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Community cafés as a response to food insecurity: what is their impact?

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Community cafés are non-profit setups seeking to address food insecurity (FI) locally and equitably usually using a pay-as-you-feel model and surplus foods⁽¹⁾. Concerns about rising levels of FI⁽²⁾ and food waste⁽³⁾ frequently drive this model. Started in 2023, the Kitchen Roots Café (KRC) aims to provide healthy, sustainable, affordable meals without proof of need or referral. Open once a week during lunch it offers hot meals, primarily using surplus foods. Clients can pay as much or little as they wish and can pay a meal forward. A mixed methods evaluation of KRC was carried out which aimed to identify who KRC clients were and their reasons for attending, in addition to its social and nutritional impact.

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered using bespoke questionnaires and optional interviews. In all, 32 individuals completed questionnaires, the majority in-person at KRC (91%), the remainder online. Four client telephone interviews were also held. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was carried out to identify recurring themes, while descriptive statistics were generated for quantitative data.

KRC clients were largely vulnerable. The majority were at least middle-aged (28.1% aged ≥60; 25.0% aged 50–59 years) and out of full-time employment (62.5% worked <1 day a week while 9.3% worked part-time). Self-reported disability was common (43.8% overall; 50.0% of all men). Several lived in supported housing (e.g. YMCA, accommodation for women victims of domestic violence). One reported homelessness due to their immigration status. High levels of FI were evident: over half (54.8%) used other, often multiple, food support services, including food banks, community fridges and church lunches.

The majority made use of the KRC primarily in response to FI, indicating as their main reason for visiting *support with food cost and/or the cost of living* (46.9%). For this group using the service was tightly linked with their ability to access a healthy hot meal and to save money; 85.7% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with this.

Many added the social aspect of the KRC experience as a second main reason for visiting (50.0% of those who gave multiple reason). Additionally, *support the local community* and *enjoy delicious food* were highlighted. Ninety-six % of participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that coming to the KRC had improved their wellbeing, while 65.6% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that it had made them feel more valued, like they 'belonged' to the community.

While concern about food waste was not their primary reason for coming, 90.6% of participants thought that eating surplus food offered at KRC benefitted the environment.

For this vulnerable group, local community café provision offered a safe space with affordable healthy food. This, plus feeling welcomed and included, benefitted their feelings of wellbeing and belonging.

Acknowledgments

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References

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