# Title

What is ‘food insecurity’ and why is it such a concern, especially for people with severe mental health?

# Speaker information

* Cheryl Blake (Interviewer) (Cheryl)
* Ashley Blacklock (Speaker 1) (Ashley)
* Claire Atkins (Speaker 2) (Claire)

# Description

Launched on World Mental Health Day 2024, this episode of 'Public Health Research and Me' sees host and public partner [Cheryl Blake](https://fuse.ac.uk/publicinvolvement/meetapublicpartner/cherylblake.html) speak with Fuse researcher [Ashley Blacklock](https://research.tees.ac.uk/en/persons/ashley-blacklock) and peer researcher Claire Atkins about research to tackle food insecurity and how to improve access to quality food in the North East. [More information about this episode can be found here](https://www.fuse.ac.uk/publicinvolvement/fusepodcast/whyisfoodinsecuritysuchaconcernforpeoplewithseverementalillness.html).

# Contact

For any questions about this episode, please contact: info@fuse.ac.uk

Fuse Podcast: Public Health Research and Me

Transcript

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[Start of recording]

[upbeat electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:05]

00:00:05 Cheryl Hello and welcome to our podcast, *Public Health Research and Me*. This podcast is led by public partners from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, and brings together the six universities in the North East and North Cumbria of Durham, Cumbria, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside in a unique collaboration to deliver world class research to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities. Fuse is also a founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research. So, hello. My name is Cheryl Blake and I’m a public partner collaborating with Fuse. My interests and special subjects are around mental health and sexual health, domestic abuse, coercive and violent behaviour, and family court and social workers within that system. In this episode, I will be talking with Claire Atkins and Ashley Blacklock, and we will be chatting about food insecurity and severe mental illness. So, hello and welcome. Ashley, would you like to introduce yourself please?

00:01:02 Ashley Hi. Yeah. So my name is Ashley. I’m the research associate from Teesside University who is associated with this study. I’ve helped to collect and analyse all the data so far.

00:01:14 Cheryl And Claire, would you like to introduce yourself please?

00:01:17 Claire Yeah. I’m Claire Atkins. I am the senior peer worker for Durham and Darlington, and I work between Lanchester Road, and Durham and West Park Hospital in Darlington, and I’m helping out on this project.

00:01:28 Cheryl So, welcome. And I will just dive straight in with the questions. So the first question is, can you tell us a little bit about the project you are working on?

00:01:37 Ashley Yeah. So to start with, I felt it was important to define what food insecurity actually is. So this tends to be defined as a lack of the financial resources to ensure reliable access to food, to meet dietary, nutritional and social needs. And it’s very disappointing to say that this issue needs defining these days, but shockingly there is around fifty seven thousand people in Middlesbrough who are at risk of food insecurity at the moment. A recent study has identified that fifty point four percent of the sample in a Northern England study were experiencing food insecurity, which is a very shocking statistic.

00:02:21 Cheryl That is definitely.

00:02:23 Ashley Also, adults experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have a mental illness, and food insecurity causes considerable stress and anxiety which can exacerbate pre-existing mental illness. And unfortunately it can also increase the risk of suicide attempts. So that’s not the only effect, though. There is also the physical aspects and physical impacts for a person. So food insecurity can also cause conditions such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and these conditions can mean that a person may die fifteen to twenty years younger than people without a severe mental illness. So, in terms of this project, we want to support people who have a mental illness to be able to eat well. So this project involved a mental health NHS Trust, Teesside University, a community organisation, and also people who have severe mental illness, but I’ll refer to that now as SMI. So, though, we tried a completely new way of working by making some different healthy ready meals, and through participant consensus we determined which was the best in terms of the taste and the appeal to others that were living with SMI. We were hoping to solve three important challenges facing the people of Middlesbrough with this project. So firstly, that’s food insecurity. So people not having the money to buy enough food to meet their needs. Secondly, people with SMI dying up to twenty years early, which I mentioned earlier. And thirdly, making sure that people with SMI have a good quality diet, which only seems fair. Food insecurity can affect people from all backgrounds. There’s certainly no typical profile for this issue and it’s certainly something that has only gotten worse in view of global events in the recent years. But, that said, it is an issue that does predate things like COVID, modern wars and cost of living crisis, but it is just more openly discussed now. But I’ll let Claire talk a bit more about that.

