

The importance of food to support people who are homeless (Clare Pettinger)



Food plays an important role in homeless people's lives, not only to support health and nutritional wellbeing, but also to support social and cultural connections.

“Food can help to mend other broken things”

I led a small University of Plymouth research study a few years ago (funded by the British Academy), the 'Food as a Lifestyle Motivator' (FLM) project, which used creative methods (photographs) to engage and explore food experiences and behaviours in a sample of individuals in a Plymouth based homeless centre. Creative methods included 'photo elicitation', a method which involved 12 participants being given disposable cameras to capture their food activities over a 10 day period, after which we had a group discussion about their photographs and associated feelings around food. Discussion transcripts were then analysed by the research team (Pettinger et al 2017).

Findings illustrated that food holds meaning and can mark identity; it also exerts emotion and can express both power and empowerment; its environment can be space and social place; it provides meaningful occupation. Similarly, observations demonstrated the crucial role of anchor staff members within the institution and challenges conducting research with this transient community. See images below

This project provided a holistic view of some of the many determinants of food choice and poverty, factors known to drive inequalities. From my own critical perspective, this project has consolidated the evidence that highlights the homeless community as being diverse and experiencing multiple vulnerabilities (see quotes and photos below). We know that food is central to many health issues, but this pilot project has shown that for those on the fringes of society, food also has the potential to be a powerful 'lifestyle motivator'.

Evidence suggests that marginalized groups are known to make poor food choices influenced by the structural factors that cause and sustain homelessness. Despite this, our sample had an informed view on 'healthy eating', the barriers to which included lack of finances, limited access to healthy foods, compromised educational opportunities, lack of positive role models for food behaviours. Understanding the diversity of this population group, working alongside them and listening to their voices is a crucial aspect to their engagement. Creative food activities and food themed events can offer 'meaningful occupation' for many homeless individuals. Engagement in such activities can enable service users to gain more control over their lives and facilitate other health promoting behaviours.

Pettinger C, Parsons JM, Cunningham M, Withers L, D'Aprano G, Letherby G, Sutton C, Whiteford A & Ayres R (2017) 'Engaging homeless individuals in discussion about their food experiences to optimise wellbeing: A pilot study' Health Education Journal

See also:

Pettinger (2017) Engaging Harder to reach service users - Food as a Lifestyle Motivator Fuse Blog <http://fuseopenscienceblog.blogspot.com/2017/01/engaging-harder-to-reach-service-users.html>

Pettinger (2019) How creative food activities can promote self-care <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/summer-showcase-2019-how-creative-food-activities-promote-self-care/>

Nemo



"...I can't eat in the dining room because I'm scared of crowds and large groups of people... ..manners, elbows out, passing wind and shouting at each other...."

Ross



"... food has become a major part of my life. I really enjoy cooking, actually it beat the demons in my head.... Look how far I've come... I just go in there...It's like being in a restaurant, using the imagination. Just see things. I like to try different things, and flavours"

Paul



" I like me dog food as well. She needs it. I make sure she's fed...that's my priority. I'd rather go without then see her go without...."