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# Children's experiences of food and poverty: the rise and implications of charitable breakfast clubs and holiday hunger projects in the UK.

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Amidst growing concerns over children's experiences of hunger and calls for feeding provision to expand, this Brief critically engages with the role projects like breakfast clubs and holiday hunger initiatives are purported to play in the lives of children experiencing food insecurity. It also examines the state of the evidence base which currently exists on these projects and highlights the key gaps that will urgently need to be filled given the current emphasis on expansion of this kind of provision.

## Background

- In the context of austerity and welfare reform since 2010 the UK has seen the proliferation of charitable food initiatives; most notably food banks providing parcels of food to people in need. This has sparked an intense debate on the nature of poverty in the UK today and the adequacy of social protection.
- It is becoming clear that children and their families are particularly vulnerable to having trouble accessing adequate food and there are worrying trends indicating that provision of food aid to children and their families is increasing.
- Recently published data from Unicef found that 19% of UK children under the age of 15 live with a respondent who is moderately or severely food insecure and that 10.4% (the highest proportion anywhere in Europe) live with someone who is severely food insecure.<sup>i</sup>
- Families with children are also increasingly turning to charitable organisations for help with food. Between 2012/13 and 2013/14 Trussell Trust food bank provision to children rose by 252% in absolute terms.<sup>ii</sup> Since then, provision has risen by a further 69% and in 2016/2017 Trussell Trust food banks provided 436, 938 food parcels to children.<sup>iii</sup>
- Recent research by Loopstra and Lalor into use of Trussell Trust foodbanks found that 38.7% of the respondents of their national survey were from a household with children, and that households with three or more children and lone parent households were particularly vulnerable to needing to use a food bank.<sup>iv</sup>
- Whilst children's experiences of household food insecurity and use of food banks is now talked about within the debate on hunger and social policy in the UK, other types of feeding provision to children have only more recently begun to enter into this conversation, led by providers such as Magic Breakfast and parliamentarians from All Party Groups on School Food and Hunger and Food Poverty.

- Child feeding initiatives which provide food to children in school or community settings have grown in the last ten years:<sup>1</sup>
  - Between 2008 and 2014 there had been a reported 45% increase in breakfast club provision.<sup>v</sup> Today, breakfast clubs run by Magic Breakfast and Greggs report feeding 57,000 children, and clubs run by Kellogg's distribute two million breakfasts each year.<sup>vi</sup>
  - Less is known about holiday hunger initiatives – designed to alleviate out of term time hunger amongst children who are eligible for free school meals – but Forsey indicates as many as 428 schemes may be in existence across the UK.<sup>vii</sup>
- As calls increase for the expansion of feeding provision to children in need, urgent questions are raised about the appropriateness of these kinds of projects as responses to children's experiences of poverty and food insecurity.

## Evidence

This Brief is based on the findings of a recently completed scoping study that analysed policy documents, literature and the websites of six major child feeding providers (see Appendix 1).

The underpinning scoping study set out to come to a better understanding of what these projects set out to achieve, how they do this and the evidence base relating to their outcomes. The research also examined the wider policy framework surrounding these projects.

The findings of the study highlighted the contemporary importance of responding to 'hunger' as a framework for the role these projects play; a lack of definitive evidence on both the operational and outcome dynamics of these initiatives; and the importance of taking into account the challenges posed by all ad hoc food initiatives.

### *Feeding hungry children*

- Breakfast clubs were originally positioned as part of a suite of state-driven responses to structural interpretations of poverty and as a way of promoting educational attainment and social inclusion. In contrast, contemporary framings of breakfast and holiday clubs emphasise their role meeting the needs of poor and hungry children and plugging gaps in state provision.
- In the years of the New Labour governments (1997-2010) breakfast club provision was situated within policy programmes aimed at tackling health and social inequalities and social exclusion.<sup>viii</sup> Since 2010 and the election of the Conservative (and Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition) governments, breakfast club funding has occurred in the context of more individualised and behavioural interpretations of poverty, which are realised through a restricted policy framework which principally aims to drive down living costs rather than raise low incomes.<sup>ix</sup>

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1 Child feeding initiatives provide food to children in school or community settings. Breakfast clubs are before school sessions which provide some breakfast foods, sometimes alongside other activities. Holiday hunger initiatives are designed to alleviate out of term time hunger through the provision of food (sometimes alongside activities) amongst children who are eligible for free school meals.

