

Time to count the hungry

The case for a standard measure of household food insecurity in the UK

Introduction

In 2014 in the United States of America, the wealthiest country in the world, 14% of households, comprising 48.1 million people, were 'food insecure', meaning they had difficulty meeting basic food needs because they lacked money or other resources.¹ In Canada in 2012, more than one million children (16.5% of the total) lived in households where there was not always enough to eat.² In the United Kingdom, however, where 13 million people are considered to be at risk of poverty³ and last year more than a million received food parcels from Trussell Trust foodbanks,⁴ the number of adults and children who are food insecure remains a mystery. Information on food insecurity, also often referred to as 'food poverty', is not collected as part of our national monitoring surveys. So unlike in the US and Canada, where the statistics are publically available, routinely updated and have been used to analyse both the causes of food insecurity and the effectiveness of remedies, UK policymakers, campaigners and others are unable to quantify the problem they are trying to tackle – even though evidence of its existence is all too apparent.

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This report is the product of a workshop devoted to this problem, jointly organised by the Food Research Collaboration, Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, the Food Foundation, Oxfam, and the Sociology Department of Oxford University.⁵ The workshop, held in London in January 2016, was attended by academics and representatives from civil society organisations with long experience of working on the issue, and included presentations on past attempts to assess household food insecurity, methods of measurement used in other countries and by the UN, and current activity in the UK's devolved administrations. The conclusion of the workshop was that the UK would now benefit from using a standard measure of household food insecurity, which could be used to monitor the problem at both national and devolved levels as part of existing social and health surveys. This report makes the case for such a measure, and suggests two possible formats. It is hoped that it will stimulate discussion and form the basis of an action plan to bring about change.

The experience of hunger in the UK

As the workshop heard, it is sometimes argued that in a country like the UK, with a well-established welfare system, there is no need for people to go hungry. If they do, it must be a result of their own incompetence or irresponsibility. But there is persistent evidence that people have to skimp or skip meals, or systematically underfeed themselves, because they lack money to buy food.⁶ This may be because their wages are low, or their benefits do not cover their living costs, or (a common reason) because a sudden interruption in their benefit payments, such as an error or sanction, tips them into crisis. In these situations, food may be the ‘flexible’ item in the budget – the thing that can be cut when housing, fuel or debt repayments cannot be postponed.⁷⁸

Much of the research that describes these situations is ‘qualitative’: it collects first-hand accounts to convey the experience of living in or on the edge of food insecurity. Interviewees describe always choosing the cheapest options, avoiding fresh foods that may go off before they are eaten, visiting multiple shops to find bargains, or, in the case of parents, going without so children can eat.⁹ The resulting diets can be monotonous and nutritionally impoverished.¹⁰ Term-times, when children have free lunch and possibly also breakfast at school, are easier than holidays, when extra food money has to be found.¹¹ Research has also shown that poorer people, who already spend a higher proportion of their income on food than people who are better off, may face additional difficulties in obtaining a nourishing diet at affordable prices.¹² Poorer people may lack the fare (or car) to reach larger stores, while the shops in their areas may have limited variety and charge higher prices. Healthier options such as wholemeal bread or fresh meat and fruit may be more expensive than processed alternatives.¹³ Interviewees also describe the anxiety that arises from living in food poverty for extended periods.¹⁴ It is therefore difficult to quantify the number of people in the UK living with these experiences. As a consequence policy is not able to respond and adapt to the needs of people facing food poverty and related problems.

