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INTRODUCTION

Food poverty and food insufficiency are important public health issues, frequently linked to poverty and deprivation. However, research on the nature, extent, epidemiology and etiology of food poverty in childhood is scarce. Previous work has demonstrated a lack of social class gradient in Ireland and has thus questioned traditional policy responses to this problem.

OBJECTIVE

This study aimed to test the utility of a cross-national question on food poverty with Irish children. The question was originally developed in Canada as part of the protocol for the 2002 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study and was originally designed to tap into extreme poverty. It is possible that children do not understand the questions we use when trying to assess food poverty, and thus their understanding is crucial to progress in this field.

METHODOLOGY

Three post-primary schools were invited to participate and consent was obtained from school management, parents and children. Data were collected from students in 7 first year groups across the 3 schools. All students first completed a short questionnaire which included socio-demographic questions and the cross-national question on food poverty:

“Some young people go to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home. How often does this happen to you?” The response options were always, often, sometimes, and never.

The questionnaire also asked children to indicate if they thought they understand what the question means, and if so to explain in their own words. A class discussion was subsequently facilitated by researchers without teachers being present.

RESULTS

In total, 143 first and second year post-primary school children participated, of whom 10% reported that they had experienced ‘food poverty’ or hunger – with no significant difference between boys and girls. When asked, 76% reported what they think this question meant. The majority understood it as being hungry for financial reasons (68%). For example, some thought the question was asking whether you are poor (n=30), or whether there is not enough money for food or if the family has a low income (n=26). Others thought it was asking if there is a shortage of food at home (n=17). One child suggested that the question is asking whether you are homeless.

Eleven percent of children thought it referred to family disorganisation (n=12), with 10 mentioning parents who are neglecting their children and 2 suggesting that the parents are not feeding their children.

Only a few thought the question was about ever being hungry because of not eating often enough (3%), with the same number believing the question refers to skipping breakfast (3%). Fewer again suggested that it meant if you don't eat you will be hungry (2%) and the same number thought the question is about you bothering to prepare food for yourself. One child suggested that it is about children not liking the food that is being served. Six percent of children reported that they did not know what the question means (n=7) and 4% copied the question exactly as it appeared on the questionnaire (n=4).

The most striking feature of the classroom discussion was that they did not express any surprise that the question was being asked and thought it relevant to their peer group. In the classroom discussions, being poor, not having enough money to buy food or not enough food at home were what the children reported that they understood from the question. When prompted to give alternative reasons for going to bed hungry children suggested there may be no time for breakfast, parents are too lazy to prepare food, or that the children don't like the food that is given to them. Other explanations included going to bed hungry as a punishment, staying up late and thus becoming hungry, or that a child has an eating disorder, but these responses were quite rare.

CONCLUSIONS

These data indicate that children are familiar with hunger and recognise that it is a feature of Irish children's lives. The vast majority indicated that they understood the question and when probed they were clear on what the question meant. A sizeable minority suggested that hunger in children may be a consequence of family disorganisation, and this deserves further exploration. Most interestingly, very few thought that the question, as asked, was to do with not liking the food available to them or skipping meals.

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REFERENCES

Available on request.