

Food Provision and the Homeless Population: Working Together to Enable Solutions

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Aim: To explore factors that contribute to the nutritional intake of the homeless population; and to co-develop and assess the feasibility of food and nutrition guidelines for service providers that work with the homeless population.

Objectives:

1. To synthesise existing literature on the determinants of the nutritional quality of food provided to homeless populations
2. To adopt principles and practice of PPI to engage with service providers in homeless services
3. To co-produce food and nutrition guidelines with and for service providers that work with the homeless population
4. To assess the feasibility of implementing the developed guidelines

The increasing availability of cheap, energy-dense and nutrient poor food has changed the profile of people living with homelessness from primarily underweight to obese in western countries. Charitable food services are crucial to the homeless population and nutrient intakes are not likely to be met outside of charitable meal programmes, making improvements in the nutritional quality of food within these organisations imperative for the improvement of nutrition-related health within this population. Nutrition guidelines for service providers are very limited and have not been co-developed with service providers, which this study addresses. The feasibility of implementing these nutrition guidelines were also explored in this PhD.

Design/Methods:

This study involved a qualitative evidence synthesis of the determinants of the nutritional quality of food provided to the homeless population in developed countries; a participatory study to co-produce food and nutrition guidelines for service providers in homeless charities and a feasibility study to assess acceptability, usability and resources for implementation of these guidelines. The latter involved the use of semi-structured interviews and an observational checklist involving serving and kitchen staff.

PPI – Public Patient Involvement

A PPI panel was established at study inception and was involved throughout the research project lifecycle. The panel comprised of stakeholders involved in and with experience working in homeless services and with those experiencing homelessness. The food-based guidelines were drafted using national and international resources on nutrition and food provision and the PPI members were integral to improving the clarity of the tool, with its use and implementation in services at the forefront of all decisions made.

Results

Seven homeless services were recruited, including two men's homeless hostels, one women's homeless hostel, one homeless day centre, one children's homeless hostel and two mixed gender homeless hostels. Food-based guidelines were well-received by homeless services and were considered easy to implement. Recipes were well-received and cost-effective and visual aids were useful for translating nutrition knowledge to service providers. The study indicates that food-based guidelines for homeless services can be used to improve the nutritional quality of food provided to people experiencing homelessness.

Dissemination

Ravikumar-Grant, D., Nic Gabhainn, S. & Kelly, C. (2025). Assessing the Feasibility of Food-based Guidelines for Homeless Services. Poster presentation at the Health Promotion Research Centre annual conference, Galway, June 2025.

Ravikumar-Grant, D. & Kelly, C. (2025). Assessing the Feasibility of Food-based Guidelines for Homeless Services. In-person poster presentation at the Nutrition Society, Irish Section Conference, Dublin, June 2025.

Ravikumar-Grant, D., Nic Gabhainn, S. & Kelly, C. (2025). The determinants of the nutritional quality of food provided to the homeless population: a systematic review. Poster presentation at the 32nd European Congress on Obesity, Malaga, Spain, May 2025.

Knowledge translation

Ravikumar-Grant, D.; Nic Gabhainn, S. & Kelly, C. (in press). Food Provision for People Experiencing Homelessness: An International Snapshot. Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice- Environment, Housing, Policy, Poverty & Inequality. <https://www.jcfj.ie/working-notes/current-issue/>