

**Struggling to
eat well.
Homelessness
and healthy
eating.**

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Housing Justice
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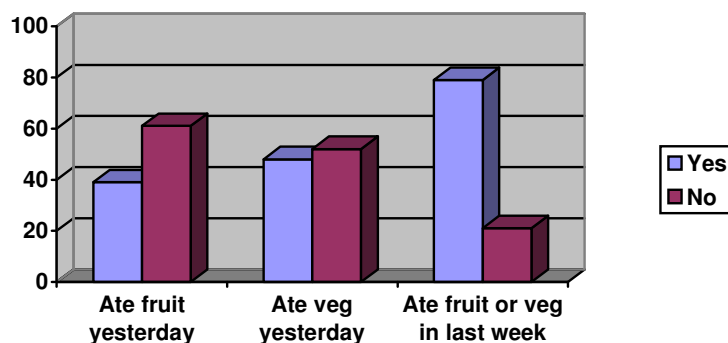
Introduction

The food we eat is so important to us. It is certainly one of the good things in life and the focus of huge amounts of media attention from diets to celebrity TV chefs. But what if you are homeless – on the street, sofa surfing or living in a hostel or temporary accommodation. Where does food fit into your life then? And how easy is it for you to eat well?

Linked with Homelessness Sunday (25th January 2004) Housing Justice carried out a small research project to explore some of these issues. Our MegaBite projects, which offer a cashless form of giving to homeless people, bring us into regular contact with day centres run for homeless people, and with their clients. So we carried out a short survey amongst day centre users in Exeter, Exmouth, Southampton, Brighton, London and Leeds. During the week 10th – 16th January 2004 survey seven day centres distributed forms to their clients. To encourage participation the number of questions was kept low (eight in all) and no demographic information was collected. However, we do know that both men and women completed forms and that a wide range of ages was represented. We believe that this was the first all age survey into the quality of homeless people's eating habits in England for more than five years.

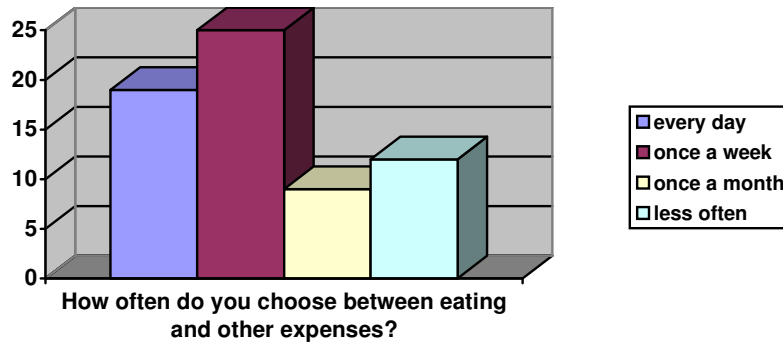
Findings

More than 60% of day centre clients had not eaten any fresh fruit the day before the survey and more than half (52%) had not eaten any fresh vegetables the day before. Almost two in five people (39%) had not eaten either fruit or fresh vegetables the day before the survey. For more than half of this group (55%) it was longer than a week since they had eaten fresh fruit or vegetables (one in five of all the respondents).

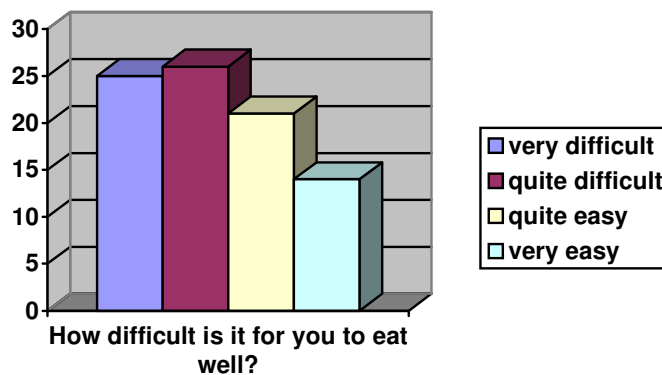


However, it is a positive sign that most of the people surveyed were eating some fresh fruit and vegetables. There are, though, issues about choice and education to be considered. Several of the participating day centres have bowls of fruit freely available all the time but clients do not always chose to

take advantage of this. More work could to be done to encourage centre users to eat the fruit. There is scope for educational work, for creating routines which include fruit and for making fruit and vegetables more appetising or easier to eat.

