

What is the extent of food poverty in Ireland? Sharon Friel¹, *Catherine Conlon*²

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Background

Policy Response to Food Poverty in Ireland is a Combat Poverty Agency commissioned collaborative study.

Aim

For the first time in Ireland this study seeks to locate food poverty within a social exclusion framework wherein the inability to enjoy an adequate and nutritious diet impacts on both health and well-being of individuals and households as well as on the social behaviour of food-poor households and their members. Some of the issues being explored relate to socioeconomic circumstance, affordability and access to food and examine nutrient intakes and dietary patterns as an outcome of that process.

Methods

A two pronged approach is being used to help develop an understanding of the processes involved in shaping the dietary behaviour of Irish social groups. One aspect has been the investigation of dietary patterns using existing national, regional and local data pertaining to the general population, low income mothers, homeless people, prisoners and rural dwelling. Household level analyses explored purchasing patterns and the impact of retail provision and identification of possible influencing factors.

Results

Social inequalities in dietary behaviour exist in Ireland. Socially disadvantaged people show worse food intake, poorer compliance with dietary recommendations and less healthy nutrient intake. Differential household purchasing patterns exist, with disadvantaged groups spending relatively more money on food but not on the healthier option. Such groups experience difficulties around access to an adequate variety of good quality affordable foodstuffs. Purchasing of food is done in supermarkets which are less likely to stock healthy foods and when they do are often more expensive. Whilst socially disadvantaged groups may know what constitutes a healthy diet they are often restricted physically and mentally due to financial matters.

Conclusions

A comprehensive coordinated policy approach is needed to address the complex constellation of issues affecting food poverty and social inequalities in dietary habits in Ireland. This should involve a partnership of statutory, voluntary, community and research agencies, driven at the government level.