The differential cost of an emergency food parcel and a consensually acceptable basket of healthy food

Statement of the Problem: Food poverty – The inability to afford or access a healthy diet - manifests itself as the dilemma of putting food on the table alongside long-term effects of habitually consuming poor nutritional quality foods. Accordingly, food poverty has become a public health emergency. In response, food banks have increased rapidly and demand for their assistance has grown. Food banks have become emblematic of modern society, standing as a metaphor for poverty in society. Essentially, the govern mentality around food has shifted from the state to the charity sector.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: This research puts a social cost on the difference between an emergency food parcel as provided by a food bank and a consensually acceptable basket of healthy food. Using shopping basket methodology to investigate the affordability of food, commonly-requested items from food banks' food lists were identified. The normal price of the cheapest option for each food item was recorded.

Findings: Comparing the consensual budget standard for a lone pensioner’s food basket (£57.05) to a food bank’s lowest-priced, one-week food list (£17.66) concludes that a nutritious diet is three times more expensive than the emergency food parcels distributed by food banks. Similarly, comparing the average UK household’s food expenditure (£56.80) to the cost of a food bank diet (£17.66) illustrates well the shortfall in the standard of living between the two dietary experiences.

Conclusion & Significance: Citizens should have the right to food and the means to access a consensually acceptable basket of food.

Biography
Sinéad Furey graduated from Ulster University (Northern Ireland) with a research degree (DPhil), with specialties including food and consumer policy and legislation. She started working at the Consumer Council where she continued her research as a Senior Consumer Affairs Officer in food, water and consumer policy; as a Nutritional Associate at the Education and Training Inspectorate inspecting approaches to whole-school food policies and practices and as a senior Executive Officer at the Food Standards Agency where she led food policy research programmes. She currently lectures and researches at Ulster University with research interests in food poverty and food access.