

Exploring engagement with the food provisioning in areas of deprivation: a focused ethnography in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk

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Introduction:

In the past few decades a large body of work has examined the relationship between the food provisioning environment and obesity, particularly in areas of deprivation. Much of this has focused either on geographical proximity to retail outlets or on quantitative measures of the 'healthiness' of the internal retail environment. There has, however, been less examination of how individuals and families engage with and experience food environments even though they are likely to be influenced in their purchasing decisions by a far greater range of factors than just proximity and availability. Conducting research that seeks to understand engagement with the food environment, is crucial in order to develop policies and interventions that can effectively alter purchasing patterns and in turn have a positive impact on reducing rates of child and adult obesity.

Methods:

Focused ethnography in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, utilising four qualitative methods: community engagement, semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation, and shop-along interviews. All participants (N=20) had children in school or nursery and resided in neighbourhoods that scored 1 or 2 on the Standard Index of Multiple Deprivation (i.e. were in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England) and experienced rates of childhood obesity that were higher than the England average. Field notes, photos, and data from transcripts were analysed thematically to identify barriers and facilitators to the purchasing and consumption of nutritious food.

Results:

Family life was described as both routinised and complex, with these aspects being reflected in parents' engagement in the food environment. Although most participants wanted to provide nutritious meals for their children, they faced challenges in achieving this in a context of financial insecurity, abundant deals for HFSS foods, the comparatively high price of nutritious foods, and pressure from children who requested a narrow range of foods. Parents also described how the food environment supported family life however. For example, deals allowed families to try new foods that weren't usually accessible to them, while takeaways and fast-food outlets provided opportunities for meaningful shared family activities.

Conclusion:

Attempts to address obesity through altering food environments must take into account the contexts and expectations of individuals as they enter into those environments. It is critical to focus policies and interventions so that people's broader needs are met, while also increasing the physical, financial, and cultural accessibility of more nutritious foods.