

V Cooper and D Whyte (eds) The Violence of Austerity. Pluto Press.

Part III Chapter 21: Food Poverty

Rebecca O'Connell and Laura Kate Hamilton

2386 including refs

Introduction

Britain is the world's fifth richest country,¹ but food poverty is a national concern. The UK media report an increase in the number of children arriving at school hungry, a marked growth in food banks handing out food parcels to families and households being forced to choose 'between heating and eating'. Whilst the UK government has repeatedly denied responsibility, the evidence is that rising levels of food poverty and insecurity in the UK are linked to reduced affordability of food in the context of food price rises, stagnant incomes and so-called austerity measures. Given that food is fundamental to health and social participation, food poverty has violent consequences of for individuals, households and society itself.

Food poverty and insecurity in the UK

Emergency food provision has been used as an indicator of the scale of food poverty in the UK. As the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty noted in 2015, the Trussell Trust, the largest emergency food provider, 'has seen the number of people referred for emergency food rise by 38 per cent in the last year'². Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty calculate that 20,247,042 meals were given to 'people in food poverty' in 2013/14³. Whilst these are shocking statistics, they are likely to underestimate the numbers in food poverty in Britain: not all people who are hungry go to food banks and not all food banks collect data in a systematic way. The Poverty and Social Exclusion UK (PSE UK) 2012 study found that the proportion of households unable to afford two adult meals a day in 2012 stood at 3%, 'back to levels found thirty years earlier having dropped to negligible levels in the intervening period'⁴. In addition, well over half a million children (4%) live in families who cannot afford to feed them properly, that is, provide at least one of the following: three meals a day, fresh fruit and vegetables every day, or meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent at least

¹ The World Bank, GDP at market prices (current US\$), 2016. Available at: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2012+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc

² Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty. *A recipe for inequality: why our food system is leaving low-income households behind*, London: Fabian Society, 2015.

³ Nial Cooper et al., *Below the Breadline*. Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, 2014.

⁴ Stuart Lansley and Joanna Mack, *Breadline Britain: The rise of mass poverty*. London: Oneworld Publications, Pp 38, 2015.

once a day⁵. If many parents were not cutting back on their own food intake to protect their children, the number would be much higher⁶.

Reports of rising food poverty and food bank use have largely been ignored or dismissed by the UK government, with politicians suggesting that supply is fuelling demand and blaming the poor for lacking budgeting skills, making poor food 'choices' and being unable to cook⁷. In contrast to government discourse, however, research shows that the cost of food relative to disposable income (affordability) is crucial⁸ and that in the wake of the financial crisis and subsequent policies of economic austerity, the affordability of food was severely reduced.

Global food price rises in 2007 marked 'the end of cheap food'⁹. In the UK, a country which imported half of the food it consumed in 2007¹⁰, this meant that food prices increased by 11.5% in real terms between 2007 and 2012 (when prices peaked), and more for fresh fruit (23%) and vegetables (24%)¹¹. Such increases reflect a more general rise in the cost of living in Britain over the same period, with households finding it more difficult to maintain or reach an acceptable standard of living, as defined by the Joseph Rowntree's Minimum Income Standard.¹² At the same time, real earnings remained stagnant or fell. For instance, a recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies¹³ states that income from employment 'is on average still lower than before the recession, driven by

⁵ David Gordon et al., 'The Impoverishment of the UK' PSE UK first results: Living Standards. 2013.

⁶ Lansley and Mack, *Breadline Britain: The rise of mass poverty*, p.39

⁷ Luciana Berger, People don't visit food banks because they're "unable to manage their finances", Mr Gove. *The Independent*, 2013. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/people-dont-visit-food-banks-because-theyre-unable-to-manage-their-finances-mr-gove-8810005.html>

Patrick Butler, Food poverty: Panorama, Edwina Currie and the missing ministers. *The Guardian*, 2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2014/mar/03/food-poverty-panorama-edwina-currie-and-the-missing-ministers-food-banks>; Patrick Butler, Tory peer

says poor people go hungry because they do not know how to cook. *The Guardian*. 2014, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/dec/08/tory-peer-apologises-poor-hungry-do-not-know-cook>; Rowena Mason, R. Lord Tebbit scorns food bank demand. *The Guardian*, 2014. Available at:

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/20/lord-tebbit-scorns-food-bank-demand>

⁸ e.g. Kath Roberts et al., *Social and economic inequalities in diet and physical activity*. London: Public Health England, 2013; Elizabeth Dowler, Dowler, E. Food and health inequalities: the challenge for sustaining just consumption. *Local Environment*, 13:8, 759-772, 2008

⁹ The Economist, *The end of cheap food*. December 6th 2007.

