

“IT’S LIKE A CHRONIC ILLNESS”

A REPORT ON FOOD INSECURITY IMPACTING SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN IN LONDON

November 2022

I feel sad when I hear about kids
going through the cost of the living
crisis

COST
OF
LIVING



The
Childhood Trust
Alleviating the impact of child poverty

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KEY FINDINGS

1. Food insecurity has reached crisis levels amongst children in London

Our survey exploring child food insecurity in schools across London found that the issue is pervasive and widespread. Of the 280 children aged between 7-16 randomly surveyed, **40% (112 children) have experienced food insecurity within the last month**. This is equivalent to approximately **426,500** children living in London. This is higher than the levels found in similar, national research by the Food Foundation, which found that, as of September 2022, 25% of households with children have experienced food insecurity. This suggests that, although child food insecurity is an issue throughout the UK, the problem is particularly acute in London.

2. The cost-of-living crisis and rising food costs are further exacerbating food insecurity

Food prices are currently at their highest level in decades and rising rapidly, with necessities such as milk costing as much as 40% more than they did the previous year [21]. All the families interviewed emphasised the struggle they are having in covering these higher costs, with food budgets no longer sufficient to buy what they would have previously.



3. Food insecurity is negatively impacting both the physical and mental health of children and families

The parents and children we interviewed displayed similar feelings of mental and physical health difficulties as a result of the lack of access to nutritious food. The widespread efforts of parents and guardians to ensure that food is on the table for their families comes at a cost to their wellbeing, marked by a multitude of sacrifices, such as skipping meals to ensure their children have enough to eat, to the struggle of having to balance tight budgets in the face of rising costs. Our survey additionally points high levels of feelings of shame, embarrassment and exclusion felt by children living in London for not having enough money to have fun and play with friends. Children are also emotionally harbouring the stress and anxiety of their parents in the face of the cost-of-living crisis. In our survey, **8%** of children reported feeling embarrassed or ashamed about the methods they or their families used to get food. **4%** experienced this shame many times, and **4%** 1 or 2 times. 10% of children affected, additionally reported being unhappy.

4. Government measures intended to help address food insecurity do not go far enough

Interviewees expressed frustration with what was perceived to be a lack of adequate support from the government to help families struggling with rising costs. This was particularly relevant in relation to Free School Meals eligibility (FSM), which has a threshold of an annual income of less than £7,400 and leaves many low-income families without this crucial access to additional food for their children. Participants emphasised that they felt that additional government support was needed during this difficult time.



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INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT

The UK is currently in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, with inflation reaching 10.1% in September 2022, its highest level in decades. The price of basic amenities is rising rapidly, affecting everyone, but particularly those on the lowest incomes whose budgets are unable to stretch to cover increased household costs.

The price of food is soaring. Recent data shows that annual prices have risen by 14.7%, the fastest annual jump since April 1980. The cost of basics such as bread and cereals, meat, milk, and eggs has risen rapidly, adding an estimated £682 to the average British household's yearly shopping bill [8]. Food bank providers have warned that these spiralling costs are "driving millions into food insecurity" [22].

The United Nations defines food insecurity as "lack(ing) regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life" [7]. People experiencing food insecurity are uncertain about their ability to obtain food due to a lack of money or other resources, and as a result, often reduce both the quality and quantity of the food they consume.

Food insecurity amongst children and families in the UK is a persistent problem, which is only growing in the face of the cost-of-living crisis. Recent research from the Food Foundation found that, nationally, one in four households with children (4 million children) experienced food insecurity in September 2022. The research further found that food insecurity increased at a higher rate in households with children, and that food insecurity was consistently higher in families with more children [9]. The scale and implications of child food insecurity cannot be overstated.

Experiencing food insecurity as a child has long-term consequences. Lack of sufficient nutrition (either quantity or quality) during critical periods in early life may cause irreversible changes to a child's development, and therefore increase the risk of chronic disease in later life.

The Childhood Trust commissioned this research to explore the issue of food insecurity amongst children and families specifically in London. The report examines the impact of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis on the food security of disadvantaged children supported by the Childhood Trust's charity partners in the capital.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyse the data in the most comprehensive way possible, to gain an in-depth, yet accessible, picture of the cost-of-living crisis on food insecurity and its impact on children and parents. The survey and interview questions focused on the experiences of food insecurity over the last month. A detailed account of the methodology can be found in the appendix.

Quantitative survey

The Childhood Trust commissioned a survey exploring child food insecurity in schools across London, reaching a random sample of 280 children aged between 7-16 living in London. Fieldwork took place between September to November 2022. A random sampling frame ensures the survey results obtained are approximate to what would have been obtained if the entire population had been measured [19]. It allowed every child an equal chance to be selected.

We additionally applied an ordinal classification using the same methods employed by the authors of the Child Food Insecurity Experiences Scale (CFIES), a validated questionnaire developed to collect data on children's experiences of food insecurity [10]. The responses to the quantitative survey questions were coded with 2 indicating many times, 1 indicating 1 or 2 times and 0 indicating never, after which a summed scale from 0 to 20 was created. The ordinal classification created summarises the experiences of food insecurity for the children in the last month as: no food insecurity experiences (score 0), few experiences (1-6), several experiences (7-10) and many experiences (11-20). Using this additional method would help to provide a snapshot of food insecurity for children living in London.

Interviews

Face to face interviews were conducted with 9 parents and 6 children who are supported by 3 charities that support children in London. By using qualitative data, we can provide greater insight and meaning to the perceptions and understandings of the quantitative survey. For the purpose of safeguarding, the names of the interviewees and children are anonymised in this report.

A SNAPSHOT OF FOOD INSECURITY FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN LONDON

Using the food insecurity classification scheme [10][12], the table below shows how many children surveyed have had many, several or few experiences of food insecurity in the last month.

