

Measuring and mitigating child hunger in the UK

TWO MINUTE SUMMARY

December 2020

SMF

Social Market Foundation



Download the full report here

Social and political concerns over child poverty and hunger in the UK long predate the Coronavirus pandemic. However, recent public interventions from Marcus Rashford and other prominent campaigners have thrust the question of food insecurity to the top of the Government's agenda.

The UK Government only started tracking food insecurity in 2019, and given the time lag associated with producing official statistics it will be 2022 until we have data covering the period of the pandemic.

This report seeks to fill that data gap and provide initial findings on the current level of child food security in the UK. It presents evidence from an SMF-commissioned survey from Opinium, closely modelled on the questions that will form the basis of the Government's official measure.

The report also models levels of child food security by local authority, producing a national 'heatmap'. It indicates that rates are highest in London, where just under one in five (19%) of children face very low food security, as well as in the South West.

Top 10 local authorities with the highest share of children with very low food security

- Redbridge (25.5%)
- Tower Hamlets (24.7%)
- Newham (23.9%)
- Harrow (23.7%)
- Brent (23.6%)
- Blackburn with Darwen (23.5%)
- Mid Devon (23.1%)
- Teignbridge (21.8%)
- North Devon (21.4%)
- Bolton (21.1%)

Data for all local authorities by ranking and an interactive map is available [here](#).

Context

Debate in the UK over child hunger has centred around one measure in particular: free school meals for vulnerable children. Going into the crisis, many families were reliant on school meals to adequately feed their children, and the loss of

that provision due to school closures has made the task much harder. Campaigners have argued the Government's initial response – issuing electronic vouchers during term time – was not sufficient, and have called for year-round food distribution to make sure children do not go hungry during the school holidays. This prompted a succession of U-turns from the Government.

The free school meals debate has taken place against the backdrop of a broader policy discussion over how best to address child hunger. The National Food Strategy, commissioned by the Government as the first major review of UK food policy in almost 75 years, makes a series of recommendations to alleviate the effects of the pandemic upon Britain's poorest households, including a relaxation of eligibility criteria for the Free School Meals programme and an extension of the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to the whole country.

The economic shutdowns of recent months, disproportionately hitting lower income households, have created fears that COVID-19 has made – and will continue to make – an already challenging situation considerably worse. In November 2020, the Legatum Institute estimated that 690,000 people – including 120,000 children – have entered poverty because of the Coronavirus crisis.

Measuring food insecurity

There is no single method for measuring food insecurity. Objective measures utilise statistics on calorie consumption, incomes and prices, whilst subjective measures of food insecurity are designed to capture households' reported experiences of food. The most prominent subjective measure of food insecurity is the US Department of Agriculture's Household Food Security Module, which forms the basis of forthcoming UK Government data on food insecurity. However, the first UK figures will not be released until March 2021, and will not cover the period prior to the pandemic. Our survey is based on the same set of questions from the USDA, but

provides a more timely picture of child food insecurity in the UK.

SMF survey findings and modelling

The figures presented in the report indicate that a large minority of children in the UK have experienced significant hardship over recent months. They suggest that the scale of the problem is greater than many might previously have imagined.

Findings from our survey indicate that:

- One in four children, 3 million in total, have faced some form of food deprivation in the six months following lockdown.
- 16% of parents said that their children made do with smaller portions, had to skip meals or went a day without eating between March and September.
- 14% of children – 1.7 million across the country – were classified as facing very low food security, using an internationally recognised assessment tool.
- Very low food security is more common and rose significantly for children with parents working in hospitality and leisure, retail and construction – all sectors badly hit by economic shutdowns.
- Of the children entering very low food security in 2020, 61% had parents whose wages had fallen (compared to 25% for those that did not enter very low food security), 44% had parents whose working hours had been cut and 24% had parents that lost a job.
- Reported usage of food banks rose from 8% before the crisis to 11% since, but reported take-up of free school meals went down slightly from 22% to 20%.
- Only 30% of children receiving free school meals are classified as very low food security, suggesting that the measure is effective at reducing hunger.
- 60% of children classified as very low food security in the survey do not report receiving free school meals, indicating possible issues with take-up and targeting.
- Younger parents were more likely to report very low food security, with just under a quarter of those aged under 35 doing so.

Policy recommendations

The Government has taken a number of welcome steps to address child poverty and hunger in recent months, but they are unlikely to be the end of the matter. Food insecurity was high before the crisis, has been worsened by COVID-19, and the economic outlook remains difficult. For a response proportionate to the scale of the problem, the Government should consider enacting the following policies.

1. **Implement all recommendations highlighted in the National Food Strategy** – this includes expanding eligibility for free school meals; extending the Holiday Activity and Food Programme; and increasing the value of Healthy Start Vouchers and expanding eligibility.
2. **Bolster Universal Credit and the wider benefits system** – the fundamental driver of food insecurity is a lack of money. The Government needs to find ways to get cash into the hands of those facing greatest hardship – perhaps by retaining the temporary £20 increase in Universal Credit, increasing its child element, or widening coverage.
3. **Coordinate and mobilise a national network of food redistribution** – harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of businesses and civil society, the Government should coordinate food redistribution at a national level and provide funding for schemes to reduce waste, identify sources of waste in the food chain and direct surplus food to the places where it is required most.
4. **Devolve responsibility and funding for on the ground food distribution to local authorities** – local authorities have the local knowledge, relationships and facilities necessary to cover the ‘last mile’ of food distribution. They should be given support and autonomy to develop Food Plans to meet their area’s needs, with ministerial oversight.
5. **Introduce healthy eating programmes across all local authorities** – long term, it is critical to take a more holistic approach to developing a healthier food ‘ecosystem’. The Government should build on the expansion of Holiday Activity and Food programmes and encourage and support community-led initiatives such as food education schemes.