



# Changes to local area public sector spending and food purchasing in England: a longitudinal ecological study

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## About the research

This research examines the impact of changes in public sector spending due to austerity policies on food consumption.

Up until now, research on austerity policies and food has focused on welfare reform and foodbank use. However, this research examines impacts of changes in public sector spending on foods people buy, and our study suggests that there may be an impact

We investigated the impact of reductions in local authority service spending on the foods that people bought between 2008-2015, specifically fresh fruits and vegetables, foods high in fat, salt and sugar (e.g. sweets and crisps), and takeaways (e.g. takeaway pizza). These were looked at as a percentage of total food and drink spending.

We used yearly gross local authority service expenditure for 324 lower tier local authorities, reported by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

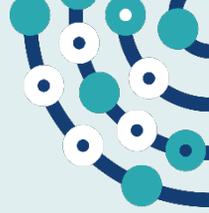
For food purchases, we used local authority estimates for money spent on different foods per person per year. This was calculated by James *et al.* from the Living Costs and Food Survey, an annual, cross-sectional, nationally representative survey.

## Policy implications

- Findings from this work suggest that reductions in local authority service spending due to austerity policies may affect the foods that people buy.
- The impacts we saw were mixed – foods high in fat, salt, and sugar decreased with a decrease in service spending, which could confer benefits to health. But we also saw decreases in fresh fruits and vegetables and increases in takeaways, which could have negative impacts on health.
- Although the associations we have described are small, there may be larger impacts in some segments of the population, and small shifts in dietary patterns can potentially have large population health impacts.
- Policy-makers should consider the diet and health implications of reductions to local authority budgets.
- As the UK government tries to reduce budget deficits following the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential impacts of austerity measures on food consumption should be considered.



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## Key Findings

- Total local authority service spending decreased by 17% on average between 2008 and 2015.
- Reductions in total service spending were associated with a small decrease in money spent on foods high in fat, salt and sugar and a small increase in takeaways.
- We found evidence that effects may differ between urban and rural areas. For highways and transport spending, effects were only statistically significant in urban areas (this may be due to car ownership or the frequency of food businesses in urban areas).
- We found evidence that effects differed by Index of Multiple Deprivation for housing expenditure, with greater effects in more deprived local authorities.

We investigated highways and transport spending and housing spending as potential pathways of this impact.

- Reductions in highways and transport spending may affect people's access to shops to buy food.
- Reductions in housing spending may affect household resources available to buy foods.

## About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial College London; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; 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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## Further information

This work has been published at: [Changes to local area public sector spending and food purchasing in England: a longitudinal ecological study | BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health](#)

Further information can be found on the SPHR website [here](#):

<https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/research/impacts-of-changes-to-public-sector-spending-on-nutritional-intakes-and-health-outcomes-in-the-uk/>

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