



Nutrition Society Congress 2024, 2–5 July 2024

Building belonging: the role of community cafés

S. Sumpter¹, N. Nancheva², R. Ranta³, D. Bhakta⁴ and H. Mulrooney^{1,4}

¹*School of Life Sciences, Pharmacy & Chemistry, Kingston University London*

²*School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Roehampton University*

³*School of Law, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Faculty of Business and Social Science, Kingston University London*

⁴*School of Human Sciences, London Metropolitan University*

Community cafés are non-profit ventures tackling food insecurity (FI) locally and equitably, primarily using pay-as-you-feel models⁽¹⁾. FI is most prevalent in low-income and other vulnerable groups⁽²⁾, in whom poor diets and worse health also intersect⁽³⁾. Despite recognition that FI is largely driven by poverty and inequity⁽⁴⁾, FI individuals are often negatively judged⁽⁵⁾, risking further marginalisation. Community approaches to tackling both food waste and FI include community cafés, which frequently utilise surplus foods⁽¹⁾ to produce fresh meals and/or donate surplus food to those in need. Beyond a nutritional impact, community cafés have the potential to offer marginalised groups a safe space and a feeling of inclusion, benefitting their mental health and wellbeing. The aim of this study was to explore the social impact of community cafés.

Two linked community cafés in a London borough were evaluated to explore their social impact on clients. Both operated using pay-as-you-feel; neither required proof of need. Evaluations were undertaken using mixed methods on 9 site visits (November 2022 - April 2023). Bespoke questionnaires (n = 72) and 4 interviews were completed by clients, and 40 interviews with volunteers. Thematic analysis of qualitative data and Kruskal Wallis analysis (posthoc Dunn's and Bonferroni correction) of quantitative data were carried out.

Both cafés relied on surplus food. Their primary priorities were tackling food waste and the environment followed by addressing FI. Qualitative and quantitative data from interviews and questionnaires revealed that for many clients, social and food provision were equally important. This was especially true for older clients; significantly more of those aged ≥65 compared with those aged 18-24 yr visited for social reasons (p = 0.02). The most highly rated aspects of provision for clients were the friendliness of the people and the helpfulness of the staff (98.7 and 97.1% respectively). Being able to meet and talk was identified as important by 70.1% of clients. Anecdotally, this was especially important to marginalised groups like migrants and refugees. Since referral to the cafés was not needed, clients included individuals utilising them for environmental reasons as well as those affected by FI. This allowed mixing among groups who would not ordinarily meet. Volunteers also highlighted this as key to enable them to hear the stories of those they served. The mixed clientele not only helped build community but helped reduce stigma, since FI was not the sole reason for attending. For volunteers, the open and accepting nature of community provision which did not require referral or proof of need, was valued.

The data suggest that community cafés have important value beyond nutrition, enabling formation of community networks and increasing understanding of the lived experience of those with FI.

Acknowledgments

We thank all those clients and volunteers who gave their time to take part.

References

1. McNeely A *et al.* (2024) *Appetite* **196**, 107274.
2. Food Foundation (2024) Available at: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecuritytracking#tabs/Round-14>.
3. Baker C (2019) Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/health-inequalities-income deprivation-and-north-south-divides/>.
4. Caplan P (2020) *Anthropology Today* **36**, 8–10.
5. Garthwaite K (2016) *J Poverty & Social Justice* **24**, 277–89.