

## **The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services: Hunger and learning**

### **I. Introduction**

In light of the socio-economic disruptions caused by measures to mitigate the national health emergencies occasioned by the novel coronavirus, the purpose of this paper is to contextualise child poverty within an account of the provisions made available to schools at this time. The uncertainties that mark this period throw into stark relief those entrenched socio-economic disparities which see children suffer poverty and food insecurity. The aim is to present an account of one specific measure of poverty as experienced by children eligible for school meals in England: food insecurity.

The preparedness of the Department for Education, relevant agencies and schools, in light of the fast-moving development that define pandemic period, is to be commended for, foremost, considering the safety and needs of children, staff and the wider community, as well as for the efforts made to minimise disruption to learning.

Nonetheless, the experience of hunger has become normalised within the landscape of ineffective and one-sided policy programmes that try to address income inequality. Measures to allay the causal and immediate health aspects of the pandemic overlook the additional burdens to health, well-being and development of isolation, of straitened household budgets and of other vulnerabilities that would further exclude children from the setting that provide structure, socialisation, and a hot meal.

### **II. What is the future for children in poverty?**

A child's experience of education is inextricably linked to their lived experience of poverty. The recent closure of schools has catalysed awareness of the deep divides in inegalitarianism that are often made invisible through the unremitting failures of centralised planning, and cumbersome bureaucratic systems for the delivery of welfare services. These are a legacy of the austerity measures that came into effect in 2010,

following the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>1</sup> An unfortunate consequence of measures to address the 2008 financial crisis has been a narrow approach to poverty alleviation that does not account for the lived experience of hunger.

The year 2020 marks the end of the first decade, since record-keeping began, in which absolute poverty in the U.K. has risen. Current socio-economic disruptions have seen unemployment rise to 6.2%, from 3.9% in the three-month period to May 2020, and an additional 2 million applicants for Universal Credit<sup>2</sup> since April 2020.<sup>3</sup>

With 1.3 million children in England receiving free school meals –breakfast and/or a hot meal – it is apt to reflect on the impact school closures have on food security, and the various social and State responses to this aspect of poverty. This period of socio-economic instability is peppered by: high unemployment and low wages;<sup>4</sup> the mushrooming Government fiscal deficit;<sup>5</sup> and fractious political divergence on delivering welfare programming, despite the rising cost of living. Analyses of food poverty on children’s welfare and learning need particular attention.

Before the onset of measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus, the economy, after the 2008 financial crisis, was beginning to stabilise. Social recovery, however, has lagged, due in no small part to the fiscal consolidation measures which began in 2010, that oversaw

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch (2019). ‘Nothing left in the cupboards: Austerity, Welfare Cuts, and the Right to Food in the UK’ [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/uk0519\\_web4.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/uk0519_web4.pdf) [Accessed 19 May 2020].

This article refers specifically to how the Government manages food poverty, as is the focus here.

<sup>2</sup> Introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012: Universal Credit consolidates into one simplified benefit six existing means-tested benefits: Income Support, income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance, income-related Employment Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. Some features, such as work-based conditionality encourage recipients into work, and aim to reduce the overall burden of welfare benefits on the State.

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics (2020). *Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 4 May 2020* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/14may2020> [Accessed 19 May 2020].

<sup>4</sup> Despite better than expected pre-pandemic employment figures (March 2020), the U.K. has an entrenched demographic of 6 million low-paid workers.

<sup>5</sup> March 2020: the estimated employment rate for all people was at a record high of 76.6%; this is 0.6 percentage points up on the year and 0.2 percentage points up on the quarter. By April 2020 the unemployment rate rose by 856,000 to 2.1 million.

Office for National Statistics, (2020). *Employment in the UK: May 2020*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/may2020> [Accessed 22 May 2020]

widespread retrenchment in social care. <sup>6</sup> A consequence are the 600,000 children living in households, where at least one adult works, who are living in absolute poverty.

In 2014, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission was established under the 2010 Child Poverty Act <sup>7</sup> to monitor progress on child poverty. The Act - the statutory framework that would end child poverty by 2020 – has not formally been repealed, but its original targets were scrapped in 2015 after several reviews determined little progress had been made. Public spending data between 2010 and 2019 reveal that public welfare measures to assist children and families, outstripped cuts in other areas of government expenditure. <sup>8</sup> Subsequent Child Poverty Strategy measures that focus on supporting families into work, providing income assistance, and improving standards of living have had disappointing results, given the evidence to hand. This evidence pre-dates the current situation. <sup>9</sup> In the long-term, at-risk families fall back into poverty. <sup>10</sup>

### III. An Era of Contradictions

One of the surprising facts of living in wealthy nation, such as the U.K., is its entrenched problem with child poverty and hunger. Hunger and malnutrition are not priority areas of Government-led research, or interventions. The right to food<sup>11</sup> is not recognised in domestic law. The emergency measures that occasioned the closure of schools throw the plight of the most vulnerable in glaring relief, with families struggling to feed themselves, and schools implementing stopgap measures in order to provide children with some measure of security and structure.

