

Let them eat chicken 'n' chips? Poor food and hunger in 21st-century Britain

Phil Hearse on the time-poor and cash-poor; **Dr Karen Postle** on cheap chicken; **Prof Trevor Hartley** on capitalism and asparagus aspirations; **Prof Julia Brannen** and others on food and social status; **Ibrahim Dogus** on healthy takeaways; **Sue Doggett** and **Gayle Letherby** on children going hungry
Letters

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I recently spent a morning at Bury market, world centre of black pudding and just down the road from Blackburn, which you report has the highest concentration of fast food outlets in Britain. A casual glance round the market reveals why one of its most prominent shops is an outsize menswear store. Obesity is evidently a local epidemic.

Patrick Butler's article ([Rapid growth in fast food outlets heightens obesity fears](#), 25 July) focuses on attempts by local authorities to limit the number of fast food outlets, but also makes the most obvious point – that fast food is cheap, convenient and most often a staple of poor people's diet.

For a cash-strapped parent with several children to feed, going to MacDonald's or KFC can be a cost-effective option that is popular with the children. Go to a city centre fast food restaurant at 5pm and you'll see what I mean. And people more familiar with tapas bars than fast food outlets will be astonished just how cheap it is.

Being time-poor is as much a factor as being cash-poor. People working long hours – a huge proportion of the workforce – often just don't have time to cook, especially if they have a family to feed.

Until last year I worked at an inner London sixth-form college. The privatised canteen was a disgrace, with poor food, high prices and few choices for the large number of Muslim students. The net result was that many students routinely eating at the epidemic of local chicken shops, which the efforts of the local authority (Waltham Forest) have failed to stem.

Fighting fast-food obesity means combating the low-wage, long-hours economy and providing decent food for students of all ages at subsidised prices. All highly unlikely under the present political regime.

Phil Hearse

Ramsbottom, Lancashire

- There is a very worrying connection between your article on fast food outlets and the one on chicken imports ([Safety worries over chlorine-washed US chicken cloud pursuit of trade deal](#), 25 July). It is clear that chlorine-washing, currently banned in the EU, is a way of addressing poor standards of hygiene. In a post-Brexit world, where would such chicken imports, or home-produced chicken applying these tactics, end up? I think we can be sure that likely retailers would include the cheapest end of takeaway food outlets. People with enough money will be able to afford free-range, high-welfare chicken, while people whose low incomes mean they rely on cheap takeaways (now inevitably cheaper than fresh food) will be the ones with no choice about eating potentially less safe food. Such moves are likely to exacerbate the already appalling inequalities in health in the UK, and there will be no EU safeguards to prevent this.

Dr Karen Postle

Titchfield, Hampshire

- Surely the main purpose of trade ([Chlorinated chicken? Yes, we can have too much trade](#), 26 July) is to provide us with goods we need in exchange for goods of which we have a surplus?

The crux of the matter is defining “need”. I buy asparagus from Peru when British asparagus is out of season because I like it. I

could do without it, but do not want to subsist on a diet of cabbage and carrots. We choose to consume in ways that cannot be satisfied by local produce, and in doing so make a moral decision about how we live. Nearly all of us are choosing to live unsustainably. I have no objection to importing chlorine-washed chicken as long its price reflects the real price of manufacture and it is clearly labelled. The tragedy of trade is that many are not wealthy enough to enact this choice because they are trade's victims rather than the beneficiaries of any wealth it may generate. We need to encourage localism, and ensure that goods are realistically priced. If countries such as the US refuse to follow then we must accept that while our society is more ethical, our standard of living will be lower. We must also ensure that everyone can pay for these more expensive goods, which will necessitate reducing the pay gap between poor and rich. Capitalism entices with choice, and lures people to buy into the concept of "free" trade by making everyone aspire to asparagus.

Professor Trevor Harley

University of Dundee

- A European Research Council-funded study of families and food poverty shows that secondary school young people from low-income families living in deprived areas visit fast food outlets frequently. Takeaways from these act as a source of energy, and supplement – and in some cases even replace – school meals (whether free or not). Being able to spend one or two pounds on “chicken ’n’ chips” also bestows social status on young people among their peers. The fast food companies clearly understand this.

Professor Julia Brannen, Dr Rebecca O’Connell and Dr Abigail Knight

Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education

- As people lead increasingly busy lives, and as the sector adapts to new technologies and our changing culinary habits, we should not be surprised that takeaways are becoming more

popular. Yet their rising numbers do not have to mean more people leading unhealthy lifestyles.

Research commissioned by Just Eat for the British Takeaway Campaign, published in the recent Takeaway Economy Report, shows that the takeaway industry is already responding to our increasingly health-conscious appetites, offering a greater range of menu options: 96% of restaurants offer vegetarian dishes, almost two-thirds offer low-fat choices, and 59% offer low-salt alternatives on their menus. Smaller portion sizes also clearly have a role to play in decisions around a balanced diet, and these are now offered in 73% of takeaway restaurants.

Your article also does not highlight the important contribution a growing takeaway sector makes to local economies and employment across the UK. Takeaways support over 230,000 jobs – 41,000 more than in 2009 – and helped contribute £9.4bn to the UK economy last year. They also make an important social contribution – 41% of takeaways are actively involved in community activities, sponsoring local sports teams and providing food to charities, care homes and local events.

On behalf of the British Takeaway Campaign, I'm proud to speak for a sector that is not only providing new jobs and support for local high streets, but also playing our part in providing increased choice and quality in the food choice available to our customers – and the right information to support informed decisions.

Ibrahim Dogus

Chair, British Takeaway Campaign

- While the inadequacy of the government's pledge to rid our streets of polluting diesel and petrol cars in the not too distant future is obviously worthy of front-page headlines, the shameful news that increasing numbers of children in the UK are going hungry only appears on page 28 ([How are children spending the school holidays? Hungry](#), 27 July). I would imagine that pollution is of little interest to working parents whose

impoverished children may not make it to 2040 – not because of a lack of clean air, but because of malnutrition and starvation.

Please give this issue a more prominent position in your paper by moving it from the opinion pages to the news pages.

Sue Doggett

London

As the school holidays begin, each time we brew ourselves a drink, reach for a snack or make ourselves a meal we need to remember that recent analysis from the Trussell Trust and others suggests that more than a million children could go hungry in England this summer. In the preface to *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens wrote “IT IS TRUE”. Commentators agree that while Dickens’ writings, in this book and others, did not eradicate poverty or cruelty, they were educative and influential. Current “fictional” representations such as the film *I, Daniel Blake* and the BBC1 drama *Broken* plus daily reminders in mainstream and social media of the scale of food poverty and the need, for those who can, to continue to donate – food, toiletries and sanitary products – to food banks starkly highlight the scale of the current problem. On Twitter this week [Jeremy Corbyn said this was a “national disgrace”](#). Whatever one’s political leaning, who can disagree?

Gayle Letherby

Falmouth, Cornwall