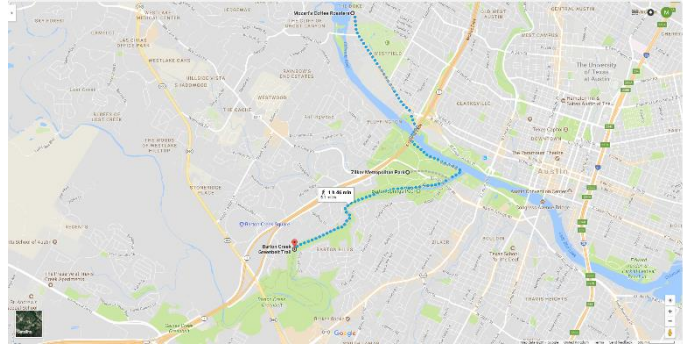


## Tackling food poverty – can the UK learn from Texas?

Dr. Martine J Barons, University of Warwick

I was becoming anxious. I had been walking the Barton Creek trail for 3 ½ miles and there was no sign of civilisation. I had enjoyed spending my few free hours in Austin, Texas, visiting Mozart's Coffee Roasters and Zilker Park, but now it was time to get back to town to meet my contact from Austin city and talk about food poverty projects. Still no sign of civilisation.

Eventually I came cross another trail-user. He was reluctant to suspend his run but was gracious enough to give me a few brief directions. I doubled back and tried a couple of routes which seemed to fit his description. Another trail user was as lost as I. After what probably seemed

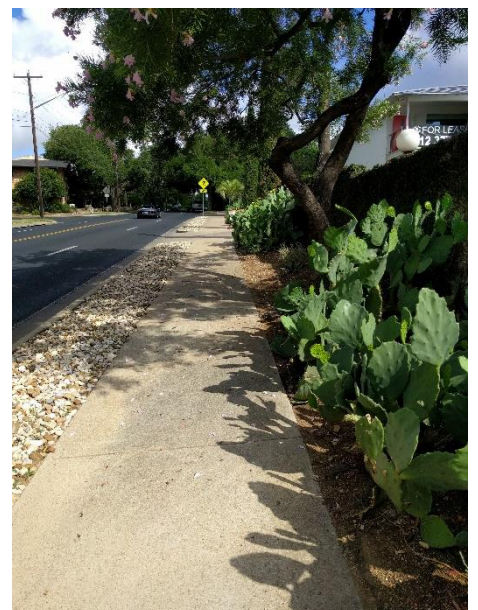


longer than it was, more trail users came along. These did not look like they had walked far in the hot sun. The trail head was just a few dozen metres further, they told me. Finally! I called Lyft (like Uber). The driver arrived, couldn't find me and left. It was couple of hours' walk to where I needed to be, so I called again, moving to a nearby office block to give a better defined location. Glad that I had brought the portable battery to top up my phone charge, I emailed my contact. She would take her laptop in case I was late. We were meeting at Starbucks on Guadeloupe and 15<sup>th</sup>. My second Lyft driver arrived and found me. 20 minutes later we were heading along Guadeloupe and spotted Starbucks. "Here?" he enquired and I replied in the affirmative.



No-one approached me as I entered the shop, so I bought a cup of tea and then approached in turn all the women sitting alone with a laptop: "Excuse me, are you Sarah?" None of them were. I was puzzled. I checked Google maps and discovered, to my dismay that I was at Starbucks on Guadeloupe and 38<sup>th</sup>. It was another half-hour walk to the other Starbucks on the same street! This wouldn't happen in the UK; very few streets are that long. Having a car, Sarah kindly drove to meet me.

