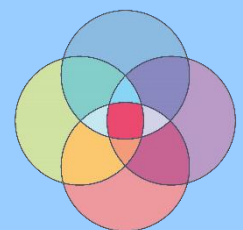


Food poverty: Experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Bristol

May 2019

A Borderlands (South West) Ltd Report
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BORDERLANDS
from exclusion to
BELONGING

Contents

Quotes from research participants	4
Quotes from research participants	4
Executive summary	5
Mission statement	5
Existing research	7
Food poverty in Bristol and the UK	7
Destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees	8
Methodology	9
Research design	9
Sample	10
Data collection	10
Ethics	10
Data analysis	11
Findings	12
Affordability of food	13
Costly products and food bags	14
Sourcing food	15
Sacrifice of food and hunger	16
Balanced diet	17
Kitchen and cooking equipment	18
Feelings surrounding food	19
Borderlands and its fight against food poverty and destitution	21

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- ANONYMOUS BORDERLANDS MEMBER

“I want to eat more fruit and vegetables but I don’t have enough money.”

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Executive summary

As a consequence of the high refusal rate of asylum cases in the UK during 2018, only 33% were granted asylum first time around. In turn, the same year 44,258 asylum seekers were relying on asylum support for their livelihood, making them vulnerable to food poverty. Refugees also face barriers to adequate income and food, such as language, trauma and difficulties accessing education, training and the job market. This study looks into the experiences of food poverty amongst both asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol. Using two methods of data collection, the study produces statistics surrounding food poverty as well as analysing the social phenomena of food poverty by looking at feelings and actions surrounding the issue, through the collection of qualitative data. The main findings of the study show that food poverty is prevalent amongst this community due to several factors. Asylum seekers and refugees often go hungry or skip meals altogether due to their low-level of weekly financial support or income. Results also reflect that more than half of asylum seekers and refugees have unbalanced diets, and over consume or under consume certain food groups, often leading to a diet lacking in nutritional value. Barriers to accessing adequate kitchen facilities and cooking equipment further add to difficulties around food consumption and preservation. The study contributes to already existing literature surrounding food poverty and concludes by highlighting the importance of third sector organisations and the support they offer to asylum seekers and refugees in tackling food poverty.

Mission statement

Explore

To explore food poverty faced by asylum seeking and refugee members of Borderlands through key factors such as diet, affordability of food, feelings surrounding food and the management of hunger.

Report

To create a detailed report on the unexplored issue of food poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol, raising awareness of the problem within the city.

Improve

To improve services available to members provided by Borderlands based on results of the research such as our food distribution or signposting information surrounding diet, hunger and food banks.

Include

To further the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees into the community by taking their food needs into account and having a thorough understanding of the issue of food poverty.

Existing research

Food poverty in Bristol and the UK

Food poverty is an issue that defines not only the quantity of food we eat but also the quality of products we consume. It is a result of destitution faced by many asylum seekers and refugees. Food poverty is a complex issue caused by many interacting factors such as quality and quantity of food, dietary choices, cultural norms as well as physical and financial resources that affect what we eat.

Asylum seekers in Bristol are at an increased risk of being affected by food poverty through limited financial support, the denial of the right to work, exclusion from social networks, weakened family networks and little personal control over their future as a result of the UK immigration system. Refugees have many of the same problems as asylum seekers. Although refugees have the right to work, many face unemployment or low-income jobs due to complex socio-political factors. In addition, asylum seekers and refugees often have limited access to adequate kitchen facilities or equipment. Many are dependent on food provided by charities and hostels resulting in this particular group often having monotonous diets, meaning that there is a lack of variety, nutritious diversity and choice of what is consumed. Existing research conducted by McEwen, Straus and Croker (2009) which looks into the diet of asylum seekers living in the UK, shows further complexities with social and cultural framings. For example, the diet of Somali asylum seekers is largely made up of carbohydrates such as rice and pasta as well as red meat. Despite 87% of Somalian asylum seekers being aware that unhealthy diets lead to adverse effects upon health, 97% failed to eat two or more pieces of fruit a day as well as 92% whom failed to eat two or more portions of vegetables. The low consumption of fruit and vegetables by Somalian asylum seekers can be explained in terms of perspectives on

social status. Where fruit and vegetables were cheap and more accessible in comparison with meat in Somalia, eating them was associated with poverty.

