food aid provision context: poverty, household food security & health

Elizabeth Dowler
Registered Public Health Nutritionist &
Professor of Food & Social Policy
University of Warwick;
member/trustee Food Ethics Council

- household food security, poverty & health
- recent Defra funded review
- food aid provision & relationship to hhfs
- evidence: what do we know/need to know?

know food, nutrition essential for health & wellbeing

- much research food components
- patterns of eating important
  - complexity, meals
  - vegetables, fruits, starchy etc
- outcomes: infectious & chronic disease; deficiency; body size – long term effects
- wellbeing: valuing food within real human needs
  (Max Neef) being, having, doing, interacting
**household food insecurity ≈ food poverty**  
*no established definition, but...*

- ‘the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food for health, in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so’  
  (Dowler et al, *Poverty Bites*, 2001, CPAG)

- households who have to spend > 10% of annual income on food  
  (Centre for Economics & Business Research, 2013)

  - need to ground in lived experiences - but recognise aspirations
  - acknowledge as structural, not an individual, problem

---

**context: economic austerity**

- retrenchment in public & private sector
  - loss of jobs / job security
  - gendered effects
  - reduction in community support

- wage freeze/ not keeping pace with inflation

- changes to welfare system
  - severe cuts / levels frozen/ caps & sanctions
  - reduction in entitlement
  - disability

- regional variations in costs and in cuts

- housing costs critical
context: food prices UK
(Hard to Swallow: the facts about food poverty. Centre for Economics & Business Research for Kelloggs & Trussell Trust, March 2013)

Dec 2007-2012, CPI ↑ 17.7% but food prices ↑ 28.2%; people spending much more on food but buying less – eg vegetable expenditure ↑ 15.3%; consumption ↓ 8%

4 out of 5 teachers say children coming to school hungry

poorest 10% spend almost 24% income on food, while richest 10% spend 4%

comparison Minimum Income Standard April 2013
(Hirsch, 2013 www.jrf.org.uk)

and wage income

and out of work benefits
Household food security: a review of Food Aid

(Lambie-Mumford, Crossley, Jensen, Verbeke, Dowler, 2014, for Defra)

- **Rapid Evidence Assessment** Feb-March 2013
- who asking for such help, how and why
- rapid, systematic literature (UK & international) review, brief case studies, expert workshop

**findings**

- food aid: diverse initiatives providing food to people in need - food banks, meal projects, soups runs, food vouchers, community care (home meals)
- some long-standing; many new; not all food banks

**findings cont..**


- most literature international – useful information
- little systematic documentation of UK initiatives’ range and practices
- The Trussell Trust best-known national food bank network; many independent initiatives exist (food banks & other projects) but hard to document
- numbers of people being helped difficult to gauge but probably underestimated
- now growing demand – 1st timers and repeats
Food Aid UK in context: evidence review for APPG Hunger and Food Poverty April 2014  House of Commons

Elizabeth Dowler
Department of Sociology
University of Warwick

findings cont..

- some evidence on drivers for seeking food aid
- triggers mostly crises in income: job loss and/or problems with benefits; these underpinned by on-going low income, rising costs, increasing indebtedness
- informal food aid may relieve emergency needs but not underlying causes of household food insecurity
- households struggle to manage; food aid is ‘last resort’; probably many do not use
- other help/support from providers very important
- provision is vulnerable to not meeting demand; policy must focus on long-term needs & causes

what we know...

- many asking for help with food ⇒ growing response
- local councils, faith groups, increasingly involved:
  - helping support food banks and projects
  - investigating needs
- CAB and others see households left with no money
- little evidence of fraud, duplicity
- evolving terminology; food aid claimants ≠ food poor or food insecure
- avoid losing sight of long-term drivers & experiences
- avoid entrenchment inadequate systems
gaps in evidence & research: who is likely to be food insecure?

- low income households
  (<60% median income; lowest income decile)
- households paid the NMW or claiming benefits
- households facing specific cuts and sanctions
- households in areas where good quality food at reasonable prices is particularly hard to find
  - food expenditure? foods bought? food experience?
  - regional variations in costs; impact household size, disability
- quality of school or workplace meals

---

gaps in evidence & research: who is addressing?

- research by Food Standards Agency, Oxfam et al; calls Research Councils, health research agencies
- local authorities, cities, dioceses, faith groups
- CAB and other support groups

challenges in research?

- who to contact & how; narratives needed - voices
- sensitivity of information/collection (& verification)
- interpreting data (e.g. on budgeting)
- devising, validating, robust indicators – who decides?