Not having a car in a city like Austin means a lot of walking. Imagine living your life in a city like that with limited public transport and without a car. How would you reach the shops? How would you transport your groceries home again? Sarah explained that this is the everyday reality for many low-income citizens in Austin. They live in 'food deserts', where access to affordable, good quality and fresh food is difficult, whilst



low-cost restaurants providing generally poor quality food abound. Working several minimum-wage jobs may provide enough to get by, but leaves very little time for anything else, including food buying and preparation. In the end, the rational choice in such a situation is to go to the takeaway, so nobody goes to bed hungry and you don't have to incur cooking costs. This strategy is fine from time to time, but does not provide a healthy long-term diet. So, how do you tackle this?

I learned a huge amount talking to Sarah. Austin city is undergoing a period of rapid growth. Unusually, the wealthy part of the city is the city centre, with the poorer residents in the suburbs. The main I35 road cuts the community in half, with the east being more disadvantaged. Historically, there was segregation along racial lines in Austin. Whilst it was illegal to enforce segregation, services were provided for specific communities in specific locations which inevitably meant that the communities moved to live near the amenities they needed to access, effectively dividing the city. The consequences of this policy are still seen today.

Feeding Texas and the Central Texas Food Bank<sup>i</sup> charities have offered rough estimates of how many people are unable to access healthy food in Austin. Recent studies indicate that one in four people in Austin is unsure of where their next meal will come from. Out of 24 Census tracts, only 3 have a major grocery store within half a mile, a further 9 more than half but less than one mile, 8 between one and two miles and the remaining 4 have more than 2 miles to walk to the supermarket. East of the I35, there are just 4 major grocery stores and higher rates of no vehicle access as well as higher rates of food insecurity. Efforts to reduce the food deserts by encouraging the establishment of full-service supermarkets in those locations has had unintended consequences: when availability of good quality food is improved, the area concerned becomes more desirable and more affluent citizens move in. This has the effect of driving up housing costs and the less affluent citizens move to cheaper areas, which typically have less availability of good food. Eventually, these communities move out of the city. This means the geographically-measured food security situation is improved, but only because different communities / citizens are being measured and not because the individuals who were food insecure previously are no longer food insecure. The challenge of surveying residents in a specific geography does not tell us about the lives of who is being measured.

In 2016, City Council of the City of Austin passed a resolution directing the city manager to develop recommendations for improving food access, benefits uptake (specifically SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program<sup>ii</sup>), to report within 3 months and to incorporate food access issues into the overall mission of the City of Austin Equity Office. A multi-disciplinary team (47 individuals representing 33 organizations) was brought together to develop these recommendations. They used extensive stakeholder engagement with presentations to residents, focus groups, surveys, schools and input from 6 city departments: Office of Sustainability; Planning and Zoning; Health and Human Services; Economic Development; Parks and Recreation; Austin Transportation. They also researched best practices on food access from other cities. 100 ideas were evaluated for their potential for community engagement and empowerment, potential to advance equity and community resilience, legal feasibility, political feasibility, financial feasibility, ability to track and evaluate return on investment and alignment with Imagine Austin policies and actions. Of these, 6 met all the criteria and were taken forward.

One was the funding of a full-time Food Access Coordinator, my contact, Sarah, who works with the Office of Sustainability's Food Policy Manager, the Office of Equity, and other City Department staff

to supervise food security research, develop and supervise the Healthy Food Retail Incentive program, overseeing, tracking and reporting progress.

As well as funding a full-time Food Access Coordinator, the Council allocated \$400,000 on-going funds to Austin Public Health (chronic disease division) to address access to healthy food, \$300,000 one-time funds to the social services department (in Austin Public Health) to address the gap between those enrolled in SNAP and those who are eligible (there are roughly 40% who are eligible but not receiving benefits).

There are a variety of projects going on to improve access to good quality food on the back of this funding.

One barrier to healthy food access is affordability. For lower income families, a smaller percentage of income is available to buy food and often fresh produce is more expensive than less nutritious options. The City of Austin contributes funding to the Sustainable Food Center's (SFC) Double Dollar Incentive Program, which doubles the dollar amount of SNAP, WIC (Women, Infant, and Children) EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer card) fruit and vegetable benefits, and/or Farmers' Market Nutrition Program vouchers.