This highlights that the diet of asylum seekers and refugees living in the UK is not only dictated by affordability, availability of food and equipment as well as other factors explored in this research but also by cultural factors, traditional diets and social associations of food. Food poverty undeniably plays a major role in the poor diet of asylum seekers and refugees. Nonetheless, the study conducted by McEwen, Straus and Croker demonstrates that the situation is not so black and white and there are additional social factors that influence diet.

Destitution amongst asylum seekers and refugees

The British government defines one as destitute based on two factors: being unable to find adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it, or being unable to meet other essential living needs. Many asylum seekers as well as refugees find themselves destitute along their immigration journey, whether it is upon claiming asylum and waiting for a decision or after receiving a decision and becoming a refugee.

Asylum seekers whom find themselves unable to afford accommodation as well as other essential living needs, become reliant on government support in the form of section 98, section 95 or section 4. In the case of asylum seekers with an active claim, section 95 equips them with accommodation in the form of a flat or a shared house as well as £37.75 a week. This amount is approximately half of the amount a single person over 25 years receives on Universal Credit (£79.45 per week) and many asylum seekers have to survive on this low-income from months to years. This allowance provided by the government fails to meet the complex needs of many. With the costs of bus tickets to access services and appointments, phone credit (to liaise with solicitors and different support services) and other everyday essentials such as sanitary items, many asylum seekers find themselves in destitution,

despite having a roof over their head as well as a regular allowance. On the other hand, if one receives a negative decision on their asylum claim, they become a refused asylum seeker and become eligible for section 4 support which is £2 less per week compared to section 95. Under section 4, one cannot withdraw their allowance as cash, and are restricted to making payments with their card in certain shops. This reduces one's autonomy surrounding what their money can be spent on and where.

Destitution doesn't end as soon as an asylum seeker gains their leave to remain. Upon receiving a positive decision, section 95 support stops within 14 days. This involves eviction and an end to financial support, meaning new refugees only have two weeks to secure new accommodation and income, or they face homelessness and poverty. As one can wait months to years for a positive decision, which often arrives out of the blue, prior organisation to ensure that accommodation and income can be quickly secured post status is extremely difficult. Furthermore, long delays in receiving a National Insurance number as well as Universal Credit make access to work or benefits even more difficult.

Methodology

Research design

The data used in this report was collected using two methods of data collection. The first being a creative, image based quantitative questionnaire, where the data obtained refers to the collection and analysis of numerical data. This eliminated any ambiguity regarding the participants understanding of the questions asked and also allowed those with

entry level English to take part in the quantitative section of the research. The second data collection method used was a focus group. This method allowed for the collection of qualitative data which looks into the meaning of social phenomena such as food poverty. The use of a focus group in this study insured that responses could be probed further to gain rich qualitative answers

and make sense of ambiguities in the responses of participants.

Sample

The first phase of the study involved the participation of 50 members whom took part in the quantitative, image based questionnaire. The structure of the questionnaire allowed the study to have an opportunistic sampling method where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study.

The second phase of the research involving a qualitative focus group required a much smaller, more selective sample of participants involving three asylum seekers and three refugees. The sample group was dictated by two main factors: English language fluency and immigration status. This meant that for this section of the study, purposive sampling was used. The recruitment process was purposive as imbedded in this is the idea that who a person is

and where the person is located within a group is important. Before participants could take part, they were assessed against the criteria.

Data collection

The study began with a quantitative image based questionnaire, completed by 50 participants. The second part of the research involved a focus group characterised by an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Six participants were recruited using an information sheet and an invitation slip as explained above. They were then asked to sign a consent form while the researcher made them aware of anonymity, confidentiality as well as the right to withdraw.

Ethics

The study into food poverty amongst asylum seeking and refugee members of Borderlands followed the Statement of Ethical Practice document (British Sociological Association, 2017). The most important issues amongst the group in question were

anonymity and confidentiality. This was dealt with by making the quantitative questionnaire anonymous; no name, email or member number was needed to complete the questionnaire, therefore making it impossible to trace participants. On the other hand, participants in the qualitative focus group were anonymised by changing their names to coded numbers e.g “LTR01”, that bore no links to the identity of the participants.

data. This was then reviewed using inductive thematic analysis where codes and themes were established in the data.

