



The Right2Eat Project

Short Report: Food poverty amongst the street homeless in the UK

Summary of Key Points:

1. Each year, thousands of people face extreme hunger.
2. A lot of individuals are considered hidden homeless.
3. There's a strong link between homeless individuals' experience of homelessness and food insecurity/poverty.
4. A major cause of food poverty was inadequate income.
5. Those who can afford rent payments are often trapped in low-paying and insecure employment, meaning little to no disposable income for food.
6. Homeless individuals who experience food poverty are more likely to engage in activities which can often worsen their situation, such as illegal activities and substance abuse.
7. The consequences of street homeless people not having access to food are numerous and revolve around serious physical and mental health issues, a continued cycle of poverty, and ultimately, in extreme cases, death.

Report

Food poverty amongst the street homeless in the UK has been a major problem for decades. Each year, thousands of people face extreme hunger, whilst many people are homeless. With the number of people using food banks use, the number of people facing food poverty due to homelessness is seemingly increasing this social issue. This article will outline the research into food poverty amongst the street homeless in the UK, exploring studies regarding the extent of the issue, its causes and effects, and potential solutions.

The Extent of the Problem

Research (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2015) has showed that the capital is a hot spot for homelessness with 4,940 people estimated to be sleeping rough. This figure has steadily increased in recent years. The situation is further compounded by the fact that a vast majority of these individuals are considered “hidden homeless”. For example, some hidden homeless people do not come to the attention of local authorities because their homelessness is difficult to quantify because they are either “sofa surfers”, staying with family or friends or living in squats etc. (White et al, 2022).

Not all street homeless people experience extreme hunger as depending on individual circumstances some are better situated than others to cope with the stressful nature of homelessness when addressing their sustenance needs (Lee & Greif ,2008).

Causes and Effects

Research into food poverty amongst the street homeless has focused on the lack of affordable housing as the key cause of homelessness. This is because so many people are unable to afford the rising rents in the UK, resulting in an increase in the levels of people registered homeless by their local authority. Furthermore, those who can afford rent payments are often trapped in low-paying and insecure employment, meaning little to no disposable income for food. This creates the issue of “in-work poverty” (Centre for Social Justice, 2015), where individuals are working full-time or close to full-time, but remain trapped in poverty due to low wages and a lack of financial support. The effects of food poverty on street homeless people range from malnutrition to psychological issues such as anxiety and depression. In addition, homeless individuals who experience food poverty are more likely to engage in activities which can often worsen their situation, such as illegal activities and substance abuse.

Potential Solutions

There are a variety of initiatives already in place to help reduce the levels of food poverty amongst the street homeless. In the UK, the Trussell Trust provides emergency food banks across the country, an increase in availability of shelters and soup kitchens (Trussell Trust, 2019), as well as tailored financial support from the government. In terms of longer-term solutions, there have been calls for a major increase in the supply of affordable housing, as well as support for homeless individuals to access employment and education (Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

The consequences of street homeless people not having access to food

The consequences of street homeless people not having access to food are immense and far-reaching. It can lead to serious physical and mental health issues, a continued cycle of poverty, and ultimately, in extreme cases, death. Without access to food, the homeless person can experience a range of serious physical health problems, such as malnourishment, fatigue, anemia, and vitamin and mineral deficiencies. All of these can contribute to an overall weak immune system, making the homeless person even more susceptible to infection and disease than the average population. Malnourishment can also cause stunted physical growth, both in terms of height and the development of muscles.

In general, research has found that a range of psychological problems have been linked to food insecurity (Myers, 2020), including anxiety, depression and decreased life satisfaction. This can be exacerbated by prolonged periods of isolations such as lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, which found that the effects of food insecurity on mental health are linked to the increased risk of mental illness (Fang et al 2021).

The physical health problems that come with not having access to food can also have profound mental health impacts. Research suggests that food insecurity is associated with poor overall health and even increased mortality. Without access to proper sustenance, homeless people can suffer mental health consequences that can lead to a worsened quality of life and greater risk of psychological distress down the line. Food insecurity is also linked to a stagnant cycle of poverty. Without the energy and resources that food provides, growth and opportunity for the homeless can be severely limited. Not only will they lack the physical power to do hard labour jobs, but their mental health issues can also make it difficult for them to attain adequate education and job opportunities. With limited prospects for mobility, they are left with no choice but to stay in poverty. Without access to food, the most severe consequence of all is death. This can come from a variety of causes, including undernourishment, diseases, and the desperation to survive that can make people take actions they normally wouldn't.