*The Double Dollars Program delivers two major services:*

- 1. gives farmers markets customers the ability to double the value of their federal nutrition benefits when used to purchase fresh, local produce*
- 2. supports the farmers markets in hiring and paying for a dedicated Market Manager*

The new nutritious food incentive pilot scheme, expands this purchasing power to traditional brick-and-mortar food retail locations in the Eastern Crescent area of Austin. The idea is to increase purchasing power of SNAP recipients in places where they shop, by offering a \$1 coupon for fresh fruit and vegetables for every \$1 they spend on fruit and vegetables grown in Texas using their SNAP card. The local economy is strengthened through promotion of local produce and there is an increase in consumption of fruits and vegetables improving health outcomes. A study by Moody's Economy showed that an increase of SNAP/Food Stamp benefits by \$1 creates a "ripple effect through the economy," resulting in \$1.73 in economic stimulus.

Austin City Council allocated \$400,000 as a one-off grant for Healthy Food Access Funding in the Health and Human Services Department budget, to fund the expansion of Healthy Corner Stores, School Farm Stands, and to pilot a Mobile Market project.

'Farm Stands' are community-run markets that are strategically located in areas that are easily walkable for residents of the community. Fresh produce from local Austin farms is sold at reduced prices, making it more affordable than a traditional farmer's market. Most stands accept SNAP benefits and offer the Double Dollars program (which doubles the benefits). Farm Stands are managed by the Sustainable Food Center.

The 'healthy corner store' initiative supports convenience stores, including gas stations, to increase their capacity to offer healthy food items. Healthy foods include both fresh produce and shelf goods that follow specific nutrition standards. The Healthy Food Retail Initiative offers flexible capital, tax

incentives, training, support, assistance with the permitting process and technical assistance to a diverse array of food-related in communities with limited nutritious food availability.

'Mobile Markets' are markets on wheels that are run by a local non-profit, Farmshare Austin. They can be easily set up and moved to another location but prioritize areas that have few or no options for buying fresh produce. In addition to produce from local Austin farms, staple goods like pasta, spices, and beans are sold.

City of Austin

# Nutritious Food Incentive Program



**Nutrition**

Nutritious foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, can be cost prohibitive to lower income individuals.

The goal is to increase the purchasing power of SNAP recipients in the places where they shop for food. By offering incentives for purchasing local produce, we decrease both the cost of nutritious food and the burden on the consumer to purchase it. In addition, the local economy is strengthened through the promotion of local produce in retail outlets. The result is increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables and better health outcomes.



**Communities**

Poverty is a condition of both money and time. We can decrease the burden of time on lower-income residents and increase their purchasing power in markets of their choice.

## How It Works

- Customers buy \$1 of Texas produce on their SNAP card and receive \$1 coupon for use on any produce
- All SNAP participants eligible to participate
- Cross promotion across markets and stores
- Uniform system within each store; works for markets of all sizes and types
- Multi-year evaluation demonstrates satisfaction among customers, farmers, and retailers



**Affordability**

Free fruits and vegetables with purchase of local produce on the SNAP card.

## Where It Works



Target area is the eastern crescent where there communities experience disproportionately higher rates of poverty, diet related diseases, and have fewer transportation options as well as limited availability of nutritious food options.



**Farmers**

This program gives local farmers a direct farm to market pipeline.



Farmer's Markets



Healthy Corner Stores



Grocery Stores







Prices are affordable and all markets accept SNAP benefits and offer the Double Dollars program. In the first year, there were 4 farm stands (FS), 3 mobile markets (MM) and 8 healthy corner stores. Here were 890 FS+MM customers during the 69 operational days at markets and stands. 69% of FS+MM customers reported increasing the amount of fresh produce they ate somewhat or greatly and customers at healthy corner stores also reported increases in amount of vegetables consumed. 75% of FS+MM customers reported they saved money on fresh produce and corner store owners were enthusiastic about the initiative. So far, in the second year there are 5 farm stands, 6 mobile markets, 8 healthy corner stores.

