

Paper 9.8 Equity and inequality in FSA research, and proposed future work exploring household food insecurity (July 2022)

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Summary

This paper outlines how equity and inequality are considered in FSA research and sets out a new work programme to explore household food insecurity. This paper is for information and discussion. During the meeting a discussion of the future work programme (outlined in point 13) will be based around the key questions in point 15.

Background

The [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) describe equality as:

“Ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents.”

Although both equity and inequality promote fairness, equality achieves this through treating everyone the same *regardless of need*, while equity achieves this through treating people differently *dependent on need*.

When it comes to food, needs primarily relate to food being affordable, accessible, safe and nutritious. Factors that affect such needs, and whether these needs are met, are varied (including income, employment status, geography, age, health, cultural beliefs/attitudes, ethnicity and dietary needs).

Even when restricting the view to the topic of food, equities and inequalities have a very wide scope. The recent steer from the board is that the FSA's Social Science work around equities and inequalities should increase focus on exploring affordability and food security.

- Food security, as defined by the [United Nations' Committee on World Food Security](#), is the condition in which *all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life*. Food affordability is a key component of food security and is the cost of the diet of a household relative to the household's income[\[1\]](#).
- In Food and You, Household Food Insecurity, (HHFI) is measured using responses to ten different questions relating to experiences with accessing and consuming food[\[2\]](#). Households that report three or more conditions indicating food insecurity are classified as 'food insecure'. Such conditions include:
 - Being worried food would run out before money available to buy more
 - Not being able to afford balanced meals
 - Skipping or cutting the size of meals because there wasn't enough money for food

Equities and inequalities in FSA research

- The FSA Analytics team have a structured approach to facilitate **sampling of groups with protected characteristics[\[3\]](#) in primary research**. See Annex 1 for FSA Analytics Diversity and Inclusion Policy (previously shared with the ACSS Assurance working group).
- **Social science** projects and work programmes often explore topics specifically related to equity and inequality. Given the steer from the board, work addressing HHFI is summarised in point 8.
- Through consideration of other legitimate factors (OLFs), our **risk analysis** process already provides broad scope to consider economic, social and environmental factors when making risk management recommendations. However, it is likely that expanding our view of what the FSA considers to be the consumer interest will sharpen our idea of what constitutes of 'other legitimate factors'. We aspire to develop a more strategic, consistent, and interdisciplinary approach, with wider evidence packages based on key strategic areas of focus, and new guidance for risk managers. This approach will take time to develop and will stretch across our multiple analytical and scientific functions - including social science; it may require new capabilities

entirely.

- **Impact Assessments** set out the objectives of policy proposals and the costs, benefits and risks of different ways (non-regulatory as well as regulatory) of achieving those objectives. They are used within government to support legislative change, the regulation of markets, policy development by economic regulators, and to inform parliamentary decision making. Impact assessments explore impacts on consumers, on a general population level, but include a consideration of distributional impacts by income level or geographical location. These distributional effects could be a deliberate government objective or the unintended consequences of an intervention. As per the [Green Book \(HM Treasury\)](#) - Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation – it is not always appropriate to calculate all distributional effects and the appraisal method employed for considering them should be proportionate to the likely consequences for those affected. Under race, disability and gender equality legislation, *equality* impact assessments (EIAs) are mandatory for interventions that are considered to directly impact on groups with protected characteristics². EIAs are a systematic and evidence-based tool, which enables the likely impacts of an intervention on such groups to be considered.

Recent steer from the Board

- On the 15th of June 2022, Social Science presented a [paper on HHFI](#) to the FSA board. This included an outline of a possible future work programme exploring HHFI further (presented in [Annex A](#) of the board paper).
- Although alleviating poverty is not an FSA policy lead, food affordability cuts right across the FSA's vision and mission. We need to understand how rising food prices and rising levels of food insecurity – which have consequences for consumers' behaviour and for the food system more generally – will affect our ability to ensure that food is safe, food is what it says it is and that food is healthier and more sustainable. As such the recommendation from the board was to continue our focus on HHFI, and progress with the future work programme we outlined to them.