¹⁰ Defra, *Food Statistics Pocketbook 2009*. London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2009.

¹¹ Defra, *Food Statistics Pocketbook 2016*. London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2016.

¹² Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *A Minimum Income Standard for the UK in 2012*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012.

¹³ Chris Belfield et al., *Living Standards, Poverty & Inequality in the UK: 2016*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2016.

the lower earnings of those in work'¹⁴. Whilst overall incomes are higher, this is due to 'lower average tax payments, higher (pensioner) benefits and higher incomes from savings, investments and private pensions'¹⁵; economic resources unlikely to be accessible to low-income households. Precarious employment that has increased with the growth of zero hours contracts, and high levels of debt, also leave households vulnerable to economic shocks. Since the food budget is relatively 'elastic' compared to other essential costs that have also risen, people can and do cut back on food to meet competing demands. Households seeking to economise may 'trade down' to cheaper versions of the same product or change what they buy and consume, although 'those in the lowest income group are not trading down because they have less opportunity to do so, being already on the most basic of diets'¹⁶.

Analysis by Defra shows that falling incomes and rising living costs mean that food is now over 20 per cent less affordable for the poorest 10 per cent of people in the UK compared to 2003. In 2012, when the proportion of the household budget spent on food peaked in the UK, those in the lowest income decile spent 22 per cent more on food than in 2007 and purchased 5.7 per cent less, buying significantly fewer portions of fruit and vegetables than previously¹⁷. Further, the number of UK adults reporting being unable to afford meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day (a measure of adequate protein in the diet) has increased between 2004-2012, i.e. in the context of economic austerity and rising food prices¹⁸. The PSE UK study found that the proportion of adults going without meat or equivalent every second day because they could not afford it rose from 2 per cent in 1999 to 5 per cent in 2012. In addition, 3 per cent of children went without adequate protein and the same proportion could not eat fresh fruit or vegetables every day because their families could not afford it¹⁹. Reduced affordability of food therefore generally leads to a reduction in nutrient quality of food consumed and, in a growing number of cases, to hunger and reliance on emergency food provision.

There is a clear association between so-called austerity measures, implemented in Britain from 2011, and food poverty, something the UK government has

¹⁴ Ibid:14

¹⁵ Ibid:14

¹⁶ Elizabeth Dowler, 'Food banks and food justice in "Austerity Britain"' Pp. 160-175 in: Riches, G. and Silvasti, T. (eds) *First World Hunger Revisited*, Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan p. 167, 2014.

¹⁷ Defra, *Food Statistics Pocketbook 2012*. London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2013.

¹⁸ Rachel Loopstra et al., *Food insecurity and social protection in Europe: Quasi-natural experiment of Europe's great recessions 2004–2012. Preventative Medicine*, 89: 44–50, 2016.

¹⁹ Lansley and Mack, *Breadline Britain: The rise of mass poverty*. P.39.

repeatedly denied²⁰. Evidence shows a clear correlation between increasing conditionality, benefits sanctions and the distribution of food parcels. Rachel Loopstra and colleagues²¹ found that Trussell Trust foodbanks were more likely to open in areas with greater unemployment and welfare sanctions and reductions in local and central government spending (e.g. austerity measures). Although foodbank parcel distribution was greater in areas with more and better established foodbanks, higher distribution was still significantly associated with government cuts, welfare sanctions and unemployment rates, contradicting the government's claims that supply is fuelling demand and signifying the consequences of austerity measures on those already living in precarious economic circumstances. Qualitative research supports the finding that benefits sanctions and delays are a main reason that people turn to foodbanks, and crucially considers the implications for individuals' and households' lived experiences²² which are unlikely to improve in the near future due to further austerity and planned cuts to government spending and benefits.

Experiences and effects of food poverty and insecurity

The deleterious consequences of poor diet intake and malnutrition, particularly for children, are well established and have long term implications. The profound effects of health inequalities that are associated with poor dietary intakes and meal patterns include increasing incidence of coronary heart disease, type II diabetes and cancer²³. Indeed the UK Faculty of Public Health has argued that recent evidence of increasing malnutrition and hunger constitutes a 'public health emergency'²⁴. Sub-optimal diet and food practices such as skipping meals are also associated with poor cognition and lower academic achievement²⁵ as children's ability to concentrate and study is damaged by insufficient food or food of poor nutritious value. In the UK, as elsewhere, food poverty and overweight and obesity are also closely connected, a trend partly explained by

²⁰ e.g. Zoe Williams, To Lord Freud, a food bank is an excuse for a free lunch. *The Guardian*, 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/04/lord-freud-food-banks>

²¹ Rachel Loopstra et al., Austerity, sanctions, and the rise of food banks in the UK. *British Medical Journal*, 350, h1775, 2015.