Data analysis

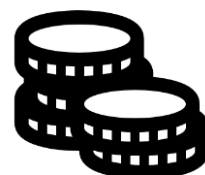
Data analysis in this instance was divided into two focuses, quantitative and qualitative analysis. In the case of the quantitative questionnaire, statistics were produced to analyse food poverty amongst asylum seekers and refugees then rounded up to the nearest whole number. On the other hand, the data produced by the qualitative focus group was analysed using thematic analysis which worked by identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within

Findings



64% of ***Borderlands*** members do not consume a **BALANCED DIET**

52% of asylum seekers and refugees have been or are **UNABLE TO AFFORD FOOD**



Fresh food products are the costliest items bought by our members, and thus least affordable

70% of our members have felt the need to collect a food bag from Borderlands to ***ensure they have enough food to avoid hunger***



50% of our members **DO NOT OWN** a **FREEZER**



MONEY for food is often spent on **other EXPENSES**, ***resulting in hunger***



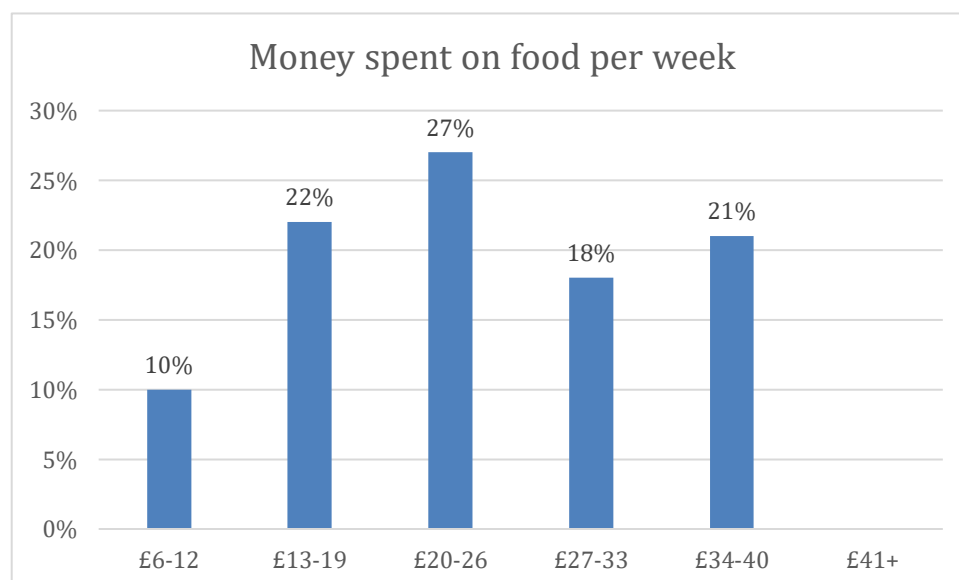
Borderlands members see food they access as **COMFORTING** however they have ***negative feelings towards its quality***

Asylum seekers source most of their food from **THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS**



Affordability of food

Our study shows that asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol, overwhelmingly spend less than the national average spent on all food per week. In the UK, the average weekly expenditure on food is £43.18. As can be seen in the table below, 0% of Borderlands members who participated in the study spend this much on food. With weekly asylum support ranging from £35.39 to £37.75, the entire income of asylum seekers who are deemed eligible for financial support does not match the average sum that British citizens spend on food. Making up approximately half of the sample, refugees whether at work or relying on benefits, also do not financially match what their British counterparts spend on food.



“I want to eat more fruit and vegetables but I don’t have enough money”

Figure 1 showing money spent on food per week

This chart shows us how much Borderlands members spend on food per week and it can be inferred that the amount is dictated by the individual’s affordability. Additional findings show that 52% of our members have admitted to not being able to afford food at some point during their membership at Borderlands. This comes as no surprise, when it is taken in to account that expenditure is higher than the total amount of asylum support, which must cover all financial outgoings, from transport, clothing, essential items to leisure. Problems surrounding food affordability are

further highlighted with 89% of members stating that having no money was the direct cause of not being able to afford food.

Costly products and food bags

Fresh products are the most expensive items that asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol purchase. At the same time, processed food is both more affordable and often more filling. This further adds to the difficulty of consuming a balanced diet. Results show that 74% of members state that fresh meat is the most expensive item that they want to buy, followed by 26% claiming that it is fruit and vegetables. While many members find these items expensive, research results show that high numbers of food bags collected by members are the result of members prioritising financial expenditure on those costly items such as meat, fruit and vegetables. It is claimed from the research findings that food bags provide the essentials and act as a buffer to the unaffordability of food, allowing members to purchase those high cost items. Findings reflect that 70% of participants have felt the need to collect a food bag from Borderlands at some point during their membership. Of the members who have collected a food bag, 34% collect on a weekly basis.