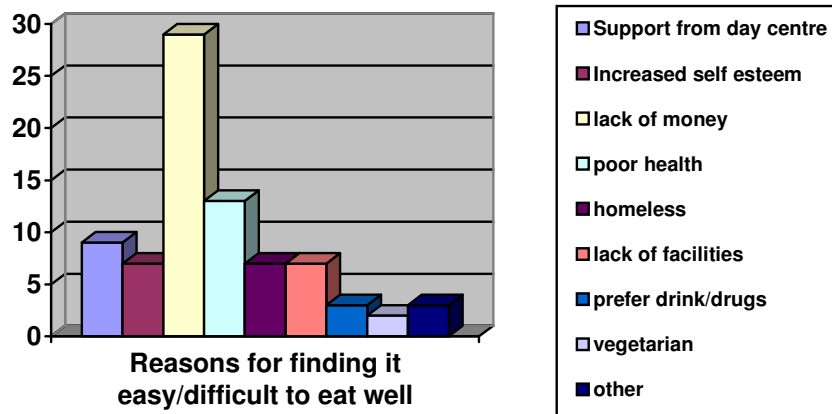


A disturbing, but predictable two in three day centre clients (65%) reported that they have to make choices between buying food and buying other essentials. Almost half (45%) of the respondents were making this sort of choice once a week or more often.

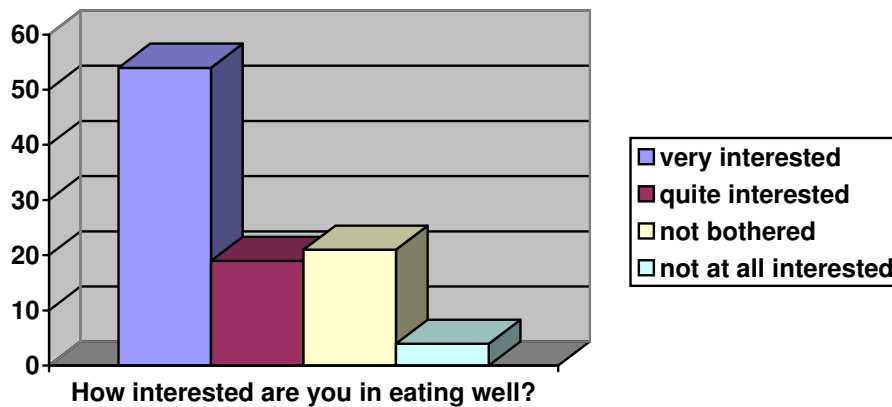


More than half (51%) of the respondents said they found it difficult to eat well. The questionnaire invited respondents to write in the reason they found it difficult (or easy) to eat well. More than two thirds offered one or more reasons. Of those who found it very or quite easy to eat well one in four mentioned the important role of the day centre in providing good food. Reasons linked with improved self esteem (for example being good at budgeting, having a routine and enjoying eating) were offered by one in five of those who found it easy to eat well. Of those who found it difficult around half attributed the difficulty to lack of money or to problems in managing money. Health problems (both physical and mental) were the cause of difficulty in eating well for around one in three people (30%). One in five attributed their difficulty in eating well to being homeless and another one in five to lack of cooking and food storage facilities. A small number of people said that they preferred to buy drink or drugs than food (8%) and an

even smaller number (5%) thought that their difficulty in eating well was due to their vegetarianism.

