

Healthy Place

Food environment

Introduction

The food environment and the methods in which we access food has changed significantly over recent years. During the pandemic our relationship with food became an important reward to stave off boredom or as a reason to leave the home during lock down. The online delivery market, and the volume of 'ready-to-eat sugary products'¹ or ultra-processed foods (UPF) which account for more than half of all the calories eaten in the UK, is cheaper than fresh food such as fruit and vegetables². The passing down of culinary skills have also diminished since the rise of ready-made food³ which will increase further as people try to save money towards rising fuel costs by using their stoves and hobs less. The placement of supermarkets in relationship to housing also plays role in the convenience and selection of food available which play an important role in the type of food which is influencing diets.

The recent pressures on the cost of living are likely to increase the prevalence of food insecurity. "An important component of overall inflation is from food and non-alcoholic beverages: this currently stands at 12.6%, a level not seen since the food price shock of 2008, due to higher costs for producers now being passed on to customers⁴." By June 2022 4 in 10 with personal incomes under £40K reported spending less on food and other essentials⁵. Across the UK 15.5% of people report experiencing food insecurity, compared with 7.6% pre-pandemic. For those receiving Universal Credit, the proportion rises to around half⁶. Two million Londoners – of which an estimated 400,000 are children under 16 – struggle to afford or access enough food⁷.

The food people eat is a key determinant of health; unhealthy diets increase the risk of many health conditions such as obesity and cardiovascular disease, and precipitate early death. The choices people make around their diets are determined by a range of factors including their cultural background, food preparation skills, affordability, access and the food environment around them. The importance of diet as a determinant has been reinforced by the pandemic as diet related diseases such as obesity and diabetes are risk factors for death from COVID-19⁸.

Food security and the links between diets and deprivation

The Food and Agriculture Organisation defines food security as "when all people, at all times... have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences"⁹. Food insecurity, on the other hand, relates to the inability of individuals to access this type of food. Food insecurity can affect people in a range of ways – from hunger itself to increasing the risk of serious health conditions such as heart disease¹⁰. Food tends to be one of the first commodities to be cut when financial pressures take hold¹¹.

Data on food insecurity is complex. One way it can be measured is by looking at the demand for food banks. The Trussell Trust reports that from 2016 to 2020/21 there were continued increases in the number of food parcels given out¹². While the number decreased in 2021/22, it remains higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Another source of data is survey data. The Food Foundation conducts regular surveys across the UK¹³. The impact is particularly felt by those receiving Universal Credit, where nearly 1 in 2 households reported experiencing food insecurity. They have also found food insecurity to disproportionately affect disabled people and people from non-white ethnic groups.

Neither of these sources of data capture the full extent of the impacts of food insecurity. A survey of independent food banks in 2022 paints a picture of people arriving desperate to eat and wanting foods that do not require fridges to store or cooking due to fuel poverty, with the food banks struggling to cope with demand¹⁴.

Deprivation is also a major factor impacting on people's diets. Deprivation is associated with a higher number of fast-food takeaways in the surrounding food environment, lower fruit and vegetable consumption and worse diet-related health outcomes¹⁵. Nationally, over a half of adults meet the five fruit and vegetables a day target, for more information see the Live Well chapter¹⁶.

The Office of National Statistics Opinions and Lifestyles Survey collected in July 2022 estimates around 9 in 10 adults in Great Britain continue to report that their cost of living has increased.¹⁷ This is an increase from 6 in 10 adults back in November 2021. The most common reason reported by adults for their increased cost of living was an increase in the price of their food shop (94% of adults). Local anecdotal information from community and voluntary sector organisations indicates there has been an increase in the demand for food support services such as food banks/community fridge networks.