²² e.g. Jane Perry, et al., Emergency Use Only: Understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK. CPAG, CoE, Trussell Trust, 2014.

²³ Debbie A. Lawlor, D.A., The Vienna Declaration on Nutrition and Non-communicable diseases. *British Medical Journal*, 347, f4417, 2013.

²⁴ The UK Faculty of Public Health, UK Faculty of Public Health Public health experts call on PM to take action on nutrition and hunger, 2014. Available at:

[http://www.fph.org.uk/public_health_experts_call_on_pm_to_take_action_on_nutrition_and_hunge](http://www.fph.org.uk/public_health_experts_call_on_pm_to_take_action_on_nutrition_and_hunger)

²⁵ A Hoyland et al., A systematic review of the effect of breakfast on the cognitive performance of children and adolescents. *Nutr. Res. Rev.* 22, 220–243, 2009.

the relative cheapness and wide availability of unhealthy foods that are high in saturated fat and non-milk extrinsic sugars²⁶.

But food is more than simply fuel or nutrition. It is fundamentally meaningful, intimately linked with identity, and an important medium of social relations, inclusion and exclusion. Exercising choice in the marketplace, including what food to buy and eat, is also one means of enacting agency in a consumer society. Individuals and households experiencing food poverty may be forced to procure foods in socially unacceptable ways (such as from food banks) and be unable to participate in ordinary social activities involving food, like eating out or offering and receiving hospitality. Although there is evidence of adapted preferences (reduced expectations) in the context of austerity, these 'social' dimensions of food and eating are widely included as part of a consensually determined minimum socially acceptable standard of living²⁷. However evidence from the PSE UK²⁸ suggests that 11 per cent of households could not afford to have friends or family around for a meal or drink at least once a month in 2012 compared to 6 per cent in 1999. Furthermore, the proportion who could not afford to have a friend's child round for tea or a snack once a fortnight had doubled between 1999 and 2012, from 4 per cent to 8 per cent, representing 1,000,000 children²⁹. Given that social relationships between children and their peers are an integral aspect of their development and well-being, the consequences are likely to be highly damaging and include increasing social exclusion and societal fragmentation.

Finally, the psychological dimensions of food poverty include not only worrying about whether there will be enough money for food, but the shame of being unable to feed oneself and one's family in a society in which this is constructed as an individual responsibility. Since the right to food is an entitlement, food charity is not the solution to food poverty³⁰. Qualitative research reports the violent and harmful effects of stigma and shame experienced by those using food banks³¹

²⁶ S Vandevijvere et al., Increased food energy supply as a major driver of the obesity epidemic: a global analysis *Bull World Health Organ* 93:446–456, 2015.

²⁷ Abigail Davis et al *A Minimum Income Standard for the UK in 2012: Keeping up in hard times*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012.

²⁸ PSE UK, *Households going without in 2012 and 1999: Britain, 2012*. Available at: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/households-going-without-1999-and-2012-britain>

²⁹ PSE UK, *Children going without in 2012 and 1999: Britain, 2012*. Available at: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/children-going-without-1999-and-2012-britain>

³⁰ Graham Riches and Tina Silvasti, *First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or the Right to Food?* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

³¹ Kayleigh Garthwaite, 2016, *Hunger pains: Life inside foodbank Britain*. Bristol: Policy press, 2016.

both from staff in some settings and from ‘othering’ media discourses³². Suggestions that the poor are unable to budget or cook are forms of symbolic violence that serve to further stigmatise and marginalise those already suffering material deprivation and social exclusion.

Conclusion

The growth in emergency food provision has been ‘the most visible symptom of the rise of food insecurity in the UK’³³ and food banks may be seen as a metonym for the impoverishment of Britain. Because food is fundamental to health and social participation, hunger and food poverty that have risen in austerity Britain have violent implications for individuals and households and for society itself.

³² Rebecca Wells and Martin Caraher, UK print media coverage of the food bank phenomenon: from food welfare to food charity?", *British Food Journal*, Vol. 116 Iss 9 pp. 1426 – 1445, 2014.

³³ Elizabeth Dowler et al. ‘Food banks and food justice in “Austerity Britain”’ Pp. 160-175 in: Riches, G. and Silvasti, T. (eds) *First World Hunger Revisited*, Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan, p4, 2014.