

Food Decisions of Low-Income Families in the Era of COVID-19: A Qualitative Exploration

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Objectives: The first lockdown enforced in the United Kingdom to limit the spread of COVID-19 had serious financial consequences for some lower-income households, which were already at risk of suboptimal food choices. Particularly in Northern Ireland, where 10% of the population live in food insecure households, the pandemic has potentially further exacerbated the nutritional challenges experienced by low-income families. This paper aimed to explore the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on food-related decisions as experienced by economically disadvantaged families in Northern Ireland, UK.

Methods: A qualitative study collected data through online individual interviews. Participation was open to parents of children 2–17 years old who self-identified as living on a tight budget in urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland. A sampling matrix enabled equal representation of single- and two-parent households, as well as younger

(<12 y) and older children (>12 y). Photovoice and participatory mapping techniques were employed to capture participant data. A thematic approach was utilised for data analysis.

Results: A total of 12 interviews were conducted. Five distinct themes were found, reflecting families' food-related decisions that were affected by the COVID-19 lockdown: 1) food planning; 2) food purchasing; 3) meal preparation; 4) eating and feeding behaviours and 5) eating food prepared outside the house. Changes included an increase in home food preparation, but also in unhealthy snacking. Fear of being exposed to carriers of the virus led to infrequent food shopping and greater reliance on supermarket home deliveries. Long waiting times in-between food shops encouraged food planning but were also a barrier to providing daily fresh foods including fruit and vegetables to their families. Financial constraints were exacerbated during lockdown and led to a search for new ways to budget when food shopping. Food donations from the community and the government were important to maintain food security, particularly in single-parent families.

Conclusions: This study highlights that the COVID-19 lockdown influenced a broad range of dietary decisions of economically disadvantaged families and offers an insight into the nutritional challenges they experienced.

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