

RESEARCH REPORT

HUNGRY FOR FREEDOM:

FOOD DEPRIVATION AMONG PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM ON NAURU

Hungry for Freedom: Inadequate food access and deprivation among people seeking asylum on Nauru



Executive summary

Between February and April this year, the ASRC interviewed 78 people seeking asylum, who had sought safety by sea but were sent to Nauru by the Australian Government. The result of these interviews were clear: people are experiencing inadequate food access, driven by limited financial support, the high cost of living, and systemic barriers to accessing food.

Of those interviewed by the ASRC:

99% of people could not buy enough food with the current allowance, and described routinely exhausting their fortnightly allowance before the next payment, leading to missed meals and periods of hunger.

68% of people rarely or never have access to fresh fruit, vegetables and meat.

82% of people do not have easy access to free, clean drinking water.

Inadequate food access is primarily caused by the high cost of food, the low income support people receive and their lack of work rights. However, it is also exacerbated by structural and environmental factors.

Irregular transport, shortages of staple foods, inadequate cooking facilities, poor access to clean water, and accommodation located far from markets all limit people's ability to obtain and prepare food. These practical barriers compound financial disadvantage and create impossible trade-offs between purchasing food and other necessities such as clothing, internet access, or personal safety, with some reporting that money intended for food had to be used to pay bribes or otherwise address safety issues.

The lack of access to food and water is having a significant impact on people's physical and mental health. The deterioration of health and wellbeing of people transferred to Nauru is of great concern, as they are Australia's responsibility.



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Background

The Detention Rights Advocacy Program

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest independent aid and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum and refugees. Our services include legal support, casework, housing, medical care, education, employment and emergency relief. Based on what we witness through our service delivery, we advocate for change alongside refugees to ensure their human rights are upheld.

The ASRC operates Australia's longest-running detention casework service, the Detention Rights Advocacy Program (DRAP), and has supported people subjected to offshore detention since the introduction of the "Pacific Solution" in 2001. DRAP has worked intensively with people seeking asylum and refugees in offshore detention from 2012 until today, providing daily casework, advocacy and emotional support to approximately 115 people in offshore detention in the Republic of Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

Through decades of direct engagement, the ASRC has deep expertise in the human rights violations of successive Australian governments against people seeking asylum in Australia's offshore detention regime.

Australia's offshore detention regime

The harms of offshore detention are well documented, including fourteen deaths, widespread abuse, medical neglect, widespread sexual violence and suicide contagion among children. In May 2026, a new [United Nations report](#)¹ confirmed that under international law, Australia cannot avoid legal responsibility for the people it sends offshore by outsourcing its obligations to Nauru, private contractors or international organisations. **The report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants stated that governments "cannot avoid responsibility by contracting out their obligations to other States, international organisations or private entities"**. The UN report also raised concerns about the persistent lack of transparency surrounding offshore detention, increasing the risk of human rights abuses.

The current cohort of people seeking asylum in Nauru

People seeking safety by sea in Australia, including women, children and men, continue to be transferred by the Australian Government to offshore detention in Nauru to have their refugee claims processed, under the policy of offshore processing which recommenced in 2012.

As of 31 May 2026, there were 101 people seeking asylum in Nauru. Of these, 10 people were held in closed, prison-like detention in Regional Processing Centre 1 (RPC-1). Once released from RPC-1, they are transferred to RPC-3 or community accommodation, where approximately 91 people currently reside. The majority of those currently in Nauru are young to middle aged men from south and east Asia.

They are arbitrarily and indefinitely held, with no information provided about timelines or processes. Some individuals have already been recognised as refugees, yet no resettlement pathways are available to them. With the New Zealand and US arrangements closed, they are trapped in indefinite limbo.



Image: RPC-3.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc6235-externalization-migration-governance-new-trends-and-specific>



Financial cost, integrity and corruption allegations

Despite the exorbitant amount of public money provided to contractors to deliver services in offshore detention, people seeking asylum receive wholly inadequate care and continue to experience serious human rights abuses.

Since 2012, [offshore detention has cost Australian taxpayers \\$14.35 billion](#).² Spending on offshore detention and processing in 2025-26 was nearly \$1 billion for the financial year, almost \$400 million higher than the funding allocated in the budget. This was the seventh year in which there has been a major cost blowout, demonstrating that Australia's offshore detention policy is not only exorbitantly expensive, but also fiscally irresponsible.³

Offshore detention is implemented by private contractors such as Management and Training Corporation (MTC), a US prison operator which has been named in civil litigation brought by the state of Mississippi alleging bribery, fraud, kickbacks and money laundering in relation to prison contracts. In 2025, the Australian Government expanded MTC's Nauru offshore detention contract to approximately \$790 million.⁴

In August 2025, the Nine newspapers reported that a Finks bikie gang leader was awarded \$40 million in security and policing contracts,⁵ and a leaked AUSTAC report read into the Senate Hansard in November 2025 contained notifications of a significant number of concerning transactions and rapid, high volume money transfers that raised serious concerns about corruption by political leaders in Nauru.⁶

Australia's offshore detention arrangements raise serious concerns about corruption, governance failures and mismanagement of public funds, particularly given the material deprivation and hunger being experienced by people seeking asylum.

Research method

Refugees and people seeking asylum in the Nauruan community have consistently reported to the ASRC concerns around destitution, inadequate access to food and hunger, and requested that ASRC advocates to the Australian Government about these issues.

