**Understanding Food Insecurity in Scotland: Making sense of the data**

On 4th October, a week on from the publication of Scotland’s first [data](https://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Health/scottish-health-survey/Publications) on food insecurity, researchers, policy makers, campaigners and community workers gathered in Glasgow to consider the evidence and how we best use it to make change, at an event organised by [NHS Health Scotland](http://www.healthscotland.scot/health-inequalities/fundamental-causes/poverty/food-poverty) and [A Menu for Change](https://menuforchange.org.uk/).

The first speaker was Professor Valerie Tarasuk, linked up via the web from her home in Toronto, who reflected on the experience of decades of food insecurity measurement in Canada. A passionate and engaging speaker, Valerie gave a compelling overview of Canada’s journey in developing a food insecurity evidence base which has been used to call for policy change.

Longitudinal [analysis](https://proof.utoronto.ca/) of food insecurity data, and linking it to various survey and administrative data, has provided important evidence of the scale, drivers and impacts of food insecurity which have powerful policy messages. Key learning from Canada included:

* Food insecurity status is a product of income: its stability, security and adequacy
* Most people who are food insecure are in work
* Social policy reforms which increase incomes have shown to reduce food insecurity levels
* Food insecurity is a powerful social determinant of health
* The evidence suggests cooking skills, proximity to food shops, and use of community gardens do not impact on food insecurity status

Val’s presentation gave important messages for those embarking on the analysis of Scotland’s food insecurity data. To optimise the potential of food insecurity measurement, we not only need an ongoing commitment to collect the data, but also to ensure we are able to link it to relevant health and economic data which can answer the sorts of questions which evidence from Canada raises.

We need to use the data we gather on food insecurity to ensure policy on food insecurity is grounded in the evidence. Cooking classes, community gardens and other local initiatives have huge benefits which have been well documented. However, evidence from Canada flags the importance of setting realistic expectations about what different interventions can be expected to achieve.

Next, Dr Catriona Rooke from the Scottish Government presented the findings on food insecurity from the recently published 2017 [Scottish Health Survey](https://www2.gov.scot/Publications/2018/09/3173/7). Three questions from the UN’s Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) were asked, and the results provide evidence of the proportion of people experiencing different levels of food insecurity. The findings show that those most affected are younger people; single adults; single parents; and people living in the most deprived areas. Next steps for government will be to do further analysis to understand the relationship between food insecurity and other demographic characteristics and health outcomes. The same thee questions will be asked in the 2018 and 2019 surveys, with a view to including the full set of questions in future surveys.

In the last presentation of the afternoon, Mary Anne MacLeod shared learning from the qualitative longitudinal research they are doing at A Menu for Change and reflections on how we use evidence for policy and practice change. She spoke about the importance of qualitative research to highlight the voices of people behind the statistics and to help us understand the things which numbers can never explain. Their research has highlighted that people experiencing food insecurity know how to eat healthily and cook on a budget, but that for so many this is financially impossible. They have also identified the role of Universal Credit, insecure work and changes to disability benefits in causing food crisis, as well as the wider context of mental health problems, disability, and caring responsibilities for those experiencing food insecurity.

For research to make a difference, Mary Anne highlighted the need to engage the people with power to change things early on in the process. She also discussed the importance of supporting people with lived experience of food insecurity to speak for themselves and play an active role in shaping solutions.

During time for updates from attendees we heard about research and evidence gathering being carried out by [Citizens Advice Scotland](https://www.cas.org.uk/campaigns/food-table-campaign), Aberdeen University, [Glasgow City Council](https://www.glasgowconsult.co.uk/KMS/dmart.aspx?strTab=PublicDMartCurrent&NoIP=1) and the [Children’s Future Food Inquiry](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/childrens-future-food-inquiry/). All of this work is helping to broaden and deepen our understanding of food insecurity in Scotland to inform better policy making.

Discussions at the event highlighted some specific topics attendees felt needed better understood in Scotland, including:

* Food insecurity among people in work
* “Holiday hunger” and evaluation of local authority provision this summer
* The “poverty premium” and physical access to food

As well as helping shape national policy, there was a concern to make sure food insecurity evidence can be used to inform local authority and community level plans. It was also felt that communities should be able easily access relevant data, and have a role in its collection and interpretation.

The ambition is that as a multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral group we can continue to exchange updates and encourage collaborations and coordination of work through events such as this. Bringing together research, policy and local community perspectives is essential as we look to better address food insecurity in Scotland.

