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Food insecurity and well-being do not affect the quality of women's diets in Southampton

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The Southampton Women's Survey (SWS) has shown that women with lower educational attainment are less likely to eat a healthy diet than women with higher educational attainment⁽¹⁾. The SWS has also found that women who are on benefits or felt they are under financial strain are more likely to be diagnosed with depression⁽²⁾ and have lower folate levels – a marker of a poor diet⁽³⁾. Focus group discussions with women of lower educational attainment have revealed that they may eat unhealthy diets because they are constrained by limited financial resources and lack of control over their lives in general and their food choices in particular⁽⁴⁾. A sense of control is important for healthy psychological functioning and has been shown to predict well-being⁽⁵⁾. The SWS team of psychologists, epidemiologists and nutritionists therefore wished to assess the impact of food insecurity and well-being on the diets of women with lower educational attainment.

A cross-sectional questionnaire survey of 212 women (mean age 27 years) of lower educational attainment (GCSE only or below) attending baby and toddler sessions at SureStart children's centres in Southampton was undertaken. Diet was measured by a twenty-item FFQ⁽⁶⁾, food insecurity was measured using the household food security scale⁽⁷⁾ and well-being was assessed by the WHO-5 well-being index⁽⁸⁾. Data on level of education attained were also collected.

Principal components analysis was used to calculate a single diet score for each woman⁽¹⁾. Women with high scores ate diets that complied with healthy eating guidelines from the Department of Health and other agencies (e.g. Food Standards Agency⁽⁹⁾), which was termed a prudent dietary pattern. No relationship was found between food insecurity and quality of diet or well-being and quality of diet. However, there was a significant correlation between food insecurity and well-being ($r = -0.22$, $P = 0.002$), such that the more food insecure the women were, the lower their sense of well-being.

Unlike previous research, the present study did not find food insecurity or well-being to be related to quality of diet in this population. The findings indicate that eating a poor quality diet may not simply be a matter of having insufficient money for food. However, the relationship between food insecurity and well-being suggests that having insufficient money for food may be stressful, thus reducing feelings of well-being. Other psychosocial factors are currently being explored to determine whether they explain why women of lower educational attainment eat poorer diets than women of higher educational attainment.

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