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The recent, widely publicized proliferation of food banks is often taken to illustrate a growing prevalence of hunger. Here again, there is no systematically collected data. The largest operator, the Trussell Trust, now runs more than 400 foodbanks, opening 95 new ones in 2014, compared with an average of 12 a year between 2003 and 2008.¹⁵ Alongside these are unknown numbers of foodbanks (or other emergency food sources) run by other organisations. It would unquestionably be useful to know more about the numbers, users and reasons for use in this picture. However, the use of foodbanks and other forms of food aid cannot be taken as an accurate measurement of food insecurity. Charitable provision, which is voluntary, is not evenly spread around the country, so not all those in food insecure households will be near a foodbank or other provider, and even those who are may not know about them. Moreover, research shows that people in food poverty often either do not consider themselves eligible for food charity or avoid using it because they see it as stigmatizing.^{16,17,18} In Canada, food insecurity data has shown that only around a fifth of those in food poverty resort to foodbanks.¹⁹

Struggles to fill the data gap

There is a long history of efforts to provide quantitative data. One of the earliest was the study of York conducted by the social reformer Seebohm Rowntree at the end of the 19th century. Rowntree worked out the cost of an extremely meagre diet, and used it to assess whether the people he surveyed were living below the 'poverty line'. Subsequent researchers have developed the idea of a 'minimum income', using consultative methods to find out what people consider to be the bare essentials of a decent life (a 'consensual budget standard') and then estimated a realistic income to cover them. Others have calculated the nutritional requirements for healthy living and costed diets that provide adequate nutrition.²⁰

More recently, researchers have made use of information gleaned from a range of formal and informal surveys. For example, data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) suggests that food insecurity is a growing problem in people aged 50 and older. A representative survey conducted by Ipsos-MORI in London in 2013 reported that 42% of parents were cutting back on the amount of food they bought or the amount they spent on food and 8% reported that at some point in the previous year their children had had to skip meals because they could not afford to buy food.²¹ Research by parenting website Netmums and the Trussell Trust in 2014 revealed that 56% of working families had switched to buying cheaper, lower quality food, and 20% of parents had chosen between paying bills and buying food in the last 12 months. In a similar survey, half of school staff surveyed in London in 2012 said some pupils did not eat breakfast because their families could not afford it and 61% reported giving food to pupils at their own expense.²² This patchwork of information is revealing, but it does not provide nationally representative data or reflect international best practice in measurement.

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The only UK survey that has sought nationwide data on the prevalence of food insecurity was the 2003-2005 Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey (LIDNS), commissioned by the Food Standards Agency. Among other things, the study aimed to measure the extent of food insecurity in the most deprived 15% of the population. It found that within this segment, in the previous year, around 30% had experienced some constraint on food buying because of lack of money or other resources, around 39% regularly worried about running out of money for food, and around 20% said they reduced or skipped eating because of lack of money for food.²³ Unfortunately, and contrary to intention, the LIDNS has not been repeated.

Progress in the devolved nations

The devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all made efforts to compile information on food insecurity, using a range of methods. Scotland has collated some data on household food insecurity as part of its public health agenda, drawing on various survey instruments. Northern Ireland has collected data via the Health Survey, the Living Costs and Food Survey and the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey. There has also been research on food deserts, and efforts to construct household food baskets using consensual budget standards methodology. These activities have provided insight into the extent of food insecurity in Northern Ireland. For example, the 2014/15 Health Survey found that

4% of households reported that there had been at least one day when they had not eaten a substantial meal in the preceding fortnight due to a lack of money, and 1% stated that they had cut the size of a child's meal because they did not have enough money for food.

Wales has identified food poverty as a policy theme, and has used data for Wales from the UK Family Resources Survey to estimate that around 14% (or 1 in 7) of the Welsh population could not afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent at least every second day.

Northern Ireland and Wales have voluntarily added additional food insecurity monitoring questions to the European Union's Survey on Incomes and Living Conditions module (EU-SILC). The EU-SILC is a large-scale survey that collects information on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions across Europe. Data from the EU-SILC are used for monitoring poverty and social inclusion in the EU. The standard module, which has been implemented annually in the UK since 2005, measures whether a person has a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day.

Northern Ireland's questions covered:

- Whether a person has fruit & vegetables every day;
- Whether a person has a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day;
- Whether a person has a 'roast dinner' once a week;
- Whether a household can afford to have family or friends around for a drink/meal once a month.

