

SUMMARY OF A STUDY OF FOOD AID IN THE HELSINKI METROPOLITAN AREA

Despite the wide provision of food aid in Finland, up until now, no systematically collected statistical data has been available about those who benefit from these provisions. As part of a national project about food aid initiated by the University of Eastern Finland, the aim of the research presented in this report, which covers the municipalities of Espoo, Helsinki and Vantaa, was to redress this paucity of data. The aim of the first, quantitative, part of the study was to document who receives food aid, how those receiving the aid see their own welfare and to survey what services and benefits they use and receive. A further aspect of this first part was to explore the attitudes that food aid recipients have towards other people and officials and the importance of the food aid in coping with their everyday lives. The second part comprised a qualitative study conducted in Vantaa that involved focus groups consisting of families with children who receive food aid. This report presents the initial findings of the study. A deeper analysis of the data obtained is to be conducted and reported separately.

The key initial findings are:

1. 905 people, who receive food aid, took part in the survey. In Vantaa seven families receiving food aid were also interviewed.
2. Typically, those receiving food aid were over 46 years of age and came from a weak labour market position. Forty-five per cent (45 %) of the respondents were unemployed or had been laid-off and 35 % were retired. The respondents came from all educational backgrounds, with the largest group having attended upper secondary or vocational schools (42 %). Most commonly, (85 %) people lived in rented housing. More than a third (35 %) lived in a one-person household and families with children made up 33 % of the total. Of the families with children 29 % were single parent families.
3. Most of the respondents claimed that they were reasonably satisfied with their lives as well as their physical and mental health. More than a fifth of the respondents, however, felt themselves to be depressed, lonely and/or hungry. More than half (51 %) of the respondents felt disadvantaged although 65 % considered that they could cope with their lives and more than half of them believed in a better future.
4. The most commonly received subsidies were housing benefit (68 %), income support (55 %) and labour market/basic unemployment allowances (45 %). The services most often used were health services (70 %), social services (55 %) and employment services (50 %).
5. After paying housing, food and other mandatory outgoings, nearly half (44 %) of the respondents were left with no more than 100 euros per month for the household. Almost 70 % felt that their income was not sufficient and 72 % stated that they were only sometimes or very rarely satisfied with their standard of living.

6. The respondents visited the food aid centres on a regular basis (49 % every week) and were mainly satisfied how the aid is organised and with the quality of food. Food aid was deemed to be essential for 92 % of the respondents but receiving food was also linked to feelings of shame and humiliation. Food aid centres also play a role in social support since 61 % of the respondents felt that meeting other people in the food aid centres was important to them.
7. During the conversations with the families with children, the key issues that arose that affected their everyday lives were the importance of access to information, feeling of community, lack of money and services. Although lack of money is constantly present in their everyday life, they did not want the sense of poverty to be passed-on to their children. Family, children and meaningful relationships were considered to be of key importance, whilst a lack of information can foster a sense of isolation from the community and services