- Calls for more emphasis on holiday food provision have been driven in particular by the All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) on School Food and on Hunger in the UK.<sup>x</sup>
- Contemporary providers emphasise their role in the lives of impoverished and hungry children:
  - Whilst other motivations such as educational attainment and health were cited, across the case studies references were made to reaching 'malnourished and vulnerable children' and 'hunger-hit schools'; providing for 'disadvantaged young people'; and providing to 'those in need'.<sup>xi</sup>
  - Holiday hunger provision is often linked by providers to free school meal entitlement and need for lunches to continue in order for children to be properly fed; but it is also inferred from levels of child poverty more generally.<sup>xii</sup>

### *Evidence base*

- Overall, the searches revealed that the body of literature which covers breakfast and holiday hunger provision is patchy, limited and mixed in terms of both findings and the scope of the underpinning research.
- From available evidence on operational aspects of breakfast club and holiday hunger provision, it remains unclear exactly what the extent and nature of provision really is in the UK today.
  - Published research has attempted to characterise breakfast club provision but also highlights the diversity of projects, for example in terms of whether (and how much) projects charge and what times they run.<sup>xiii</sup>
  - Evidence on holiday hunger provision is even more limited but it appears that these projects also vary considerably, running for one or a few hours, for various numbers of days per week and often only in some weeks of some holidays.<sup>xiv</sup>
- Evidence on the outcomes of these projects is also far from conclusive.
  - The findings from peer reviewed evidence on outcomes of breakfast club provision surrounding education, health, social inclusion and family life are highly mixed, with several studies finding improvements in some areas and none in others, whilst some indicators got worse.<sup>xv</sup>
  - Two studies provided conclusions relating to the impact of breakfast provision on experiences of child food insecurity but neither incorporated direct measures of food security or food security outcomes.<sup>xvi</sup>
  - The grey literature (non-peer reviewed research) included two reviews of holiday hunger provision which again provided mixed findings. McConnon et al identified benefits for children and parents in terms of relieving stress and pressure and encouraging physical activity and healthy eating.<sup>xvii</sup> But Forsey highlights that the sporadic and piecemeal provision; scarcity of funding, lack of co-ordination; and reliance on donations were significant issues facing holiday hunger provision.<sup>xviii</sup>

### *Challenges of ad hoc provision*

- By situating analysis of child feeding initiatives within the context of food and poverty research, it is possible to take account of the well-established critiques which apply to all ad hoc food provision and raise bigger questions around the extent to which these projects can achieve their aims in practice.
- Our review of the research literature and analysis of websites suggests that breakfast clubs and holiday hunger projects are susceptible to four particular challenges.<sup>xxix</sup>
  1. Inaccessibility. These projects are not always accessible. The published literature suggests that availability, capacity and opening hours can all vary, and costs of breakfast clubs can be a barrier for the poorest children.<sup>xxx</sup>
  2. Unreliability. The evidence reviewed also questions the reliability of breakfast and holiday hunger club provision where clubs do not run continuously over time.<sup>xxxi</sup>
  3. Unaccountability. The accountability of breakfast and holiday hunger provision is also questionable, given that it is provided on a voluntary basis by communities and schools and not overseen nationally.
  4. Socially unacceptable. Urgent questions are also raised about the social acceptability of this provision to children. Particularly if they are targeted at 'hungry' young people, there are significant implications for children's experiences of social exclusion, embarrassment and stigma all of which are acutely felt by children.<sup>xxxi</sup>

## Analysis

Looking forward, there are three key implications for future policy, practice and research agendas. Firstly, better evidence on these projects is required. Secondly, taking account of a child's family and household circumstances must remain a focal point. And thirdly, there is an urgent need for policy and research work in this area to link to robust definitions and measurements if it is to say anything about experiences of food insecurity.

