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# Families and Food in Hard Times: rising food poverty and the importance of children's experiences

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In the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, there is evidence that increasing numbers of people are unable to feed themselves and their families, but little systematic data about the characteristics of households experiencing food poverty or how experiences vary within them. Drawing on an international, mixed methods study of Families and Food in Hard Times that focuses on young people and their families, this brief reports some early and preliminary UK findings. Our research **provides evidence of the number, types and conditions of families who are at risk of food poverty in the UK and the experiences of parents and children that include hunger, exclusion, stigma and shame.**

## Background

There is evidence that the impacts of the global financial crisis and changing social policy, including welfare retrenchment and reform, have hit UK families (households with children) harder than those without. However there is less evidence about which types of families are at risk of food poverty in the UK. Whilst research about food banks suggests increasing use by families with children, recent surveys e.g. by the Food and Agriculture Organisation, do not have large enough samples to examine the characteristics of households in relation to food insecurity. Furthermore, the poorest households are under represented in large scale datasets, while those who are at the very bottom of the income distribution, such as asylum seekers and those without leave to remain, may be totally excluded.

## Evidence

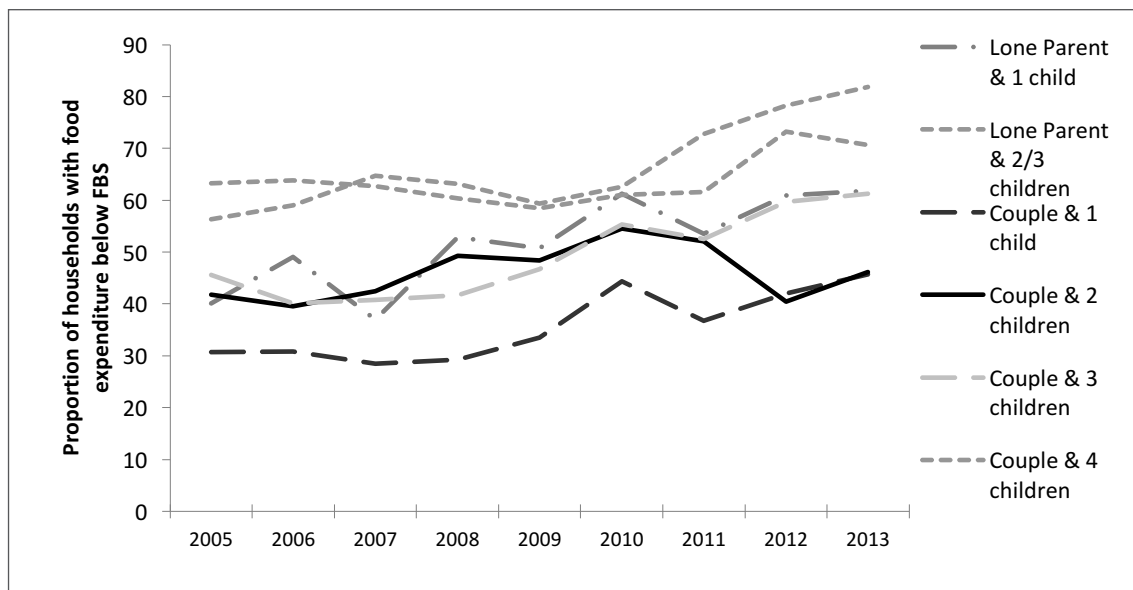
- The research on which the brief draws is a mixed methods study, funded by the European Research Council, that examines food poverty and food practices in poor and low-income families in three European countries: the UK, Portugal and Norway. It uses **qualitative methods with parents and young people aged 11-15 years** in 45 families in the UK and Portugal and 43 families in Norway in addition to **secondary analysis of national and international quantitative data**. This brief draws only on the UK research findings.
- The definition and measurement of food poverty and insecurity are complex and vary across time and place. **In our study we draw on Peter Townsend's concept of relative poverty and define food poverty as encompassing both social and material deprivation<sup>i</sup>**. Since the ways in which seemingly 'basic' needs (for example for nutrition) are met serve social functions, Townsend argued that they cannot usefully be divided<sup>ii</sup>. Furthermore, the 'social' dimensions of food and eating – for example being able to modestly eat out once in a while, have friends over to eat, or celebrate special occasions - are widely included as part of consensually determined minimum socially acceptable standards of living despite evidence of adapted preferences (reduced expectations) in the context of austerity.