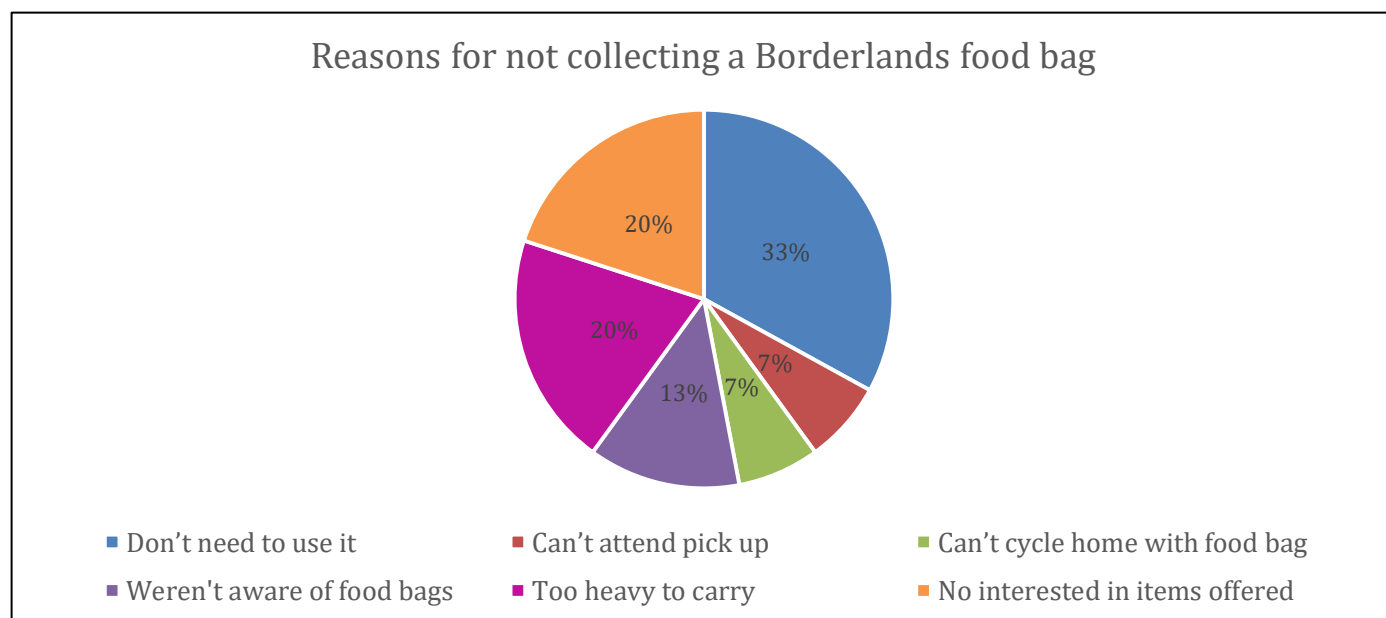


Figure 2- A pie chart to show reasons for not collecting a Borderlands food bag

Consequently, only 30% of asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol have not collected a food bag during their membership. The majority of members

claim this is due to not needing it, followed by not being interested in the items offered as well as the food bags being too heavy to carry. Furthermore, 62% of our members also receive free food from other organisations such as Bristol Hospitality Network, Bristol Refugee Rights and food banks. This demonstrates the high level by reliance of asylum seekers and refugees on third sector organisations for the provision of essential food items.

Sourcing food

Since the start of the recession in 2007, food prices per item have increased ranging from 19% to 47%. This has affected not those with a steady income as well as those reliant on government support such as asylum seekers and refugees. The research into food poverty has shown that our members source most of their food from organisations like Borderlands, Bristol Refugee Rights or Bristol Hospitality Network. One member stated, “*We get as much food to take away as we can from here and maybe wherever else we can*”. The reason behind this was the lack of money that many members faced. The majority of members who took part in the focus group expressed the idea that whatever they are unable to get from third sector organisation, they get from cheap supermarkets. This statement is supported by a quote from a member stating:

“Local shops are thieves. I can only afford Lidl or Aldi. The prices used to be cheaper and I could buy so much more. Now I rely on charity and only shop in cheap shops”.

