This case study details research commissioned by the FSA Northern Ireland in 2006 into food poverty and homelessness, to understand better the impact of poverty and social exclusion on the diet of people who are homeless in Northern Ireland.

In the summer of 2012 the UK experienced its second wettest summer on record which blighted UK harvests and led to food price rises. Wheat yields in England were down by almost 15% on the five-year average. The global price of grain sharply rose following a heatwave in Russia, and the worst drought in 50 years in the US destroyed 45% of corn and 35% of the soya bean crop. The extreme weather experienced in the summer of 2012 caused a dramatic increase in international and UK food prices, with an increases of 10% on international food markets, and 113% in domestic staples.

A changing climate therefore poses a significant threat to food-related industries through impacts on agricultural production and food security. Global loss of crops and livestock through impacts such as drought and flood increase food prices, however global food production must remain at a price that people can afford to avoid worsening levels of food poverty.

Food poverty is defined as the inability of individuals to obtain an adequate and nutritious diet due to accessibility, availability and affordability difficulties. In Northern Ireland food poverty is an urgent issue.

Key Points

The research found that although most homeless people are getting enough to eat, the quality of their diet is poor.

Key barriers to people who are homeless eating a balanced diet are their financial situation and education/cooking skills, as well as depression/stress, alcohol and drug abuse contributing to a lack of appetite, and a perception that food was not always seen as a priority.
Project Aim
The aim of the research (2006) was to better understand the impact of poverty and social exclusion on the diet of people who are homeless in Northern Ireland. The results would be used to inform policy response to tackling food poverty and homelessness.

Project Objectives
The objectives of the review were:

⇒ Establish the extent to which homeless people are vulnerable to poor diets and inadequate nutrition;

⇒ Explore the issues homeless people face in sourcing, funding, storing and preparing nourishing food for themselves and/or their families;

⇒ Explore issues of service use and service access by homeless people in Northern Ireland and develop a clear understanding of the barriers to healthy eating; and

⇒ Identify the impact of food poverty upon health and wider experiences of social exclusion.

Methodology
The methodology of the commissioned research included in-depth interviews (n=72) with people who are homeless (both rough sleepers and those accessing temporary accommodation) involving completion of food frequency questionnaires and objective measurements including blood pressure, height and weight, and in-depth interviews with key service providers for people who are homeless.

Research Tools
Food Frequency Questionnaire – a modified version of the Semi-Quantitative Food Frequency Questionnaire used in the US Nurses’ Health Study with a food list that was adapted to include foods that were commonly consumed within the UK and NI.

Semi-structured depth interview comprising questions on socio-demographic profile, accommodation status, homelessness history, income and health status of participants and questions relating to sources of food, food preparation and storage, expenditure on food and diet.
Food Poverty in Northern Ireland, FSA

Key Statistics

- The number of foods consumed by more than 50% of the sample at least once a week was quite limited and indicates a lack of variety in the diet.
- There was no significant correlation between income, duration of homelessness, age, Body Mass Index, blood pressure and intake of any macro and micronutrient.
- The main reasons why certain types of food were chosen were the availability of food (52% of respondents), money available to spend (51%), ability to prepare the food chosen (47%) and freshness of food (37%).

Research Outcomes

The research found that although most homeless people are getting enough to eat, the quality of their diet is poor. Key barriers to people who are homeless eating a balanced diet are their financial situation and education/cooking skills, as well as depression/stress, alcohol and drug abuse contributing to a lack of appetite, and a perception that food was not always seen as a priority.

The findings from the research were used to inform decisions about how FSA in NI can strengthen partnerships with key stakeholders in supporting, encouraging and developing effective policy responses to tackling food poverty and homelessness.

Project Successes

Since 2010, the FSA in Northern Ireland has jointly funded a FareShare depot in Northern Ireland. FareShare sources quality, surplus, ‘fit for purpose’ food and drink from retailers and manufacturers throughout Ireland and redistributes it to local charities feeding hungry and vulnerable people in the community.

The research contributed to the Department of Health and Social Services in Northern Ireland asking the FSA in NI to include food poverty in its remit and conduct ongoing research to better understand the issue.

The obesity prevention strategy for Northern Ireland – A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022 – seeks to develop a coordinated approach to address food poverty. The strategy sets medium-term outcomes (2016 to 2019) that ensure local support, resources and facilities are available to those experiencing food poverty. The long-term outcomes (2020 to 2022) include ensuring that a greater proportion of adults are eating a healthy diet. The indicator will be the percentage of adults experiencing food poverty. A Food Poverty Network for the Island of Ireland (the FSA in NI is co-chair with Safefood) is tasked with developing a food poverty indicator based on routinely available data.
Key Challenges

Difficulty was experienced in measuring how many people were affected by food poverty due to the complexity of the issue and the number of contributing factors. Currently there is no measure of food poverty and such an indicator, using easily accessible and routinely available data, would allow for a quantifiable assessment of the extent of food poverty in order to inform practice and policy.

Respondents have to make choices between food and other essentials.

A further challenge was the small sample size and their relatively short periods of homelessness. This sample’s nutritional status may differ from those with a longer history of homelessness.

Further Information

Food Standards Agency in NI—Food Poverty

A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022

FareShare NI

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