



Poverty and social exclusion: Review of food insecurity

Background

The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct a review of international poverty and social exclusion strategies, programmes and interventions. As part of this work, the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the LSE was commissioned to conduct a review of the international evidence on promising policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and social exclusion across twelve key policy areas. This briefing summarises the findings on food insecurity.

Introduction

Food insecurity refers to the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. Food insecurity can affect diet quality in different ways, potentially leading to undernutrition as well as overweight and obesity.

Food insecurity therefore pertains to both quantity and quality of food and encompasses psychological and social aspects experienced by people with low food security. Lacking stable access to affordable, good quality food can be extremely damaging to a range of outcomes, entrenching poverty and social exclusion.

Income levels and volatility, as well as exposure to adverse experiences and ill-health increase households' vulnerability to food insecurity. Younger people, people with disabilities and people with complex needs experience greater risks.

Support for food banks should acknowledge their limitations in terms of reach, wide-scale impact and ability to address drivers of food insecurity.

Evidence of policy effectiveness

Of the four food security 'pillars' (availability, access, utilisation and stability), access and stability are particularly important in relation to the contextual drivers of food insecurity.

General availability of food is largely not an issue in high-income countries. Utilisation requires access, but poor dietary quality (e.g. over-consumption of high energy foods, reduced intake of fruit and vegetables, limited diet diversity) can be the result of people's personal knowledge and skills.

Programmes aiming to improve low-income families' food selection and resource management skills can decrease the risk of food insecurity. However, evidence shows that differences in budgeting or food skills are not significant drivers of food insecurity.

This is because limited material and financial resources hinder the implementation of healthy eating principles promoted by such interventions. Food literacy programmes can thus play only a complementary role and need to be accompanied by measures to improve access to food to prove more effective.

The review addresses policies that aim to facilitate stable access to quality food via: a) food deserts and food swamps; b) social protection policies; c) food banks and community-based interventions and; d) free or reduced-price school meals.

Policies related to 'food deserts' and 'food swamps'

Both financial resources and geographical disparities shape access to food. Food deserts are areas inadequately served by retailers offering affordable, nutritious food. Food deserts can lead to households spending more on transport to access food and are linked to poor diet based on consumption of cheap, nutrient poor foods, and higher risks of obesity.

However, opening healthy food retailers in food deserts have shown little or no evidence that this improves diet quality and body mass index (BMI). These initiatives may not alter important demand factors, especially prices. Policies that affect this demand would thus be necessary, e.g. policies that aim to boost household income, reduce healthy-unhealthy food price ratios, extend food subsidies to online shopping, and improve education and skills.

Mixed results of policies around food deserts also suggest that the impact of introducing healthier foods into a neighbourhood may be limited by the continued accessibility of unhealthy foods.

A connected literature explores the effects of food swamps – areas with a high concentration of establishments selling high-calorie fast food relative to healthier food options. Energy-dense, processed food products have been shown to be cheaper than healthier alternatives and such price differences have been associated with lower likelihoods of a high-quality diet.

There is international evidence showing that unhealthy food outlets cluster in more deprived areas or in areas with higher concentrations of certain ethnic minority groups. The presence of a food swamp is a stronger predictor of obesity than a food desert and the food swamp effect is

stronger in less mobile areas (e.g. where people have limited access to private/public transport).

These studies suggest there is a role to be played by the regulation of these outlets, but where affordable, healthy alternatives are not provided this could decrease access to food. Creating buffer zones (e.g. around schools); incentivising the opening of healthy retailers; improving transport services; and increasing access to farmers' markets (including supporting use of food subsidies) are the types of initiatives that have been recommended and whose effectiveness currently needs evaluation.

The expansion of free school meals should be considered in light of evidence that universal provision increases uptake and reduces stigma.

Social protection policies

There is good evidence that social protection policies, including cash transfers and food-specific social security interventions (e.g. food subsidies), reduce household food insecurity.

The US Supplement Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP) is the US's largest federal food assistance programme, which provides means-tested benefits to purchase eligible food in authorised retailers. The programme is found to be effective, reducing the prevalence of severe food insecurity by an estimated 20-50%. It also shows positive effects on child and adult health.

A comparison study found that both cash and food assistance are effective in reducing food insecurity among lone parents. There was no evidence that food assistance is more effective than cash programmes. In turn there is evidence that social security retrenchment and increased sanctioning and conditionality have negative effects on food security. This is shown by UK evidence that food insecurity increased following social welfare spending cuts.