In response, and to provide an evidence based assessment, the ASRC systematically conducted in-depth interviews with people to hear and document their experiences and understand the extent of the problem.

ASRC caseworkers interviewed 78 people from February to April 2026 and asked questions about how people are managing on the allowance, and their access to food and safe, clean drinking water.

In parallel we conducted a comprehensive audit of 90 detention health records and case files. This report compiles qualitative data including extracts from interviews in the form of case examples and quotes, as well as de-identified health data.

2 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/2026-27-federal-budget-analysis/>

3 <https://asrc.org.au/2026/05/12/offshore-detention-costs-blow-out/>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/29/us-private-prisons-operator-paid-790m-to-hold-100-people-on-nauru-in-quiet-expansion-of-contract>

5 'Dirty Deals', Nauru Rorting, bikie gang allegations to be referred to the NACC, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/dirty-deals-nauru-rorting-bikie-gang-allegations-to-be-referred-to-nacc-20251110-p5n8zu.html>

6 Labor accused in Senate of turning blind eye to Nauru corruption allegations, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-11-26/senate-nauru-corruption-allegations/106055896>



Access to fresh food and clean water in Nauru

Access to fresh food

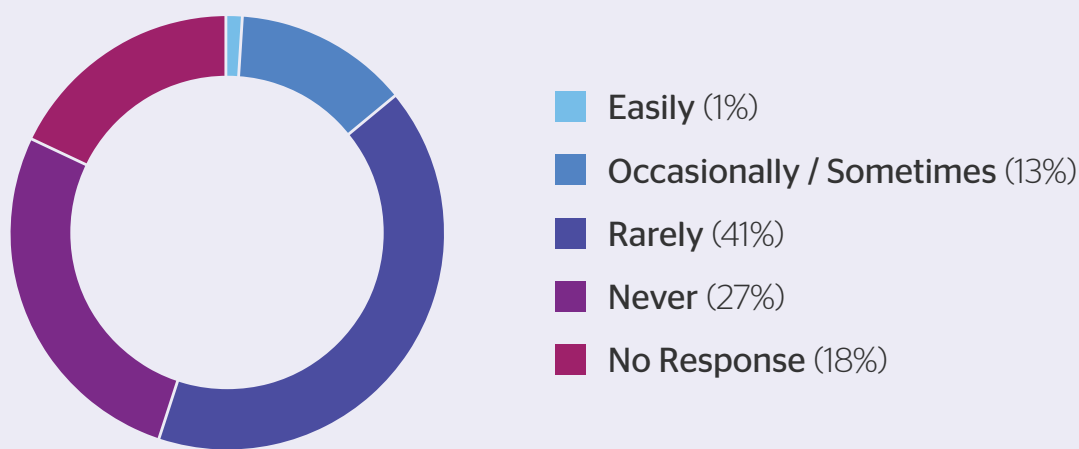
“My partner is shocked when she sees how thin I am on video calls. She says ‘*why do you look like this?*’ I lie and tell her I’m eating enough - that I am thin because of the climate, not lack of food.”

Anonymous person seeking asylum

The ASRC’s DRAP team caseworkers asked people seeking asylum whether they had regular access to fresh food, including fruit, vegetables and meat. Of the total number of people interviewed (78), **68% reported that they rarely or never accessed fresh food:**

- 21 selected that they ‘never’ have access
- 32 selected that they ‘rarely’ have access
- 1 selected that they ‘occasionally’ have access
- 9 selected that they ‘sometimes’ have access
- 1 selected that they ‘easily’ have access
- 14 didn’t respond.

“Do you have regular access to fresh fruit, vegetables and meat?”



Refugees and people seeking asylum are provided with no information, orientation or local knowledge on release into the community, or about where or how to access the least expensive foods in Nauru, and therefore are likely to have more difficulty accessing food than the general population.

Food insecurity in Nauru is well documented and driven by geographic isolation, heavy reliance on imported food, and limited local agriculture⁷ due to extensive environmental degradation caused by phosphate mining.⁸ Australia contributed to the destruction of local food systems during the colonial phosphate mining era, including the clearing of plantain and other vegetation that previously formed an important part of the local diet. These factors

⁷ Nauru National Food Systems Pathway, Department of Commerce, Industry, Trade & Environment Nauru, p.2, https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/national-pathways/nauru/2021-09-21-en-fss-national-pathway-nauru_2021_september_2021_finaldraft_approved.pdf?sfvrsn=7ee38768_1

⁸ Nauru Phosphate History and the Resource Curse Narrative, <https://nauru-data.sprep.org/resource/nauru-phosphate-history-and-resource-curse-narrative>



have contributed to widespread dependence on imported processed foods and high rates of diet-related illness such as diabetes. As a result of these food security issues, Nauru has one of the highest obesity rates in the world.

Information provided by a long-term resident and local food producer in Nauru⁹ indicates that the typical Nauruan diet is heavily dependent on imported foods. Rice is the staple food, often forming the basis of most meals, commonly accompanied by fish, as well as chicken, other meats, and processed canned meats such as Spam.

