

Food poverty



NHS Health Scotland is a national Health Board working with and through public, private and third sector organisations to reduce health inequalities and improve health. We are committed to working with others and provide a range of services to support our stakeholders to take the action required to reduce health inequalities and improve health.

Key messages

- Food poverty is preventable. It is a consequence of the socioeconomic and environmental context in which people live.
- Food poverty has negative health and economic outcomes, as well as social and psychological impacts.
- The existence of emergency food aid provision reflects the growth of both episodic and chronic severe food poverty. As food bank usage is just one aspect of food poverty, it does not show the nature and the scale of the problem.

Key actions

- To increase our understanding of the prevalence, nature, causes and consequences of food poverty, we must use recent improvements in measuring and monitoring food poverty. We must also use qualitative data, practitioner experience and community-led research.
- The benefits of taking a human rights-based approach to food poverty needs to be better understood and applied, as does the contribution of lived experience and community-led responses.
- Emergency food provision should not replace, or form an integral part of, an adequate social security net.

What is food poverty/food insecurity?

Food poverty is one specific dimension of poverty.¹ Clearly and consistently defining food poverty and its related issues presents numerous challenges. The most commonly used terms are often used interchangeably and can be confused or interpreted differently (see page 9).

NHS Health Scotland uses the following, widely used,² definition:

'The inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.'³

The more specific term of food security, and household food insecurity (see page 9), is more commonly used in terms of measurement of the scale and understanding the nature of food poverty.

How does food poverty affect health and health inequalities?

Food is an important mechanism linking poverty with health and social outcomes. It is also a fundamental human right.

Not having access to or being able to consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food has significant consequences for an individual's nutritional intake and subsequent health and wellbeing. The detrimental impact of poor nutrition on health outcomes, from malnutrition and numerous non-communicable diseases to psychological wellbeing, underlines the importance of access to and choice over an adequate, well-balanced and healthy diet throughout someone's life. Cultural, social and environmental barriers to eating a healthy diet are associated with socioeconomic status, ethnicity or geographical region. Nutrition-related inequalities (i.e. differences in what people eat across social groups) can affect health and wellbeing and contribute to wider health inequalities.

The social and psychological consequences of experiencing food poverty, combined with the physical health costs of an inadequate or uncertain diet, present key challenges when trying to improve health, reduce health inequalities and reduce health costs.

Why do we have food poverty?

Food poverty is complex and multidimensional, with different combinations of factors having an effect on individuals, families and communities.

These factors include:



income



local availability of and access to retailers selling affordable, nutritious food



access to transport



access to cooking, storage and preparation facilities



appropriate food skills and knowledge.

As with all poverty, food poverty is primarily driven by income deprivation. Although food choice is influenced by many interrelated factors, in a consumer-driven environment, the importance of food price and having money to buy food are key.

Rising living costs, low wages, job insecurity, insecure or underemployment, the low level of social security benefits, and changes to and inefficient implementation of the welfare system since 2012 have impacted the number of people experiencing food poverty. Food price instability and the higher food inflation experienced by poorer households further increases uncertainty around what is affordable.⁴ As a specific dimension of poverty, food poverty is ultimately rooted in political and social decisions made in our society.

'A rise in food prices is more difficult for low income households to cope with because those on low incomes spend a greater proportion of their income on food - a rise in food prices has a disproportionately large impact on money available to spend elsewhere... Food is exerting greater pressure on household budgets since 2007 when food prices started to rise in real terms.'⁵

Who experiences food poverty?

A number of complex and multidimensional factors, such as economic, social, psychological and geographical factors, result in individuals, families and communities experiencing food poverty to different degrees.

The experience can often involve sacrifice and dietary adjustments, e.g. mothers skipping meals so that their children can eat,⁶ and compromises on food quality and variety.⁷ The experience for some can also involve reliance on family, friends and neighbours.

Below are some quotes from studies of food poverty. These reflect the mixture of motivations and emotions felt by individuals and families experiencing food poverty – the worry, ingenuity, embarrassment, resilience, frustration and sacrifice.

To buy reduced price products may mean low quality or about to expire food. However, this type of food helps to rescue the day.

I'm lucky, my family, my mum has helped me out, I've had help, but if I hadn't had that to lean on, basically, I know for a fact, I would have to have went to a food bank.

The finance wasn't coming in enough to heat the house, or it was heat the house or feed the kids and it was torture, I was lucky that my family helped.

If I've been at the lunch club I'll probably skip a meal.