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- Research about children, families and poverty has shown that food intake and food practices are compromised in low income households and that **parents make sacrifices to protect their children**. Understanding families and food poverty therefore requires an approach that examines differences within as well as between households. In contrast to survey research on food insecurity that has focussed on the household as an undifferentiated unit, and qualitative research that has tended to focus (for good reason) on the views of mothers, **our study is concerned with intra-as well as inter-household variation and particularly with the views of children as well as parents**.
  - There is a lack of evidence about the types of families who are at risk of food poverty and how this has changed over time in the UK. Our secondary analysis of UK data includes analysis of the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCFS) to **identify the types of family (households with children under 18 years) who are most at risk of food poverty in the UK and how this has changed between 2005-2013**. We used Minimum Income Standard (MIS) research on what counts as a socially acceptable diet that meets needs for health and social participation in the UK, and how much this costs, and compared it to actual spending on food by different family types over time.
  - Whilst there is a growing body of research about food poverty and insecurity in the UK the food practices and perspectives of children and young people remain largely absent. Not enough is known about the relationship between income and the food intake of young people. Our analysis of children's and young people's self reported eating behaviours in the Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) study examined **trends in young people's food behaviour in England in relation to family affluence (FAS) between 2005 and 2014<sup>iii</sup>**.
  - Our ongoing qualitative research examines some of **the conditions under which families' food budgets are constrained, the processes by which parents and children get by and how experiences and practices vary within as well as between households**. In the UK we interviewed young people aged 11-15 years and their parent/s in 45 families in two contrasting areas of social deprivation: 30 in an Inner London borough and 15 in a coastal area of the South East of England. Reflecting the quantitative evidence, two thirds (30/45) of the families were headed by a lone parent (usually mother) whilst the remaining third were couples. In the London sample the parent/s in a third (10/30) of the households had migrated from outside the EU. In this group there were several cases in which state support had been cut off to the family as the mothers were in the lengthy process of applying for 'leave to remain'. Most households (41/45) were in the bottom two income quintiles (equivalised after housing costs) compared to the national distribution. More than half (25/45) had at least one adult in paid work.
  - Public discourses about poverty that attribute blame to individuals can stigmatise those who are materially deprived and contribute to feelings of shame. Since we were also interested in **how the discursive context in each country shapes families' and children's experiences**, in the UK we analysed content and narratives about families, children and food poverty in six contrasting newspapers from 2006 to 2015.

## Quantitative findings

Figure 1 shows which kinds of families are spending less than expected between 2005 and 2013 and may be at risk of food poverty. The proportion spending below what is needed for a minimum nutritious socially acceptable diet – the Food Budget Standard (FBS) – has increased over time for all of the different household forms examined. For all households with children the proportion spending below the FBS has increased from 41 per cent in 2005 to 52 per cent in 2013. In other words, **more than half of all households with children in 2013 were spending less on food than that needed** for a minimum nutritious socially acceptable diet that allows for social participation.