Local food production remains extremely limited with around 2% of the produce consumed on the island grown locally due to factors mentioned above. When available, locally grown produce includes fruits and vegetables such as soursop, papaya, guava, cape gooseberry, banana, hog plum, moringa, coconut, bok choy, and breadfruit. Imported fresh produce commonly includes apples, oranges, grapes, cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, potatoes, and other seasonal vegetables.¹⁰

Because local food production is extremely limited, most fresh fruit and vegetables must be imported. Perishable produce generally arrives by air on a weekly Thursday flight, and limited supply means that some items sell quickly and are often prohibitively expensive.

Shortages are also common among imported foods. Staple items such as flour and UHT milk are generally delivered by ship and may be unavailable for extended periods when supplies run out before the next shipment. Frozen vegetables are also affected by supply disruptions and periodic shortages.

People seeking asylum have told the ASRC that these shortages are particularly difficult when culturally important staple foods, such as rice, are unavailable, as affordable and familiar alternatives can be hard to find.

"You have rights and food in prison. Australian people love justice and humanity. Where does that show for basic human rights? I know they don't want to treat people like animals so why do they let this happen? How would you survive on \$100 in Australia even? Last 2-3 months, there's been no flour and rice. One week ago, we got rice. Until then, we only eat noodles. Aid rice came but there wasn't enough for more than two days. Healthy food is the most expensive so we can't get the food that will help heal us."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

While food security and access to fresh food is, and is likely to continue to be, an overwhelming problem for everyone in Nauru, people seeking asylum and refugees are likely to be some of the most vulnerable to these issues.

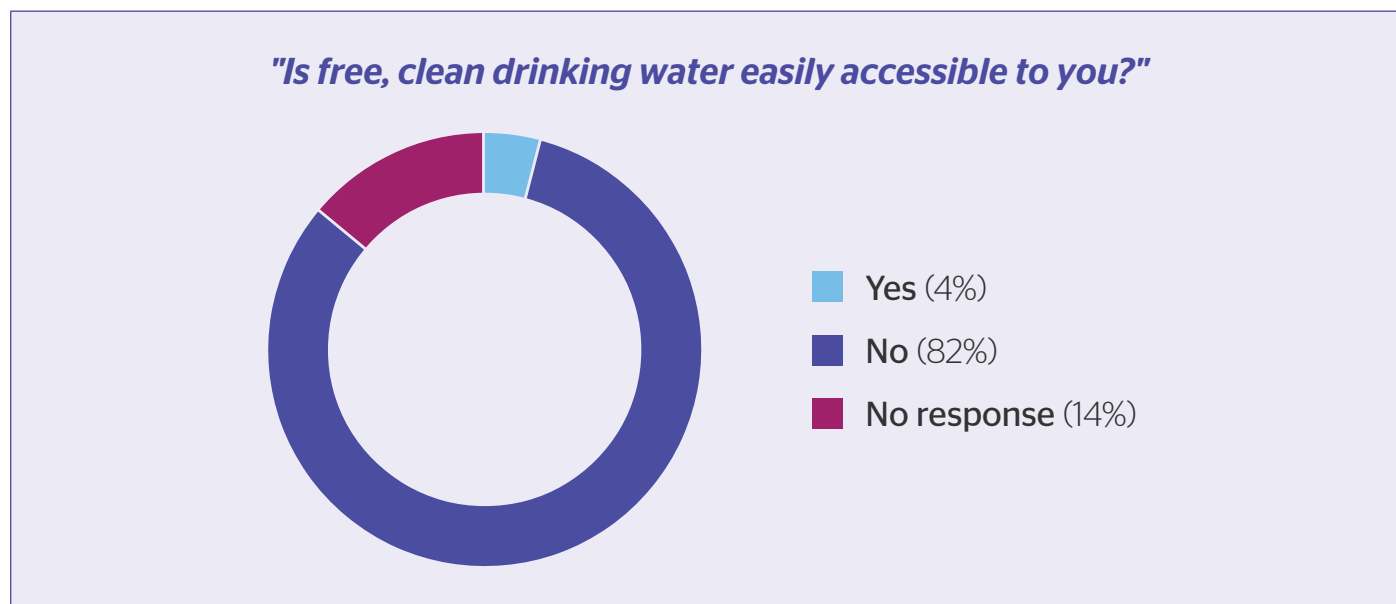
⁹ Anonymous personal communication with the author 21st May, 2026

¹⁰ Anonymous personal communication with the author on 21st May, 2026



Water scarcity

The ASRC's interviews found that **82% of respondents said they do not have free access to clean drinking water.**



Access to safe drinking water remains one of Nauru's significant public health and infrastructure challenges. The island has no rivers or freshwater lakes and relies primarily on rainwater harvesting and reverse osmosis desalination to meet its drinking water needs.¹¹ During periods of drought or below-average rainfall, water shortages are common because limited storage capacity reduces the reliability of water supplies and increases reliance on water deliveries.¹²

Poor water quality and unreliable access to safe drinking water increase the risk of illness and place additional pressure on Nauru's health system. Contaminated drinking water can cause diarrhoea, gastroenteritis, typhoid and other waterborne infections, while inadequate sanitation increases the likelihood of faecal contamination of water supplies.¹³

For people seeking asylum, there is no access to clean, safe drinking water, and repeated requests for basic water filters have been ignored, meaning that people are either having to drink unclean water from taps, or boil and cool tank water.

Tank water is kept in unsealed tanks and people report to the ASRC that it smells and is sometimes contaminated with dirt, insects or dead animals such as lizards. It takes time to boil and cool the water ready for drinking, and containers to store the cooled water are not readily available.

