

Heating or eating? The framing of food and fuel poverty in UK news media

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In a time of economic turmoil, the UK is facing a stark cost-of-living crisis where people may be forced to choose between heating their homes and eating regular, nutritious meals⁽¹⁾. Although the “heat or eat” trade-off has been widely portrayed in the UK media, academic research exploring this intersection of food and fuel poverty (FFP) has been limited⁽²⁾. This media analysis seeks to assess how FFP are framed relationally in the UK news and how surrounding public health messaging has been portrayed to elucidate how the health policy process may be impacted.

Using Nexis Lexis, we searched for UK news articles about overlapping FFP, published between January 2010 and April 2022. Relevant data were extracted and relying on framing analysis, data fragments were coded and analysed. Framing explores sense-making; how some aspects of phenomena are promoted or omitted to shape understandings, evaluations, and responses⁽³⁾.

We identified 189 articles that met the inclusion criteria. Despite a spike in FFP news in 2013/2014, the issue largely gained momentum in late 2021 into 2022, following the cost-of-living crisis and, later, Russian invasion of Ukraine. Journalists predominantly identified food poverty as a reliance on food banks, and fuel poverty as an inability to afford to heat and, to a lesser extent, power household (e.g., cooking) appliances.

In conceptualising FFP, many (68%) news articles framed FFP as a “trade-off” (choosing between food and fuel), while others framed FFP as “mutually compounding” (e.g., fuel poverty begetting food poverty due to an inability to cook food items) or “not distinct” (the problem is income or monetary poverty). FFP was subsequently framed as unethical and overwhelmingly a matter of government responsibility. Fifty-five (29%) articles framed the simultaneous experience of FFP in relation to public health, with 35% drawing connections to mental health, 29% to death/mortality, and 62% to physical health. Children (n = 76), older adults (n = 48), and people with disabilities and/or long-term illnesses (n = 33) were outlined as having a distinct relationship with FFP – either as particularly hard hit, vulnerable to health consequences, or, related to the unethical framing, unacceptably experiencing FFP.

The intersection of FFP has been a reoccurring and growing topic in mainstream UK news since (at least) 2010. Despite the known health consequences of FFP individually, the issue is relatively rarely framed as a public health issue. Furthermore, though the UK news has frequently called on government to address FFP, specific bodies of government have not been systematically targeted, potentially diluting responsibility. Together these framings (or absence thereof) may begin to explain gaps in public health policy to address FFP. However, the rich lived experiences portrayed by journalists suggest the need to further explore policy that addresses food insecurity in tandem with fuel poverty.

References

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