

Children's future food inquiry

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Questions

Please tell us whether you think children are able to access a sufficient quantity of food to prevent them going hungry?

Hunger is a measure of severe food insecurity, but as food insecurity is not subject to monitoring in the UK, it is impossible to quantify the number of children going hungry. Qualitative research evidence does report that there are children living in the UK who are experiencing hunger, yet in the absence of quantitative research evidence, here I focus more broadly on children's access to healthy food that meets their nutritional needs.

Please use this space to tell us whether children are able to access enough healthy food to meet their nutritional needs.

Recent research has identified the cost of a socially acceptable diet in the UK and compared this cost with food expenditure among families with children, to identify families at risk of food poverty. Socially acceptable diets were defined through focus group methods in which groups discussed and agreed upon menus for different household types, in recognition of the varying food needs of differently aged children. The food needs identified therefore relate to both nutritional requirements and social participation. In 2013, 52 per cent of households with children spent less on food than was needed for a socially acceptable diet, an increase from 41 per cent in 2005 (O'Connell *et al.*, 2018). These figures strongly suggest that families with children are increasingly at risk of food poverty. Likewise, a representative survey conducted in London in 2013 reported that 42 per cent of parents were cutting back on the amount of food they buy or the amount they spend on food and 8 per cent reported that their children had skipped meals in the last year because they cannot afford to buy food (Ipsos MORI, 2013).

Please tell us what you think helps/hinders children from receiving enough healthy food to meet their nutritional needs

The potential for children to meet their nutritional needs is fundamentally linked to their households' income. A year-long study of low-income families in Canada found that rising incomes were associated with reductions in food insecurity over this period (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2013), and the same pattern is expected in the UK. In England, evidence that food insecurity among mothers is more prevalent among those in the lower social classes, benefit recipients, and mothers living in deprived local areas points to relevance of income in determining food insecurity (Pilgrim *et al.*, 2012).

Recent research on the cost of a socially acceptable diet indicates that certain children are at greater risk of food poverty. In 2013, 82 per cent of couples with four children and 71 per cent of lone parents with two or three children spent less on food than needed for a socially acceptable diet, considerably higher than the proportion for all households with children (52 per cent). Furthermore, the proportion of household income needed to be spent on food to meet this budget standard was considerably higher for couples with four children (24 per cent) and lone parents with two or three children (22 per cent) than all households with children (14 per cent) (O'Connell *et al.*, 2018). It is therefore clear that larger families are more vulnerable to food poverty.

Research on food bank use also confirms the greater vulnerability of larger families to severe food insecurity: Loopstra and Lalor (2017) reported that children living in large families (with three or more children) are over-represented among people using foodbanks, compared with their prevalence in the population of all low-income households with children (37 and 15 per cent, respectively). Likewise, research consistently highlights the nutritional vulnerabilities of children living in lone-parent households: the 2017 Scottish Health Survey revealed that 21 per cent of lone

parents worried they would run out of food, 18 per cent ate less, and 10 per cent ran out of food (The Scottish Government, 2018).

Some research has explored food insecurity and food bank use in relation to local area characteristics as a proxy for individual characteristics. Evidence from Canada revealed that food insecurity among 4-10 year-olds was significantly more prevalent in children living in areas with high social deprivation, low social cohesion, and high disorder (Carter *et al.*, 2012). Food insecurity in England is also more prevalent in multiply deprived areas (Pilgrim *et al.*, 2012), and foodbank use among children living in England and Wales was greater in areas of income deprivation (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). Although these studies provide a less direct measure of food insecurity in relation to household income, they all point to the importance of material resources in influencing food insecurity.

Please tell us if you are aware of children who are accessing food in socially unacceptable ways? Please include any ways of obtaining food that may cause embarrassment/shame for children and their families or that are not culturally appropriate

Data on foodbank use among families in children provides robust evidence that children are accessing food in socially unacceptable ways. Moreover, the evidence demonstrates that children are disproportionately represented among people using foodbanks: the most recent Trussell Trust data recorded 1,332,952 food supplies distributed between April 2017 and March 2018. Of these, 484,026 (or 36 per cent) went to children. The first estimate of the *proportion* of people receiving emergency food identified 2.3 per cent of children receiving emergency food from West Cheshire Foodbank in 2014. This proportion was over twice the corresponding figure for adults (1.0 per cent), suggesting that families with children are especially vulnerable to severe food insecurity (Garratt, 2017). Looking at trends over time, after a period of relative stability, children's receipt of emergency food more than doubled between 2012/13 and 2013/14 (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017), corroborating other evidence that families with children were disproportionately affected by austerity measures resulting from 2012 welfare reforms.

Moreover, evidence that children sometimes accompany their parents to foodbanks demonstrates that they are directly experiencing the embarrassment and shame that characterises foodbank use. Children are also aware of the measures their parents take to protect children's food supply, as this comment from a ten-year-old child accompanying their parent to a foodbank in north-west England demonstrates: "*We say to my mum make sure you eat but she says she's not hungry...she's just making sure we eat first*" (Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2016, page 11).

Alongside food bank use, children are also accessing food in other socially unacceptable ways. Half of school staff surveyed in London in 2012 said children did not eat breakfast because their families could not afford it, and 61 per cent reported giving food to pupils at their own expense (Greater London Authority, 2012).

Please tell us about any policies or programmes that you think have helped to alleviate children's food poverty

The introduction of universal free school meals for infant-school children in DATE may have helped alleviate food insecurity, however I am unaware of any formal evaluation of this change. We should however be careful not to over-state the potential for free school meals to impact on children's overall experiences of food insecurity as they supply one one meal per day. School meals are also necessarily unable to cover meals at weekends and during school holidays.

Please tell us of any policies or programmes which you think should be introduced to help alleviate children's food poverty

Growth in children's receipt of emergency food was more marked in years since the 2012 welfare reform (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017), suggesting that these reforms have contributed to increases in children's food poverty, and should therefore be reversed.

The issue of 'holiday hunger' is a matter of some concern. A 2015 YouGov survey reported that 60 per cent of households with 5-16 year-old children who had a household income of £25,000 or less could not always afford to buy food outside term time, and this figure rose to 73 per cent among households with incomes lower than £15,000 (Kellogg's, 2015). Ensuring that households with children have sufficient incomes to afford nutritional food - through living wages and adequate benefits - would provide some protection from holiday hunger. In the context of these figures, it is important to recognise that children experiencing holiday hunger are also likely to be at risk of food insecurity throughout the year.

References

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