The Forgotten Welfare Gap in Older Age – Food Insecurity and Living Alone in the UK

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Welfare reform and long term austerity in the UK has led to reductions in public spending on support services for older people. Age UK (2014a) has highlighted how nearly one million older people have unmet social care needs. This of particular concern as we approach the winter months. In this research we examine food insecurity in older age by analysing survey data and interviewing older people using foodbanks.

The present population of 10 million people in the UK who are over 65 years old is expected to increase to 19 million by 2050 (1 in every 4 people) (ONS 2013). The definition of what constitutes old age is subject to some debate, however in certain areas of the UK life expectancy for men can be as low as 67 years old and healthy life expectancy can be as low as 52 years old (Purdam 2017).

Poverty and Social Isolation in Old Age

Whilst many older people have been less affected by the recent recession than other age groups, in part because of the triple lock protection for pensions, poverty can persist in old age. 1.6 million pensioners live below the poverty line, of whom one million live in severe poverty (below the 50 per cent median line). 8 per cent of pensioners are in persistent poverty (defined as having spent three years out of any four year period in a household with below 60 per cent of median income) (ONS 2015). Around 20 per cent of older people have little or no private pension, housing or material wealth. Retiring with debt is also a growing problem (Banks et al. 2012). Moreover, 3.8 million people aged 65 and older live alone in the UK (ONS 2013). Evidence from Age UK (2014b) suggests that nearly 1 million people aged 65 and over always or often feels lonely. Older people living alone tend to eat less (Herne 1995).

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is when people do not have the economic, social and physical resources to shop, cook and eat in order to ensure a sufficient supply of nutritionally appropriate food. Under-nutrition is a major cause of functional decline and mortality amongst older people. It can lead to poorer health outcomes, falls, delays in recovery from illness and longer periods in hospital (including delayed operations) (FSA 2009).

Evidence from the National Nutrition Screening Survey suggests that an estimated 1.3 million people aged 65 years and older in the UK are not getting adequate protein or energy in their diet (Russell and Elia 2014). On admission to hospital, 29 per cent of adults have been identified as being at risk of under-nutrition, highlighting its community basis. Many older people have become reliant on foodbanks. For example, of those people who were using Trussell Trust foodbank and who provided information on their age, 1.4 per cent were aged 65 years and older (Trussell Trust 2015). Evidence from the food redistribution charity FareShare (2012) suggests that 13 per cent of their clients were aged 65 years and older.

Embarrassment and Health Risks

In our analysis evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing suggests that for around 10 per cent of people aged 50 and over: “Too little money stops them buying their first choice of food items” and this has increased in recent years. Evidence from Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey found that 12 per cent of people aged 65 years and older had often
or sometimes: “skimped on food so others in the household would have enough to eat”. Evidence from the Health Survey of England has consistently highlighted the issue of unmet need amongst older people. 6 per cent of people aged 65 years and older reported that they had not: “received help from anyone with shopping for food, including getting to the shops, choosing the items, carrying the items home and then unpacking and putting the items away, in the last month”. 19 per cent of people aged 65 years and older reported needing help to leave their home.

Our interviews with older people using foodbanks also highlighted the challenges many older people can face. Embarrassment and pride were a concern for one foodbank user who highlighted how he preferred coming to the food bank than asking family or friends for help: “I don’t believe in asking others, I don’t want to upset people” (Male, aged 69). Another older person we interviewed commented: “My family would help but I don’t like to ask them, they have their own families to look after” (Male, aged 65).

Highlighting their urgent need, one interviewee stated: “I can go for a couple of days without food...the gas is cut off and I get hot water from the kettle to wash” (Male, aged 54). There was as evidence that some older people were not fully recognising their nutritional needs. As one interviewee stated: “When you are on your own...sometimes I don’t cook, depends how I feel” (Female, aged 60). Another interviewee revealed their poor diet, stating how when they had no food they would: “Just eat cornflakes” (Male, aged 65). A further aspect of these risky behaviours was the issue of people cutting back on food during the winter due to the costs of heating their home. As one interviewee stated: “Sometimes I just go without putting the heating on” (Female, aged 72).

The Cost and the Health Risks in Winter

Our findings suggest that an increasing number of older people are constrained in their spending on food and many are skipping meals and are not getting the social care support they need. Some older people are in urgent need but are unable, or are too embarrassed, to visit a food bank and are having food parcels delivered. Emergency food parcels are an inadequate and unsustainable way of addressing the issue of food insecurity. As the size of the older population continues to grow, the reductions in local authority spending on social care raise concerns about their long-term welfare. Given the follow-on costs to the public purse, including in terms of healthcare, questions remain about the present policy approach and the responsibilities of the UK government concerning food insecurity amongst older people.

This article is based on ongoing research at the University of Manchester.

http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/social-statistics/research/projects/budgeting-strategies-and-health-risks/

References


Age UK (2014b) Nearly one third of older people with care needs do not receive crucial help. London: Age UK.