Of the 280 children in the survey sample, 112 children had experienced food insecurity. Nearly 10% have had many experiences of food insecurity, 12.50% have had several experiences and 77.68% have had few experiences. One or few experiences are enough to raise concerns about the scale of the issue, let alone many experiences. Children experiencing many experiences of food insecurity is a risk factor for clinical malnourishment.

Food insecurity classification	Food insecurity score	Number of children	Percentage of food insecure children by frequency of experience
Many experiences	11-20	11	9.82%
Several experiences	7-10	14	12.50%
Few experiences	1-6	87	77.68%
Total		112	100%

9.82% of children aged 7 to 16 who have many experiences of food insecurity is equivalent to approximately 41,900 children living in London. The same follows that 12.5% is equivalent to approximately 53,300 children living in London, and 77.68% approximately 331,300 children. The severity of food insecurity varies but nevertheless indicates that food insecurity is a likely experience for thousands of children.

In total, these results would suggest that approximately 426,500 children living in London have experienced food insecurity in the last month. Around 3-5% of the London population of school children, therefore, struggles to have access to the most basic human need: adequate food.

Child hunger is a degradation of basic human dignity and should be eliminated in all of its aspects to ensure children have the basic foundation to lead happy and healthy lives. The cost-of-living crisis presents a major barrier to this simple and attainable goal.



THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS AND REPERCUSSIONS ON HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY

How the cost-of-living crisis is impacting access to food

The cost-of-living crisis is making it increasingly difficult for people to afford necessities, including food. Rising food and energy costs, without a corresponding increase in income or financial support, have meant that families on low incomes, especially those with 3 or more children, are struggling to maintain adequate levels of food intake. This reality was reflected in our interviews, with families highlighting how rising food costs at supermarkets were stretching their budgets and eroding their purchasing power. One participant shared that:

“Before, if I bought food with 200 pounds, we eat it for like two weeks but now if you buy 200 pounds, a week will finish it. So, food doesn't last.”

Rozy, single mother of four

In a similar vein, one interviewee was distressed about the worsening crisis, stating that:

“Everything is expensive now, 5 years ago when I went to the supermarket with 50 pounds, I could cook every single meal but these days it's difficult.”

Lucy, married mother of two

Beyond simply accessing adequate levels of food, interviewees were also concerned about the quality of the food that they are able to provide for their families in the face of rising prices, facing a dilemma between affordability and nutritiousness. When interviewed, parents expressed frustration at the high cost of nutrient-dense, whole foods when compared to their processed counterparts, as well as the inherent stress and worry over whether their children were receiving a healthy diet:

“I've noticed in stores and stuff that the healthy stuff is expensive and the unhealthy stuff is much cheaper. The chemical cheap food is not good for my kids. Sometimes we make bean soup but the kids don't want it. It's hard with kids to pay for everything. We just have to balance as best as possible with food, kids and other bills. We are thinking too much, it's really stressful, always thinking and worrying for the future.”

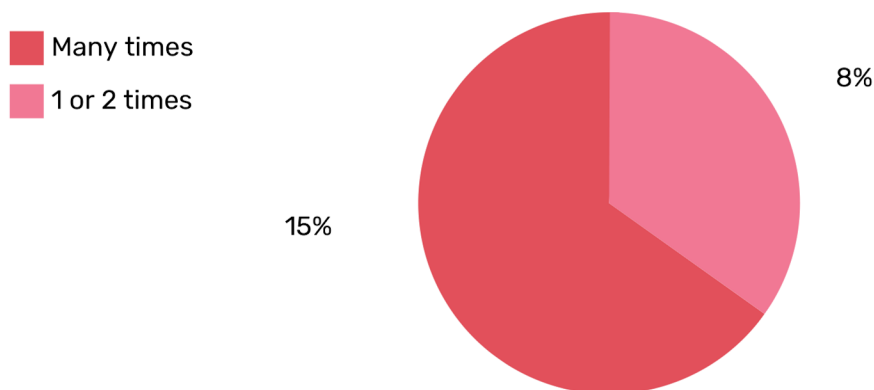
Maria, married mother of two

Lack of sufficient nutrition (either quantity or quality) during critical periods in early life may cause irreversible changes to a child's development, and therefore increase the risk of chronic disease in later life. Household food insecurity during infancy and early childhood is linked to an increased risk of obesity, as well as other conditions such as poor dental health and stunted growth. Research from the Food Foundation has found that approximately twice as many children aged 4-5 in the most deprived fifth of households suffer from obesity compared with the least deprived fifth across England, Wales and Scotland [11].

Our survey of schoolchildren in London highlighted that children were aware of the difficulties that their parents were experiencing in securing enough food. 23% of children reported feeling worried about food scarcity over the last month, with 8% of children experiencing this concern many times.

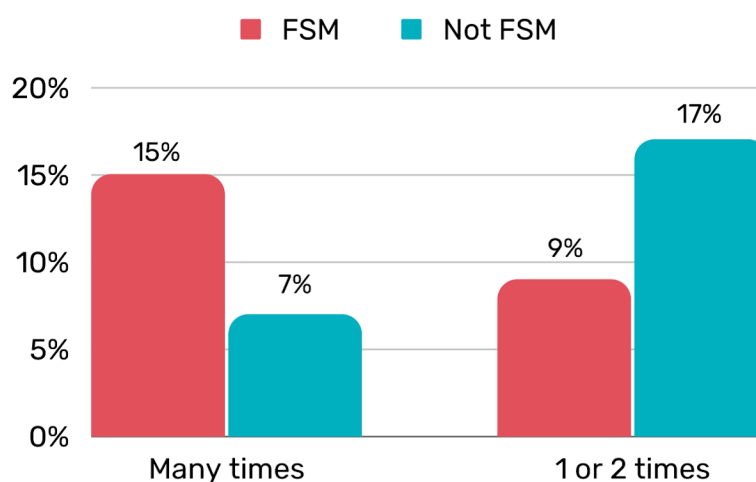


Figure 1: Have you worried that food at home would run out before your family was able to get more?



