

Millions of the poorest in the UK eat an unhealthy diet

Thomas Scripps
13 December 2017

In a report commissioned to investigate the effects of Brexit on fruit and vegetable prices in the UK, the Food Foundation think-tank found that only a minority of the population regularly eats healthy food.

Only a small minority is eating enough fruit and vegetables—even by the older standards of “five-a-day” (five 80g portions of fruit or vegetables).

Since 2016, government recommendations have suggested a target of seven portions a day, and more recent studies indicate yet greater benefits from eating 10 portions. These benefits include significantly reduced risks of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, hypertension and many types of cancer, according to the World Health Organisation.

However, just 8 percent of children aged 11-18, 27 percent of adults aged 19-64 and 35 percent of adults over 65 years old are achieving even five-a-day. Since the financial crash in 2008, moreover, the trajectory of these percentages has been downward. In 2008, 10 percent of children managed to reach the target amount, as did 29 percent of 19-64 year olds and 36 percent of over 65s.

Deficiencies are skewed strongly towards the poorest families. Whereas those in the £50,000-and-above income group are eating, on average, 3 percent less than the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables, those on incomes between £25,000-£50,000 are eating between 11-13 percent less, and those earning less than £25,000 are eating between 21-27 percent less. This last group, roughly 7/10ths of the UK’s earning population, is also consuming 15 percent more sugar—generally more prevalent in cheaper, faster foods—than recommended.

The reasons for this are not hard to guess. Data from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs shows that, between 2007 and 2015, households

were forced to save five percent on their food bills by buying cheaper versions of their regular items, in addition to buying seven percent less food. But despite making these savings, households still saw a 16 percent increase in their food bills on average over this period; for the poorest 10 percent of the population, the increase was 26 percent.

In short, under the impact of austerity cuts to social services, falling wages and rising food prices, many working people are unable to provide themselves, and particularly their children, with a healthy diet.

If the UK were to leave the European Union without an exit deal, the Food Foundation claims that the changed cost of exchange rates, labour and tariffs would result in a £158 a year increase in the amount spent on just fruit and vegetables by a family of four. For a family of the same size, the cost of eating seven-a-day would cost a full half of the average food budget of the poorest 10 percent.

In the case of excessive sugar consumption—and that of high calorie foods generally—poverty and inequality, beyond imposing financial constraints, have been shown to have deeper psychological effects. A study at the University of St Andrews last year, “Poverty, inequality, and increased consumption of high calorie food: experimental evidence for a causal link,” suggested that the way the body responds to the scarcity and social stresses imposed by poverty and extreme inequality encourages higher consumption of sugary and fatty foods.

The overall health cost of poor diet to individuals, and consequent financial costs to health services, are immense.

In a global study published in 2015, reported in the *Guardian*, the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) found that “Cumulatively,

unhealthy eating, including diets low in fruit, whole grains, and vegetables, and diets high in red meat and sugar-sweetened beverages, contributed to more deaths than any other factor, causing ischemic heart disease, stroke and diabetes.”

While smoking remained the largest single health risk factor in the UK, high blood pressure, high body mass index, high cholesterol, diet low in fruit, diabetes and diet low in vegetables were all among the top ten. Obesity is thought likely to soon outstrip smoking as the leading cause of cancer, with over one-quarter of UK adults currently obese (the worst rate in Western Europe) and official estimates suggesting the figure will rise to 50 percent by 2050.

In 2014-15, the NHS estimated it spent £6.1 billion on obesity-related illness alone; the wider social costs of obesity are estimated at roughly £27 billion. These figures are projected to reach £9.7 billion and £49.9 billion by 2050. They do not take into account health problems caused by other dietary issues.

As with fruit and vegetable deficiencies, the effects of obesity are more sharply felt in economically deprived households and areas. Children from the poorest 10 percent of households are twice as likely to become obese as those from the richest 10 percent, and fast food outlets are more prevalent in poorer areas of the country, according to Public Health England.

Obesity is linked to a wide range of social and environmental factors, not least of which is the great power exercised by fast-food and confectionery businesses, whose influence the government’s piecemeal health campaigns will not begin to challenge.

The “Change 4 Life” national healthy eating campaign, for example, spends just £5 million on advertising a year, compared to over £12 million a year by Cadbury’s, £11 million by Coca Cola, £11 million by Galaxy and £8 million by Walker’s. The list goes on.

The government’s sugar tax, which will come into effect in 2018, is likely to see additional costs passed onto consumers, with poorer people hit disproportionately harder. It offers no guarantees of reduced consumption, and is in any case limited to sugary drinks. Other reductions in sugar content have been agreed with certain businesses on a purely voluntary basis.

The health crisis is being stoked by the millions of people regularly going hungry due to lack of income. According to the Food Foundation report, quoting UN estimates, 4.2 percent of the UK’s population is experiencing severe food insecurity, compared to a European average of 1.6 percent—putting the UK in the bottom half of European countries scored on hunger.

Other surveys paint an even bleaker picture. The Food Standards Agency (FSA), for example, found that eight percent of adults (around 4 million people) had low or very low food security—regularly going whole days without eating due to lack of money. Seventeen percent of adults, meanwhile, are regularly worrying about their food supplies running out before they can afford to buy more. This rises to 47 percent among the unemployed, one-third of whom have low or very low food security. The WSWS recently reported on the continually rising use of food banks across the country.

The catastrophic state of dietary health and chronic problem of hunger are an indictment of the failed capitalist system.

The health dangers and benefits of various foods and diets are known, and the wealth to ensure full access to healthy diets for all exists in abundance, but the power to produce and distribute food is held by a small number of private corporations only concerned with safeguarding their profit, without regard for the population’s health.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact