

Food deserts in the UK

Scott Corfe, Social Market Foundation, November 2018

Background

The poverty premium – whereby lower income households pay more for a range of essential items – has been a key area of research for the Social Market Foundation (SMF) in 2018. Understanding the poverty premium is part of our assessment of what needs to be done to ensure the UK economy works for all people, and not just those on the highest incomes.

If we are to restore faith in the UK's economic model, we need to move away from a situation where lower income households pay more than higher income ones for things such as energy and insurance. Yet, unfortunately, this is all-too-common across the country. Low income households on pre-payment meters end up paying a substantial premium for electricity and gas. And they often end up paying more to insure their cars and homes, as a result of living in areas where crime rates are relatively high.

Our research even suggests that some low-income households are having to pay more for food as a result of living in so-called “food deserts”. These are areas where access to food stores is more limited than other parts of the country.

The existence of food deserts in the UK

An SMF study this year, supported by Kellogg's, estimated that about one in ten deprived areas in the UK are food deserts. This includes out-of-town housing estates which suffer from a lack of shops – including food stores – within walking distance. But deprived inner-city areas are sometimes food deserts too. Often, such areas contain no large supermarkets, leaving residents to shop in smaller convenience stores where food prices are higher, and the selection of fresh, healthy food is more limited.

Smaller stores, more limited choice and costs associated with getting to and from a supermarket can all lead to a situation where individuals pay a poverty premium for groceries. Worryingly, we estimate that 1.2 million individuals in deprived areas in Britain are living in food deserts.

Greater Manchester is not without such deserts. Many residents in Hattersley, for example, are over a mile away from Tesco Extra – the nearest large supermarket. This might not sound like far for car owners. But in Hattersley about half of households are without a car, making it much more time consuming to get to a food shop. This can be particularly problematic for the elderly and those with disabilities.

Those in some parts of Seedley, in Salford, have to travel similar distances to get to a supermarket, and again about half of households are without access to a car.

The impact of food deserts

Not only can food deserts lead to people paying more for food, but they can also have a negative impact on diet and health outcomes. In a UK-wide survey undertaken as part of our study, 16% of respondents said either not having access to a car or not being near a supermarket offering healthy food at low prices was a barrier to eating healthy. This rises to over a fifth (22%) for those with a household income of £10,000 or less.

Studies of the United States also suggest living in a food desert can have a negative impact on health outcomes. Research by academics at the London School of Economics found that children living in food deserts in the US were more likely to be overweight – particularly if these food deserts were in urban areas

The implications for policy

What does all this mean for policymakers? Tackling the problem of food deserts is not easy. Further, the problem could get worse over time, as the rise of online grocery shopping leads to the closure of “bricks and mortar” food stores.

Improving public transport links between housing estates and food stores could play a key role in increasing food availability and affordability in deprived areas. Working with local services, such as schools, to provide breakfast and supper clubs can also help to improve access to food.

There is also a broader point around urban planning and where we build the homes of the future – particularly if we want to encourage more people to walk and take public transport, rather than use cars. Housing, including social housing, needs to be accompanied by the amenities that are vital for day-to-day life – including food stores within easy reach. The days of isolated housing estates, separated from vital services such as supermarkets, ought to be numbered.

Finally, we need to raise awareness of the issue of food deserts. For the average person in the UK, it may be hard to grasp the difficulties that some people face getting to a food store, particularly as much of the country is indeed well-served by supermarkets. Many also struggle to appreciate that, for those without a car, getting to and from a supermarket can be much trickier. There may be some eye-opening to be done before policymakers are willing to act on this matter.

Written by Scott Corfe on behalf of Greater Manchester Poverty Action.