NIHR | School for Public Health Research

Research briefing

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Improved use of routine data to assess and evaluate food environments

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About the research

Around half of local authorities have a planning policy to control the numbers of takeaway and fast food outlets in their localities. Typically, this restricts the number of new outlets in an area, such as within 400 metres of a school. However, there is currently no evidence on how effective these restrictions are in improving health or reducing health inequalities.

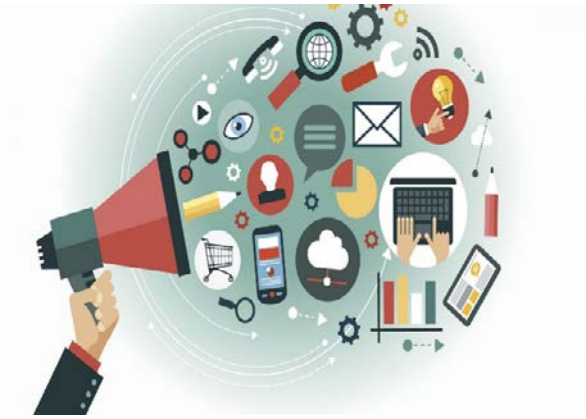
Fuse/SPHR researchers used data from the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) in North East England held by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to find out if it could be used by public health teams and researchers to address this gap.

The Food Hygiene Rating Scheme data includes the location of all outlets where food is eaten, sold, or provided for all local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland and has been available online since 2012. The national data is available for public download, updated regularly, unrestricted in terms of use, and free.

The researchers assessed the spatial accuracy of the data by recording outlets selling food in five areas in Gateshead and Northumberland, including urban and rural areas and those with least and most deprivation. These areas were chosen because they were actively using planning guidance to restrict the proliferation of new takeaway outlets.

Policy implications

- Our findings demonstrate that the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme data provides an accurate picture on the number and location of food outlets in North East England.
- It can be used be public health practitioners to monitor the numbers of takeaway and fast food outlets, and to implement planning policy to control their proliferation.
- This data is a valuable resource for practitioners to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food environment.
- This dataset has information on all food outlets so it will be possible to see how the food environment is changing because of containment measure to stop the spread of the virus.



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Key findings

- The researchers found 182 outlets during the ground work, of which 162 were in the FHRS data, giving it an accuracy of 89%.
- They could not find 8 outlets recorded in the FHRS data, giving an accuracy of 95%.
- There was less than a 100-metre difference in the accuracy of the FSA data and the data recorded during the field work for 77% (117) of outlets.
- No difference was found in the distribution of food outlets in the most and least deprived areas, and there was no significant difference in the distances between urban and rural areas with an exception of one location in Gateshead with 15 mobile caters in one location.

Further information

This work forms part of the NIHR School for Public Health Research's work on improved use of routine data to assess and evaluate food environments

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About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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