00:04:49 Cheryl So when do you think food insecurity as a concept began then?

00:04:53 Claire I think food insecurity has always been a thing, right? You look back in history and it doesn’t matter which part of history you look at, there’s always been the haves and the have nots. There’s always been people who have struggled to put food on the table and people who haven’t. I think in society as we have it now, I think it’s becoming more prevalent. Because actually what is being sort of discovered is that there are people in full-time employment who can’t afford to put food on the table. But they work full-time, they work thirty eight hours a week and it gets to the end of the month and they can’t afford to make ends meet. I think most people who you talk to about like food insecurity, they would assume that it’s people who are out of work, unemployed, on benefits. And actually, what the reality is, is that’s not the case. More and more, because of global pressures, national pressures, societal pressures, it’s become more and more commonplace for everyday working people to not be able to afford to feed themselves. I think food insecurity itself was like—I’m sure I was told recently that it was like 1974 or something, in the Food World Summit thing before it became sort of recognised. But I don’t think food insecurity’s just been there since 1974. I think that’s just when somebody decided to put a label on it. Right?

00:06:20 Cheryl Yeah. Definitely. Yeah, I completely agree with that. It’s always been something that’s been around, like you say, and definitely when you look at history. But I just think it’s become more socially aware these days and more socially acceptable, actually, to be able to talk about it. Which is a good thing, really, but then it also can actually be quite upsetting. But I think it’s good that you are more aware of it now and research like yours is incredibly important. So, how have you found in your research about having a lack of cookery skills and knowledge about how to prepare healthy, affordable food can cause risk with more challenges, particularly in terms of mental health?

00:06:54 Ashley So we’ve found that a lack of skills and knowledge around nutritious foods and also how to properly cook them is an issue facing many households, regardless of mental health status. I think a main reason for this is today’s busy society has had such a culinary shift from the traditional fresh home cooking to having more fast food and ultra-processed foods that are high in fat, salt, sugar. And because of this shift, cooking skills are quickly being forgotten or even missed on today’s younger generation, so that’s leaving a real skills gap for the future. But for some individuals living with mental illness, the barriers are much vaster and that means that it’s a more difficult situation to manage. Literature has suggested that skills and knowledge are also an issue for those living with SMI, though for some, there are additional barriers such as factors like medication side effects, financial difficulties, symptoms of mental illness, including a lack of motivation. They were all identified as additional difficulties for this patient group. More recent research has also highlighted that, for some, factors such as employment status, fuel poverty, and the overly complicated application process for things like food banks are also barriers. So, this can understandably impact on a person’s ability and drive to research nutritious foods, and also for that drive to actually get up and cook them. I feel that, from this project, it’s really highlighted that support and guidance around diet and cooking has been identified as a barrier for some individuals living with SMI. But we did find that having a structured group session was a really successful intervention to this. Our participants—it was so lovely—they felt really inspired to cook more at home. They made dietary changes, they tried new foods. The feedback was fantastic. And they were all in agreement that if there was a session such as this out in the community, they would want to participate. There is that drive there. So I feel that’s a really valuable outcome from our research, is this could be a way of helping those with a SMI to improve their nutritional intake, as well as increasing their skills and knowledge around food and cooking.

00:09:50 Cheryl Definitely. I mean, that sounds like a really valuable sort of insight and it’s something that, you know, going forward, I think definitely needs to be there. Yeah, I won’t mind admitting that I’ve had to use food banks myself in the past, and, you know, fortunately I grew up with my mum being quite inventive with various things so I know how to use it when you get all these various kinds of wonders, you know. And I can put things together but, you know, not everyone has that sort of skill of mothers’ inventiveness. I’ve said that—I’ve like, “Have you seen what’s here?” And I don’t even know what to do with it myself sometimes. You know, you do look at it and think, “Well, what can I do?” And if you don’t have that support from family members or friends of family or like the local communities, you know, it is very, very hard. Particularly for someone with mental health issues, which I struggle with myself. So, what do you think are the effects of experiencing food insecurity, especially amongst people living with severe mental illness?

