

CLAHRCBITE

Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

TITLE: A realist investigation of the impact of Healthy Start on the diets of low-income pregnant women in the UK.



The overall aim of this study was to explore potential outcomes of the Healthy Start programme (including intended and unintended outcomes) and develop explanations for how and why these outcomes might occur.

Background

Healthy Start is the UK government's food voucher programme for low-income pregnant women and young children. It aims to improve maternal and child nutrition, and reduce health inequalities, by providing support to low-income families. It was introduced in 2006, but the impact of the programme on nutritional outcomes remains understudied.

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Who was involved?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 low-income women from North West England, who received Healthy Start vouchers during pregnancy. A stakeholder group was consulted throughout the study including six midwives, two academics and two public health practitioners.

What did we do?

This study was conducted in two phases: a realist review and a qualitative study. The realist approach to evaluation assumes that any programme is likely to work better for some beneficiaries than for others. The overall objectives were to develop and test theories or hypotheses about how the Healthy Start programme works, for who, in what circumstances and why.

What we found and what does this mean?

Some women experienced the intended outcome of the programme by using the vouchers to improve their diets during pregnancy. However, some women were diverted towards alternative or unintended outcomes, such as using the vouchers to save money or to stockpile formula during pregnancy. The realist evaluation approach demonstrated how women's individual circumstances, beliefs, values, views and perceptions (context) influenced their reasoning and reactions in response to the vouchers (mechanisms). A theoretical model for Healthy Start was developed to illustrate the combination of context and resources needed to generate the intended outcome of dietary improvements for low-income pregnant women, and the mechanisms by which this outcome may be generated.

What next?

We hope that our study findings will inform policy developments and future evaluations of the Healthy Start programme

Partners / Stakeholders

Children's Centres in two local authorities: Blackburn with Darwen and Barrow-in-Furness.

What is NIHR CLAHRC NWC?

The mission of the NIHR CLAHRC NWC is to work collaboratively with Partner organisations and other stakeholders including members of the public to co-produce and conduct high-quality, leadership enhancing, applied research designed to decrease health inequalities and improve the health of the population of the North West Coast.

Find out more

<http://www.clahrc-nwc.nihr.ac.uk/index.php>

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