**Figure 1: Proportion (percentage) spending below the FBS for working age households with children, 2005-2013**



- The proportion of lone parents with one child spending less than the FBS on food each week has increased by over 50 per cent (54.1 per cent) between 2005 and 2013, rising from 40 to 62 per cent. The proportion of couples with one child and couples with four children spending less than the FBS has increased by a similar order of magnitude over the same period. **Lone parents with either two or three children and couples with four children are the most likely to spend less on food than that needed** to provide the FBS; 71 per cent of lone parents with two or three children and 82 per cent of couples with four children have food expenditure below the level of the FBS in 2013. While there are fluctuations in the proportion of households spending below the FBS between 2005 and 2013, the clear overall pattern is one of an increasing proportion of families not spending what is needed for the minimum nutritious socially acceptable diet as defined through MIS.

- There is likely to be a qualitative difference between spending just below and well below the FBS on a weekly basis. Households with incomes below 75 per cent of that needed to reach MIS are around four times as likely to experience material or income deprivation as those with incomes above MIS<sup>iv</sup>. We examined the proportions of households spending below 75 per cent of the FBS, who can be thought of as those having to make serious compromises in terms of food quality and quantity on a daily and weekly basis. The overall trend is one of an increasing proportion of households with children spending less than 75 per cent of the FBS between 2005 and 2013. Nearly a third of all households with children (31.2 per cent) were spending below this level on food in 2013, compared to just more than a fifth (21.9 per cent) in 2005. This means that **around 2.2 million families were spending substantially less than the FBS on food in 2013, on a weekly basis, compared to 1.4 million in 2009**. The risk of spending below 75 per cent of the FBS is not evenly distributed: lone parents with two or three children and couples with four children are most likely to be spending below this level.
- Our analysis of children's self-reported food behaviours in England between 2005-2014 using HBSC data finds that **young people in the low FAS group consistently report less healthy eating behaviours than those in higher FAS groups**, as well as differences by gender, such as more soft/sugary drink consumption and lower consumption of fruit and vegetables for boys. The analysis also finds evidence of a 'closing gap' between the FAS groups over time in terms of some behaviours, such as eating breakfast. It is possible that some of this may be attributable to changes in social policy such as increasing breakfast club provision, however robust research on the nature, scale and impact of such provision is lacking<sup>v</sup>. In addition, the narrowing gap in reported fruit consumption is largely explained by a fall in the reported fruit intake of the higher FAS group.

## Qualitative findings

- Our content and narrative analysis of six UK newspapers from 2006-2015 found that **when articles mention families and children they rarely include the voices of children and young people**. Furthermore, articles predominantly focussed on food banks, reducing the problem of food poverty to food crisis<sup>vi</sup>. Preliminary findings from our qualitative research with 45 UK families **provide a more nuanced picture** and include **children's experiences of hunger and social exclusion**:
- In **almost half (20/45) of families, parents reported eating less than they felt they should or skipping meals** so that others could eat. In around a third of these households in which parents were sacrificing their food intake to protect their children, **at least one adult was in paid work**.
- Whilst parental sacrifice or 'altruism' protected many children from not having enough food, they could not achieve this in all cases; in 13/45 families **children said they sometimes or often went hungry** at times
- **Children also sacrificed their own food intake** to protect younger siblings or shared what food there was with parents.

- Reflecting larger scale research, **only a small proportion of families (8/45) had used a food bank in the past year**. Whilst they were grateful, parents reported difficulty carrying heavy bags without money for the bus fare, the cultural inappropriateness of foods in some cases and that the food was not enough. The **accounts of children who had accompanied parents to food banks included difficult experiences such as being required to pray before being given food**.
- Parents and children **were unable to participate in social occasions involving food and eating**, or invite friends home to eat, due to a lack of resources; this was more prevalent and salient for young people who were excluded from activities considered ordinary for teenagers such as eating with friends after school or on the weekends.
- **Around half of the young people in the study were receiving free school meals (FSM) but half were not eligible**. Most usually this was because their parents were in receipt of Working Tax Credits (WTC), whilst in other cases the family's immigration status meant they had no recourse to public funds (NRPF)<sup>vii</sup>.
- Children's access to and experiences of school meals were also determined by school practices especially related to FSM. Some children on FSM had positive experiences while others reported **exclusion, shame and stigma**. Children from one school told us about being sent to the back of the queue when they reached the checkout because their allowance did not permit them to buy large baguettes. Dependent on their school lunch for their main meal of the day, some children said **the allowance was insufficient to buy enough food to keep up their energy levels**.
- Parents receiving WTC (the 'just about managing') said the **cost of school meals** placed an additional burden upon scarce household resources whilst children reported their lunch money was inadequate. **Some schools managed to fund meals for children with NRPF from their own budgets, but others did not**. Young people in this group, the most severely deprived children in the country, often reported going hungry at school. One boy told us how he hid in the library at lunchtimes to avoid the embarrassment and pain of watching others eat while he could not.
- Asked who is responsible for ensuring that families and children can eat well, many parents blamed their situations and internalised normative responsibility, whereas the **majority of children suggested government was accountable**<sup>viii</sup>.