Dehydration is exacerbated by this situation, especially when people are sick and need extra fluids. Purchasing bottled water is not an option due to the expense.

¹¹ Republic of Nauru, National Sustainable Development Strategy 2019-2030 (2019), p. 26, <https://naurufinance.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final-NSDS-2019-2030.pdf>

¹² Republic of Nauru, National Sustainable Development Strategy 2019-2030 (2019), p. 26.

¹³ 'Drinking Water', World Health Organisation, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>



Case Study: Salim*

Unable to access clean drinking water, and unable to tolerate boiled water, Salim has chronic dehydration. Salim sought safety in Australia by sea in 2024. Salim reports ongoing challenges with basic hydration and nutritional needs due to a lack of clean safe drinking water, financial destitution and inadequate food access.

International Health and Medical Services (IHMS) the medical provider for people seeking asylum on Nauru, confirmed that Salim is experiencing dehydration. He attributes this to both the accessibility and quality of drinking water available. To make the water safe for drinking, the water requires boiling, cooling, and storing, which is logistically difficult in his accommodation. Even when boiled, Salim describes the water quality as poor, and that drinking sufficient quantities often leads to vomiting and chronic dehydration.

The only alternative recommended by IHMS has been to purchase bottled water. However this is expensive, making it inaccessible with his allowance. Salim is forced to decide between safe drinking water and food.

Salim reports that if he were to eat three meals per day, his funds would be exhausted halfway through the month. This calculation already assumes a highly restricted diet, including only occasional consumption of meat, no access to fruit or vegetables and no bottled water. Salim worries about the long-term health consequences of chronic dehydration and drinking unclean water.

* Name changed to protect privacy

Improving water infrastructure, sanitation systems, storage capacity and water treatment is therefore critical to reducing preventable illness and ensuring reliable access to safe drinking water for both the local population and people seeking asylum in Nauru.



Barriers to food access

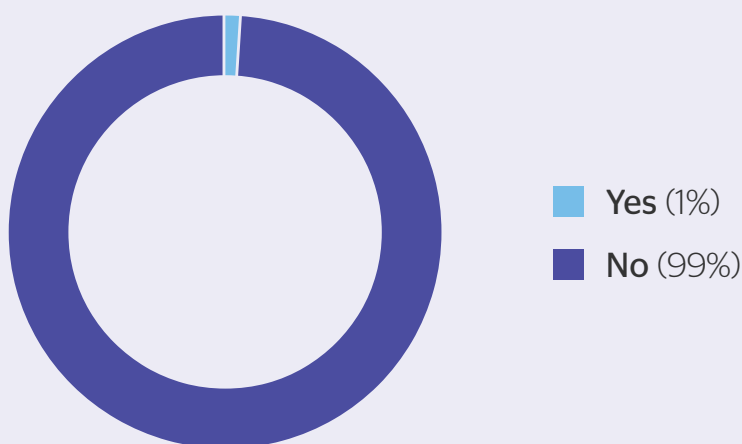
Inadequate financial support

“Sometimes we eat, sometimes we don’t eat. This is tough for me without medication, proper food, and work rights. Please do something for me, if you don’t do anything I’m helpless.”

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Of the people the ASRC spoke to for this research, 77 of 78 people interviewed said that the allowance they receive is not enough to buy adequate food. Only people who have been recognised as refugees are permitted to work, and those who work without authorisation risk prosecution, deportation, and the reduction or removal of their allowance.

“Is the allowance you receive enough to buy adequate food?”



As a result, most people living in the community are expected to survive on an allowance of just \$260 AUD per fortnight. This must cover food, drinking water, phone credit and internet access, which is essential for maintaining contact with family and support networks. **People have consistently told the ASRC that the allowance is insufficient to meet their basic needs and that they are experiencing severe financial hardship, inadequate access to food and hunger.**

Many people run out of money before their next payment and regularly reduce the size and frequency of their meals or go without food altogether. Some have experienced significant unintentional weight loss.

“By the end of the fortnight, I run out of money and so sometimes I have to starve. I bought some biscuits and we just drink water some days... we’re in great difficulty.”

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Until recently, people received approximately \$230 per fortnight to cover all basic needs. This rate had remained unchanged for years despite rising living costs. In December 2025, the stipend was increased to \$260 per fortnight, with payments determined by the Government of Nauru based on the average local wage.



"We cannot survive on the \$260 per fortnight allowance, the money is not enough because everything is expensive here - rice, fish, we cannot buy any fruit here, internet for \$100 per month, how is it possible to survive? What does the Australian Government say about this issue of the Nauru Government moving us out of here? My life is in trouble. I want my right to life back."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Most people who spoke with the DRAP team reported eating less often than they needed or wanted to and regularly skipping meals because they could not afford food. Their diets consisted primarily of rice and fish, with little access to fruit, vegetables, meat or other nutritious foods. People described having to choose between essential food groups because they could not afford to buy them together.

"I'm not even eating a quarter of what I ate before coming to Nauru. I cannot afford fruit or vegetables. I just eat pulses and rice. I skip meals frequently in the second week of my pay cycle. I've lost 15kg since arriving on Nauru. People tell me that I have lost weight. My clothes are much looser now than they were on arrival. I feel weak and tired from the lack of food. I have no energy. My mood is negatively affected by my current diet."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

"If I eat one meal a day, the allowance can last two weeks, however, if I eat twice a day, the allowance only lasts for one week."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

"With food we have to compromise, if you buy vegetables you can't afford rice. If you buy meat, you can't afford fruit."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

People also described scavenging for discarded or expired food. Although they feared that this food could make them sick, they felt they had little choice but to eat it rather than endure hunger.