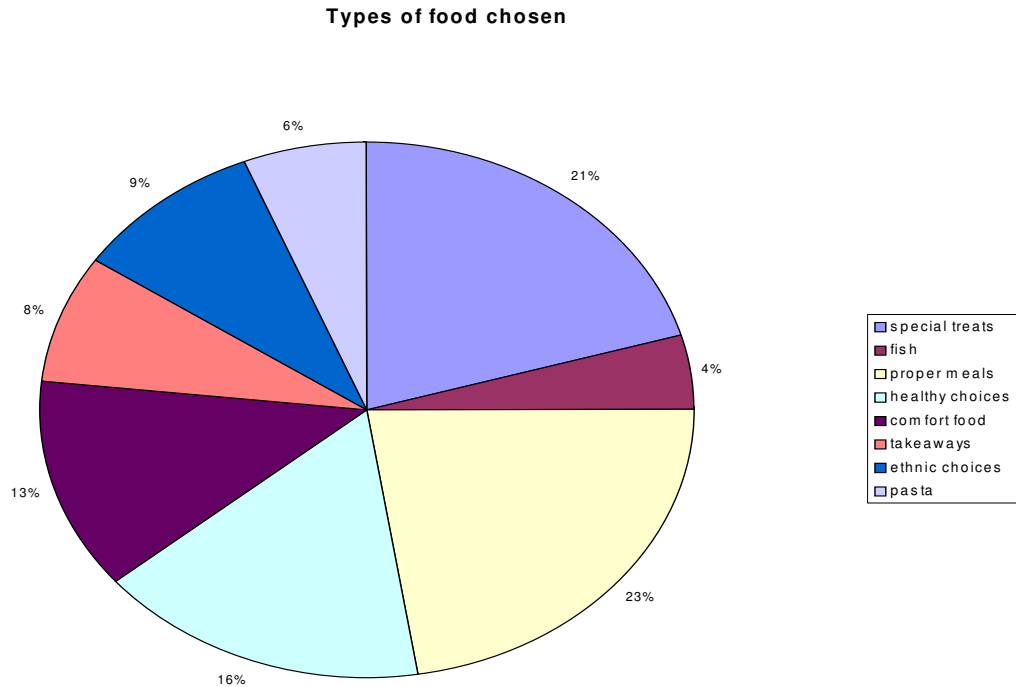


As the chart below show, despite the difficulties of their lives, the overwhelming majority of respondents (73%) were interested in eating well and more than half (54%) were very interested in eating well.



The range of food people would like to eat, given a free choice and unlimited funds, was wide. Altogether 48 different items were proposed. The most popular (chosen by 23% of people) was some kind of 'proper' meal like a roast dinner (chosen by 13%) or three course meal. Luxury foods or special meals also featured strongly representing more than one in five (21%) of the meals chosen. Steak was the most popular at 14%, but other requests included lobster thermidor, monk fish with steamed vegetables, chicken in garlic marinade and chilli barbecued prawns on saffron rice. The next most common choices (17%) were healthy foods like salad and fresh fruit, but including some particular items such as granary bread, water melon, marrow and prunes. Added to this 7% requested a pasta based dish and 5% would chose to eat fish. A significant minority (around one in ten) wanted food from a particular ethnic community, most

notably Asian and Caribbean dishes. Finally there were two groups who were not looking for a healthy eating choice because they were seeking comfort food of various kinds (from fry ups to chocolate and cake) or takeaways (Indian, Chinese, Pizza, MacDonald's...).



Conclusions

This suggests that there have been some small improvements in healthy eating in recent years (for example, more people seem to be eating fruit and vegetables now than in the 1998 Crisis survey) but it also shows that there is a long way to go.

- A significant group of respondents (two in five) had not eaten either fruit or vegetables in the day before the survey and one in five had not eaten any fresh fruit or vegetables for more than a week prior to the survey.
- The majority of respondents (65%) were having to make regular choices between buying food and paying for other essentials.
- More than half said they found it difficult to eat well.
- Clients who found eating well easy noted the role of day centres in supporting healthy eating.

- The problem of lack of money loomed large for clients who found eating well difficult. Other issues contributing to making healthy eating difficult were: health problems (mental and physical); homelessness and lack of cooking and storage facilities.
- Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties the overwhelming majority of respondents were interested in eating well (73%).
- When asked what they would really like to eat most day centre users wanted some kind of proper meal or food that is associated with special treats (steak for example), but there was also a strong demand for ethnic dishes, particularly for Caribbean home cooking.

Enormous thanks are due to the day centres: Two Saints, No Limits and Clear in Southampton; Cardinal Hume in London; St George's Crypt in Leeds; St Petrock's in Exeter; Open Door in Exmouth; and St Patrick's in Brighton. Many thanks are also due to the clients who took the time to complete the forms. This survey would not have been possible without them.

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