### *Need for better evidence*

- In the face of the current policy debate surrounding the expansion of such initiatives, more evidence is urgently needed.
- Empirically, there is a need for up to date, comprehensive, representative national operational data, including what the projects all provide and how, when they open, how many children can access them, how many children do access them and which children attend. Also, a more definitive body of knowledge is urgently required on the outcomes of these initiatives as they currently operate. Future research will need to overcome the previously identified methodological challenges which face large scale trials.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### *The importance of family and household context*

- Canadian literature has already established that a key limitation of child feeding initiatives like breakfast and holiday clubs is that they take children out of their family setting and do not address 'the root cause of the problem of family food insecurity'.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- Evidence tells us that children's experiences are intimately linked to the experiences of their family and caregivers.<sup>xxv</sup> It will be crucial that future policy (and related research) doesn't lose sight of the importance of wider family circumstances.

### *Need for robust definitions and measurements of 'food insecurity'*

- Given the increasing focus on child hunger that these projects are surrounded by, it will be vitally important that policy makers and researchers adopt clearer and more coherent definitions of the 'hunger' problem.
- Narrow definitions focused on food quantity or nutritional intake would not take sufficient account of other key elements of 'food insecurity', notably the importance of the social acceptability of food experiences and the role of socio-economic and policy determinants.<sup>xxvi</sup>
- A broader definition is recommended:
  - *'Food security is the access for all, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.'*<sup>xxvii</sup>
- If the concept of 'food insecurity' is going to be used, appropriate measures will need to be adopted, to provide reliable evidence on baseline food insecurity and the food insecurity outcomes of particular policy or voluntary initiatives.
- Established measures can be used such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) measure used by the Food Standards Agency.<sup>xxviii</sup> Without adequate measures it is impossible to evaluate whether child feeding initiatives meet their own aims, or address the growing problem of child food insecurity.

## Conclusion

In the context of increasing calls for the expansion of child feeding provision, this Brief has highlighted that the evidence base on both the operational and outcome characteristics of these initiatives is limited and far from conclusive. Furthermore, unless organised as statutory entitlements, such initiatives are open to a number of established critiques of ad hoc food provision; namely their limited accessibility, unreliability, unaccountability and social unacceptability. Finally, it will be important that, in the midst of calls for increasing focus on food provision to individual children, policy makers, practitioners and researchers do not forget the importance of a child's family and household circumstances. Ultimately, family food insecurity will need to be addressed if child hunger is to be solved and policy makers and researchers should maintain a critical focus on this point.

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## Appendix 1: Methodology

The project involved a literature review; policy document reviews; and website content analysis of six national networks of breakfast club and holiday hunger providers. For the literature review, key databases were searched (in May 2017) for peer reviewed publications published since 1997 (including Proquest, Web of Science, Scopus, Science Direct) and Google was used to identify grey literature and policy documents. The search terms used were: 'Breakfast Clubs + UK'; 'School breakfast schemes + UK'; 'Holiday Food Provision + UK'; 'Summer Feeding Programmes + UK'; 'Food Aid in Schools + UK'; 'Holiday Breakfast clubs + UK'; 'Holiday Hunger + UK'. In order to capture work around current discourses of hunger we also included the following terms: 'Hunger in Schools + UK'; 'Hunger + Schools + UK'; 'Hungry Children + UK'; 'Hungry Children + School + UK'.

Online searches were conducted (in May 2017) to identify projects for inclusion in the website content analysis. Six national schemes were identified: Magic Breakfast; Greggs and Kellogg's (who donate some of their food products as well as funding to breakfast clubs); the Make Lunch holiday project initiative; The Trussell Trust's Holiday Club pilot scheme; and FareShare (food redistribution to both breakfast clubs and holiday hunger clubs). Since the total number and variety of breakfast and holiday club providers is unknown, the six selected websites cannot be understood as representative of all breakfast and holiday club provision, but they have been selected to provide a snapshot of this kind of provision in 2017.

From the websites of the six identified case study projects, specific webpages were selected for coding and used in the analysis. Inclusion criteria were for webpages which described or publicised the workings of the project or provision (how it was funded, how it worked in practice) but excluded other information (members of staff, contact pages). The number of webpages coded was 42. Qualitative Content Analysis was the method adopted to analyse the webpages of the projects, and by using an inductive reasoning approach we allowed conclusions about the projects to develop throughout the analysis.<sup>xxix</sup> A coding frame was developed by both researchers, directed by the research aims and objectives. All webpages were analysed in NVivo. Both researchers coded the data and an inter-coder comparison query was run which showed broad agreement. Where there was dissonance we discussed as a team and came to an agreement.



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