

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Southampton is a unique city in the south when it comes to wealth and deprivation, with stark contrasts in small areas. An interdisciplinary research project is looking at how this plays out when it comes to health inequalities.



Spatial health inequalities are easy to find in Southampton. Pockets of prolonged deprivation are next door to areas of significant wealth. This contrast leads to food insecurity in some areas – which in turn leads to health inequalities.

Dr Dianna Smith, Associate Professor within the School of Geography and Environmental Science, and Nisreen Alwan, Professor of Public Health, have joined forces to understand the picture and assess the measures in place to address the issues.

Outlining the situation, Dianna said: “Southampton is almost unique for a southern city. Some areas are very heavily deprived, but there are areas of real wealth as well. It’s similar to somewhere like Islington – a huge contrast over a small space – and it leads to masked deprivation, which means some people don’t see it or understand it.”

Dianna and Nisreen’s two-year DIET (Determining the Impact of food insEcurity in young families and Testing interventions)

project, funded by the National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration, began in November 2021. DIET was co-designed with Southampton City Council, with input from Hampshire County Council and Dorset Council.

“We are interested in spatial health inequalities – how we see differences in health in the population and what we can do about it,” said Dianna. “There are lots of different charities – food banks, community kitchens, food pantries – but what actually makes a difference to people’s health?”

Food banks

Dianna and Nisreen are working with Southampton City Mission, a charity that oversees five food banks in the city, and Southampton Social Aid Group, a co-operative that runs a food club.

Southampton City Mission has created a marketplace model – also known as a ‘pantry’ model – where members pay a small weekly fee to select food, rather than it being selected for them.

Above Free goods available at St Mary’s, Southampton, food bank

Centre Food pantry produce

Right Claire and Elise, Millbrook Marketplace volunteer supervisors

Opposite A member shopping at a food bank in St Mary’s, Southampton





“The marketplace model is thought to be more sustainable for food security because there is money coming in,” explained Dianna. “It also gives people a higher agency – they can choose what they want, rather than being handed a bag of goods. We’re hoping that people have a better experience, without some of the feelings of shame or embarrassment they might have from visiting a food bank.”

As part of DIET, Nisreen and Dianna are surveying food pantry users to ask about their diet, food security and mental health – before and after using the pantry.

They are also surveying the staff and volunteers who run the services to find out what challenges they face. “There are, for example, all the procedural challenges,” said Dianna. “The increasing competition for surplus food is an interesting issue now, so there is a reduction in food donations coming to food aid charities.”

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Dr Dianna Smith

Resources for improvement

The main output of the DIET project will be a set of freely-available resources that charities and local authorities can use to identify and improve food insecurity in their neighbourhoods.

“Councils and other organisations are asked to put money behind different charities to deal with food aid,” said Dianna. “The reality is the way we address food shortages is through food banks and pantries. If we’re following this model, we need to know what is working for people and what is not, and which areas are most in need. This research is helping to answer those questions.”

“We also want to identify the challenges in setting up food banks and pantries. The main challenges we are hearing about are finding a space, finding and keeping volunteers, and then getting the goods.”