

WHAT IS THE COST OF A HEALTHY FOOD BASKET IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS:



Eat less well



Higher level of diet-related disease

PILOT RESEARCH TO FIND OUT THE COST OF A FOOD BASKET THAT IS:



TOTAL COST AND PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLD BUDGET FOR TWO HOUSEHOLD TYPES



£59
Per week

Pensioner living alone



£1119
Per Week

Two-parent, two-child (2-4 & 6-11 years)



Pensioner living alone on State Pension



Two-parent, two-child household on Jobseeker's Allowance



Two-parent, two-child household on minimum wage



LOW INCOME HOUSEHOLDS WOULD HAVE TO SPEND 1/3 OF THEIR TAKE-HOME INCOME ON A HEALTHY FOOD BASKET

Cost of healthy food basket in Northern Ireland

Pilot study for two household types

Food is a flexible aspect of the household budget. Low-cost nutritionally-poor foods can satisfy hunger and calorie needs in the short term. Being unable to access a healthy and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability and accessibility is known as food poverty. Those on low income eat less well and suffer greater diet-related health diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes and are most at risk of experiencing food poverty. An initial estimate based on responses to a selection of questions taken from the Health Survey Northern Ireland suggests that 8% of households are experiencing food poverty.

The objectives of this research were to determine the cost of a healthy food basket for two household types:

- A pensioner living alone receiving the State Pension
- A family household, two adults and two children, one in pre-school (aged 2–4) and one in primary school (aged 6–11) with the following income scenarios applied
 - The family in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance
 - One parent working full-time and earning the national minimum wage. (see table 1)

Approach

This research was consumer-led rather than being expert-led. Food menus were developed by consumers who agreed that the menus met a minimal acceptable standard of living while also meeting nutritional needs.

Findings

Menus for the two household types were agreed by the focus groups. No major differences emerged between the urban (Belfast and Derry/Londonderry) and rural (Enniskillen) focus groups in terms of patterns or the stores that were identified for food shopping.

There was strong consensus across groups as to what is an acceptable and healthy food basket. Interestingly few changes had to be made by the nutrition experts.

There was consensus that the menus include additional items such as alcohol, eating out, takeaways and extra food for visitors and Christmas reflecting the role that food plays in social participation.

The cost of a healthy basket for the two household types is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Total cost of food basket per household type

Household type	Total cost of food basket	Take-home income	Proportion of take-home income (%)
Pensioner living alone on State Pension	£59	£164	36
Two-parent, two-child household on Jobseeker's Allowance	£119	£338	35
Two-parent, two-child household on minimum wage	£119	£415	29

The spend on key food categories by the two household types are shown in Table 2. Most money in the food basket went towards meat and fruits and vegetables.

Table 2: Percentage spend on key food categories

Food type	Percentage of basket cost for pensioner living alone	Percentage of basket cost for two-parent, two-child household
Meat	20%	25%
Fruits and vegetables (including potatoes)	21%	23%
Milk, cheese, eggs	6%	11%
Breads and cereals	4%	11%

Methodology

A methodology known as the 'Consensual Budget Standards' was used. For each household three focus groups were established in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Enniskillen to include both urban and rural households. Those who took part in the research reflected a social class mix. Each group took part in the first three stages of the research between September and November 2014.

1. Orientation Phase

- A seven-day menu was developed by one group and then reviewed by other groups
- The UK eatwell plate was used as a reference during group discussion
- Outlets where food items are generally bought were identified

2. Task Phase

- Amended versions of the menus were reviewed by all groups and a consensus agreed
- The menus were reviewed by nutritionists at Ulster University

3. Costing Phase

- Items priced in retailer with largest market share in NI (Tesco)
- Items purchased in local butchers and convenience stores were priced

4. Check Back Phase

- Suggested amendments from nutritionist were reviewed.

The online calculator www.entitledto.co.uk was used to generate the income scenarios. The take-home pay took into account tax credits, housing benefit, child benefit and pension credits. Other entitlements were not taken into consideration.

Key conclusions

- The cost of an acceptable and healthy food basket was determined for two household types in NI using a validated and robust method.
- The two low-income households would have to spend approximately one third of their take-home income on this food basket.
- The cost of the food basket for the single-person household was comparatively high relative to the two-parent, two-child household.
- The social and cultural aspect of food was reinforced by the inclusion of additional items such as eating out and providing for visitors.
- The flexible nature of the household's food budget was confirmed by the focus groups.

This research should be extended to other household types and be updated on an annual basis to inform policy and practice in the area of food-related inequalities.

To download a copy of the full report visit www.safefood.eu
The research was conducted by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. Note: All figures have been rounded to the nearest pound.