A particularly striking finding from the survey was that 24% of children who reported being worried that food would run out at home received Free School Meals (FSM), with 15% of FSM recipients experiencing these concerns frequently. These findings suggest that FSM, intended as a safety for families on the lowest incomes, are not providing sufficient support against food insecurity or relief for families struggling with rising food costs.

Figure 2: % of Children worrying if food at home would run and their FSM status



Concern about food running out in the home was not limited to FSM recipients, with 24% of children not on FSM also reporting being worried about adequate food supplies. This is likely due to the fact that the threshold for receiving FSM, a household income of under £7,400 annually, is very low, meaning that many families are denied this extra support, despite struggling to cover food costs. Sofia, a single mother of 2 children who do not qualify for FSM highlighted this issue, stating that **“they think I have enough, but I don’t”**, despite having to rely on her local food bank as a lifeline for her children.

The crucial role that food banks played in helping families struggling with food insecurity was a recurrent theme in our interviews. Interviewees, who were primarily contacted through charity partners who provide support in the form of food supplies or vouchers, described these services as critical to maintaining adequate access to food.

For instance, the Rose Vouchers, provided by the participating charity Alexandra Rose, which constituted many interviewees’ only source of fruit and vegetable intake were described as **“a lifeline for someone like myself when the finance is not there for me to go and buy the healthy options that I need.”** (Miriam, full-time carer and single mother of 3 children)

The increasing dependency on food banks as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, however, means that organisations are now facing unprecedented demand, becoming overstretched and putting the ongoing feasibility of these operations in meeting the needs of families experiencing food insecurity into question [15].

A constant trade-off between basic necessities

It is important to realise the context many of our participants are in when dealing with these issues. Many of the parents interviewed **suffer from physical and mental health conditions**, often attributed to the stress caused by deprivation and insecurity. They are often single carers of their children, many of whom have disabilities such as autism or a chronic disease. For parents in these situations, balancing a budget to meet children's health needs against education and wellbeing can feel like an overwhelming task.

One mother talks about her struggles with food as she has to spend a significant part of her budget on her son's treatments, as he is dealing with a chronic illness. Trying to satisfy both her son's medical needs and her family's basic survival needs is now an everyday challenge she has to face and manage:

"Having to be going to hospital all the time, I'm spending more, not even more, triple than the average person would have."

Miriam, mother of three

Another family talks about having to give up other activities their children love to do because they cannot afford the rising prices of food anymore. They express how important it is for their children to take part in sports clubs and social events with their peers, yet how they have no choice but to sacrifice those essential activities for their children simply to give them enough food everyday:

"My kids' activities, such as swimming and football, have had to be cut because it's so expensive, but my kids need swimming lessons because it helps with their asthma."

Maria, mother of two

Another mother stressed that:

"My kids go to the breakfast club in the school, but they had to stop going because I can't pay for it. I had to tell the school to stop taking my son because I cannot afford it. I have to choose between my sons what school club they go to."

Sofia, mother of two

Even essential items that children need in order to go to school, such as school uniforms, are not affordable anymore and compound the already precarious situations families already go through:

"With the cost-of-living I've seen myself struggling, as a single mother I'm not able to buy things I need, like the school uniform."

Sofia, mother of two

Despairing criminality

Although uncommon, participants did allude to instances of shoplifting during the most hopeless times. The fact that they did not have another choice is highlighted, as well as the guilt they feel both visibly by talking to them and by the shame they felt when sharing their experiences.

One participant, a single mother of four who doesn't work due to a mental health condition which prevents a lot of physical activity, expressed how providing for her family comes first, no matter what:

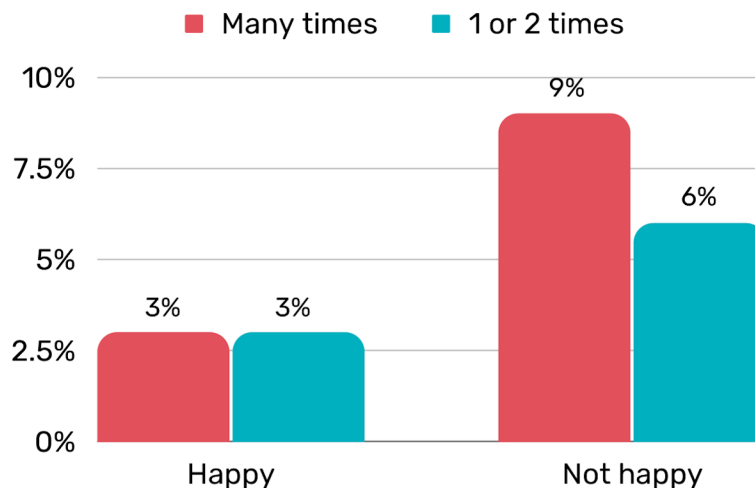
“Everything is getting so expensive... the majority of the time we run out of stuff, if I don't have something, I don't have money, I just go to the Morrisons and get it because I've got children to feed. If I'm hungry then I'm gonna' go and find food. It's not a good thing to do but I got a family.”

Sara, unemployed mother of four

8% of children reported feeling embarrassed or ashamed about the methods they or their family used to get food. **4%** experienced this shame many times, **4%** 1 or 2 times.

Almost 10% additionally reported being unhappy. See below

Figure 3: Whether the children who feel shame report being happy or not happy



These findings highlight the fact that food insecurity can force children and parents into criminality to ensure that there is enough food on the table for the family. Food is a necessity, and a human right to ensure a basic adequate standard of living.

EXPERIENCING HUNGER AND ITS IMPACTS

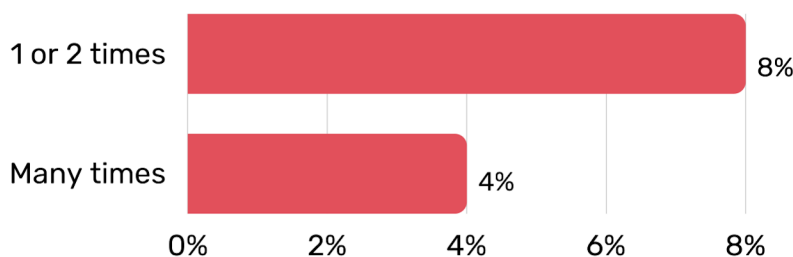
“Managing” hunger as a child

A handful of children said they were often hungry, and when asked how they dealt with it, many said they simply “manage” this problem. This finding suggests that feelings of hunger have been normalised as children know they will experience hunger often and have internalised it as a regularity.

Damian, a 10-year-old boy, said he often feels hungry at home and at school, even after having just eaten, says he **“holds it”** and **“just drinks water”**.

In our survey, when children were asked if the size of their meals were cut because their family didn’t have enough food, 8% experienced this at least 1 or 2 times in the last month. 4% many times.

Figure 4: Has the size of your meal been cut because your family didn't have enough food?



We know that families are increasingly facing “heat or eat” choices, forcing households to rein in food spending, whilst some households are unable to afford either [2].

Despite the best efforts of parents, as shown above, to ensure their children are well fed, managing hunger remains a heartbreaking reality. Yet, cutting the size of a meal not only implies growing hunger, but also the inability to have an effectively balanced meal that is adequately nutritious to sustain the basic essential activities children need, such as learning in school and participating in play.

Hunger and everyday life

As mentioned previously, many activities children expect to take part in are jeopardised because of parents' inability to simultaneously afford both extracurricular activities and a sufficient diet. However, some children who are still able to attend these are also affected by food insecurity in other ways. As they are hungry throughout the day, participants expressed feelings of tiredness and weakness because of this, impacting their performance both in sports activities and at school. One boy and girl, both 7 years old, recalled that:

"When I don't have enough food, I don't get enough muscles and it makes me can't do stuff like running"

Jose, 7 years old

"It makes me feel not happy because I can't concentrate like at school"

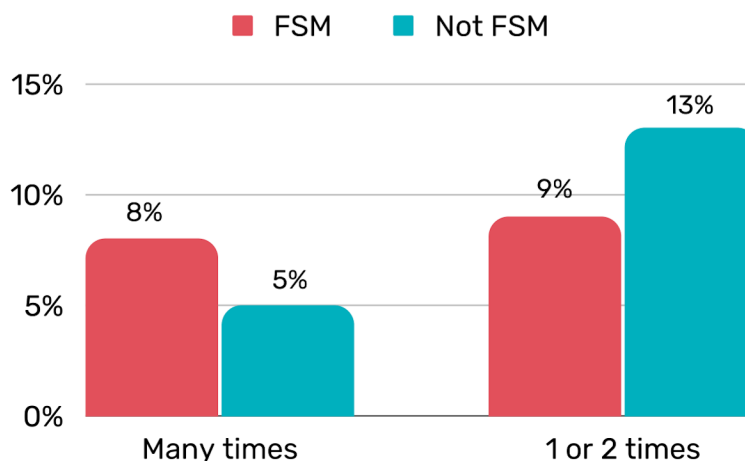
Jenny, 7 years old

In the data that we collected, when asked if they were hungry but didn't eat because their family didn't have enough food, 15% of the children experienced hunger in the last month. 4% did many times. In the figure below, where data on FSM is recorded, 17% of the children that reported many times and 1 or 2 times being hungry, but not eating because their family didn't have enough food, are on FSM. Concomitantly, 18% are not on FSM.

Hunger is not an isolated issue but a widespread concern affecting children regardless of whether they receive FSM or not. It is not surprising, therefore, that 'managing' hunger by cutting the size of meals and experiencing hunger every day are more prevalent.

We can additionally see below that 17% are on FSM, whereas 18% are on FSM.

Figure 5: Children reporting whether hungry but didn't eat and their FSM status



Hunger and mental health

Children’s inability to either attend or perform well in social and educational activities due to inadequate dietary intake or expenditure choice between eating and not participating in paid-for activities can have a negative impact on their physical and mental wellbeing.

Children expressed how they felt left out, as they watched their friends plan activities after school that their families could not afford. One boy, age 9, shared his experience and how it makes him feel ashamed of having less money than his peers, making him feel upset about feeling left out from the fun his friends enjoyed. He felt as though he could not talk about this issue to anyone due to the stigma associated with being in poverty and being food insecure, which shows how children are dealing with the consequences, for the most part, alone:

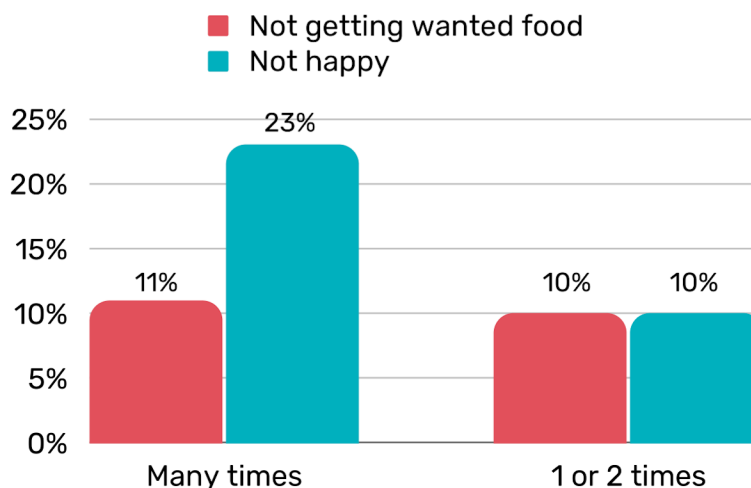
“My friends in school have so much stuff. My friends tell me like ‘ah after school let’s go and get food, but I can’t go because my mum doesn’t have enough money to give me. My brother’s friend at school invited him to go to Five Guys but he couldn’t go. I wouldn’t talk to others about this because I feel ashamed that my mum has no money”

John, 9 years old

As the boy described the situation, his mother started crying, unable to contain her emotions as her son described being unable to do the basic things any child should be freely able to do. The staff at the charity encouraged his mother to step outside the room and offered support by providing a safe and private space.

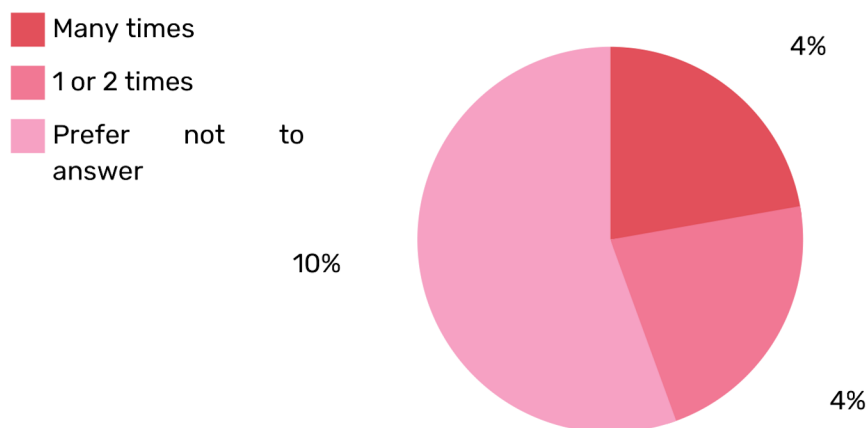
21% of the children reported not being able to get food they wanted in the last month because there was not enough money available. 11% experienced this many times, and 10% 1 or 2 times. We can also see that 33% reported being unhappy, of which 23% fall under the many time's bracket.

Figure 6: Were you not able to get the food you wanted because there wasn't enough money?



Below, 8% of the children felt ashamed or embarrassed about their family not being able to get food, of which 4% reported many times. 10% preferred not to say. These findings point to the situation where stigmas relating to being food insecure are becoming normalised because more people are reporting it. Contrarily, there is still a proportion of children who feel stigmatised and are therefore reluctant to provide an answer to this question out of fear of feeling embarrassed.

Figure 7: Have you felt embarrassed or ashamed because your family didn't have enough food?



Many children are incredibly aware of the situation and the rising costs their parents have to deal with. They share feelings of anger and sadness towards the situation, but never towards their parents. One child, age 6, shares how she wants to help her parents by giving them her spare change.

"Sometimes they run out of money, so I tell them to get some from my piggy bank."

Bonnie, 6 years old

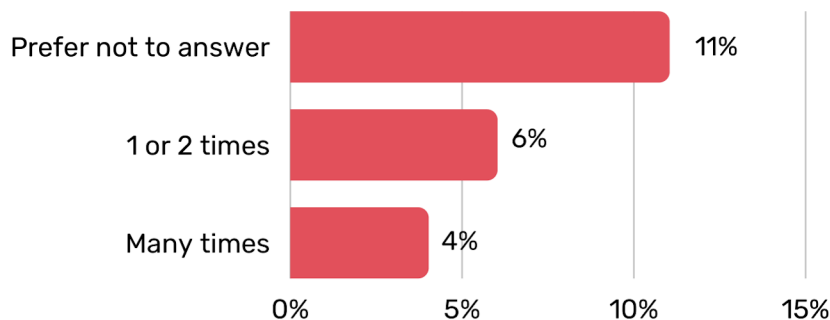
Carrying this weight on their shoulders at a time when children are growing and developing their identities is a significant emotional burden. The discussions show how children perceive situations of food insecurity, and how children can feel anger and frustration around the issues of poverty and food insecurity.

"I hate when people do not have money to get food... I feel upset and worried if I don't get strong enough because I was dreaming to be like a superhero. My favourite superhero is superman."

Jose, 7 years old

We can see below that 10% of the children felt tired and weak in the last month because their families didn't have enough food to eat. 11% preferred not to say, likely out of stigmatised feelings.

Figure 8: Have you felt tired or weak because your family didn't have enough food to eat?



The result of spending more money for less food has left many families with a feeling of helplessness. As each day feels like the last straw to an endless need for more, the next day will simply be even worse, as two mothers recollect:

"This thing is getting too much. When you go to the market today you will see maybe 50p difference, when you go tomorrow it's getting up again. But there is nothing we can do then, just manage what we have."

Rozy, mother of four

"I can see how in Tesco prices are increasing. It's crazy, on one day bread is 90p, the next 1 pound."

Sofia, mother of two

As the figure below shows, 34% of the children worried about how hard it is for their parents to get food, likely cultivating the feeling of helplessness further across families. 17% experienced this worry many times, and 17% 1 or 2 times during the last month. This issue is merely the tip of the iceberg. 3 per cent are also unhappy and 38 per cent are reported to have problems with health.

Figure 9: Have you worried about how hard it is for your parents/guardians to get enough food for your family?

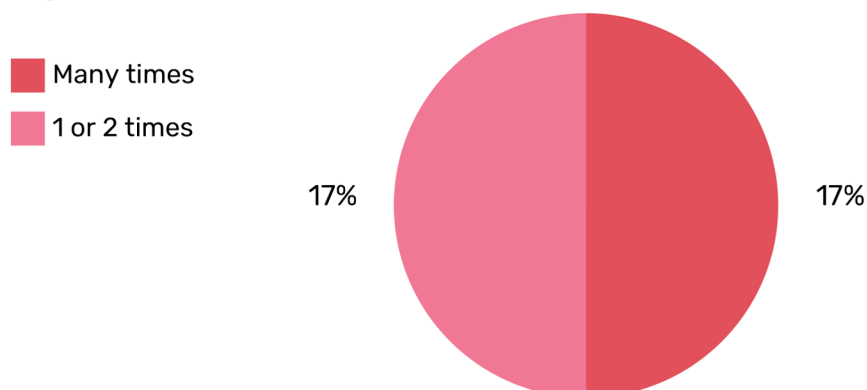
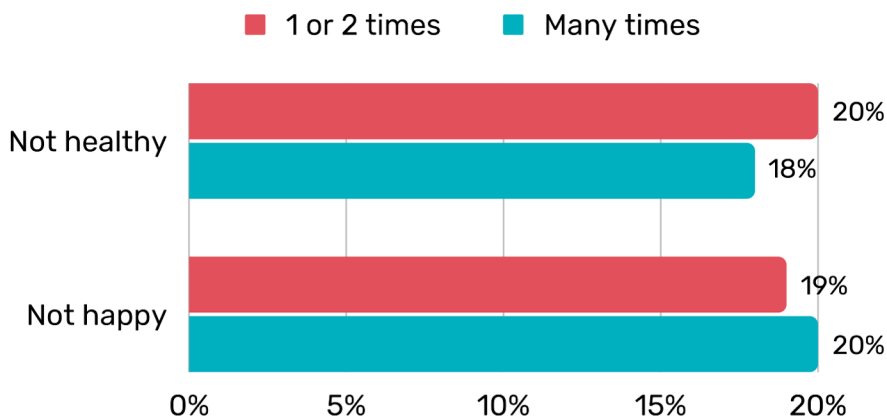


Figure 10: % of children who worry how hard it is for their parents reporting whether they are not healthy and not happy



The constant feeling of worry, particularly for children that do so many times, are more likely to experience depression, anxiety and psychological distress [2][24]. Medically unexplained disorders are often a basis for poor mental health, given that stressful and worrisome environments are associated with higher rates of adverse mental health conditions, such as emotional disorders, conduct disorders, hyperkinetic disorders and autistic spectrum disorders [23][24].



PARENTS AND THEIR SACRIFICES TO FEED THEIR CHILDREN

Rationing meals and eating children's leftovers

A common mindset parents shared was putting their children before themselves, making sure they ate enough first before thinking about their own food intake:

"My children say, 'mummy you don't eat anything', I want them to feel well and eat something nice... if my children feel well, it is a part of my joy."

Sylvia, full-time carer and mother of four

"The children always come first."

Miriam, mother of three

Many expressed this in their rationing of food, cutting back on the number of meals they used to eat when food was more affordable, sometimes cutting their intake in half to make sure children never had to cut back themselves. This is now a part of their "routine", as some mothers stated:

"I only eat once a day and only in the evening. I make sure my children are satisfied, they have breakfast and lunch at least."

Sylvia, mother of four

"Before this pandemic, or the cost-of-living crisis, I ate 4 times. But now I skip, I eat 2 times a day."

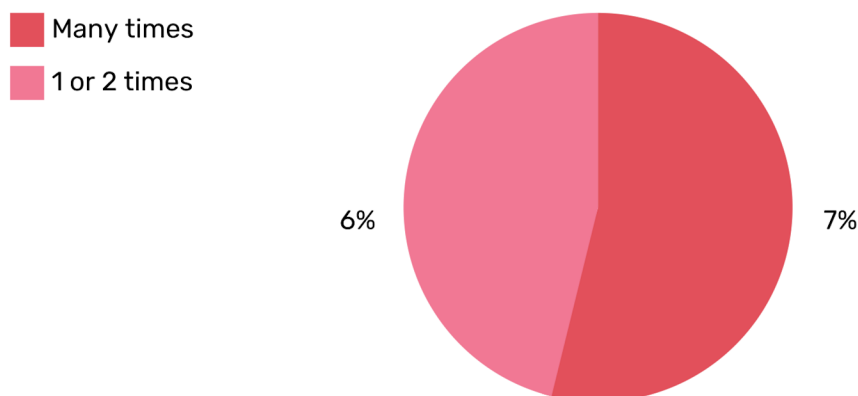
Rozy, mother of four

"I've had to stop my eating habits to make sure my children have enough on their plate."

Maria, mother of two

Children often feel sad or angry about their families not having enough food. The data below shows that 13% of children experience negative feelings, 7% doing so many times over the last month. As such, food insecurity further contributes to children’s psychological distress [16]. Given the well documented impact of chronic stress in childhood, as mentioned earlier, the psychological distress of food insecurity threatens the ability of children to grow and flourish into adulthood.

Figure 11: Have you felt sad or angry because your family didn't have enough food?



Sometimes, even rationing their own meals is not enough. One mother shared that her eating habits consisted of eating leftovers only, as the risk of cooking anything unnecessary when every bite is precious, is not worth it. She describes it as **“cleaning up their plates”**, emphasising how waste is not an option in her household environment:

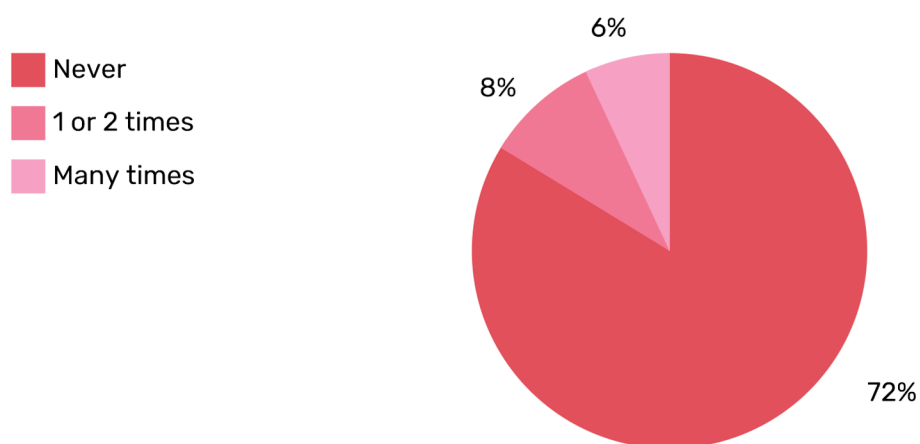
“I don't actually make meals for myself, I wait for them [the children] to finish eating because if they finish eating and they haven't finished the whole thing that they wanted to eat, then that'll be my meal basically. So I will consume their leftovers instead of having to make more than is needed.”

Miriam, mother of three

These experiences show the instability and uncertainty that parents experience regarding their next meal, as they feel dependent on whatever their children will eat. Indeed, if the children are hungry that day, parents will simply not eat.

We can see below that, although 14% of children skipped meals in the last month, of which 6% did many times, 72% answered never. This finding underlies, to a large extent, the sacrifices and efforts made by so many parents who love their children and fulfil their duty as carers to ensure their children have food to eat.

Figure 12: Have you skipped a meal because your family didn't have enough food?



PARENTING JEOPARDISED BY THE CONSEQUENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Physical wellbeing

Constantly cutting back on nutritious food or food altogether has, serious implications for parents' physical health. This not only impacts parents own happiness, productivity levels, and health, but also has repercussions on their children. Indeed, feeling exhausted, having migraines, losing weight or aching impacts parents' ability to take care of their children and 'parent' the same way other parents can. Participants share what a lack of access to food does to them:

"I feel tired sometimes if I don't have what I'm supposed to have. Before I weighed 79 but now I weigh 75."

Rozy, mother of four

"I seem to experience a lot of migraines, tiredness. And then you get tired throughout the day and you're thinking why am I tired, I don't drink, I don't do this, don't do that - I shouldn't be. But when you're not supplementing your body with very good nutrition, that will impact me one way or another."

Miriam, mother of three

"Having these problems makes my crone's disease worse because I get more stressed right now I cannot work because of this. My doctor recommends me to not work but I need to, to make money."

Sofia, mother of two

Mental wellbeing

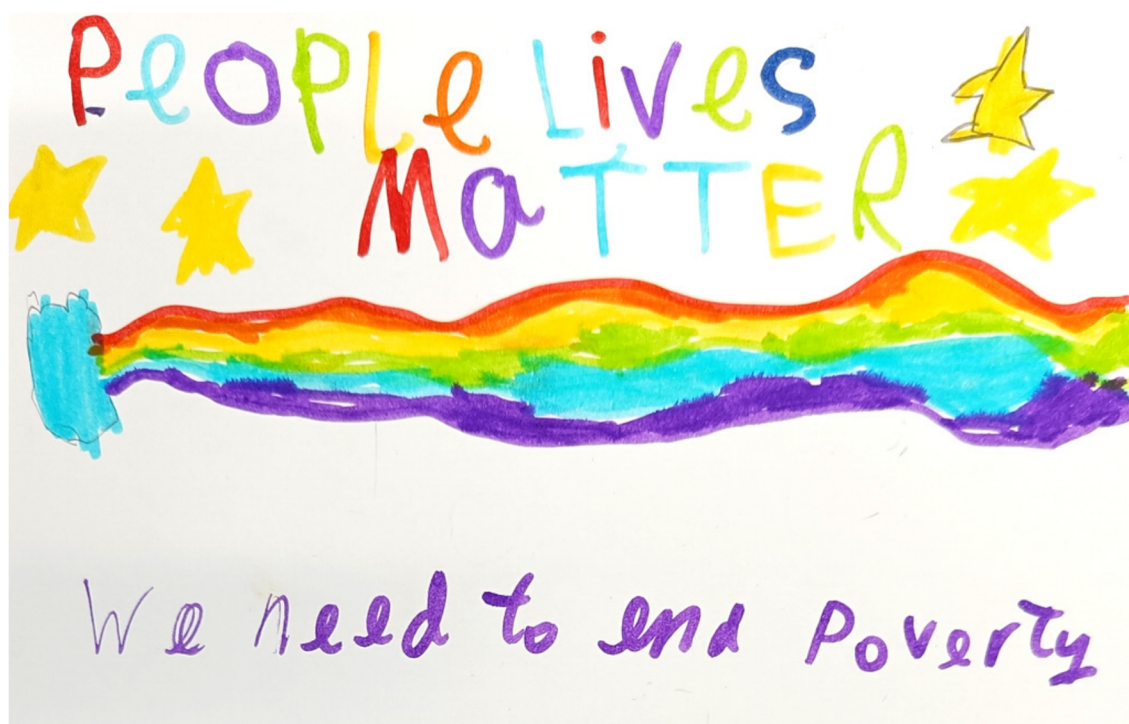
These physical symptoms of food insecurity alone affect parents' mental wellbeing, but it is the anxiety and frustration of providing food every single day with little to no support that is most damaging to participants. One mother described this feeling of calculating your every move as a "chronic illness":

"Basically, when you don't have the good nutrition that you need it's like an illness. You're always constantly thinking about where am I going to get the next balanced diet from, where am I gonna' get the next healthy options or something like that. So basically like, in my opinion, it's a chronic illness. You're constantly thinking about how are you gonna' provide the best meal for your children that is good for them."

Miriam, mother of three

The use of the word "chronic" highlights the hopelessness parents can feel in these situations, as they feel powerless to change anything. A feeling of fear is also shared by parents, as they do not know where the limit will be for them and their children, or when their struggles will ever stop.

Our observations during the interviews found a constant theme of distress from the parents. As polite as the participants were, the anguish was visible in the way they communicated their problems and expressed their concerns verbally and non-verbally through their body language during the interviews.



CONCLUSION: AN URGENT NEED FOR MORE SUPPORT

The UK government's Autumn Statement 2022 comes at a backdrop of significant economic challenge for the UK. The government set out steps on taxation and spending to repair public finances under the banner of 'fairness', with a priority on stability, growth and public services. Whilst the challenges discussed and the prices of food and energy are increasing, the changes outlined in the Autumn Statement are not enough to address the multifaceted issues affecting disadvantaged families during the cost-of-living crisis.

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBS) forecast suggests that living standards are set to go from bad, to worse. By 2027-2028, we are not expected to have a single year of growth higher than the pre-2008 average since 2015-2016. Average household income per head is due to be same in 2027-2028 as it was in 2018-2019. As Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute of Fiscal studies (IFS), said, "the next two years will see the biggest fall in household incomes in generations" [1].

Hunger and food insecurity should be recognised and urgently prioritised in the government's agenda. One way to ensure this is to appoint a Child Poverty Minister within the government, working hand in hand with civil society with the responsibility of understanding the causes and scale of food insecurity, regulating the progress and impact of existing policies, reforming them, if necessary, and introducing new effective policies. However, the latest Autumn Statement touches little on this crisis directly, with an alternative focus on the broader implications of its newly proposed fiscal tightening.

In line with the findings of this report, certain policy proposals are brought forward, as well as addressed in view of the Autumn Statement, to ensure low-income families are better supported.

1. Increasing benefits in line with inflation: Contradictions

Tens of billions of pounds will be spent by the Treasury next year to uplift pensions and benefits for two decades to keep up with inflation [3]. The state pension and benefits for working aged people will rise by 10.1% from next year. But this would still leave their real value on course to be 6% below their pre-pandemic levels, equivalent to almost £500 per year for the average out-of-work claimant [13].

And yet, this is only the fourth time UK benefits have risen by inflation in the last 10 years. There are still almost 4 million children living in poverty in the UK [6]. One in five people in the UK are experiencing food insecurity. The consequences of this have been highlighted through the lived experiences, statistics of food insecurity and affordability found in this research. Even with the positive measures introduced, they do not adequately address the needs of vulnerable low-income families.

2. Expanding the criteria for Free School Meals eligibility

The current criterion for receiving FSM is that households must earn below £7,400 a year before benefits and after tax to qualify, which according to the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) [4], excludes 1 in 3 children living in poverty. A recent study interviewing parents on how expanding this criterion would change their access to food highlights how single carers who work to be able to support their family feel like they are being punished for doing so, as they earn just above the threshold but are still facing food insecurity and financial stress [20]. Raising the threshold and making the policy more flexible would ensure all children receive a healthy and filling school meal, which is currently not the case. Hundreds of thousands of children living in poverty in the UK do not qualify for FSM, but no mention of FSM was mentioned in the Autumn Statement [14].

3. Ensuring the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme extends to more children and covers all school holidays

Although this programme has been helpful to many children suffering from food insecurity, just as the FSM has been, it has not addressed all children due to the similar criteria issues mentioned above. Furthermore, the HAF does not cover all the school holidays, which makes a significant difference for families that are struggling day after day, as seen through the interviews. The Welsh and Scottish governments have extended both their FSM and HAF programmes, making them more inclusive and accessible than before, which gives us hope that the English government may act on this issue as well.

4. Scrapping the two-child limit on benefits

According to government figures, more than 1 million children are affected by the government's two-child limit on benefits, meaning households only get support for the two first children in their household [17]. As seen by the participants in this study, many low-income families have three to five children, leaving them out of benefits that could ensure they eat a proper meal every day. CPAG emphasises how removing this cap would only cost £500 million to remove, accounting for 0.2% of Britain's total social expenditure budget, adding £65 a week in the pockets of capped households, which is a drastic help in affording enough and healthier food [4].

APPENDIX

Quantitative survey

The Childhood Trust commissioned the survey through CHILDWISE, a specialist in research with children. The following response options focused on the last month of experience: 1) many times, 2) 1 or 2 times, 3) don't know, 4) prefer not to say, and 5) never. The survey used a 50/50 weighting scale to balance responses and achieve full saturation. See below:

Gender	Age range	Target	Actual	Weight
Boy	5-10	50	77	0.64935
Girl	5-10	50	92	0.54348
Boy	11-16	50	21	2.38095
Girl	11-16	50	90	0.55556
		200	280	

The research only reports the absolute figures and does not disaggregate the data to ensure an accurate representation of food insecurity in London.

The additional variables of FSM/not on FSM, healthy/not healthy and happy/ not happy are self-reported by the children.

Equivalences made to make comparisons between the survey sample and general population draw on data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Census 2021 results. The population sample size from the ONS data focuses on ages 5 to 14. The equivalences are not a direct measure but are intended to be an approximate estimate of the equivalence ratio. We recognise the limitations of this survey and recommend that the Government urgently undertakes large scale child food insecurity research to assess the scale of food insecurity in the UK.

Interviews

Interviewees were sampled through The Childhood Trust's charity partners to ensure that their characteristics met the sampling criteria. The characteristics for families were: 1) living in poverty, 2) experiencing severe food insecurity, and 3) having children aged between 6-12.

Interview questions for the children were based on the same Child Food Insecurity Experiences Scale (CFIES) used in the quantitative survey [10]. For the parents, a similar set of 8-item questions were used. The questions were taken from the latest 2021 International Food Policy Study: UK survey. The same response options with the same focus over the last month as in the quantitative survey were employed to maintain consistency.

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