"If I don't eat these foods, I'll go hungry; if I do eat them, I'll just feel uncomfortable. The most important thing right now is to eat my fill."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Throughout the period of these interviews and in our day to day work, the overwhelming message from people seeking asylum who have been sent to Nauru is that they are unable to survive on the allowance they receive.

Lack of transportation and access to informal networks

Difficulty in accessing marketplaces regularly enough or at the right time also contributes to the food shortages people are experiencing. Due to the limited nature of the living allowance and the lack of work rights, people seeking asylum have not been in a position to purchase their own transportation, which Nauruans rely on to get around the island, including to get to the markets and shops.

Eigigu Solutions provides case management, and can provide some limited assistance with transportation. However, in practice this is not reliable and means that people are unable to visit the shops when food is available. This issue is especially acute for those who live in Regional Processing Centre 3 (RPC3), which is in the middle of the island far from the 'ring road' where the majority of businesses are located.



Image: Nauru. Via Google Maps. Imagery ©2026 Airbus, Landsat / Copernicus, Maxar Technologies, Map data ©2026.

"Transport on the island is very irregular and there is no guarantee that it will even come at all. This makes it very difficult for us to buy food. If we want to buy food, we need to queue up before 7am and by the time we arrive there is often no food left for us to buy."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

The Department says that the allowance provided to refugees and people seeking asylum is based on the average Nauruan wage.¹⁴ However, the ability to subsist on this amount assumes that people seeking asylum are on equal footing with Nauruans - and this is not the case. People seeking asylum and refugees do not have access to the supportive family and cultural networks that Nauruan locals have, and they are unable to access local informal trade networks.

Violence and discrimination

Escalating violence and safety concerns also have a significant impact on the ability of people seeking asylum and refugees to access food safely, as does the discrimination and exclusion they report experiencing. The ASRC has recently received reports of at least 21 incidents of physical assault, 31 incidents of verbal abuse and 23 incidents of theft.

There have been 6 reports of people being assaulted while they are fishing, meaning that people feel unsafe trying to supplement their food intake in this way. Some have reported having their fishing equipment stolen or damaged, and as a result many are no longer trying to catch fish. Given that fishing is a major supplement to the Nauruan diet,¹⁵ this has a serious impact on their access to a nutritious diet.

¹⁴ BE24-0701: Nauru Transfers - Financial Allowances, 2024-25 Budget Estimates, Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, answered 17 June 2024.

¹⁵ Anonymous personal communication with the author 21st May, 2026



Case study: Imran*

Imran tried to combat food inaccessibility through alternative methods such as fishing and growing produce, but his materials and produce were stolen by local Nauruans.

Imran has experienced inadequate food access and an inability to meet basic food needs with the allowance provided. He tried to source food from other sources such as fishing and growing his own fruit, but these methods have been repeatedly derailed due to theft.

"The money is not sufficient. It's not enough for expenses. We bought a fishing net to try and supplement the food but our nets were stolen and broken three times. We had put the net outside due to the smell, and local Nauruans came and stole it. We planted fruit but unfortunately, all the fruit was stolen. Even my shoes got stolen."

* Name changed to protect privacy

Case study: Hamza*

Hamza was forced to stop working due to a violent assault, and now has no way to supplement the allowance, which has led to inadequate food access.

Hamza fled his country of origin, sought safety in Australia by sea in 2024, and was subsequently transferred to Nauru.

Hamza experiences inadequate food access and reports an inability to survive on the meagre allowance. Hamza began working a casual job, however he was physically assaulted at work. *"I suffered blows to the head and back... I left my country for protection. I can't go back to my country or I could be killed. But it's similarly unsafe here in Nauru. They don't care about refugees at all. It's a hopeless situation."*

Hamza reported that the police did not assist him following the attack, instead urging him to return to his country of origin. Due to the physical assault, Hamza ceased working and has been forced to subsist on the allowance alone, which means eating less and skipping meals. *"\$260 a fortnight is not enough to survive. I can't work anymore because I got assaulted at work. If I could work, I'd be able to afford more food. I'm eating less."*

* Name changed to protect privacy

People who have reported violence say that police have failed to take action to protect them. Despite reports of verbal abuse and physical assault, they say there have been no meaningful investigations and little or no follow-up. As a result, many have lost confidence in the police and do not believe that reporting violence will lead to protection or accountability.

Failures by Nauruan police to respond to reports of violence and other crimes have been raised throughout almost the entire period of offshore detention on Nauru.¹⁶ Some people have also said that police demanded payment before taking steps to protect them, forcing people with barely enough money for food and other essentials to pay for their own safety.

¹⁶ 'They don't care': a refugee's story of reporting sexual assault on Nauru', <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/aug/13/they-dont-care-a-refugees-story-of-reporting-sexual-assault-on-nauru>



"I have experienced repeated verbal and physical assaults over several months. I reported to the police and they complained that I made a report. I had to bribe with my food money so that they would do something, but nothing has happened. They lost my original police report, so I gave an old copy to them. Not sure if they lost it on purpose or incompetency. I wonder who has the competency and power here?"