These are taken to provide an indication of individual or household food insecurity. However, they do not explicitly capture households reporting not having enough food to eat due to lack of money, and the lack of any timescale makes it impossible to know whether households are only referring to their current living situation. They also contain some assumptions about diet that might not be relevant or culturally appropriate to all sections of UK society (Wales dropped the question referring to a 'roast dinner' for this reason.)

The information collected in the devolved nations, though useful, is patched together from a range of sources, making it time-consuming to collate and hard to compare over time or between the different areas of the UK.

To measure or not to measure

There are arguments against developing a standard measure. One is that it is a distraction: given that we know there is a problem, all available resources should be targeted at solving it, rather than trying to find out more about it. Another is the recognition that despite widespread aspirations for 'evidence-based' policy, the production of evidence, in the form of quantitative data, does not inevitably lead to policy solutions. Some workers in the field argue that food poverty is just one facet of the much wider problem of poverty, and efforts should focus on understanding (and measuring) that issue in its totality. Others argue that focusing on an extreme measure of poverty such as severe food insecurity may in fact create space for

policy makers to lower the bar for what is considered to be poverty. Measurement also raises practical problems (adding a question to national surveys has a cost, and public budgets are contracting) and technical ones (could questions be devised to elicit information on the important social and psychological dimensions of food insecurity, as well as numeric data about its prevalence?). Finally, there is a concern that identifying food insecurity as a narrowly food-based issue will encourage food-based solutions (such as food charity) and allow underlying structural and social factors (such as low income levels or inadequate social security provision) to be sidestepped. In other words, it could transfer to the private and charitable spheres a problem that is properly the responsibility of the state.

While acknowledging the wisdom of these views, the strong consensus at the workshop was that they are outweighed by the arguments that policymaking, campaigning and research would all be aided by the production of standard, comparable, quantitative data on the prevalence, severity and distribution of food insecurity in the UK. It is no longer necessary to argue about what food poverty or food insecurity means – there is strong consensus around some version of the definition used at the beginning of this report, which highlights both insufficient and insecure access to food due to resource constraint.

Quantitative data collected using a standard measure would allow the issue to be looked at systematically, would allow changes to be monitored over time and would show the impacts of policy interventions. Apart from providing information on the scale of problem, the types of quantitative survey used elsewhere produce fine-grained data on the degree of food insecurity experienced, on the distribution by region or population segment, and on triggers or associations with specific risk factors – all highly relevant to policy development. Practitioners with experience of measuring food poverty argue that it not only highlights aspects of the issue that may otherwise remain invisible (because they have not been problematised or investigated), but also provides a uniquely sensitive measure of material deprivation.

In several other countries, and within the UN, the need for measurement is now beyond argument. Surveying has become routine, and is felt to have proved its worth. In Canada, where regular monitoring of food insecurity began in 2005, the data have provided a rich picture of subgroups which are vulnerable to food insecurity in the population and the extent of regional variation across the country.²⁴ Research investigating policy impacts on the problem has shown that interventions addressing income and poverty are associated with declining risk of food insecurity among those targeted.^{25,26} The profound consequences of food insecurity have also been charted. Mapping the data onto health outcomes has shown that food insecurity correlates strongly not just with poorer nutritional intakes and the diseases already associated with poor diet (such as obesity and diabetes), but also with a wider range of chronic illnesses – most notably, 50% of women in highly food insecure households had suffered from anxiety or mental health disorders.^{27,28} A recent study in the Province of Ontario showed that severity of food insecurity is also associated with rising healthcare costs, which are

publically funded. Those living in most severe food insecurity have costs that are nearly 2.5 times higher than those who are food secure.²⁹

Different ways of measuring

The most direct way to measure and monitor food insecurity is to include a set of questions on the topic in a survey that is routinely administered to a large enough sample of the population to provide reliable results. Following on from the workshop, we argue that the UK should adopt one of the following two well-researched and robust measurements for food insecurity.