It can therefore be inferred that while the majority of food consumed by members comes from third sector organisations, gaps in provisions are filled by cheaper supermarkets. In addition, when sourcing food, asylum seekers and refugees decide what to buy solely by price, due to the low support received from the government or unstable financial situations. One member stated, “*I want to eat more fruit and vegetables but I don’t have enough money*”. There was a group consensus expressing the desire for

purchasing nutritious food, however affordability was a huge barrier and therefore cost was an overriding factor during purchase. Another member stated:

“For us obviously, money is a problem. You want to buy healthy and organic but at the same time you need to look at your pocket”.

It can be concluded that when food is purchased by asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol, the price is the most important factor. However, it is clear that there is desire for a healthier diet at the same time.

Sacrifice of food and hunger

Results from the focus group show that asylum seekers and refugees who use the Borderlands services often sacrifice money for food in order to purchase other things. For example, one member stated:

“I buy less food when I want to treat my baby. You don’t want your child to think it is hard so you hide it. If I buy less, I can take my son out or get him some ice cream while we are out”.

The majority of the group agreed that they sacrifice money for food in order to afford transport to appointments as well as leisure activities such as going to the cinema or buying new clothes. Members claimed such leisure activities are fundamental to their wellbeing and also reduced trauma. As one member said, – *“Those little things make you feel better and keep you going”*. From this, it can be seen that money for food is often reduced when factors such as children, appointments or leisure activities come into play and are prioritised. Since the total allowance of an asylum seeker doesn’t even match the average that a British citizen spends on food (£43.18), the issue of food poverty becomes even more urgent when it is evident that the

financial support must cover other necessary outgoings. As a result, money for food is sacrificed in the name of these other expenditures.

Furthermore, findings express the idea that when members experience hunger, they do not feel like they can turn to their social networks for support and only have the support of organisations like Borderlands. A participant said *“You can’t ask people for money or for food. You can’t tell them that you haven’t eaten because they probably haven’t either. I can survive on just bread but I will never ask another person in need to help me. I just try to eat more here or at BRR and bring food back”*. The lack of support networks that are financially stable can be further supported by another member stating:

“When I have no food, I just don’t eat. I don’t ask anyone but I do try and get more to bring back home from Borderlands”.

As a result, it can be inferred that in times of need and hunger, members turn to organisations rather than each other, due to the knowledge of their peers being in similarly difficult situations.

Balanced diet

The findings reflect that more than half of asylum seekers and refugees have unbalanced diets. This means that Borderlands members are not consuming a broad range of food groups, they are also under-consuming or over-consuming certain food groups, or skipping food groups entirely. This is illustrated through the research results showing that majority of the group in question eat rice more than any other food product per week (62%). A quarter of the participants stated that carbohydrates dominate their weekly diet. According to the World Health Organisation (2019), a high level of carbohydrate consumption can lead to comparable weight gain and related health problems. Where in a balanced diet, the amount of fruit and vegetables consumed should match the amount of carbohydrates, only 34% eat any fruit and vegetables on a weekly basis.

Kitchen and cooking equipment

As well as facing barriers to a balanced diet, asylum seekers and refugees living in Bristol are also limited by the equipment available to them for preparing food. This in turn can impact the usefulness of the food they may receive or buy. Findings state that out of the sample size, only 28% have full kitchen equipment, as defined in the study. This includes a fridge, freezer, cooker, microwave, oven, cupboards and a sink or hot water. A total of half of Borderlands members do not own a freezer. This limits methods of food storage and thus may increase food wastage, bringing further negative impacts to a social group where food poverty is already prevalent. An additional 22% have no cooker or microwave to prepare or heat food, restricting their consumption to only already prepared food or items which can be eaten raw. Furthermore, 6% do not have access to hot water. As a result, these limitations increase the barriers to achieving a balanced diet.

