity (6,48,56).

Internationally, there have been a small number of evaluations of SSM initiatives to date, suggesting that SSMs can significantly increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables (52,83), reduce food insecurity (52,53) and save users money (3,84).

Meanwhile in Australia, one evaluation of The Community Grocer, in partnership with Monash University and Deakin University, was published in 2019 (19). The study looked at the ability of TCG's weekly fresh fruit and vegetable markets to increase access, use and availability of nutritious food for customers from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The study found that this social enterprise helped address food security for at-risk populations through providing a good variety of fruit and vegetables (more than 50 types), at lower cost (approximately 40% less than local stores), in a convenient and dignified context (19). This initiative continues to conduct annual impact evaluations in collaboration with Monash University.

Also in Australia, while the Food Centre is yet to publish a formal long-term evaluation, a rubric tool developed during the pilot project has been found to be a useful tool for planning and evaluation, and may aid existing food relief models transitioning towards a SSM model (85). No other references to previous, current or planned evaluations of Australian initiatives were identified during the desktop review, meaning that evidence of the impact of SSMs remains somewhat limited.

6.4. Future challenges

SSMs face future challenges, including rising competition for surplus food and finding new ways to gather evaluation data.

Globally, governments have committed to reducing food waste (86,87), which, along with an expanding food relief sector, may shrink surplus food availability (3,6). This competition has already led to the closures of some Austrian SSMs (78). Additionally, mainstream supermarkets are increasingly selling surplus food at reduced prices, as seen with Woolworths' "Odd Bunch" campaign (88), and marking down the prices of products near their use-by dates (6).

Obtaining data for evaluation purposes can prove challenging for SSMs, however, finding appropriate, feasible and effective ways to obtain such data is essential to build a robust evidence base for SSMs.

7. CONCLUSION

Prior to undertaking this desktop review, no review of SSMs analysed in the Australian context was available. Thus, this desktop review addresses a significant gap within the literature, summarising available evidence on SSMs with the goal of supporting stakeholders in their consideration of alternative food relief models.

To better understand SSMs this desktop review has summarised available international evidence on SSMs, defined SSMs, identified five initiatives operating in Australia and described the varying characteristics of SSMs. Additionally, through describing enablers, common challenges, model limitations and future challenges, this review provides initial insights into the feasibility of SSMs in the NEPHU catchment, and beyond.

Due to the limitations of existing literature on SSMs, particularly in the Australian context, the report draws heavily upon international evidence to answer the research questions. Time and scope limitations also meant some SSM themes within the literature (e.g. goals, legal considerations, food safety) were not explored in this report.

In conclusion, food insecurity is an urgent public health issue and SSMs may offer an alternative model to traditional food relief services. While this model is well-established internationally, more evaluation is needed, particularly in the Australian context. Even though SSMs may offer a good interim solution, they do not replace the need for more upstream policy changes to address the underlying causes of food insecurity.

Beyond this desktop review, future potential areas of work could include:

- Consultation with Australian SSM models to gain a more in-depth understanding of approaches, impact, financial models and plans for evaluations
- Nutrition analysis of food supplied by SSMs
- Engagement with stakeholders who may consider establishing a SSM to support the use of these findings for informing community consultation, planning and implementation
- Community consultation to ascertain interest in the implementation of a SSM model within the NEPHU catchment
- Support any stakeholders that may implement this model with robust evaluations
- Continue to work towards addressing the underlying drivers of food insecurity as we strive to create more equitable, sustainable food systems into the future.

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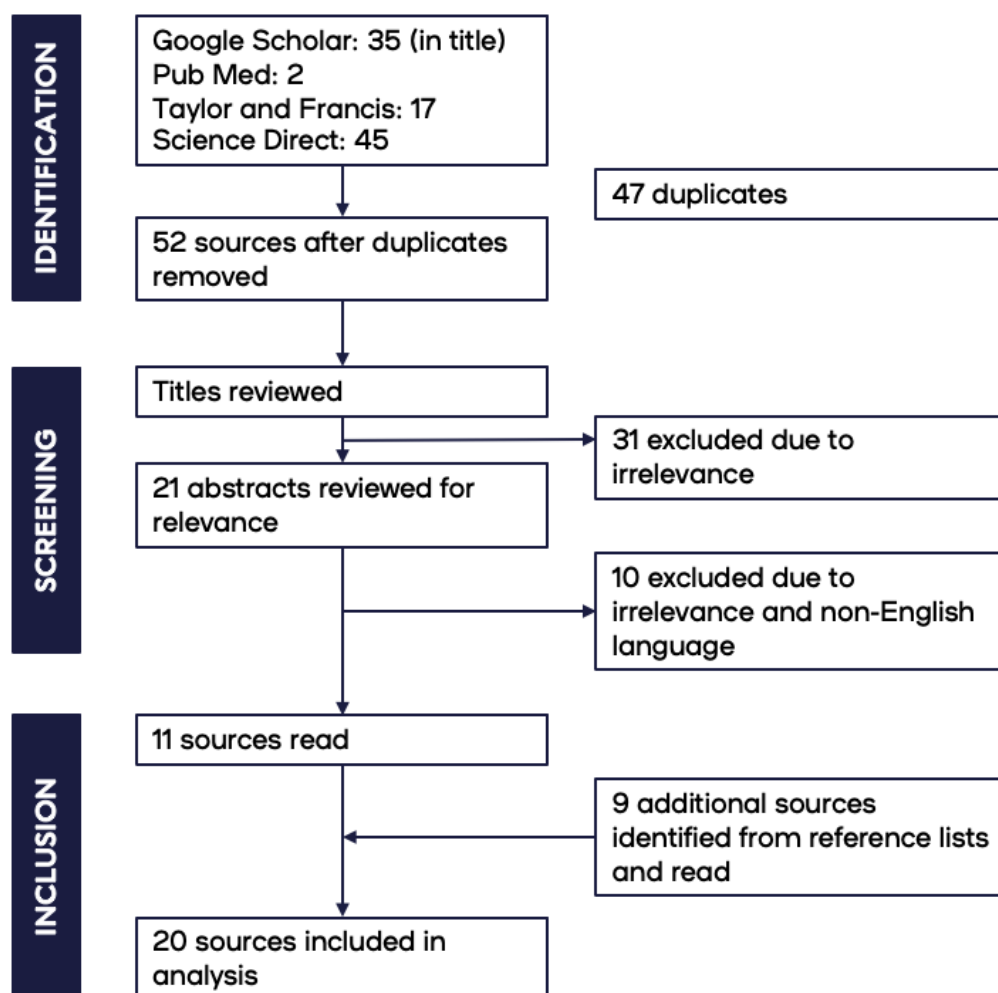