Social science work exploring HHFI

Completed research

- [UK Public's Interests, Needs and Concerns Around Food \(2022\)](#): This mixed methods research explored UK consumer interests, needs and concerns

around food and what drives these. The findings show that food affordability and food insecurity is currently the most important aspect of consumer decision making the way that people think about food.

- [Community Food Providers \(2022\)](#): Qualitative research which explored the journey that food takes from suppliers to end consumers in the community food provisions sector in the UK. As a result of rising Covid-19 infections, food networks were expecting an ongoing increase in demand for their services with other contributing factors including: (1) the end of the £20 Universal Credit uplift; (2) the end of the furlough scheme; (3) a large increase in energy prices and other inflationary pressures.
- [COVID-19 tracker \(2021\)](#): Survey research, conducted monthly throughout the pandemic, which tracked consumers' concerns and indicators of household food insecurity, eating habits and food safety behaviours. including those in larger households. Younger adults and those in households with children were more likely to be 'food insecure' across all measures of food insecurity. Further, those who were food insecure were more likely to eat food past their use-by dates.
- [Food in a Pandemic \(2021\)](#): Mixed methods research which explored how a new food environment, created during the pandemic, impacted the public's behaviours and preferences, including food insecurity and eating habits. The report shows there had been an increase in multiple forms of food insecurity, including physical availability and financial access, with 4 million people, including 2.3 million children has experienced moderate or server food insecurity between March 2020 to September 2020.
- [The lived experience of food insecurity under Covid-19 \(2020\)](#): Qualitative research which explored food insecurity experiences during Covid-19 and lockdown. The research showed that income loss rapidly exacerbated existing insecurity and vulnerabilities, that lockdowns had reduced access to affordable food, and that the impacts of Covid-19 were multi-layered and complex.

Current, ongoing research

- Biannual survey - **Food and You 2** - measuring self-reported consumer knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to food issues and food safety amongst adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. [The latest data](#) shows that household food insecurity is particularly acute among younger adults, low-income families, and people who were unemployed. The datasets are available to analyse food insecurity by ethnicity, socio-demographic groups, region and disability.

- Monthly survey - [Consumer insight tracker \(2022\)](#): monitoring consumer behaviour and attitudes towards food insecurity, food availability, concerns in relation to food, confidence in the food supply chain and confidence in the FSA. Publishing will occur quarterly. Demographic analysis for household food insecurity measures for March 2022 data is included (income, household size, age and if children are present in the household). The proportion of participants who were worried about food affordability was 31% in March 2022; the highest reported figure since the tracker started in April 2020 and a statistical increase since the tracker began.
- Monthly **Social Media** analysis of conversations around food poverty, reporting each month to colleagues in the FSA and across government to complement our consumer survey data and food price tracking. In June 2022, there were 2.5k total mentions around food affordability on social media. The most mentioned topic was about how families are likely to face further stress due to the rising cost of living as food inflation is predicted to reach 15% over summer.
- Monthly **Tracking of food prices** to provide a snapshot of commodity price changes across the food system to understand the increases over time. The Tracker dashboard contains data from the ONS and the World Bank to inform the exchange rate, global commodities, food producer costs and consumer food prices. The consumer price of Bread and Cereals significantly rose by 1.6% between April and May 2022 and by 9.7% between May 2021 and May 2022. Households with lower incomes spend more of their incomes on Bread, Cereal and Rice products. The share of total household spending that goes on Bread, Cereal and Rice products is 28% greater for the 10% of poorest households by income than it is for the median household.

In train

- **Exploring levels of food insecurity amongst Higher Education Students:** Mixed methods research exploring food safety behaviour and food insecurity amongst higher education students, with a focus on those living in shared accommodation (a cohort not included in FY2, given sampling frame excludes communal establishments). Currently in analysis stage, publication hoped for October 2022.
- **Exploring measurements of household food insecurity.** We are in the very early stages of scoping this work, to inform how we measure HHFI in FY2 and other sources, and intend to explore academic partnerships.