You don't want people thinking 'Oh you cannot cope'. So you try to make the effort to cook. I can do it to show folk 'I'm coping there is nothing to worry about'. When I close the door it's 'sod it why should I be bothered?'

I quite like to go for a coffee to be sociable. I know I can't afford to do that all the time.

It's no just food they need, they need good food to grow. Sometimes you have to sacrifice things for yourself to have good meals so they are getting what they need.

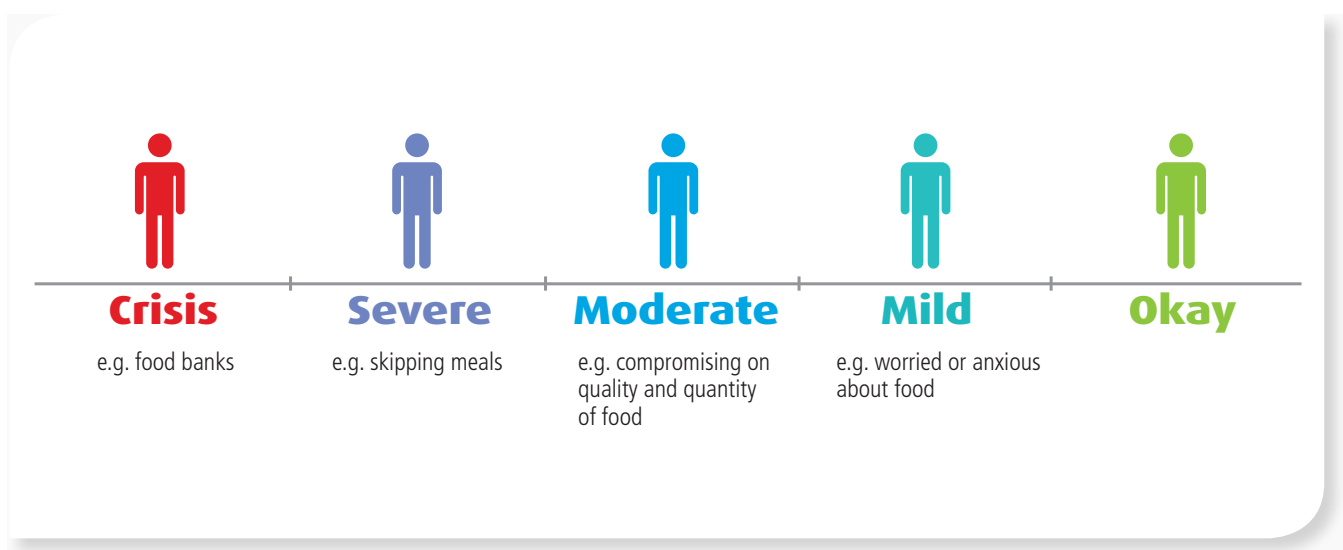
Quotes taken from community-led research undertaken by Central and West Integration Network (Glasgow), the Borders Healthy Living Network and Linwood Community Development Trust, supported by Community Food and Health (Scotland.)⁸

What is the nature and scale of food poverty/food insecurity in Scotland?

Effective monitoring and evaluation are needed to not only better understand the extent of food insecurity in Scotland but also to understand its intensity and the consequences for particular parts of the population in certain circumstances.

From 2017/18, questions on household food insecurity, based on the internationally recognised Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES),⁹ have been incorporated into the Scottish Health Survey. No single tool can account for the many dimensions of food and nutrition security; however, it is crucial that a growing body of data is efficiently analysed, complemented with targeted research and used to inform policy responses.

Where are you on the food security line?



'The fact that over one-quarter of respondents to the survey reported having to go into debt at least once in the previous year to pay for food provides a stark indication of how fundamental the impacts of financial difficulties can be.'¹⁰

'It was also established that for every food bank user, there were nearly four other households who experienced frequent difficulty paying for food, but who had not used a food bank.'¹¹

'The more detail you have the less risk there is of underestimating or misunderstanding food insecurity...we can't forget the social dimension of food...narrow definitions lead to narrow solutions'.¹²

Further action to reduce food poverty

'Establishing the right to adequate food in Scots Law will not in itself end food insecurity, just as homelessness legislation has not eradicated homelessness. It would mean, however, that the Scottish Government and other public bodies would have a duty to ensure that all individuals have secure access to adequate and affordable food including the means to purchase it.'²

Responses – nationally and locally – need to reflect improved understanding of the nature of food poverty and need to be proportionate to the scale of the challenge. This should be informed by an inclusive and empowering approach that recognises and addresses inequalities. The structural causes of health inequalities – the unequal distribution of income, power and wealth – will need to be tackled, alongside engaging those facing food poverty.