Recent research for the North Central Austin area (Plan4Health) revealed that the existing data on food access and availability is insufficient, so Sarah plans to complete a new Food Environment Analysis by the end of 2017. This Food Environment Analysis will provide an analytical basis for prioritizing food access initiatives in high-need areas and gain a deeper understanding of food access in Austin and reassessed bi-annually. Part of this research includes developing a Food Environment Map for each City Council District, collecting data for each District including: Food retail and supermarket locations; Household income; Vehicle availability; Supply of healthy food at food retail

locations. This effort will include an analysis of food deserts and rates of diet-related disease, the locations of food assistance programs, and measuring the gap between those who are eligible for food assistance but are not currently enrolled (known as the SNAP Gap). Sarah plans that these Food Environment Maps will be updated every two years to inform ongoing food access initiatives and prioritize future investment. The methodology developed by Johns Hopkins University is being adapted for use in Austin with the help of research partners at the University of Texas at Austin

## Addressing Food Security in the City of Austin

The City of Austin is committed to increasing food security and reducing diet-related diseases by ensuring equitable access to GOOD\*, affordable food, empowering people to live a high quality of life while preserving the social fabric of the community.

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### Drivers

**FOOD SECURITY IS A CONDITION OF ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF NUTRITIOUS FOOD.**

Hunger and obesity can exist simultaneously. Food security exists when communities not only have enough food, but also nutritious food. Increasing availability, education, and purchasing power for GOOD food is critical to mitigating food insecurity.

**COST OF LIVING IS A BARRIER.**

Low-income residents often have few resources left to buy food after housing, transportation, childcare, and healthcare costs. Addressing housing and transportation also addresses food security.

**FOOD DOES NOT SOLVE FOOD INSECURITY.**

The root causes of food insecurity- poverty and inequity- must be addressed for lasting change. Altering the food environment alone will not eliminate food insecurity.

**COMMUNITY STABILIZATION IS KEY TO FOOD SECURITY.**

Improving the food environment makes neighborhoods more appealing and as a result, more expensive, which unintentionally causes people to move.

**ACCESS IS MORE THAN AVAILABILITY AND PROXIMITY.**


Lack of access contributes to food insecurity, but is not the primary driver. People with more time and money can more easily access GOOD food. Lack of both time and financial resources are a barrier to food security.

**WHERE YOU LIVE IMPACTS YOUR HEALTH.**


Areas experiencing the highest rates of food insecurity and chronic diseases are also areas with large minority and low-income residents. Food insecurity and bad health are linked to a history of geographic inequity.

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### Long Term Goals




Improve the availability and supply of GOOD, affordable food.




Increase transparency about food and it's impact on health.




Decrease barriers to entry into local, urban farming.




Remove barriers to increase the amount of food retail available in low-income communities.




Increase communities' direct control over decisions about their neighborhood.




Ensure farmers receive sufficient compensation for their produce.



Increase purchasing power of low-income residents so GOOD food is affordable within budget constraints.



Empower individuals and families to consume a nutritious and diverse diet.



Increase farmers' direct marketing pipeline.

\*GOOD food is defined by the Center for Good Food Purchasing as food that is produced from a food system dedicated to strengthening local economies, health outcomes, environmental sustainability, as well as preserving animal welfare and a valued workforce.

Another recommendation from the report of the City Manager is to increase local food production. This will be achieved by the expansion of existing community garden program and investigating

opportunities for commercial urban agriculture on City land. Public and Private Foundations, such as the Austin Parks Foundation, could match the City investment in community gardens.

Another ambition is to build awareness about nutritious food with a new initiative built on existing efforts through SNAP Education and SNAP Outreach. Numerous organizations in Austin are working to improve access to healthy food, but without coordination between these efforts, outreach and messaging can be confusing, and resources expended on duplicate efforts. A Coordinated Awareness Campaign across organizations would be more efficient in connecting people to the resources they need about healthy food and/or assistance programs. Additionally, a coordinated effort would provide a better understanding about which strategies are effective and where gaps exist.