Future work programme

The [future HHFI work programme](#) presented to the board is presented below. These are current proposals on which we are currently engaging with internal stakeholders to refine and develop, with an aim to deliver over the next 2 years.

- A systematic review of HHFI in the UK identifying existing evidence gaps
- Synthesis and interpretation of currently available data, generating more products, e.g. academic articles, thought pieces, from existing external data as well as our own sources (e.g. Food and You 2)
- Stakeholder mapping exercise and subsequent stakeholder workshop, assessing and filling gaps and sharing research plans
- Mapping of HHFI at LA level (overlaid with e.g.: food desserts, types of food businesses, food banks, Indices of Multiple Deprivation, FHS etc to inform LA / local response)
- Explore NHS datasets to assess the impacts of household food insecurity on food borne disease, as well as nutrition and health, (depending on access to data).
- Commission new primary research on additional questions, such as the lived experience of those in household food insecurity, the hidden costs of food, or the trade-offs that consumers make in practice against health and sustainability.
- Actively report on food prices, joining up our reporting to produce a dashboard with OGD partners.
- Explore how we develop our risk analysis and impact assessment capabilities to look at the impact on consumers in the round: consistently including criteria such as; social equity, impact on household food insecurity (as well as healthy/sustainable consumer choices, food waste, animal welfare and trade).
- We intend to complete this work under the Wider Consumers' Interest (WCI) programme. As such it will be guided by the WCI cross government steering group, as well as the ACSS WCI Working Group. Additionally, newly commissioned work will go through the new ACSS gateway process, led by the ACSS Assurance Working Group. Therefore, as our plans for this work progress, there will be various opportunities for ACSS members to input.

Discussion

At this early stage in the development of the work programme, we would welcome ACSS views on the questions below, and will facilitate a discussion around these questions at the plenary.

1. What are your views on the steer from the Board?
2. Are there other areas/elements of work that could be considered?
3. How can the ACSS best support the work programme outlines

Annex A: FSA Analytics - diversity and inclusion in analysis

Prompted by communications from the ONS as to how they would be treating ethnic minority groups for analysis, FSA Analytics team leaders discussed setting down a more structured approach for how we decide which characteristics to include in analysis and where necessary, to boost sample sizes. The protected characteristics as per the Equality Act are as follows:

- Age,
- Disability,
- Gender reassignment,
- Race,
- Religion or belief,
- Sex,
- Sexual orientation,
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity.

Habitually we will boost samples so that we can also analyse by country (i.e. England, Wales and NI) and often, we are also able to analyse by income bracket or SEG. Though there is no one size fits all policy which will be appropriate to every study, where analysis is based on a statistically robust sample of consumers we propose to seek to identify differences and impacts on groups by:

- Age
- Sex
- Ethnic group
- Socioeconomic group
- Disability
- Family/children in the home
- Country (England, Wales and NI)

We accept that in some cases sample sizes will be insufficient for robust analysis unless we collect data over time. Where qualitative work includes work with consumers, we will seek to include a diverse range of individuals to cover all

these characteristics.

The main change to how we currently operate will be that instead of deciding which of these to include, the **default option** will be to ask for proposals which include the analysis of data in this way, unless there is a prior agreement that this is not required. Restrictions might include the feasibility of collecting data (see below) the timing and budget allocated to study, or there may be sufficient evidence to exclude a certain characteristic from the sampling or analysis on grounds of relevance. Factors affecting feasibility might be:

- Whether respondents will tell us about their protected characteristics
- Whether asking this could affect response rates.
- Cost implications of boosting sample sizes for a given characteristic

[1] Turrell G, Hewitt B, Patterson C, Oldenburg B, Gould T. [Socioeconomic differences in food purchasing behaviour and suggested implications for diet-related health promotion](#). J Hum Nutr Diet 2002; 15: 355–364.

[2] For full survey questions, see [Wave 3 technical report](#)

[3] age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity.