

Feeding the Future? Evidence on Food Insecurity in the UK



Policy Brief (2022)

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This brief is based on: Clair, A., Fledderjohann, J., & Knowles, B. (2021). *A Watershed Moment for Social Policy and Human Rights? Where next for the UK Post-COVID*. Policy Press. ISBN: 978-1447363842. The book also considers inequities in the areas of health and medical care, housing, and access to digital technology, as well as intersections between these domains.

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Executive Summary

Food insecurity is a long-term, pressing problem in the UK. Nearly 15% of households experienced food insecurity in 2019-2020. Marginalised groups have been disproportionately impacted. Charities cannot feasibly address the underlying structural problems that are driving food insecurity, including austerity, poverty, and the climate crisis. Urgent action is needed to reinvest in social protection and reduce carbon emissions.

Problem

Around 1-in-7 households in the UK were food insecureⁱ in 2019-2020.¹ Food insecurity is associated with costly health problems, stigma and stress, social exclusion, poorer learning outcomes for children, and missed days of work and school.

Policy Implications:

- Social protection policies are needed to ensure all people have access to enough food
- Food insecurity was a problem well before the pandemic;² policies to address food insecurity must take a long-term view
- Recent efforts to monitor food insecurity at the population level must be continued
- Immediate, large-scale action is needed to reduce carbon emissions and stem the tide of the global climate crisis to stabilise the food supply

Key Figures:

- Just prior to Covid-19, about 20% of adults in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland experienced food insecurity.³
- In 2019-2020 some groups faced a disproportionately high risk of moderate to severe food insecurity:¹
 - 28% of lone-adult households with two children and 26% with one child
 - Nearly 1-in-5 households with one more working-age adults with a disability
 - 19% of households with Black/African/Caribbean/ Black British head and 14% with other ethnic groups (14%) headⁱⁱ
- Social protection policies are currently insufficient to ensure households can meet their basic food needs, with moderate to severe food insecurity in 2019-2020 among:¹
 - 43% of households receiving Universal Credit
 - 37% of households receiving Jobseeker's Allowance
 - 36% of households receiving Income Support
- The number of food-insecure households quadrupled during the first Covid-19 lockdown³
- The Trussell Trust food bank network reported a rise to 1.2 million food parcels distributed in April–September 2020 alone
 - A 42% increase from the 843,655 parcels in the same period in 2019
- In February 2022, 1 million UK adults reported, during the past month, someone in their household had to go a whole day without eating due to food affordability/access⁴

ⁱ Food insecurity, sometimes called food poverty, is a situation in which people sometimes or often face difficulties accessing enough safe and nutritious food to support a healthy life. The statistic reported here includes mild, moderate, and severe forms of food insecurity.

ⁱⁱ Ethnicity categories as reported by DWP.

Food Insecurity as a Social Problem

Food insecurity is a large and growing problem in the UK. It is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes^{5—9}, including:

- Malnutrition
- Mental distress
- Chronic illness, including diabetes
- Difficulties managing medical regimens
- Spending trade-offs with paying for heating, electricity, and other essential costs
- Difficulties concentrating and poorer learning outcomes for children
- Stigma and social exclusion

Food insecurity is a critical concern in its own right. It can also result in missed days of work and school, require medical attention, prompt spending trade-offs that leave people in unsafe living conditions, and otherwise prevent people from leading health and active lives. Food insecurity therefore threatens to raise costs and decrease efficiency of state systems.

The dramatic rise in food bank use observed since 2010 corresponds to the introduction of austerity and retrenchment of social protection policies. Administrative delays, introduction of conditionalities, and removal of existing provisions are linked to rising food insecurity and food bank use.^{6,10,11}

The food system in the UK is heavily import dependent, and global instability in the food supply can have very serious local implications.

Food supplies globally are negatively impacted by diminished crop yields, droughts, river levels, and other agricultural factors that are being aggravated by the climate crisis. Without immediate attention to the climate crisis, food insecurity will be a growing problem in future.

More sustainable agricultural practices and greener practices in other interconnected areas, including energy and transport, can help to slow the pace of the climate crisis. Proactive state policies are urgently needed to address the climate crisis and stabilise the food supply.

The Right to Food

The UK has committed to ensure the right to food for all people within its jurisdiction through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).²

To fulfil this right, food must be calorically sufficient, adequately diverse, healthy, and safe, as well as being culturally acceptable. Sporadic access to food is insufficient—access must be sustained over time.

Realising the right to food is a process that takes time.¹² However, states are expected within the ICESCR framework to proactively take steps to ensure progressive realisation of the right to food over time. States are obligated to take action to ensure the right to food ‘even in times of natural or other disasters’ (p. 3).

Progressive action is needed to address social and economic barriers to ensure equitable access to food for all. This includes social policy to address the drivers of poverty and inequalities and provide social protection for people in need of additional support.

Why Charities Aren't the Answer

Many communities in the UK have responded to food insecurity by establishing food banks, where people in need can access a small, short-term supply of emergency food. There has been a remarkable growth in both the number of food banks and the number of food parcels they distribute over the past decade.

Unfortunately, as charities themselves point out,¹³ food banks and other charities cannot address food insecurity as a social problem because large-scale, structural change to address poverty, the climate crisis, and other social determinants of food insecurity is needed.

There are several important reasons^{2,14} why charities ultimately cannot resolve food insecurity and ensure the right to food, including:

- *Insufficiency*: Providing 'enough' food is extremely difficult because
 - Who is in need changes daily
 - People in need may not access services due to stigma and operational barriers
 - Supplies cannot be well-planned for due to reliance on donors
- *Nutritional inadequacy*: Supplies are determined by what is donated, not by nutritional needs. Donations are often highly processed/of limited nutritional value.
- *Instability*: Volunteer labour and food donations rely on external actors. People donate time and supplies when they feel able to do so. Labour and food donations may therefore be least available when they are most needed.
- *Inaccessibility*: Food banks operate around donor availability, not around centrally monitored need. Groups with the greatest need may be the least well-served.
- *Indignity*: Culturally, relying on charity is stigmatised. This can mean people who urgently need help do not access charitable resources.

Main Conclusions

- Food insecurity is a pressing and costly social problem in the UK, with far-reaching negative consequences
- The UK has committed to progressively realising the right to food, but austerity-era cuts have seen regression rather than progress in ensuring the right to food
- Removal of conditionalities and scaling up of provisioning for Universal Credit and other income support programs is urgently needed to address food insecurity
- Immediate action is needed to drastically reduce carbon emissions to slow the climate crisis and stabilise the food supply
- Charities are not a viable solution to food insecurity, and should not be institutionalised as part of the UK Government's response.

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