In addition to coordinating messaging and communication materials, it is important to have effective, culturally appropriate delivery and navigation of healthy food information. Community Health Workers are trained and certified advocates working in association with the local health care system to bridge the gap between providers and underserved populations in need of care. They typically share ethnicity, language, and life experiences with those they serve. A Community Health Worker helps people gain access to needed services and builds individual, community, and system capacity by increasing knowledge and self-sufficiency and are invaluable in identifying and delivering the most relevant food-related resources to community members. To address the SNAP gap, the City and other community organizations plan to increase awareness about SNAP benefits and eligibility, as well as assist residents in the enrolment process.

The Safe Routes to Markets work recognises that accessibility to food, especially healthy food, is problematic for residents who do not own cars or individuals who cannot access the store due to disability, a threatened sense of personal safety, a lack of sidewalk connectivity, or limited public transportation options. To address these issues, Safe Routes to Markets will prioritize planning and development of dense, mixed-use, affordable housing and multiple mobility options to make sure that low-income community members have sufficient access to good food retailers. In addition to developing new sidewalks, bike lanes, and bus routes, the City will explore additional avenues for increasing safety in areas that are both high-crime and high-food insecure to ensure that residents feel safe walking or biking to and from food retailers by increasing lighting, clearing overgrown vegetation, providing routes that do not require crossing major highways, and increasing collaboration with the Austin Police Department. This work will be completed as part of existing & proposed planning, Capital Planning Office and operational budgets, building on the example of Pennsylvania where increasing food access through transportation planning is a priority in their sustainability plan.

In her regular appraisal and reporting, Sarah will focus on measures to determine whether there is:

- Increase in food security as indicated in future Food Environment Analysis.
- Number of new healthy food retail establishments created in targeted areas.
- Amount of food sourced locally or sustainably in healthy food retail in targeted areas.

In the longer term, more ideas about who might have access to these schemes is needed. Nationally, the majority of Nutritious Food Incentive Programs use SNAP enrolment as the sole criteria for eligibility. However, this excludes many from participating who are food insecure due to strict SNAP eligibility requirements. Sarah proposes developing additional criteria for food insecurity

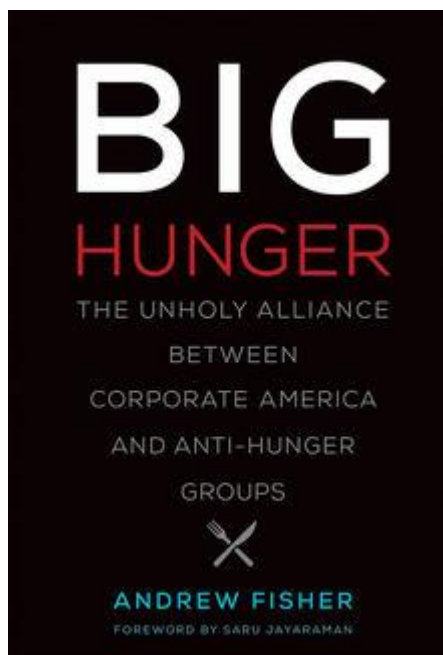
to include other poverty indicators, including specific criteria for the Nutritious Food Incentives Pilot to identify: 1) who would be eligible (SNAP, Section 8 Housing<sup>i</sup>, Free and Reduced Lunch, etc.), 2) eligible food purchases that best promote proper nutrition, and 3) possible food retail collaborators.

Sarah mentioned a piece of research undertaken in Spain which is giving her pause for thought.

