

Communicating food poverty on the island of Ireland

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Funder: Safefood



Aim and objectives:

The overall aim of the research was to investigate the discursive construction of food poverty in the media, and to explore public, policy and key stakeholder perceptions of food poverty.

The core research objectives were:

1. To investigate how food poverty is discursively constructed across policy documents, newspaper, and broadcast media in the Island of Ireland.
2. To examine key stakeholder views, perceptions and understandings of food poverty.
3. To explore perceptions on how the issue of food poverty is framed in print and broadcast media.

Design/Methods:

To meet the research objectives, the following studies were carried out:

- A systematic policy analysis, drawing on policy documents (n=48) from Northern Ireland and Ireland
- Analysis of news media reporting on food poverty on the island of Ireland, drawing on a sample of newspaper articles (n=81), and TV and radio segments (n=91) from across both Northern Ireland and Ireland.
- Qualitative interviews with key stakeholders (n=44), including news media professionals (n=16), members of the public (n=8), third sector community organisations (n=14) and policymakers (n=4).

Public Patient Involvement:

A stakeholder advisory panel (n=9) comprising members of the public, food poverty advocates/community organisations, and journalists helped inform the project, including advising on recruitment, data collection tools, and knowledge translation.

Results:

- Analysis of policy documents (n=48) across Northern Ireland (n=26) and Ireland (n=22) showed that food poverty tends to be presented as problematic food affordability and/or accessibility; food insufficiency; a lack of varied food to maintain a healthy lifestyle; reliance on food banks; and exclusion from social and cultural participation. Food poverty and food insecurity were largely used interchangeably. In

both Ireland and Northern Ireland, the default solutions include charitable food aid, and re-distribution of waste/surplus foods. While both jurisdictions have anti-poverty strategies, and there is some evidence of cross-governmental coordination and linkages with other policies, neither Ireland nor Northern Ireland have a national food poverty strategy per se.

- Analysis of broadcast news media (n=91) – including radio and television – across the island showed that both mediums tended to frame food poverty as driven by upstream macro-level (i.e. policy and political) factors, including the cost of living crisis, localised issues such as the housing crisis (Ireland) and absence of leadership in Stormont (Northern Ireland), and lack of government action to address the issue through policy measures. Existing measures to address the immediate issue were largely third-sector led with calls for greater government intervention; some news packages included tips on shopping and budgeting and as money-saving mechanisms. The growing normalisation of the issue of the problem was illustrated through the discursive construction of the ‘new’ or ‘working poor’ and encouragement to the audience to seek help if needed.
- Analysis of print news media (n=81) – including local and national newspapers in Ireland and Northern Ireland showed that publications tended to frame food poverty as driven by upstream macro-level factors, including cost-of-living crisis, inflation and wage stagnation, and shortcomings in the social welfare system; some reference was also made to individual level drivers such as addiction issues. Existing measures to address the immediate issue were presented as largely third-sector led with calls for greater government intervention; coverage of third sector led responses significantly outweighed coverage of policy responses however. Common features of reporting included circumscribing those predominantly affected as families with children, while the discursive construction of the ‘working’ poor was also apparent.
- Stakeholders across various sectors share a multifaceted understanding of food poverty, with a focus on inadequate food quantity, poor dietary quality, and social dimensions. Mental health issues and social exclusion are commonly perceived consequences, while stakeholders differ on ideological and regional grounds regarding the drivers and responses to food poverty. Northern Irish stakeholders emphasise governmental drivers and policies, whereas those from the Ireland highlight individual-level factors. Policy-makers stress the need for coordinated, cross-sectoral strategies. Regarding media reporting, professionals advocate for impactful storytelling with personal narratives, yet face challenges accessing service-users for case studies. Public voices question the efficacy of media representation and suggest involving field experts. Challenges in communicating food poverty include its complexity, stigma, and industry-specific obstacles. Both media professionals and third-sector stakeholders acknowledge a mutual reliance in

addressing the issue but express concerns about one-dimensional reporting and the lack of contextualised data.

Knowledge translation:

Recommendations for knowledge translation were collaboratively generated via two participatory workshops held with the knowledge users (n=12) and a stakeholder panel (n=6). The recommendations generated highlight the need:

- To develop a position statement and agree upon a shared language among advocates on the island of Ireland for communicating on food poverty
- To establish a resource database and a panel of academics, lived experience experts and advocates
- To improve the data landscape on food poverty
- To collaboratively develop best practice guidelines for reporting on food poverty
- To develop training workshops for media professionals and journalism students
- To raise awareness of food poverty and the right to food among the public

Dissemination:

- The project report will be launched on the 17th of September, 2024, in Belfast at a public event hosted by Safefood as part of the All-island Food Poverty Network.
- Findings presented at Nutrition Society Congress: Kerins, C., Kelly, C., Furey, S., Kerrigan P., McCartan, A., Vaughan, E. (2024). Understanding current discourses on food poverty on the island of Ireland. [Oral Presentation], Nutrition Society Congress, Belfast, 02-JUL-24.
- A rapid review conducted to inform the project was published in December 2023 in Health Promotion International: Kerins, C., Furey, S., Kerrigan, P., McCartan, A., Kelly, C., & Vaughan, E. (2023). News media framing of food poverty and insecurity in high-income countries: a rapid review. Health promotion international, 38(6), daad188. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daad188>
- An additional paper is under review and another one is in development.
- Dr Kerins won the joint third-best oral presentation on the project findings at the University of Galway CMNHS Future Research Day.