

# Food Poverty – a UK problem

Malnutrition isn't just a problem for developing nations, writes Catherine Heffernan – it's right here in the UK and an increasing public health concern.

When you mention the word malnutrition, people automatically think of famines in developing nations and images of starving children. However, it may come as a surprise to learn that malnutrition is a big problem in the UK with an estimated 2 million people affected by malnutrition at any one time. Malnutrition is a deficiency of one or more nutrients resulting from a poor diet. In the UK, this usually is a lack of fruit and vegetables and an over-reliance on processed, high fat, high salt and sugary foods. The end results are a suppressed immune system, dental cavities, nutritional deficiencies, hypertension, obesity, diabetes, cancer and coronary heart disease. Furthermore, malnourished mothers give birth to babies with low-birth weight, which is associated with lower life expectancy.

What causes malnourishment in the UK? Surely a good education system, an abundance of supermarkets and restaurants and a media dominated celebrity endorsed healthy living, people know how to eat? The greatest cause of malnutrition in this country is food poverty. Approximately four million people are unable to choose, buy, prepare and eat an adequate quantity of good quality foods. Food poverty is not the lack of food. It is the lack of access to healthy affordable food.

While food poverty varies across communities and individuals, it does affect certain groups more than others, predominantly the elderly, immigrants and people on low wages. As we know only too well, people with low personal or household incomes tend to live in low socio-economic areas. These areas are marked by high unemployment, inadequate housing, low levels of car ownership, poor public transport links and a scarcity of shops. Supermarkets tend to be located out in the suburbs, predominantly middle class areas, while the inner cities are devoid of supermarkets.

Most inner-cities are home to low socio-economic areas where you are more likely to find a fish 'n' chips shop or a MacDonald's than a greengrocer.



Farmers' Markets can help bring fresh food closer to urban communities, but may not help the poorest

Street markets and corner shops provide opportunities for communities to eat more fruit and vegetables but in the current climate, such enterprises are closing down, edged out of the market by the more competitive prices of the 'big boys'. Interestingly enough, even within supermarkets, fruit and vegetables tend to be marketed at those with more disposable income with their pleasant packaging of 'finest' and 'organic' with prices to match.

Apart from trouble in accessing shops or the availability of healthy food in areas, other factors that contribute to food poverty are debt, marketing of 'junk food' culture, poor awareness about nutrition and the fact that many people lack the cooking skills to make a meal from scratch. Rising fuel prices also have an impact on an expenditure on food. Once bills are paid, the amount available to spend on food is reduced. When fruit, vegetables and low fat foods are expensive with a short shelf life, people tend to avoid them.

Parental attitudes are also a major factor. How often do you hear a mother say that her children won't eat vegetables? If you scratch the surface, you

will find that the parents themselves don't like vegetables or children are being told they won't get any pudding unless they eat their greens, making healthy eating a chore.

So what can we do to reduce food poverty? Across the country primary care trusts are working with local authorities to set up community food projects. These consist of food co-ops, community cafes, cooking and nutrition courses, markets lunch clubs and roving fruit and vegetable vans. Councils can also help by encouraging food providers to set up in low socio-economic or inner city areas.

A good source of information on food poverty is The Food Access Network, which aims to tackle food poverty and links up organisations and individuals who are working to improve the nutrition, health and wellbeing of local communities. Sustain; the alliance for better food and farming is also working on a BIG funded project called "Making Local Food Work". For more information on these projects and the Food Access Network go to the Sustain website [www.sustainweb.org](http://www.sustainweb.org) 