## Analysis

- Given what is known about persistent links between family structures and poverty in the UK, it is unsurprising that **it is large and lone parent families who are furthest from what is regarded as a minimum food budget standard**. Whilst in other European countries investment in welfare successfully removes families from poverty, central to UK policy is an emphasis on paid employment. **However lone parents' work opportunities are constrained by high childcare costs and low paid part time work**. Furthermore the **largest proportion of households with children living in relative poverty in the UK includes at least one employed adult**<sup>ix</sup> suggesting that paid work does not provide a route out of poverty.

- **Welfare support has been increasingly withheld by successive governments as a tool for controlling immigration. This is creating hunger among children and families who have NRPF** and leaving them totally dependent on charity. Children whose parents have NRPF are not usually entitled to free school meals (FSM) meaning that in some cases they go hungry at school as well as at home.
- Nutritious school meals are essential for children's health and can be an important means of socialisation and inclusion. However national policies and local practices often fail to meet children's needs whilst under current Universal Credit proposals entitlement to FSM will be reduced. **Government should seek to extend not reduce entitlement to FSM to reduce, if not eliminate, social stigma and fragmentation as well as nutritional and health inequalities<sup>x</sup>.**
- A social gradient in health and diet intake in the UK persists among teenagers over time. Whilst our findings highlight some potentially positive effects of government policies for addressing poor diets and dietary inequalities **there is a lack of research examining the effectiveness of interventions such as breakfast clubs.** Moreover a **persistent gap in the food behaviours of higher and lower income young people** is of concern given the UK context of continuing economic austerity and political uncertainty linked to fluctuating food prices.

## Conclusion

- Our quantitative analyses and preliminary findings from the qualitative research add to what is known about the extent and experience of food poverty in the UK. **In particular they provide evidence of the number, types and conditions of families who are at risk of food poverty in the UK and the experiences of parents and children that include hunger, exclusion, stigma and shame.**
- The research also suggests the benefits of adopting a **broad conceptualisation of food poverty that includes food's role in social participation.** Whilst it is acknowledged that there are challenges to operationalisation, **measures that fail to acknowledge the social nature of food effectively reduce food to nutrients.**
- Instead of further stigmatising and excluding families from 'ordinary living patterns'<sup>xi</sup>, and discriminating against large and lone parent families, **government policy should use budget standards to ensure that wages and social security benefits, in combination, are adequate for a socially acceptable standard of living and eating** that recognises the fundamental role of food in health and social inclusion.
- Such an approach would counter the current situation where public policy relies on charitable responses to food insecurity that include giving 'wasted food to surplus people'<sup>xii</sup>. **Food banks and food charity cannot 'solve' the problem of food poverty and in fact may serve to further stigmatise and marginalise those already suffering material deprivation and social exclusion.** People should have the right to food, not to be fed<sup>xiii</sup>. **Increasing malnutrition and hunger constitute a 'public health emergency'. But food poverty is a social emergency too, for parents and children.**



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