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Understanding current discourses on food poverty on the island of Ireland

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Food poverty is an acknowledged social determinant of health and is associated with significant adverse health outcomes^(1,2). It is a growing issue on the Island of Ireland, due to a number of factors, including, the COVID-19 pandemic, chain supply issues, inflation and external geo-political events. As news media play a key role in shaping policy discourse⁽³⁾ and public attitudes⁽⁴⁾ towards health and social issues, understanding how the issue of food poverty is framed on the island of Ireland may help health promoters develop alternate framings to better advocate for effective policy measures. The overall aim of this research was to investigate the discursive construction of food poverty in the news media, and to explore public, policy and key stakeholder perceptions of food poverty.

A series of interlinked studies were conducted, including analysis of policy documents, analysis of print and broadcast news media reporting on food poverty, and qualitative interviews with news media professionals, members of the public, third sector community organisations and policymakers. In analysing how the topic is framed, the research drew on Entman's Framing Theory. An integrated knowledge translation approach was adopted throughout the research process.

Findings from analysis of policy documents ($n = 48$), print ($n = 81$) and broadcast ($n = 91$) news media, and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders ($n = 44$) across the island of Ireland revealed four core inter-linked and over-lapping discursive frames, including: political dysfunction, economic dysfunction, social dysfunction, and individual dysfunction. A key finding included differing opinions between participants in the North and the Republic on whether lifestyle (individual dysfunction) or structural (political dysfunction) factors were salient drivers of food poverty. Those who leaned more towards understandings of food poverty that included individual dysfunction showed greater endorsement of individual and community level interventions, while those who leaned more towards understandings that included political dysfunction showed greater endorsement of policy-led interventions. This coherence was not evident in news media reporting, where media discourse more prominently highlighted community-led responses (e.g. charitable food aid), despite acknowledgement of its upstream drivers. Another key finding was the absence of the voices of those experiencing food poverty from news media reporting on the issue. While news media professionals expressed a need for case studies, third sector service providers raised questions about the ethical engagement with vulnerable populations.

The research findings highlight that the problem of food poverty is largely depicted through the lens of charity, which precludes obligations for state actors and says nothing of the right to food. Re-framing discussions of food poverty as a health and human rights issue may be a fruitful strategy in addressing the problem. Health promoters, researchers and other stakeholders interested in food poverty should move towards adopting rights-based messaging when translating knowledge, including to policymakers and the media.

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References

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