

Food Poverty, Mental Health and Obesity: understanding the interplay to tackle health inequalities

By Flo Sheen, PhD student at the University of Liverpool and ASO Student member.

In May, I had the pleasure of attending the ASO North West Regional Meeting 2018 in which we discussed food poverty, mental health, and obesity. Representatives from universities, the NHS, and Liverpool City Council to name but a few joined together for what promised to be an insightful meeting with change and innovation at its forefront.

In the first talk of the day, Dr Charlotte Hardman (Lecturer, University of Liverpool) addressed the large body of research showing that obesity tends to be more common in lower socio-economic groups. The environment in lower income areas tends to be “obesogenic” – characterised by easy access to take-aways and fast food outlets, with healthier foods harder to obtain in comparison. However, very little research has examined psychological factors that might explain the relationship between socioeconomic status, diet and obesity. Interestingly, Charlotte and her colleagues found that the relationship between lower socioeconomic status and higher body weight may be partly explained by psychological distress and eating as a coping strategy. Furthermore, distress and eating to cope mediated the association between food insecurity and poor diet. These results suggest that targeting unhealthy behaviours in response to distress may be one way of reducing obesity and improving health in low-income populations.

Charlotte also presented quotes from a recently completed interview-based study, asking people who experienced acute food insecurity how they feel about their households’ current access to food. The words stress, panic, and struggling were all used in abundance, and chronic hunger was rife (one interviewee struggled to keep on track with the questions because they were so hungry). One interviewee summed up the prevailing message, saying “it’s depressing because it should be easier to live, basically, and get food.”

The next speaker, Lucy Antal, Sustainable Food Adviser (the Food Domain and Project Manager, Regional Food Economy North West), highlighted the myriad of factors behind lack of food access and food insecurity, from unemployment and lower skills attainment to lack of social support and reduced physical and emotional wellbeing. One particularly harrowing statistic is that 1 in 4 UK families have to choose between heating and eating, with more than 1 million households facing this agonising choice in Winter 2017. The impact on our youngest generation is also daunting; an estimated 3.9 million children are living in poverty in the UK, an increase of 200,000 in just one year. Lucy summed up the situation of individuals living in deprived areas with this quote: “People are surviving, not living”. However, Lucy also discussed initiatives already moving to tackle these issues, such as the Alexander Rose Charity voucher scheme which helps parents with young children on low incomes to buy fresh fruit and vegetables by providing vouchers (£3-worth per child per week) that

can only be redeemed at markets that sell fresh fruit and vegetables, and providing tasting and cooking sessions to build confidence with novel foods and cooking from scratch. Also, The Food Domain has teamed up with Liverpool hospitals to deploy a fleet of vans which go once a week to the most deprived areas of Liverpool providing fresh fruit and vegetables.

Robbie Davison (director of “Can Cook”) echoed the prevailing theme of a desperate need for change, arguing that although poverty itself is too nebulous an issue to ever truly solve, ending food poverty is within our grasp if we commit to making some serious changes. To tackle this, Can Cook Kitchen are working on their mission to “feed people very well....of every age, from the youngest children to the oldest people”, having so far taught 14,000 people to cook and served 370,000 free hand-prepared meals using fresh, locally-sourced ingredients to nurseries, schools and residential homes throughout Merseyside. They are currently spearheading a move to stop child hunger in the summer holidays in Flintshire and are planning to create a new line of supermarkets providing fresh meals that can be accessed by all, including struggling families through the use of a credit system. As the happiest of bonuses, they work by purchasing the surplus of fresh produce from local farmers and suppliers to be transformed into meals – fighting food waste and hunger single-handedly!

All speakers presented rays of innovation and hope within the bleak situation of food poverty. All of these exciting initiatives in the North West are working towards the same goal: making healthy eating the easy choice. We need to create an accessible, good food environment. If we do nothing, food insecurity, mental health problems and obesity rates will continue to rise, and people will continue to survive, albeit barely, and not live.

References and links:

- <http://www.thefooddomain.com/>
- <http://alexandrarose.org.uk/>
- <http://www.cancook.co.uk/>
- <https://www.netmums.com/coffeehouse/other-chat-514/politics-866/870458-1-4-families-forced-choose-between-eating-heating.html>
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