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Inadequate cooking facilities and food storage

"We can't cook or boil the water or shower, leaving us hungry, thirsty and dirty."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Even when people can afford to buy some food, inadequate cooking and storage facilities make it difficult to prepare meals safely and hygienically. People report that shared kitchen facilities are dirty, insect infested and affected by mould, creating further risks to their health. Regular power outages at refugee accommodation also interrupt refrigeration and repeatedly cause the limited food people have been able to purchase to spoil.

These outages have been particularly frequent at the Budapest Hotel, a community accommodation facility housing approximately 45 people seeking asylum. In January 2026, the power was cut for around 24 hours, causing all refrigerated and frozen food stored by residents to spoil. This was the third time a lengthy power outage had been reported by people seeking asylum who live in this accommodation over a 6-month period.

"We are forced to throw away precious food which multiplies our hunger and financial distress."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

"We feel tortured with our food, water (unfiltered), everything is not good... we have four stoves - only one is working well enough to cook, so we have to wait a long time in a queue one-by-one to prepare."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

"Living in this state of absolute uncertainty, combined with inadequate food, unsafe water and poor infrastructure feels like a deliberate form of physical and mental torture."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

Each time an outage causes food to spoil, residents can be left without enough to eat until their next allowance payment. Without work rights or any other source of income, they have no means to replace what has been lost. Following the January 2026 outage, some residents had to wait a further 11 days for their next payment. During the outage, they were also left without water for drinking, bathing or keeping cool.

People supported by the ASRC who live at the Budapest Hotel say they have been told that the power was disconnected because the service provider had failed to pay the electricity bills.

People seeking asylum continue to experience and report rolling blackouts at the Budapest hotel.



Image: Budapest Hotel.



Impact on health and mental health

“I can’t afford fresh fruits and vegetables, and I feel my health deteriorating. This makes me feel helpless and desperate.”

Anonymous person seeking asylum

The lack of access to fresh food, drinking water and adequate nutrition is likely contributing to the deterioration of the physical and mental health of people seeking asylum on Nauru. In addition to asking people about their access to food, the ASRC asked people about their physical and mental health. Of the 78 people the ASRC interviewed:

- 39 reported weakness, dizziness, or fatigue
- 26 reported mental health impacts that they linked to lack of food such as increased anxiety, depression and hopelessness
- 14 people reported malnutrition/weight loss indicators (self-reported weight loss, hair loss, other people noticing a visible difference in their appearance).

Constant hunger and the inability to access enough food are significant sources of stress for people seeking asylum on Nauru. People regularly tell the ASRC that being unable to meet even their most basic needs leaves them feeling powerless and deprived of control over their own lives. This distress compounds the longer they remain in offshore detention.

In interviews, people consistently linked inadequate food access and poor nutrition with hopelessness, emotional distress and declining mental health. Many described changing how often and how much they ate simply to make their allowance last, while others said that the constant struggle to obtain food was itself psychologically harmful.

This experience accords with research showing food insecurity can worsen mental health, with the adverse outcomes including stress, distress, clinical depression and anxiety,¹⁷ and increased mental health service usage.¹⁸ Mental illness may also make it harder for people to achieve food security: for example, through inability to prepare food, and inability to work and therefore purchase food or to access it (e.g. because of transport problems). In addition to low mood, it has also been proposed that fatigue and apathy (impaired focus and decision-making) operating as energy conservation strategies may have these impacts.¹⁹ This may result in people becoming locked in a spiral of worsening mental health and increasing hunger.

¹⁷ Bateson M, Chevallier C, Johnson EA, Johnson MT, Pickett KE, Nettle D (2025) Does food insecurity cause anxiety and depression? Evidence from the changing cost of living study. PLOS Ment Health 2(7): e0000320. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmen.0000320>

¹⁸ PROOF (Food Insecurity Policy Research). Food Insecurity and Mental Health. Toronto: PROOF; February 2016. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27581581>

¹⁹ Bateson M, Pepper GV. Food insecurity as a cause of adiposity: evolutionary and mechanistic hypotheses. Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci. 2023;378(1888). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2022.0228> PMID: 37661744



Case study: Mohammad*

Mohammad went from a normal BMI on arrival in Nauru to an underweight BMI in 2 years, and has lost the largest amount of weight among the cohort.

Mohammad sought safety in Australia by sea in 2024 and was transferred to Nauru where he applied for refugee protection. He is separated from family, who remain in his country of origin.

Mohammad has no work rights and struggles to survive on the limited allowance. Mohammad has a chronic metabolic disorder, which requires eating a specific and nutritious diet to manage his condition. He struggles to afford vegetables on the allowance and the only food he can afford to eat is rice, which is sometimes unavailable. Mohammad has inadequate access to food and is now eating only one meal and one snack per day.

Mohammad weighed 67kg on arrival in Nauru with a normal BMI. However, he has lost 16kg, now weighing 51kg with an underweight BMI. Mohammad attributes his weight loss to food unaffordability in Nauru.

Further, Mohammad says the water at his accommodation is switched off 2-3 times per week, without notice. When the water is connected, it is very dirty, and he has to boil it to make it safe for drinking.

Mohammad suffers from anxiety, insomnia and suicidal ideation, which causes him significant distress as *“it is a great sin in my culture”*. He is receiving limited IHMS mental health support, and is only offered sleeping tablets to manage his condition. He feels that his mental health is declining with inadequate medical treatment and no end date to his suffering.