00:10:43 Claire I think the effects of people who experience food insecurity are physical, mental, emotional. I don’t think it’s as straightforward as one thing. I think… the first thing I think of when I hear this question is shame. The shame that people feel because they have to go to a food bank or because they have to get food donations is a real thing. And shame is the toxicity of the emotion world, right? Shame is so toxic. It’s a horrible, horrible emotion. Because of shame, people quite often don’t ask for the help or support that they might need because that shame prevents them from doing so. Shame itself stops people from telling other people that they’re struggling because they get embarrassed about it, because they don’t want people to know. You know, somebody like me is a prime example of that. So when I first started working for the trust that I work for, when I was the band three, I struggled—really badly struggled—to make ends meet. Even though I’d come off benefits, I’d gone into full-time employment, actually, the reality of the situation was I was financially better off on benefits than I was in full-time employment. And certainly, for a short while, I was getting help and support from people giving me food; food donations and things like that, just to make ends meet at the end of the month. I know how that made me feel. And it’s just me and the cat. Like, I don’t have kids. I don’t have a partner. I don’t have other humans that depend on me and I can’t envisage how that kind of shame must make somebody feel when they do have other people that are dependent on them. And the impact of that on somebody’s mental health is real. It’s things that we witness every day in my job that I do at the hospital, but it’s real. And the physical and the mental and the emotional impact that that has, has a real detrimental impact on people’s lives, their stability and their welfare.

00:12:57 Cheryl Definitely. I would agree with that a hundred percent. Having been in that exact [chuckles] situation, it was definitely the shame. And, yeah, I’ll be honest, I felt like I’d let the kids down because I couldn’t provide for them. Because I was trying to stand on my own two feet, and same as you, I’d come off the benefits. And you know, it is harder. It is harder when you’re off the benefits, and you know, you are suddenly in this world where you’ve got to try and support yourself completely and it’s just not that easy.

00:13:24 Claire But it’s an epistemic issue. It’s not just a localised issue to you or me. This is a national issue. In fact, probably go so far as to say it’s a global issue, right? There are people all over the world who go to work every day that don’t earn enough to feed themselves. Like, this is a problem and it’s a problem we need to talk about.

00:13:45 Cheryl It is definitely, and it is something that you do see every single day. More and more people in the same situation as you, and it—I mean, [chuckles] in one sense it’s nice to see because you don’t feel so alone, but at the other, it’s incredibly sad. So I think, you know, obviously research like this is incredibly important. So, how do you think we can improve the social stigma around food insecurity and particularly the use of food banks? What changes would you like to see, especially for people with multiple health conditions?

00:14:13 Claire This. Talking about it. This. This is huge. That social acceptance; for people to realise that they’re not the only one, and you’ve just said it yourself there, right? In a little way, it’s nice to sometimes know you’re not the only one going through that. That other people do understand. And there is power in that. There’s real power in that. But ultimately, I think, as a society, if we don’t start talking about these things, what’s actually going to change? Because things need to change. You know, people’s basic needs. You know, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it’s basics. You are talking the basics for people; food, water, shelter. You know, it’s not like we’re asking for people to have millions and millions of pounds in the bank. I mean, it would be nice, but it’s not what we’re asking for. Basic needs. Everybody on the planet has a right to have their basic needs met. And I think if we don’t start these bigger, wider conversations, how do we effect change for that to happen?

00:15:15 Cheryl And I feel like, you know, you’re sort of going in with like a double sort of like focus here. Because you’re talking about mental health and you’re also talking about the food insecurities, and both of them have always traditionally been stigmatised. So, you know, to cover both of them at the same time—which do coincide with each other and more than people want to admit.

00:15:35 Claire It’s a symbiotic relationship, isn’t it? Because ultimately, you know, if you don’t eat, you become physically unwell, you become mentally unwell, you become emotionally unwell. And then your mental health, if you do have a predisposition to a mental health condition, becomes worse. And the longer that that cycle continues, the more people find themselves stuck. Because they don’t know how to improve their mental health while they’re still struggling to get their basic needs met, while they’re still struggling to put food on the table. Of course somebody isn’t going to find mental stability while they’re stressed about, “How do I feed my kids at the end of the day?” That’s a horrible thing for people to have to think. I know how it feels just to worry about feeding myself, let alone little people. So, you know, the symbiotic relationship between the two is huge. If you can help people with the food insecurity, the overall impact of that will be less hungry, less stressed, and hopefully, more stable people.

