

Community Food Pantries: a combined response to food insecurity and environmental sustainability? A Social Policy MSc thesis by Emma Slavin.



This briefing is for Scottish Government social researchers, and policymakers with an interest in food policy, sustainability policy, or social and economic policy for health and inequalities.

Background and Methods

Community food pantries are an increasingly popular form of food support initiative that offer members access to low-cost food. Pantries are intended to be a more dignified model than food banks, as well as contributing to sustainability by reducing food waste (Baillie et al., 2024). The food bank model has been the subject of a lot of academic research; however, newer forms of food support are under-researched. In this thesis I explored the role community food pantries play in addressing food insecurity and improving the sustainability of food systems. Focusing on Glasgow, I conducted seven qualitative interviews with community food pantry workers, then used Reflexive Thematic Analysis to analyse the results.

What did I find?

- **Role of food pantries:** participants viewed pantries as enabling more choice and being less stigmatised than food banks
- **Culturally appropriate food support:** there are concerns regarding a lack of provision of halal meat and other culturally appropriate foods, which may be amplifying the effects of food insecurity for migrant and BME communities
- **Surplus food redistribution:** pantry workers reported negative experiences of surplus food redistribution, although the prevention of food waste was the primary contribution of pantries to environmental sustainability. The findings

Findings related to six key themes
Role of food pantries
Culturally appropriate food support
Surplus food redistribution
Growing projects and local food
Financial sustainability
Implementing change

demonstrate the dangers of relying on food surplus, and indicate the need for alternative methods of sourcing food

- **Growing projects and local food:** findings demonstrated the presence of growing projects in a number of pantries as well as provision of locally grown food via allotment surplus – however difficulties were experienced providing suitable amounts of food through these methods
- **Financial sustainability:** financial sustainability was a key concern for the majority of pantries, and many participants described measures taken to improve financial sustainability – however clear that there were trade-offs with regard to financial accessibility
- **Implementing change:** findings also indicated the importance of facilitating the involvement of people experiencing food insecurity in decision making regarding food policy

Implications and Recommendations

As food support organisations, pantries have the potential to play a key role in the Scottish Government's Cash-First approach to food insecurity, as well as in local Good Food Nation plans.

1. Research should be carried out involving people using food pantries, to assess the impact of pantries on experiences of food insecurity
2. The Scottish Government should consider how to incentivise partnership working between food retailers and manufacturers, and community food initiatives, in order to enable access to low-cost and culturally appropriate foods.
3. Researchers and policymakers should enable the re-evaluation of the reliance on surplus food redistribution by exploring options to incentivise a reduction in systemic over-production
4. Pantries should provide culturally appropriate food support – partners such as The Scottish Pantry Network and local authorities should collaborate with faith-based or culturally-specific types of food support in order to increase multicultural food support