

8

Hunger and Food Poverty

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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'. While the UK government has repeatedly denied responsibility, evidence shows 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 for individuals, households and society itself.

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 2013/14.³ While 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 per cent, '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 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 once a day.⁵ If many parents were not cutting back on their own food intake to protect their children, the number would be much higher.⁶

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 cook.⁷ 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 2007,¹⁰ food prices increased by 11.5 per cent in real terms between 2007 and 2012 (when prices peaked), and even higher for fresh fruit (23 per cent) and vegetables (24 per cent).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 the lower earnings of those in work.’¹⁴ While 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 the UK government’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 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 previously.¹⁷ Further, the number of UK adults who have reported being unable to afford meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day (a measure of adequate protein in the diet) has increased between 2004 and 2012, that is, in the context of economic austerity and rising food prices.¹⁸ The PSE UK study noted above 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 did not eat fresh fruit or vegetables every day because their families could not afford it.¹⁹ 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 repeatedly denied.²⁰ Evidence shows a clear correlation between increasing conditionality, benefits sanctions and the distribution of food parcels. Rachel Loopstra and colleagues²¹ found that Trussell Trust food banks 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 food bank parcel distribution was greater in areas with more and better established food banks, 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 food banks, 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.

The deleterious consequences of poor diet intake and malnutrition, particularly for children, are well established and have long-term

implications (see Chapter 7 by Joanna Mack). 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 cancer.²³ 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 being overweight and obesity are closely connected, a trend partly explained by the relative cheapness and wide availability of unhealthy foods that are high in saturated fat and non-milk extrinsic sugars.²⁶

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 living.²⁷ 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 around for tea or a snack once a fortnight doubled between 1999 and 2012, from 4 per cent to 8 per cent, representing 1,000,000 children.²⁹ 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 (on the impact of poverty on mental health, see Chapter 1 by Mary O’Hara). Since the right to food is an entitlement, food charity is not the solution to food poverty.³⁰ Qualitative research reports the violent and harmful effects of stigma and shame experienced by those using food banks³¹ both from staff in some settings and from ‘othering’ media discourses.³² 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.

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.

NOTES

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