00:16:30 Cheryl So going forward, what do you think needs to change and what are you hoping to come out of your research?

00:16:35 Ashley I mean, that is a huge question, really, isn’t it? [chuckles]

00:16:39 Claire Isn’t it? [chuckles]

00:16:40 Ashley Yeah. So, I think, to start with, mental health services need to promote mental health-enhancing group sessions such as, you know, the cooking session that we had in our project. But things like gardening and craft sessions would also be really nice, and they are examples that were mentioned by our participants that they would be really happy to have a go of and get out there. Have a bit of a try. So it would be really impactful for those who are struggling to integrate with their community. You know, they may be feeling lonely, or even lacking a sense of self—which I feel is something that was briefly highlighted in our results. So these sorts of sessions can feel really empowering and offer such a confidence boost for an individual who had no idea that they were able to make or create something completely new. It’s a skill they didn’t know that they had. And that always feels good, doesn’t it? Recent research has certainly highlighted that there is a lack of assessing for food insecurity in mental health services, which is just so disappointing. There’s a golden opportunity to help people directly, offer them support, point them in the right direction towards charities, organisations who are there to help. They want to help. And they are patient group who need that support at that time and they’re not getting it, so that is something that is really disappointing to hear. Because of this, there certainly needs to be more of an awareness of the issues around food insecurity and the options that are available to help people who are experiencing this terrible situation. There’s many local council-led and charitable organisations that run EcoShops. So EcoShops are similar to food banks, which is the more well-known service, but they are very different as the items that they sell there are not free compared to the food bank where you do get items for free. The reason that they’re not free is they don’t make any profit, but they need to break even to be able to keep running. So these items tend to be surplus food, or it might be food that’s nearing its use-by date so it does need to be used quite quickly. So it’s got a very fast turnaround on what is available there. Some weeks people who use it might be quite happy with what’s available. [chuckles] Some weeks they’re not sure what to do with what they’ve been given. But there’s lots of different options and it’s always cycling round. And it’s really important to note as well that different EcoShops charge different amounts, so you’ll normally get X amount of items for X amount of pounds depending on where you go. It always works out that it’s all very reasonably priced though, and it is a service that could make a huge difference to an individual’s health and wellbeing as well as making a huge positive impact on the local community as well.

00:20:00 Cheryl Definitely. I’ve seen them myself actually, and I have looked at them myself a few times, and I think it’s just—it’s really invaluable to have that there as another option. Yeah. These things definitely need to be more like sort of advertised as well. It’s only recently that I even found out about them.

00:20:19 Ashley It’s the same for us. I mean, everybody who’s part of the research project has said that they didn’t know that the EcoShops were there. All the participants had no idea it was an option on their doorstep and they would be happy to use that again. So, it was really nice to hear.

00:20:35 Cheryl So what has surprised—apart from that, [chuckles] what has surprised or interested you most in your research?

