UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Preventing and Tackling Food Insecurity through Policy Solutions

Executive summary

Food insecurity refers to people's inability to access or afford a sufficient quantity of healthy, nutritious, good quality and culturally-acceptable foods. It is a growing problem in the UK and a crucial policy issue. Many factors can cause food insecurity including intersecting personal and structural issues.

- 7.2 million people or 11% of the UK population were in households experiencing food poverty during 2022/23. This included 17% of children.
- 3.12 million parcels of emergency food were distributed between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023, representing a 37% increase over a 12-month period and a 94% increase over a period of 5 years.
- This magnitude of food insecurity also reflects rising and deepening levels of poverty and precarity across the UK.
- This is a trend that pre-dates Covid-19, which reflects the ongoing structural effects of years of austerity policy measures and the more recent cost-of-living crisis.

When access to food through market-based spaces is only partially possible and/or no longer an option, people rely instead on spaces of emergency food access, such as foodbanks. But they can also utilise liminal and sometimes progressive and caring spaces of food aid access, including social supermarkets, subsidised fresh food spaces, community kitchens, social eating spaces, among others.

We need to reduce the need for emergency foodbanks and improve food security more generally. Alternative models of food access that are dignified, place-based and socially oriented in addition to market-based models can also help achieve this goal.

Preventative policy recommendations

1. Develop a good work policy package to adequately tackle low pay and insecurity, and implement a statutory real living wage.

2. Remove austerity measures implemented by the state (i.e., welfare benefits cap, benefit sanctions, lengthy assessment periods for first payment of Universal Credit), as austerity during a recession or a fragile recovery has harmful socio-economic effects.

3. Provide adequate, place-based access to advice and support on eligibility for social security benefits, debt management and tailored employment search support for people on low or no incomes.

4. Introduce legislation to ensure the right to food across the UK, following the lead of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022.

Reparatory policy recommendations

5. Accelerate policy and legislation on a sustainable surplus food redistribution system to minimise unnecessary food waste and liability concerns regarding no-risk expiry dates.

6. Reduce barriers to accessing emergency food aid by removing stigmatising referral systems and hosting food aid services in discrete, safe venues. Make it about place-based social activities and connections to build dignity and resilience, as food insecurity is not just about a lack of calories or nutrition.

7. Implement a cash-first approach to emergency food support, enabling councils to deliver local support to people who suddenly struggle to make ends meet.

8. Reinstate national public diners offering nutritious, healthy meals at low prices.

9. Support a more diverse food access ecosystem in addition to market-based models (e.g., subsidise fresh fruit and vegetable spaces in areas of food deserts and food swamps and support community-based social supermarkets and commensality projects).

About the research

Our collaborative research was conducted between 2018 and 2019 and its aim was to understand people's lived experiences of food insecurity. This research remains relevant, as the drivers of food insecurity remain largely the same.

We collected data in the Greater Manchester and West Midlands regions and interviewed 24 food-insecure participants plus 11 foodbanks and social supermarkets.

Our original evidence base shows that benefit delays, caps and sanctions contribute to people's need for emergency food support. Many people transition from emergency to a longer-lasting use of alternative types of food access including social supermarkets.

Only a small number of people could foresee a time when they would no longer need at least occasional access to food aid, even though many of them were working or in households with someone in work.

The stigma attached to using foodbanks and other types of food aid was evident. Nevertheless, many community-based food aid providers were facilitating appropriate spaces for clients by providing non-judgemental, compassionate, caring, and safe support.

The benefits of utilising additional support services where available (e.g., clothes banks,

benefits advice, skills training) were mentioned by all, with some pointing towards improved confidence levels because of accessing these services.

From this research, we produced a research brief for policy audiences and two peer-reviewed articles focusing on food insecurity liminality and the role of food aid providers in alleviating urban food insecurity. We also produced an end-of-project report for our funders, the British Academy, and extended the work by publishing an edited book with chapters from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Conclusion

We cannot solve individual and household-level food insecurity without addressing the impacts of austerity, welfare reform, cost-of-living and good work policies.

There is also a need to progress the government's 2022 Food Strategy to achieve crucial national food system targets that include improvements in food security. In this sense, Birmingham City Council's Food System Strategy is an inclusive step in the right direction.

Together, the analysis and policy recommendations above reflect a need for a joined-up approach to policymaking in the UK; one which reduces the need for short-term emergency food access, and which considers access to food a basic human right for all consumers.

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