“We’re subject to mental abuse from the workers here. They tell us we have to return back to our country. Why did I come here? Because my country is unsafe. If the authority keeps trying to send us back it just adds more pressure and tension. They don’t understand our situation back home. We’re living in a horrible situation. I can barely survive here, I feel helpless. I’m alone and my family is not here so I have tension about my uncertain future. The weather is not good. The environment is polluted. I stay indoors to stay safe from the young locals. They ask us for money. If we decline, they swear at us and threaten and abuse us. Three days ago, an asylum seeker was attacked. We’re refugees so we don’t have any value to the local people, we’re less than human. They look at us with very low eyes.” – Mohammad, person seeking asylum

* Name changed to protect privacy

It is also difficult for people to follow the medical advice they are given in order to improve their mental and physical health. It is common for IHMS to advise people with various health conditions to eat lots of fruit and vegetables, and to exercise to improve their mood. Physical activity is well-evidenced as a protective factor for mental health, however it requires sufficient nutrition to support energy levels.

“How much money I get, it’s not enough to maintain myself, here food is so expensive, vegetables and fruit it’s impossible for me to buy. I only take 2 times meal a day, morning I don’t take breakfast because I can’t afford it. Day by day I lose my weight and my health condition is not good. I can’t support myself properly. It’s so difficult to survive in Nauru and here the weather is not good. When I meet doctors in IHMS they always said, eat vegetables, fruits and milk, but I can’t afford it.”

Anonymous person seeking asylum

This disconnect between healthcare advice, such as recommendations to consume more fruit and vegetables or exercise, and the reality of being unable to afford adequate food and feeling too weak to exercise, contributes to feelings of frustration and helplessness.



Refugees and people seeking asylum have consistently reported inadequate healthcare in Nauru. In 2024 ASRC released the policy paper “Cruelty by Design, the health crisis in offshore detention”.²⁰ Alongside these interviews about food access, ASRC conducted an updated audit of client files and IHMS medical records. The data shows a marked and concerning further deterioration of people’s physical and mental health conditions.

A range of serious health conditions were reported, with **93% reporting physical health issues** including: coronary issues, tumours, lung infections, unmanaged diabetes, nerve damage, abscesses, dental pain, anal bleeding, hearing difficulties, high cholesterol, hepatitis B, gastric issues, urinary tract infections, persistent coughing, rashes and dermatitis, loss of appetite and unexplained hair loss.

Mental health deterioration and trauma is also significant, with **95% reporting mental health concerns** including: suicidality, severe depression/anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, memory impairment and persistent rumination.

Case study: Rahim*

Rahim experienced threats of violence and exploitation at work. He was on the lower end of a normal BMI on arrival in Nauru, however he now has an underweight BMI and is the most underweight person in the cohort.

Rahim fled a dangerous political situation in his country of origin where there was an escalation in violence. He sought safety in Australia by sea in 2024, was transferred to Nauru and sought asylum. Rahim was the sole income earner for his family who were dependent on him, and he was forced to leave them behind because he was in danger.

“I weighed 47 kilograms before coming to Nauru, now I weigh 43 kilograms, the most underweight of the group of us here. I can’t afford enough food. The cost of groceries is high, the only thing you can buy is rice and a bit of meat. Vegetables are too expensive. The stress of being here has caused weight loss too. There’s nothing to do here and we always feel like we’re in prison.”

Rahim suffers anxiety and insomnia. His anxiety spiked after a recent accident he suffered. His sleeping issues and lack of food access contribute to symptoms of fatigue and weakness. He reports that IHMS mental health care is inadequate, and he has not been offered counselling.

Rahim has tried to supplement the limited allowance with work. However when he found work, he was not paid. *“My boss said, ‘if you keep asking (to be paid), I will hurt you.’ Safety is always a concern here. I never go outside if I don’t have to, we’re always being assaulted or intimidated. There is a local grocery shop. We used to go at night time but the locals saw us and started yelling at us and threatening us because we’re refugees. Case managers and police don’t do anything. Now I only leave my accommodation at night in the event of something urgent.”* – Rahim, person seeking asylum

* Name changed to protect privacy

Failures in case management compound healthcare access issues. Refugees have consistently reported that Eigigu Solutions does not provide adequate support, including reliable transportation to appointments. This has resulted in some people going without healthcare for months because it is too far or too dangerous to travel independently with unreliable transport.

Inadequate nutrition and inadequate food access are associated with increased vulnerability to disease, poorer immune function, greater risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases, and reduced capacity to recover from illness. Among refugee and displaced populations, inadequate access to food and health services can exacerbate

20 https://asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ASRCreport_Healthcrisisinoffshoredetention_July2024.pdf



existing health conditions and contribute to further physical and mental health deterioration.²¹

The medical facilities in Nauru have very limited capacity to manage complex health issues. Except for emergencies, there is no after hours IHMS primary healthcare available. IHMS provide basic laboratory testing and limited diagnostic imaging, however advanced diagnostics and specialist investigations generally require overseas referral. Other healthcare limitations in Nauru include delayed access to specialist assessment and treatment, limited and delayed dental care, no inpatient psychiatric care facility, no MRI equipment essential for emergency diagnosis, no air ambulance stationed on the island, inadequate mental health support, issues with access to medications, and no experienced specialist torture and trauma counselling provider.