00:20:40 Ashley I mean, there’s been lots of things that have come up, both in sort of the background research, in the project. But in terms of the project itself, I feel like the community feel that we’ve had with the participants was a big surprise. I wasn’t expecting it. It felt more like friends coming together and meeting each week rather than a research project. It’s something that, you know, whether you were staff or participant, we all looked forward to these sessions. And there was always lots of laughter and jokes and it just had a really warm feel and that was really nice. The final product that we made was actually named after one of our participants, because the group agreed that this was a really nice tribute to the team effort that was put into that final product. That’s been a really nice outcome and certainly something that we didn’t expect to happen at the start. In terms of background research, the most surprising thing is the fact that, you know, food banks are not always meeting needs of populations that they offer their services to. So different cultures and vegetarians, they don’t always have food products that they can access or use, and that’s something that’s come out of recent research. Also, it’s highlighted that food insecurity is an intergenerational issue. You know, this issue, for some families, has been experienced across the generations so it’s very deep rooted and something that is going to take a lot of time to help and put right again. And, as I mentioned as well, a terribly shocking outcome from the research: the amount of barriers that there are, but in particular, the forms that are needed to fill in—to be filled in by users of things like food banks. Because that is a huge barrier for somebody who perhaps doesn’t have the level of reading and writing that they need to be able to fill it in, or perhaps English isn’t their first language. Then that’s—like I said, that’s a huge barrier for somebody who is already feeling embarrassed and shameful for having to go, and then they have to then try and come over that barrier too. So I feel like this is something that definitely needs to be spoken about more. It’s already being spoken about a lot more recently, but we need to go even more. We need to normalise this, and we need to help spread the word about all the good work that is being done, and try to help minimise the effects of food insecurity moving forward. But I think the biggest surprise in all of this is, to me, just how big this problem is in this day and age and how unrecognised the support is out there. So I do feel that more research would be helpful to see how best to direct individuals to services like food banks, EcoShops. Also, very much like you were saying, you know, research on how to distribute this information. How can we advertise it directly to these different populations who really need it?

00:23:59 Cheryl So, I mean, you know, it’s just something like I’ve noticed myself. You know, you’re talking about the cultural sort of food being available, or for vegetarianism as well, which my daughter’s vegetarian and I’m—depending what mood I’m in. But my issue that I’ve always had is the gluten-free aspect. I’m gluten-free, but the automatic assumption is, “Well, if you’re struggling for money, we will give you lots of rice and pasta.” And well, you know, the rice is alright, but they give you lots of pasta and I can’t eat that. So, I’ll sit there and I’ll be hungry, but the kids are full so that’s fine. You know, I’m alright with that. But, you know, that’s really hard and obviously that is something that’s expensive to add into, but if there could be more options perhaps, or people just think about it and, you know, to give other—I don’t know. It is something that I think needs to be talked about. And I have noticed like, in the sort of forums I’m involved in, that a lot of people have said the same thing about the gluten-free aspect. And there’s a lot of people that do have them issues and that does affect your mental health as well, going forward. Because if you’re hungry or whatever, you know, you’re struggling and it makes you feel, you know, all the rest of it. [laughs]

00:25:05 Ashley There’s a lot of conditions that rely on specific diets, isn’t there?

00:25:08 Cheryl Definitely.

00:25:08 Ashley And the more it’s talked about, the more that we can do something about it.

00:25:13 Cheryl Actually, for me as well, it’s—like you were saying about the forms and things, like I struggle filling forms in and I’ve actually helped other people, ironically. [laughs] Which is funny because I struggle with them myself and you—but you’ve got to like fill the forms in or you’ve got to do things online or, you know, you have to find out who to be able to talk to to get even—so you’ve—because you’ve got to get them prescribed as well, technically, haven’t you? You know, and that’s hard in itself. You’re not sure who to go to. So it’s definitely about the awareness and spreading that it’s okay to ask, you know, “Where do I go for this?” So people don’t feel that shame that, you know, Claire was mentioning before. Like, you don’t want to feel that. You know, you need to be able to feel like you can approach people. Definitely. So, is there anything else that you would like to add before I ask my last question?

00:25:56 Ashley The only thing I would probably add in, actually, is the fact that the EcoShops—there’s people from all walks of life that go there. It’s not just, you know, the stereotypical person on benefits or struggling to make ends meet. It’s everybody. When I went—and I was lucky enough to shadow them for a few hours—and there was people queuing up outside a couple of hours before it even opened. And like I say, these people are from all walks of life. All backgrounds are there and they all appreciated the service that was being run. It was a lifeline for them. And sadly, that one that I went to has had to close now. So, yeah, that’s a real loss. And they’ve now had to go elsewhere or find another way of making ends meet. But I think that would be a key sort of thing that I would like to add in, actually. The fact that food banks, you have to—as you’ve mentioned, you have to get referred to and there’s as a process there. Whereas EcoShops, this is for everyone. Everyone is welcome. Obviously it’s not infinite supplies, but there is a good amount there. And you can pay a small amount to get your products and it is a real lifeline for a lot of people from all different backgrounds.

