

Understanding food in the context of poverty, economic insecurity and social exclusion

Area of research interest: [Behaviour and perception](#)

Study duration: 2014-10-01

Project code: FS307008

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Background

The key strategic driver for this research was the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland policy, 'A Fitter Future for All: a framework for preventing and addressing overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022'. Within this strategy document, the FSA in Northern Ireland assumes co-responsibility for the short-term objective of developing a co-ordinated approach to address 'food poverty'; the medium-term objective of ensuring local support, resources, and facilities are available to those experiencing 'food poverty'; and the long-term objective of a greater proportion of adults eating a healthy diet (as measured by the indicator: percentage of adults experiencing food poverty).

A Food Poverty Network, of which FSA in NI is co-Chair, has been set up to measure the extent of food poverty across the island of Ireland. Network members are seeking to develop a coordinated approach to address 'food poverty' in order to inform and influence practice and policy.

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Research Approach

FSA in NI is interested in gaining an improved understanding of food in the context of poverty. The overall aim of the research was to provide an updated and critical body of evidence on "food poverty". In particular, to more fully understand the social determinants which may result in a diet that is not adequate, nutritious or socially acceptable. The rapid evidence assessment / literature review has a specific Northern Ireland focus but draws on research from the UK, EU and international sources. The research also addresses the advantages and disadvantages of using a food poverty indicator as a way of quantifying and measuring the issues.

The research consists of:

- a Rapid Evidence Assessment of relevant literature, focused on social scientific evidence
- a targeted programme of twenty in-depth interviews with key stakeholders
- two workshops with policy and research communities

Specific issues the rapid evidence assessment addresses are:

- whether and how the issue(s) of food in the context of poverty, economic insecurity and social exclusion can be defined and measured
- the advantages and disadvantages of using a “food poverty” indicator as a way of quantifying and measuring the issue(s)
- whether and how families in economic hardship prioritise food
- the nutritional or social adequacy of the diet of families in economic hardship
- the social determinants which may result in a diet that is not adequate, nutritious or socially acceptable

a discussion of this evidence in regards to the specific Northern Ireland context

Outcomes of the research overall have provided:

- recommendations for policy makers regarding the policy implications of the findings
- practical and realistic actions for the All Island Food Poverty Network to consider on how to address food poverty.
- next steps for the FSA to NI to address the issues of food in the context of poverty, economic insecurity and social exclusion including:
 - relevant questions and approaches to the issue
 - how lessons learnt in wider issues of poverty, economic insecurity and social exclusion might be applicable to food
 - any gaps in the evidence and where future research might be best directed

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Results

The research was conducted in three phases: a formal review of recent, relevant literature; a programme of interviews with experts and stakeholders; and two interactive workshops with policy makers and practitioners.

The report provides evidence that more and more people in Northern Ireland are struggling to afford to buy food. At the same time, evidence is presented that although many people in poverty or suffering economic hardship are still buying food, they are buying cheaper and less nutritious foods.

As a working definition of food poverty, the study developed an approach suggesting that where constraints are such that it is not possible for individuals or households to consume a nutritionally adequate diet, they could be considered to be in food poverty.

The research concluding having a credible and widely-acknowledged way of measuring food poverty would help to highlight the significance of the issue, and thereby raise its profile, secure attention and harness resources. Measuring food poverty would also provide a basis for assessing the success (or otherwise) of initiatives seeking to address food poverty. The research reviewed three measures currently available or under development in Northern Ireland and recommends one of these measures should be taken forward as a definitive measure of food poverty in Northern Ireland, in order for the issue to be consolidated and understood.

Recommended Actions:

- Action 1: Develop and promote effective indicator / measure
- Action 2: Undertake comprehensive policy and programme mapping
- Action 3: Promote and enhance community food initiatives
- Action 4: Include tackling food poverty within ongoing local government reform

- Action 5: Support and encourage improved life skills among key target groups
- Action 6: Improve coordination among existing activities

It is recommended an Action Plan is developed and published taking into account the horizon for the recommended actions is likely to be between 12 and 24 months.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

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