French network scientists Thomas Louail, Maxime Lenormand, Juan Murillo Arias and Jose Ramasco looked at the question of income disparity in the context of neighborhoods and shopping trips. They analysed 150,000 anonymized credit card transactions of residents of Madrid and Barcelona data to explore the flow of money in urban areas, and what can help spread wealth more evenly among neighbourhoods. By having so much real data about the real economic life of cities, Louail and Lenormand could ask what would happen if things were different. What if people changed their shopping habits and picked up that cat food somewhere else? In particular, what if those paper towels were bought in a less economically advantaged neighborhood, keeping things like travel time constant? Could just changing a few shopping trips change the city's map of economic disparity? If so, how much change was needed to make a difference?

It turned out that by getting people to change just five of 100 trips, the researchers saw the neighborhoods in their experiments become more economically balanced; enough to keep the less affluent areas served with good food availability.

<http://blogs.springeropen.com/springeropen/2017/06/20/fighting-inequality-help-network-science/> Austin City is now reflecting on how that knowledge might inform their policy.



In the USA as in the UK, there is a debate about the role of supermarkets in food poverty. On the one hand, they are very efficient at delivering cheap food for a growing population, but on the other hand they are accused of unethical practices, including wasting a large amount of food. One solution to food poverty has been for alliances for form between supermarkets and hunger activists, including the donation of surplus food to charities. However, the supply of emergency food supplies does not tackle to causes of hunger <http://www.city.ac.uk/news/2017/february/why-giving-surplus-food-to-charities-is-not-a-solution-to-food-poverty> and there has been some suggestion that the emergency food system masks economic injustice.

This is a subject the Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) has had to consider. This is an organisation which undertakes research and provides networking opportunities between hunger initiatives on the ground to share good practice, discuss evidence, engage in collaborations and campaign for change. Much of the funding for this comes from the Walmart foundation and they have struggled with the issues raised recently in the book "Big Hunger" in taking funding from organisations which, through low wages, etc. are part of the problem. On the other hand, the

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<sup>i</sup> Similar to council housing or social housing in the UK

funding has allowed them to do much to ameliorate the hunger problem. Diversifying their funding stream is a long term goal.

I was fortunate enough to be able to travel to Waco and meet two members of the THI team, Erin and Grace, who told me about some of the projects THI and other organisations are involved in for the alleviation of food insecurity.

A Waco non-profit 'Mission Waco' has been fundraising for some time and have recently opened a community-led (rather than government-led) social supermarket, Jubilee Market, to alleviate a food desert. They have managed to keep prices low and to employ some of the local people, with any profits going to their core mission activities <http://missionwaco.org/jubilee-market/>

Their Facebook page states: "The Jubilee Food Market opened fall 2016 as a non-profit grocery store created by Mission Waco to serve North Waco lower-income neighbours in a food desert who had no place to buy groceries at a reasonable price. We invite anyone and everyone in Waco area." <https://www.facebook.com/jubileefoodmarket/>

Grace picked me up to drive me to Georgetown Monument Café and meet my booked SuperShuttle ride to the airport. As we drove and then had breakfast, we chatted about THI. It began in Baylor University's department of Social Work<sup>iii</sup>. It started as a project to see 'what works' in terms of projects to end hunger. Then it had government contracts and private grant funding from Walmart foundation etc. This meant that they had to keep sponsors happy and deliver the projects they wanted to see. However, they negotiated those projects that aligned with their goals.

One such project is to deliver schools feeding programmes including breakfast, lunch, take-home weekend food and holiday meals. There has been lots of learning from different ways of doing things. Moving over to anonymous delivery has improved uptake; for example, There used to be different coloured payment cards for the free school meals (FSM) students but now most pupils use their ID to acknowledge they have taken a meal and this is automatically assigned to free meals, part payment ~\$0.50 or full Payment ~\$3.00 as appropriate, with payment taken by direct debit behind the scenes. No pupil's circumstances are obvious to their peers.

Breakfast in the classroom for primary schools, after the bell has gone has improved uptake over having to arrive early and go to the dining hall. Again, this is for all and so differentiation is not obvious and the pressure to arrive early, when public transport may not allow, is removed. In high school 'grab and go' breakfast bags available in the entrance works better and improves uptake, although uptake in older age groups still drops off. Additionally, only 1 in 8 pupils taking FSM at school also take holiday meals.