There are many causes of death amongst homeless people in the UK such as alcohol and drug poisoning and suicide (See ONS, 2021). However, less is known about how many deaths amongst homeless people in the UK is the result of starvation which is one of the leading causes of death among homeless populations worldwide. Whilst it is possible that the number of people living on the streets who are malnourished, and starving is small, it should be noted that this number may be far greater than official statistics suggest. Further, it is important to remember that whatever the official figures state it should not distract from the fact that they are an extremely vulnerable population. There tends to be a lot of stigma when it comes to the public perception of homelessness and homeless people, which can lead to increased invisibility and lack of access to adequate nutrition for homeless individuals. As previously mentioned, the prevalence of homelessness and food insecurity is also compounded by poverty, mental illness, and drug addiction. These and many other consequences paint a grim picture of what can happen when street homeless people don't have access to food. With adequate resources to feed the homeless, all of these issues can be prevented, and major steps can be taken towards ending homelessness and poverty. Sadly, we are still far away from that goal, and the consequences of not having enough food will continue to be felt until then.

Summary

In summary, food poverty amongst the street homeless in the UK is a major issue. With rising rates of homelessness, living in poverty, and reliance on food banks, the issue needs urgent attention. The research has clearly shown that inadequate income is the major cause of food poverty for the street homeless, and interventions such as increasing access to affordable housing, alongside employment and education support are essential. Despite the challenges, there are a range of initiatives in place to help alleviate the situation, with a real need to focus on long-term solutions in order to reduce the pain and distress of food poverty.

Reading time: 5 minutes

Keywords: homeless, food, poverty, people, street, access, individuals, homelessness, health, mental

Words: 1,321

Characters: 8,406

Sentences: 53

Paragraphs: 65

What can be done to prevent street homeless people from starving?

1. Provide food assistance programs and services such as soup kitchens, meal delivery, and food pantries.
2. Develop low-cost housing options to reduce the high cost of living for those at risk of homelessness.
3. Increase access to mental health services to ensure that individuals have the support and resources needed to transition out of homelessness.
4. Strengthen social safety net programs to ensure financial assistance for rental assistance, food, and other basic needs.
5. Support grassroots initiatives that provide street outreach, employment assistance, and other necessary services to homeless individuals.
6. Expand job training programs that teach skills and provide employment for homeless individuals.
7. Create partnerships between businesses, non-profits, and government organizations to provide free meals and other essential items to homeless people.
8. Increase access to health care services by expanding coverage to homeless individuals.
9. Support volunteer-run programs that provide meals, clothing, hygiene supplies, and other resources to those experiencing homelessness.
10. Advocate for the rights of homeless individuals to ensure that they have access to the same basic needs as everyone else.

References

1. See <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/40/4005.htm>. Retrieved 07/09/2023

2. White J, Fluharty M, de Groot R, Bell S, Batty GD. Mortality among rough sleepers, squatters, residents of homeless shelters or hotels and sofa-surfers: a pooled analysis of UK birth cohorts. *Int J Epidemiol*. 2022 Jun 13;51(3):839-846.

3. Lee BA, Greif MJ. Homelessness and hunger. *J Health Soc Behav*. 2008 Mar;49(1):3-19.

4. Centre for Social Justice (2015) Breakthrough Britain :Transforming the British poverty debate,

See https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CSJJ2470_BB_2015_WEB.pdf. retrieved 09/09/2023

5. Centre for Social Justice (2015) Transforming Lives to Strengthen Britain: A Social Justice Manifesto, See https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CSJJ3030_CSJ_Manifesto_02.15_WEB.pdf. Retrieved 09/09/2023

6. Skelton, D (2015) Tackling Low Pay: Centre for Social Justice.

See https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CSJJ3147_Tackling_Low_Pay.pdf. Retrieved 09/09/2023

7. The Trussell Trust (2019) Steepest increase in people needing food banks for past 5 years as need soars by 23%. See <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2019/11/13/april-sept-2019-foodbank-figures/>. Retrieved 09/09/2023

8. Housing & Communities (2023) Quality homes in thriving places are crucial for tackling poverty.

See <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/about/the-five-pathways/housing>. Retrieved 09/09/2023

9. UN Report (2022) Global hunger. See <https://www.who.int/news/item/06-07-2022-un-report--global-hunger-numbers-rose-to-as-many-as-828-million-in-2021>. Retrieved 09/09/2023

10. McCormick , E (2022) Homelessness is lethal: US deaths among those without housing are surging. See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/07/homelessness-is-lethal-deaths-have-risen-dramatically>. Retrieved 09/09/2023

11. Fitzpatrick KM, Willis DE. Homeless and hungry: food insecurity in the land of plenty. *Food Secur.* 2021;13(1):3-12

12. Fang, D., Thomsen, M.R. & Nayga, R.M. The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Public Health* 21, 607 (2021). See <https://bmcpublikealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-021-10631-0>. Retrieved 10/09/2023.

13. Myers CA. Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: a Review of the Recent Literature. *Curr Nutr Rep.* 2020 Jun;9(2):107-118.

14. Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 23 November 2022, ONS website, statistical bulletin, Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2021 registrations. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2021registrations>. Retrieved 10/09/2023.