Whilst there have been some upgrades to the Naoero Medical Centre and the RoN hospital, there is limited capacity to manage complex medical emergencies and specialist conditions. The hospital provides basic medical care, but patients requiring advanced diagnostics, specialist treatment, or complex surgery are often referred overseas. Former medical staff, refugee health advocates and human rights organisations have described the emergency department and wards as having inadequate equipment, poorly trained staff, and ageing infrastructure, limiting the hospital's capacity to respond to complex medical needs.²²

"In Nauru, I can't get enough food. I never take morning breakfast because money is not enough, and I also can't buy any vegetables and fruit.. it's so expensive here.. offshore detention is impacting my health and mental health. My health is not good. Maximum time I feel pain in my chest and here I also can't get proper treatment. Every day I feel I'm dying... most of the time I think my life has no meaning..."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

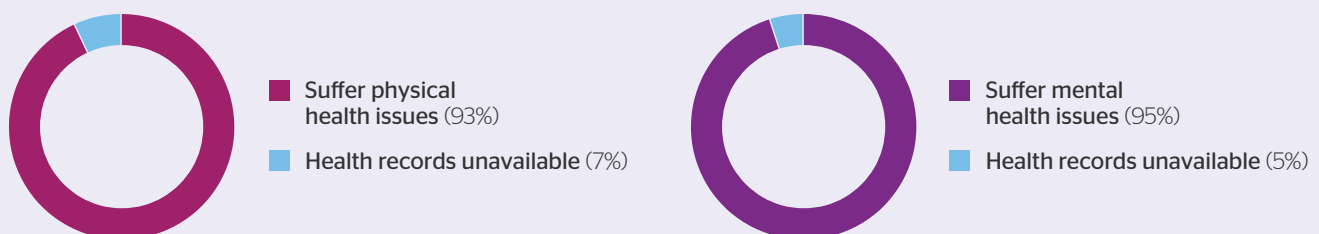
"When we first came to Nauru we were healthy. The longer we are here, the more sick we become and we cannot get treatment here on Nauru. We cannot afford to eat three meals a day. There is no resettlement for us. We are scared and we don't know what will happen to us."

Anonymous person seeking asylum

ASRC is currently supporting people experiencing persistent chest pain who have waited months to see a cardiologist, individuals waiting six months for dental treatment despite being in pain, and people waiting indefinitely for MRI scans that cannot be conducted on Nauru.

There is a lack of transparency around medical transfers and the Overseas Medical Referral pathway, and many people the ASRC works with are distressed about medical care they are not able to receive.

Records detail deterioration of people's physical and mental health conditions



Findings of ASRC comprehensive audit of 90 detention case files and health records in February 2026. This audit project was completed in parallel with the research project where 78 client were interviewed.

²¹ McKay, F & Dunn, M, 'Food security among asylum seekers in Melbourne', p. 1, <https://www.asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ANZJPH-2014-260-McKay.pdf>

²² <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/nauru-report>



Conclusion

Inadequate food access among people seeking asylum in Nauru is a manifestation of local food insecurity for the general population, restrictive policy settings and inadequate living conditions. The cumulative effects extend beyond hunger to include deteriorating physical health, poor mental health, and loss of dignity. Collectively, these findings point to a humanitarian crisis in which access to adequate, nutritious food is compromised by interconnected political, economic, social and structural factors.

The Australian Government spent almost \$1 billion in 2025-26 maintaining offshore detention in Nauru, yet the people it has transferred there are going hungry, unable to afford sufficient food to meet their nutritional needs. Without reliable access to safe drinking water or adequate healthcare, many are denied work rights and trapped indefinitely without a meaningful pathway to safety or resettlement. While millions of taxpayer dollars flow to private contractors through opaque offshore arrangements, people seeking asylum are skipping meals, losing weight, surviving on rice and water, and experiencing preventable physical and psychological decline. The stark contrast between the scale of public expenditure and the conditions endured by people seeking asylum raises serious questions about where the money is going.

Australia also bears a broader historical responsibility for conditions in Nauru. Decades of phosphate mining, undertaken with Australian involvement, devastated the island's environment, destroyed much of its agricultural capacity, and created long-term dependence on expensive imported food. Australia now compounds that legacy by outsourcing its protection obligations to the very island whose vulnerability it helped create.

Offshore detention is not merely costly, it is a policy of purposefully imposed deprivation. Australia cannot avoid its legal or moral responsibilities by transferring people to another state. As the United Nations has repeatedly affirmed, responsibility for the treatment of people transferred offshore remains with Australia.

The Australian Government created this system of offshore detention, continues to fund it and remains responsible for the harm it causes. It is clear that the offshore detention regime is beyond repair. Australia's offshore detention regime has involved the expenditure of extraordinary amounts of public money over more than a decade, while consistently failing to deliver basic standards of safety, care, or accountability.

The Australian Government must end the policy of sending people seeking asylum by sea to offshore detention on Nauru, transfer those currently there to Australia and process applications for refugee protection in the community. People found to be refugees should be permanently and swiftly resettled.

The ASRC acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn, and work every day.

We pay our respects to them, their customs, their culture, and Elders past and present. We recognise that First Nations' sovereignty and lands were never ceded. This land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

As part of our commitment to First Nations justice, we support Treaty for Victoria.

We pay the rent to Traditional Owners through www.paytherent.net.au