We should also take a human-rights based approach. This is about making sure that people's rights are put at the very centre of policies and practices.

This approach has been well laid out by the **Scottish National Action Plan** on human rights and within the core messages from the government's short-life working group on food poverty, **Dignity: ending hunger together in Scotland**.²

The Independent Working Group on Food Poverty was set up to look at food poverty and food insecurity in Scotland. Six core messages were presented in the **report** from the short-life working group on food poverty.

1. The biggest problem is not having enough money to feed yourself.
2. Every response must be dignified.
3. Involving people experiencing food insecurity is where we will find the solution.
4. Everyone has the right to good-quality and nutritious food.
5. Food is about community and not just consumption.
6. Emergency food aid is not a long-term solution to hunger.

Recommendations

The group highlighted 19 recommendations for action at national, local and community level:

1. The Independent Working Group on Food Poverty should continue to work in partnership to help deliver the recommendations in their report.

Dignity

2. Any organisation which secures Scottish Government funding and support to work on tackling food poverty must demonstrate how its approach promotes dignity and is helping to transition away from emergency food aid as the primary response.

Understand

3. The Scottish Government should explore how the right to food can be enshrined within Scots Law.
4. The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a robust system to measure food insecurity in Scotland, alongside wider measures of poverty.
5. The Scottish Government, having established reliable population data on household food insecurity, should set stretching targets to reduce it and explore how these could be integrated within the National Performance Framework.
6. The Scottish Government should lead in communicating clearly and consistently the causes of food insecurity as identified by research.

Prevent

7. The Scottish Government should use all available devolved powers, including procurement rules, to ensure work is a reliable route out of poverty, including payment of the Living Wage as defined by the Living Wage Foundation, and the promotion of decent work more widely.
8. The Scottish Government should use new social security powers to improve the value of social security support, initially prioritising households with children through a top up to Child Benefit.
9. The Scottish Government and local authorities should prioritise investment in benefits advice and information services in order to maximise people's incomes and should carry out a review to enhance the quality of the service provided.
10. The Scottish Government should ensure key stakeholders, especially those with direct experience of the social security system, are fully involved in consultation on the forthcoming Scottish Social Security Bill, the development of the new Social Security Agency, and the creation of its new employment programmes.
11. The Scottish Government should continue to make strong representation to the UK Government with a view to reducing the risk of sanctions, maladministration, error and delay in the UK benefits system.

12. The Scottish Government and local authorities should use all available devolved powers to reduce the costs for energy, rent, transport and the school day for low-income households.
13. The Scottish Government and local authorities should prioritise investment in healthy meals at school, and further explore the potential for providing healthy meals as part of school holiday programmes.

Respond

14. The Scottish Government, along with local authorities and all those responding to acute food insecurity, should ensure widespread use of the Scottish Welfare Fund as the first port of call for emergency support and ensure the fund is administered in a way that allows this.
15. If demand for the Scottish Welfare Fund grows, the Scottish Government should increase investment in it accordingly.
16. Community food providers (including those providing food in an emergency) should work together to improve the quality of the food provided and create opportunities to enable the sharing of meals, the provision of choice, and culturally appropriate nutritious foods.

Invest

17. The social enterprise and community sector should continue the development of community food hubs across Scotland, supported by the recently expanded Fair Food Fund.
18. The Scottish Government, assisted by the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty, should work with non-government donors to increase the capacity of funding and expertise to tackle food insecurity.
19. Local authorities should work with others including those with lived experience of food poverty to develop and implement Community Food Plans, of which a central element should be reducing food insecurity and hunger.

Definitions of terms relating to food poverty

Food poverty

The inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.

Food security

All people, at all times, have physical, economic and social access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.¹⁴

Household food insecurity

Households with an income below 60% of the average income (where the 'average income' is the median household equivalised income). A household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

Hunger

An individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.¹⁵

Food aid

An umbrella term used to describe any type of aid-giving activity that aims to provide relief from the symptoms of food insecurity and poverty. It includes a broad spectrum of activities, from small to large scale, local to national, emergency one-off operations or established food banks.¹⁶

Food bank

A place where stocks of food, typically basic provisions and non-perishable items, are supplied free of charge to people in need.¹⁷

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Collaboration with NHS Health Scotland

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