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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: SSM Literature search strategy



Appendix 2: Web-based sources

STATE	NAME	SOURCES
SA	The Food Centre	https://thefoodcentre.com.au https://news.flinders.edu.au/blog/2024/01/29/praise-for-social-supermarket-model/ https://www.csi.edu.au/research/part-discount-grocer-part-social-connection-defining-elements-of-social-supermarkets/ https://thefoodcentre.com.au - Evaluation: https://researchnow.flinders.edu.au/en/publications/evaluation-of-the-social-supermarket-model-across-three-new-sites https://citymag.indaily.com.au/happening/community/social-supermarkets-try-to-curb-the-cost-of-living/ https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/charities/ca34e651-38af-e811-a960-000d3ad24282/documents/7fb92550-12b0-ee11-a569-00224893d32a https://thefoodcentre.com.au/easyfeast/
WA	Leramugadu Café, Gallery, and Social Supermarket	https://nit.com.au/28-06-2022/3342/social-supermarket-experiment-slashes-grocery-bills-in-pilbara-town-as-costs-skyrocket https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-30/pilbara-social-supermarket-hailed-a-success/101193434 https://au.sodexo.com/home/media/news-room/newsList-area/australia-press-releases/social-supermarket-partnership-d.html https://www.mineralresources.com.au/news-media/joining-forces-to-support-a-social-supermarket-in-roebourne/ https://www.facebook.com/leramugadustoremaya?mibextid=LQQJ4d
NSW	The Shack Shop	https://coastcommunitynews.com.au/central-coast/news/2020/08/the-shack-shop-reopens/ https://homeinplace.org/community-hubs/the-meeting-place/ https://homeinplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-Tenant-Newsletter-Autumn-WEB.pdf
	The Pantry	https://homeinplace.org/community-hubs/123-community-hub/ https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-19/low-cost-supermarket-opens-to-help-those-doing-it/103739128 https://homeinplace.org/new-community-pantry-opens-in-broken-hill/
VIC	The Community Grocer	https://www.thecommunitygrocer.com.au https://www.thecommunitygrocer.com.au/annualreports - CoP meeting 16th July - Impact evaluations in collaboration with Monash University: https://www.thecommunitygrocer.com.au/impactevaluations

Appendix 3: SSM Literature definitions

AUTHOR(S) (YEAR)	DEFINITION
Schnedlitz et al (2011)	“a small, non-profit oriented retailing operation offering a limited assortment of products at symbolic prices primarily in self-service manner. Authorised for shopping are needy people only. The products are donated by food production and retail companies free of charge as they are edible but not marketable due to small blemishes. Achieved profit is reinvested into social projects”(3, p11,85)
Sellmeister (2010)	“social markets (sozialmärkte) are organisations which provide food that is no longer useful for the common trade cheaply to people who are in situations of poverty”(3, p11)
Schneider et al (2015)	“an organisation which sells food – at least a part of which is sourced from surplus food – to poorer people at a reduced price”(3, p12)
Saxena et al (2018)	“acquire food surplus from the food industry and sell it at heavily discounted prices to low-income consumers. They also provide social support programmes to their members ... [and] are, uniformly, social enterprises” (6, p9)

Appendix 4: Excluded Australian initiatives

LOW-COST SUPERMARKET

Lighthouse Care: The Good Food Shop is an open-access not-for-profit grocery store, operating in two locations in Queensland, and allows users to purchase a trolley-worth of groceries for \$25 or individual groceries for up to 70% off RRP (90). The initiative also provides emergency food relief to those in need through their 'free trolley' program. Whilst this initiative aligns closely with several elements of SSM models, no explicit mention of any 'social' element was found on their website, and thus they were excluded.

THE STAPLES BAG

Identified by Williams and Tait (2023) as a social supermarket (13), the Staples Bag opened in 2015 and allowed users to purchase groceries and other essentials, as well as nutritionally balanced pre-packed 'staples bags' at a discount of up to 70% off RRP. The initiative was located within an inner-city housing estate in Campsie, NSW, and was co-located with other support services. Whilst this initiative aligned closely with the report definition, upon further research, the Staples Bag appeared to be permanently closed. Their website is no longer available, and no other resources (news articles, social media posts) were found mentioning the initiative after 2020. No reason for closure was found, however it is possible the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of financial sustainability alluded to by Williams and Tait (2023) may have been factors. As this initiative was determined to be no longer active, it was excluded from further analysis.

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