United Nations Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)

The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) was developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The FIES has emerged from past use of ‘experience-based food security scales’, and is based on the US Household Food Security Survey module. The US measure was itself the product of extensive research by the United States Department of Agriculture throughout the 1990s. It has been used to measure and monitor household food insecurity in the US since 1995 and was also adopted by Canada, where it first appeared in a national survey in 2004 (see below). Variations of it have been used in several South and Central American countries. For the FIES, eight questions are used, relating to the qualitative and quantitative manifestations of food insecurity. Respondents are asked whether, during the past 12 months:

- You were worried you would run out of food because of a lack of money or other resources?
- You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food because of a lack of money or other resources?
- You ate only a few kinds of foods because of a lack of money or other resources?
- You had to skip a meal because there was not enough money or other resources to get food?
- You ate less than you thought you should because of a lack of money or other resources?
- Your household ran out of food because of a lack of money or other resources?
- You were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food?
- You went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money or other resources?

The answers are used to place respondents on a scale from mild (‘experiencing anxiety about ability to procure adequate food’) to severe (‘experiencing hunger’). The FIES thus provides information about the degree of severity of food insecurity and accordingly, how prevalent these levels of severity are in the population. When incorporated into large-scale, representative surveys, food insecurity can be examined across gender, age and other individual traits, and subgroups in the population which are particularly vulnerable can be identified. However, the FIES omits an element in the US and Canadian model relating to children’s experience of food poverty.

Canadian Household Food Security Survey Module

The Canadian Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) forms part of the biennial Canadian Community Health Survey, and has been used regularly by most provinces since 2005. It asks 18 questions about situations where food experience was limited by not having enough money to buy food. Unlike the FIES, it differentiates between adults' and children's experiences. Questions cover:

- Worrying about not having enough food;
- Reliance on low-cost foods;
- Not being able to afford balanced meals;
- Adults/children skipping meals;
- Adults/children cutting size of meals;
- Adults/children not having enough to eat;
- Adults losing weight;
- Adults/children not eating for whole day.

The module enables the use of 'skip' patterns, where if a question is answered negatively, a subset of related questions does not need to be asked, which means that many respondents do not have to answer all the questions. This is important in large national surveys, where time is limited. In practice, the module has been found to take 1-4 minutes to complete.

Both the FIES and the Canadian HFSSM demonstrate that well-designed questions administered as part of large surveys can provide robust and fine-grained data on the prevalence, distribution and degree of food insecurity.

Next steps

This report has shown that there is abundant qualitative evidence about the experience of food insecurity in the UK, and a patchwork of complementary quantitative data. The quantitative data are culled from various sources, are not consistent or readily comparable, and do not reflect international best practice. They do not meet the requirement for 'hard' evidence that many policy makers and campaigners say is necessary to lever policy change. The use of surveys in countries comparable to the UK in wealth and development has shown the feasibility and value of measurement. In this landscape, there is now a strong case for regular, standard measurement and monitoring of food insecurity in the UK.

The next step is to discuss this proposal in more detail with the devolved administrations, to agree on a set of questions suitable for use in the UK, and to investigate how (and at what cost) the proposed set of questions could most effectively be included in UK-wide or devolved-level surveys. As part of its obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals, agreed in 2016, the UK will shortly have to begin collecting data on national food insecurity. This presents an opportunity to introduce a robust measurement, along the lines described here, which would assist all those whose ambition is to end food insecurity in the UK.

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³ Department for Work and Pensions (2015) Households Below Average Income, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-19941995-to-20132014>.

⁴ This figure is from the Trussell Trust website (<http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>, viewed 27.1.16), but Trussell is only one of many organisations providing emergency food aid, so the figure underestimates the extent of aid provided.

⁵ The workshop, 'Mapping the way forward on food poverty', was hosted at City University London on 18 January 2016.

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