

Rising income inequalities are linked to unhealthy diets and loneliness

October 29 2018, by Megan Blake



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[One in every five people](#) in the UK today are living in poverty – that is, living with a household income below 60% of the median national income when housing costs are considered. And according to recent research by the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#), two thirds of children in poverty live in a working family. These rates are expected to increase

sharply by 2021-22, assuming there is no change in government policy.

Poverty is linked directly to how people access food. A recent Social Market Foundation (SMF) [study](#) confirms a growing body of academic research that shows that food is a key component of household budgets. When these budgets are stretched, families trade down on their food choices. One in three low income households in the survey indicate that they purchase cheaper and less healthy food in order to make their budgets stretch. Many adults reported cutting back on their own food consumption so that others in their family, such as children, can eat.

Geography plays an important role in the affordability of food. The cost of food available to people will depend on what format of shop is located in an area, for example. Research by the consumer charity [Which?](#) shows that convenience shops charge more for the same items compared to larger format shops. On top of this, small shops have fewer product lines, tend not to carry own-brand value labels, and have a limited selection of fruits and vegetables.

Food deserts

The SMF study also found that more than [a million](#) low-income households live in areas known as "food deserts". These are areas where access to good quality food is likely to be a challenge because there is an absence of such food available to purchase. The study defines a food desert as the presence of two or fewer VAT-registered food shops in areas based on population concentrations of between 5,000 to 15,000 people. These areas will be smaller in urban places [compared to rural places](#). What the study shows is that nearly one in ten areas that are classed as income deprived can also be considered a food desert.

The important thing to understand about this research is that it identifies areas where there are likely to be high concentrations of people on low

income who will have the added burden of having to travel further than others to access food. This will insure an additional cost for them in terms of time or money. If you have [£20 a week spend on food](#), not unusual for the poorest fifth of the population, then you don't want to be spending some of that on the transport to get to the shops. You want that money to go toward food.

On top of this, you must carry what you get, so you will choose food items that are easy to carry and make decisions about what you really need. A bag of potatoes is heavy. Vegetables take up a lot of volume and go off quickly. Fruit is expensive. This will limit what you can get. Frozen pizza, however, is much lighter and easier to carry. You can buy five and put them in the freezer and then eat them through the week. You will know that they will still be as good on day five as on the day you purchased them. Everyone in your family will eat this food and feel full. The vegetables are a heavier and riskier prospect, and you can't afford the risk. Grocery delivery is also out of the question as most stores have a minimum spend that exceeds this budget before delivery is free.

Being food insecure

While there are obvious health implications associated with hunger and not eating a healthy diet, there are other less obvious implications associated with the struggle to access food. One key aspect that is emerging is the way in which people also [miss out on social interactions](#). We have a [crisis of loneliness](#) in the UK today, so much so that the prime minister has appointed a minister for loneliness, currently [Tracy Crouch](#) MP. While the causes of loneliness vary depending on the circumstances of individuals, it is also clear that being unable to afford or access food also means that people forgo social interactions.

Mary McGrath, director of the charity [FoodCycle](#), reports that 71% of

those who attend FoodCycle meals report that they feel lonely sometimes or often. This rate is much higher in Peterborough, where 91% of people who responded to the survey said that they were lonely. There is clear [research evidence](#) that shows that those who have good social networks, even those who are poor, live better. There is also clear medical evidence that the presence of friends will make a difference to recovery rates from life threatening illnesses, [for example heart attacks](#).

Across the country a number of charities, including FoodCycle, are supporting low-income communities by providing activities that bring people together and they are using food to do this. Not only do these activities support people who are food insecure, but it is also meeting that social need. Gary Stott, director of the surplus food social enterprise [Community Shop](#), makes this connection clear when he says: "Food is the heart of our individual relationships with our selves and how we feel. But [food](#) at its best gathers people together to talk to each other and start to develop quality relationships with each other."

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