Dietary restrictions of Borderlands members

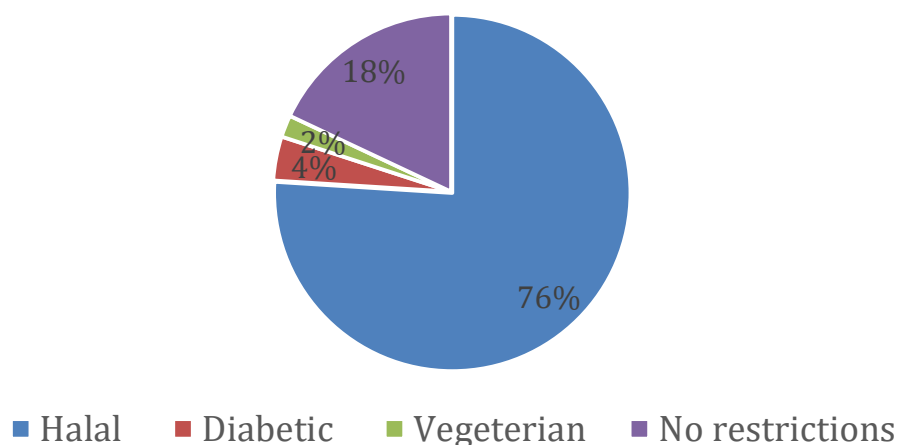


Figure 3 showing dietary restrictions of Borderlands members

Lastly, the study shows that Borderlands members have several dietary restrictions, which minimise the food they can consume. From the pie chart, we can see that the majority of participants (74%) only consume meat that is Halal. Meat is an important dietary element for many of Borderlands members from a cultural perspective. For many asylum seekers and refugees, this limits the number of places that free food which contains meat

can be accessed, that is appropriate to their cultural and religious needs. Further, results also express that 4% of members are diabetic. This minimised the amount of carbohydrates they are allowed to consume which can rapidly increase blood sugar levels. As carbohydrates are cheap, filling and make up the majority of our members diet, this can cause challenges to members who suffer from diabetes, when it comes to accessing appropriate food. Lastly, 2% of asylum seekers and refugees in Bristol are vegetarian. It can be suggested that this diet choice is very costly from the above findings, however without the need to purchase meat, this group may be the closest to achieving a balanced diet, considering their income restrictions.

Feelings surrounding food

Our study shows that asylum seekers and refugees have positive feelings towards food. Through thematic analysis it was revealed that food and consumption is a social time for friends and family. One participant stated *“Everyone will come together and then eat together and then chat. It is more than eating”*. This view is shared in a study by Dunbar (2017), looking at social eating which justifies why one would feel positive about food. Here it is claimed that those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life; are more trusting of others; are more engaged with their local communities; and have more friends they can depend on for support. The majority of the focus group felt that eating was a time for catching up with friends and family. Another member claimed that:

“For me, when I think about food, I feel happy. It is comforting. It makes me feel better”.

It can therefore be inferred that food brings asylum seekers and refugees closer to one another and provides comfort in times of anxiety and stress. Nonetheless, negative feelings towards food arise when we focus on its quality. One participant stated; *“In this country, some food is bad. It is not cooked, processed. Goes through God knows what”*. During the focus group,

there was a consensus that food available to asylum seekers and refugees is not healthy. This view is supported by a statement from a member:

“Because we have no income, we only afford processed food. Food here isn’t bad but the food we can afford is”

It has been proven that processed foods correlate highly with obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and related illnesses. As a result, asylum seekers and refugees have negative feelings surrounding the quality of food available, however they enjoy its comforting effects as well as the socialising around food.

Borderlands and its fight against food poverty and destitution

As the study presents, the financial means available to asylum seekers and refugee members of Borderlands fail to cover the food needs of an average individual. In this instance, food provisions provided by third sector organisations available to asylum seekers and refugees are crucial in the fight against food poverty, acting as a buffer to hunger.

In an attempt to combat food poverty and destitution amongst its members, Borderlands offers a weekly food provision to those in need. All donated food available to members largely comes from FareShare, Marks and Spencer, FoodCycle as well as other occasional sources. These allow us to not only distribute food to our members and thus contribute to fighting food poverty but also enable to cook our community lunch on Tuesday during our Drop In. We also receive the much desired Halal meat used in our lunches at a lowered price from Pak Butchers – a local chain of Halal meat shops, that works hard to support the community as well as the refugee sector.

Thanks to our food provision, each week we help approximately 30 people by providing them with a food bag to take home. There is range of items we offer that changes weekly, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, rice and pasta, tinned goods as well as some dairy products. Every Tuesday we also provide a hot meal which feeds around 100 people. Together with other third sector organisations in Bristol that support asylum seekers and refugees such as Bristol Refugee Rights or Bristol Hospitality Network, we aim to reduce the number of people who suffer from food poverty.

Borderlands is part of a joint effort to tackle destitution in Bristol. Through the Solidarity Fund, together with the British Red Cross we provide financial support to those who need it most.