00:27:22 Cheryl So you don’t need to be referred to a EcoShop then?

00:27:25 Ashley No.

00:27:25 Cheryl Okay. That’s a really important message then, I think. Yeah. So, if you have one message for our listeners to take away, what would it be?

00:27:33 Claire I think the message from this is so powerful, but yet so simple. Talk about it. Talk about it, start a conversation. Reduce the stigma. Like, reduce the shame. Reduce all of that and you’re not going to do any of that unless you talk about it. I think the other thing that I would want people to take away from this, actually, is teach the kids. Teach kids how to open their cupboard and go, “There’s four things in there. I’m going to teach you how to feed yourself on whatever four things are in the cupboard today.” Because nobody taught me that. Not until I was a grownup. Not until6 I was in my thirties somebody showed me how to take four really simple things and feed myself for three days on that. Now that’s a huge skill to be able to have. And I think, as Ashley pointed out earlier, that’s a skill being lost by so many people. Because it is cheaper and easier to buy convenience food. It is cheaper and easier to just stick something in a microwave that’s full of salt and whatever else that they put in these things, right? Take the time to teach the kids how to just make something from scratch. Because actually, if you’ve got the skills, it doesn’t take long and you can feed yourself healthily and you can feed yourself for days if you do it right. But somebody has to teach people how to do that. And I think Ashley’s right, it’s a thing that’s being lost but the impact on that will be generational for years to come. Because if you teach the kids now, they then teach their kids and so on and so forth. Hopefully you’ll eventually reach a point where actually food insecurity isn’t a thing anymore. Like remove the barriers, right? It’s, again, what Ashley was saying before, remove the barriers. There’s so many barriers for people. Whether it’s because they don’t have the skills because no one’s showed them, because they don’t know how to fill the forms out at the food bank or whatever the barriers might be, like fix those. And also, if you have spare food in your cupboard, people, take it. Drop it off. Donate it to these places. Because there are genuinely people out there who aren’t going to eat tomorrow if the rest of us don’t help out. So come together with your community, come together with the people who—you know, people who live in your area. Help each other out.

00:30:03 Cheryl Yeah. It would be really nice, you know. Like, I can’t even imagine asking my neighbour for a cup of sugar these days. Do you know what I mean? That sort of feeling’s just gone. I mean, I’m a massive fan of community and supporting each other, and you know, as well as going back to having like community allotments and things like that. You know, like, can you remember when you were a kid and at nursery you grew a little packet of cress seeds? I don’t actually think my kids did that at school. It’s just simple things like that that gives you that ability to think, “Oh, I can do that. I can grow something from seed,” and you know, then you’ve got your own food as well. You know, you can—it’s very like easy to say these things, but it’s got to be able to have people to put that idea there in the first place and to have people pushing forward to make these boundaries disappear. So Ashley, what was yours? What’s your one last message?

00:30:54 Ashley So I absolutely agree with everything that Claire has so passionately said there.

00:30:59 Cheryl It was very passionate. I liked it. [laughs]

00:31:01 Ashley It was. I loved it. I mean, just kind of jumping on it, and [sighs] I don’t know, it goes back to that good old phrase of—I’ll probably get wrong. What is it? “Give a man fish, he’ll eat for a day. Give him the fishing rod, and he’ll eat for the rest of his life,” style. Let’s hand out fishing rods. Let’s skill people up. Let’s teach the kids. Let’s make sure that this generational cycle of lack of cooking skills, lack of awareness, lack of ability is minimised going forward. But it—so my main point, I think, to take away is to get out there. If you need help, there are services, organisations, charities; they’re out there and they want to help you. You are not alone in needing this support and there is no shame in taking it. We are all human beings who need support with things at times. It’s okay. That would be me.

00:32:11 Cheryl Oh, I like that. Yes. Yes. Very much agree. So, if you’re a fan of our *Public Health Research and Me* podcast, please subscribe on your preferred streaming platforms. [upbeat electronic music fades in] Let us know how we are doing with a rate and a review and share with your friends, family, colleagues and networks. And with that, I would really like to thank Ashley and Claire for being here today.

00:32:33 Ashley Thank you.

00:32:34 Claire Thank you. [music fades out]

[End of recording]