Holiday hunger or summer meals are a real challenge for low income households. Whilst the children may be given breakfast and lunch at school, in school holidays families have to find an extra 10 meals per week per child and, depending on family circumstances, additional costs for childcare or holiday activities. This is a significant challenge during the UK 6-week school summer holidays but in the USA the school summer break is twice as long, leading to even greater hardship.

Summer meals provision typically requires parents or carers to take the children to a location for their food, such as a school or church building. But this may be difficult because of the local transport situation, as for grocery shopping. Grace told me that in Washington Wendy has done some evaluation of summer meals methods of delivery, especially for rural inhabitants for whom



travelling to a centre for food is even more problematic. One idea was a vending machine. In practice, this meant parent picking up the food in their lunchbreak and taking it home at night for their children to eat next day. There was some choice, so this gave parents back dignity of choosing and providing for their child.

The Social Investment fund (SIF) under the Obamas was generous funding to get deep into communities, with tight deliverables, e.g. to get FSM uptake for 60% to 80%; very challenging but realistic goals. This meant that project were always missing targets and this was negotiated and scaled back to 70% which is more achievable.

They also imposed nutritional targets for free meals, wholemeal, low salt, etc. There was some resistance from parents who asked 'who are they to tell us what to feed our kids?' Also, the small increase in funding for healthy meals did not offset the increased costs. This is in contrast to the UK where, in some quarters, the government was deemed irresponsible to have removed nutritional standards leading to lots of turkey twizzlers<sup>iv</sup> and other junk food in the school dinners in the 1990s and early 2000s.

THI has been instrumental in negotiating access points for benefit renewal in schools & churches away from government offices and this has aided uptake of benefit entitlement, giving families the money they need for food and other essentials.

After a delicious breakfast at Monument Café, I bade goodbye to Grace and headed for the Airport in Austin, my head full of all the things I had learned on my trip to Texas.

So what can the UK learn? There is a lot here about how local authorities can use planning and their other regular activities to promote food security for households through safe routes, community support workers (e.g. health visitors) and so on. There are ideas about how to promote healthy eating at no extra cost and how to incorporate this with increasing the purchase of local food, promoting long term sustainability as well as healthy eating. There are also ideas about how details of the delivery of free school meals, especially for teenagers, can strongly influence uptake. There are also ideas about how holiday hunger can be addressed and how food provision can be maintained outside school hours. Both local authorities and the charitable sector are involved in the amelioration of holiday hunger and can reflect on how these ideas might be relevant to local provision.

I have shared these insights with colleagues at Feeding Coventry, the Warwickshire Food for Health Group and the West Midlands Strategic Food Board, as well as contacts at local authorities. In November I will be going to work on food security in Australia, funded by the Monash-Warwick partnership and will share these insights with collaborators there.

**Acknowledgements:** I am grateful to the Warwick Food GRP for funding, to Rachel Wilkerson for the contacts in Austin and Waco, and to Sarah, Erin & Grace for their time.

**Further reading:** Latest analysis of UK Trussell Trust Foodbank use:

[https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/OU\\_Report\\_final\\_01\\_08\\_online.pdf](https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/OU_Report_final_01_08_online.pdf)

Brexit and UK food security:

<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=foodbrexitreport-langmillstonemarsden-july2017pdf.pdf&site=25>

Food Skills and food security: <http://proof.utoronto.ca/new-research-factsheet-food-procurement-food-skills-food-insecurity/>

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<sup>i</sup> In the USA Food Banks gather stocks and supply the Food Pantries which hand out food to individuals. Food Pantries are the US equivalent of UK Food Banks.

<sup>ii</sup> SNAP is delivered by means of a credit-type card, preloaded with monetary value and can be used to buy food at participating outlets.

<sup>iii</sup> Different from UK social work, nearer to sociology.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-342395/The-truth-Turkey-Twizzlers.html>