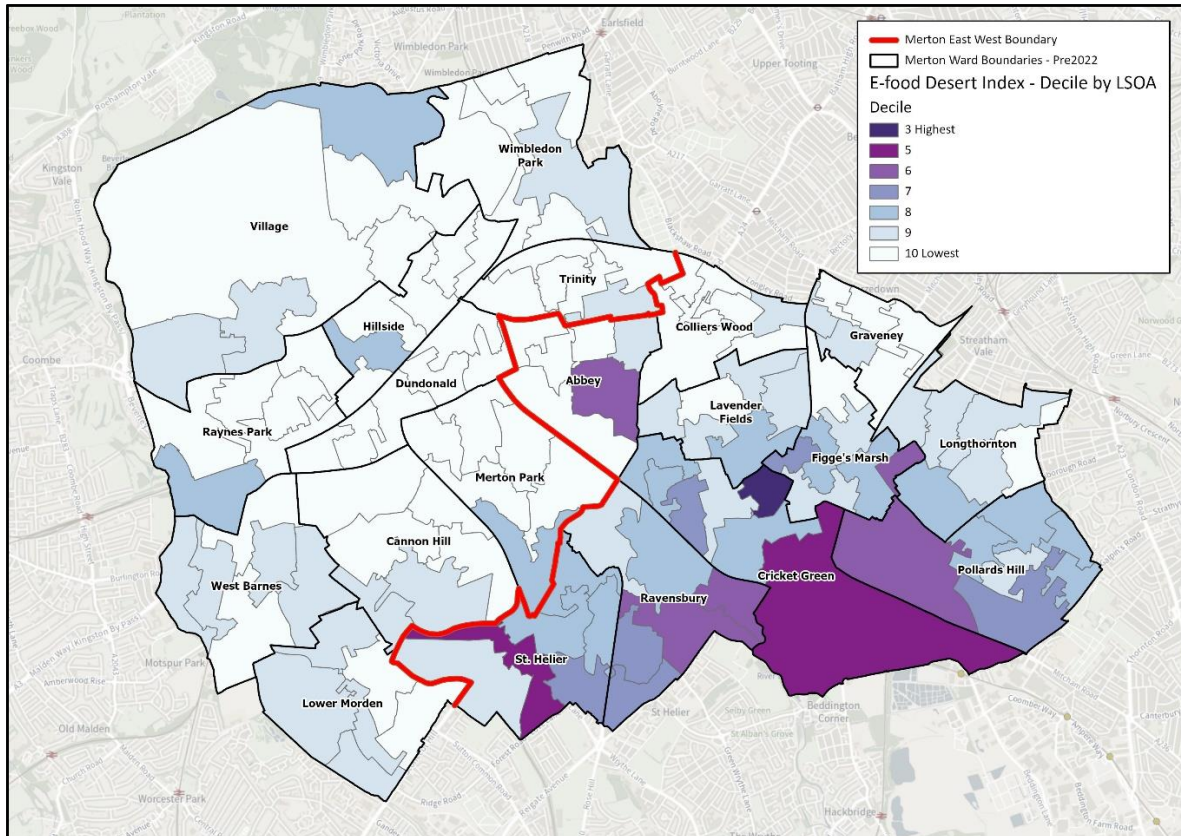
Food environments

The environment around us is made up of interacting factors, containing an array of assets and risks which determine the health or ill health of an individual over their lifetime. Risks such as the lack of access to fresh, affordable food being replaced by fast food options only are examples of how the proximity and visibility of food options can play a role in the diets we follow. The advertising on bus shelters or billboards, and our phones are all other sources that shape the decisions we make. Previous Annual Public Health Reports for Merton have assessed the presence of fast-food outlets in Merton compared with other London boroughs or around schools in Merton¹⁸. In Merton there is a higher density of fast-food outlets in the east of the borough compared with the west.

“Food deserts” is a concept that describe areas where affordable and fresh food are inaccessible. The e-food desert index is a score illustrating ward level access to both physical shops and online groceries¹⁹. Figure 1 shows that access to food is generally worse in

Southeast Merton than in the rest of the borough, with some areas being particularly poorly served.

Figure 1: Map of E-Food Desert Index by LSOA (deciles), 2020. Source: Adapted from CDRC²⁰.



Recommendations

- Monitoring the number of fast-food takeaways across Merton on an annual basis using the food register.
- Developing a set of metrics to assess the health impacts of the local food environment which can be measured at regular intervals.
- Sustain is a powerful alliance of organisations and communities to improve food systems across London, they provide borough breakdowns of this progress. Under the category of 'No recourse to public funds' it is noted that no actions or data has been reported from Merton Council indicating a lack of pathways to link vulnerable communities such as those with temporary immigrant status to cash support or council funded community food offers²¹. This is an opportunity to explore how we can eliminate food insecurity in Merton.

Further Information:

- 1) Child Healthy Weight
- 2) Adult obesity & diet

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