A subsection of food subsidies targets specific groups (e.g. women or children) and supports access to specific products, e.g. fruit, vegetables or essential goods such as milk. Women are often the direct recipients of these vouchers, and this can contribute to distributing resources within the household and ameliorating the risks of some household members accessing less food than others. There is also evidence that labelling part of the household budget to a certain use shapes the way it is spent.

There are a range of factors which can limit the effectiveness of these food subsidy programmes including low take-up and awareness; rising food prices eroding voucher value; complex registration procedures; exclusionary eligibility criteria; and supply issues.

Food banks and community-based interventions

There is a lack of robust evidence on the effectiveness of food banks and community-based interventions (such as community-based kitchens, food boxes, programmes offering food as well as nutrition, budgeting, and lifestyle education) in preventing people from going hungry and experiencing severe food insecurity.

In relation to food banks, while these services can provide immediate relief for severe food deprivation, a high prevalence of severe food insecurity remains. Factors that may explain their limited effectiveness include reliance on donations, lack of resources, limited operating times, nutritional inadequacy of foods provided, entry requirements and stigma.

Food bank use substantially underestimates the prevalence of food insecurity and is not a reliable indicator of the nature of vulnerabilities experienced by the larger food insecure population. Overall, food banks do not address drivers of food insecurity, meaning upstream interventions are necessary.

Community-based interventions can mitigate adverse experiences and economic shocks that would further entrench households' food insecurity. However, people experiencing

deteriorating circumstances often struggle to remain in these community programmes.

Overall, food banks and community-based interventions lack the reach to have a significant impact on food insecurity on a wide scale because they only serve a small proportion of the food insecure population. Increased use of food banks and community-based food programmes among those who receive social assistance signals that the support they receive is insufficient to cover basic needs. There is concern that reliance on these types of relief programmes reduces focus on expanding the coverage and generosity of insufficient safety nets.

Free or reduced-price school meals

Free or reduced-price school meals have been shown to alleviate food insecurity. International evidence, particularly from the US, shows positive effects – albeit to a lesser extent than household-level programmes like SNAP. Benefits from these programmes also accrue to others in the households as they free up resources that can help to improve household food security.

Different levels of food insecurity impact these programmes' ability to make a difference: for instance, the School Breakfast Programme in the US succeeded in substantially reducing the risk of marginal food insecurity but not in alleviating severe food insecurity. Studies looking at the impact of summer programmes find reductions in food insecurity among participants but also low participation rates, and therefore less widespread reach than programmes like the National School Lunch Programme. Evidence of the impact of these programmes on diet and health outcomes (e.g. obesity rates) is mixed.

Take-up is an issue for most targeted forms of assistance due to a lack of information and stigma. Universal free school meals have been shown to increase participation rates, including in the UK, and positive associations have been found particularly between free school lunches

and food security, diet quality, and academic performance, while more tentative positive effects have been found on BMI.

Promising actions

The review concludes with promising actions to consider in the Welsh context as emerging from the analysis of the international literature:

- 1. Support for food banks and community-based interventions (e.g. community pantries, community cafes etc.) should acknowledge their limitations** in terms of reach, wide-scale impact and ability to address drivers of food insecurity. Upstream interventions are necessary to ensure that households have the financial means to meet their basic needs.
 - Localised solutions should **promote service coordination and provide diversified support** (e.g. in relation to housing, mental health, debt relief).

- Key challenges to tackle are uneven provision, lack of sustainability, limited operating times, stigma, restrictive eligibility criteria and limited food choice and availability.

- 2. The expansion of free school meals** should be considered in light of evidence that universal provision reduces stigma and increases uptake. Restrictive eligibility criteria undermine their role in improving households' overall resources and work incentives. A range of actions can be evaluated in terms of feasibility, including:

- **Revising eligibility criteria** that currently exclude a large number of vulnerable households (e.g. maintaining extensions adopted during the Coronavirus crisis).
- **Adopting universal free school meals**, for a limited age group as in England and Scotland, or for all school-aged children. Complementary **area-based solutions** could also be assessed.

Find out more

For the full report see Bucelli, I., and McKnight, A. (2022). *Poverty and social exclusion: review of international evidence on food insecurity*. Cardiff: WCPP.

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is

based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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