<sup>6</sup> Hastings, Annette; Bailey, Nick; Bramley, *et al.* (2015). 'The Cost of the Cuts: The Impact on Local Government and Poorer Communities', Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/Summary-Final.pdf>

[Accessed 22 May 2020]

<sup>7</sup> as amended by the Welfare Reform Act 2012

<sup>8</sup> IBID Human Rights Watch (2019)

<sup>9</sup> Browne, James and Hood, Andrew (2016). *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2015–16 to 2020–21*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, February.

<sup>10</sup> The social safety nets have been 'deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos', Philip Alston UN Special Rapporteur on Poverty, May 2019

Human Rights Council Forty-first session

24 June–12 July 2019 Agenda item 3

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, April 2019 [<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1>]

<sup>11</sup>The right to food is a cornerstone to a number of international treaties to which the U.K. is signatory: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is also set out in the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) 1996 Rome Declaration.

Austerity measures from 2010 have decimated public services.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Gross Domestic Product per capita at year-end 2019 rose by 6.5% to US\$42,580, making the U.K the fifth largest economy in the world in terms of GDP<sup>13</sup> at the start of 2020. The unemployment rate, in March 2020, was the lowest in 40 years, with 3.3 million more people in work than in 2010. This is partly due to growth in the workforce over time, and only because 2010 represented a low point following the global recession<sup>14</sup>.

However, 79% of the jobs created from 2010 until February 2020 are full-time, and hence out of reach of carers<sup>15</sup>. Government-funded provisions for nursery and child-minding places<sup>16</sup>, social and elderly care have been subject fiscal retrenchment.<sup>17</sup> While overall labour market participation outperformed expectations, with more parents in work in 2018/2019 year-on-year, the opportunity costs of working in flexible employment have been reduced pay<sup>18</sup> and financial security<sup>19</sup>. Real regular pay and real total pay registered at 0.2% lower than the downturn peak reached in February-April. The rate of growth had significantly slowed since mid-2019, though in the first three months of 2020, but the monthly growth in weekly average earnings was 1.5% for total pay, and 2.4% for regular pay, rising faster than inflation.<sup>20</sup> Yet, one person in six in the U.K. is in relative low income before housing costs

<sup>12</sup>Professor Alston on his visit to the U.K. in 2018: the U.K.'s experience of austerity 'underscore[d] the conclusion that poverty is a political choice. Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so'.

<sup>13</sup> Listed in US\$ as per Financial Times, *Country Economy: United Kingdom* <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/uk>, as better indication of relative GDP in light of the currency fluctuations of 2018-2019. U.K. population as at November 2019 stood at 64.6 million.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, United Kingdom employment statistics mirror those experienced in recent years in many OECD countries

<sup>15</sup> In the three months to February 2020, out of the 172,000 new jobs, 107,000 were full-time.

<sup>16</sup> When housing costs are accounted for (AHC), an extra 300,000 children are pushed into poverty. (*IBID*, CPAG, 2019)

<sup>17</sup> At the end of 2019 there was a £662 million gap in Government underfunding of childcare for early years education – and many working mothers, already up against a pay gap or 0 hour contracts, live with the uncertainty of whether their childcare facility is one of those slated to close its doors as many already operate on hollowed-out local authority budgets. Imagine the ramifications. Their plight is not unique. Half of childcare workers (98% of whom are women) earn poverty wages - over 70% of whom are themselves working mothers.

<sup>18</sup> Pascale Bourquin, Agnes Norris Keiller and Tom Waters (2019). *The distributional impact of personal tax and benefit reforms, 2010 to 2019*, Institute for Fiscal Studies

<sup>19</sup> The National Living Wage was set to increase by 6.2% in 2020, roughly averaging to an annual pay rise of up to £930 for a full time worker, to affect nearly 2.8 million people.

See: Government's official announcement, 31 December 2019.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-pay-rise-for-28-million-people>  
[Accessed 28 April 2020].

<sup>20</sup> Office for National Statistics (2020). *Average weekly earnings in Great Britain: May 2020*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/averageweeklyearningsingreatbritain/may2020>

[Accessed 20 May 2020]

(BHC), rising to more than one in five, after accounting for housing costs (AHC). In-work poverty, is a major and growing problem in this country, outpacing rates in the growth of employment in 2019.<sup>21</sup>

On average, median household disposable income averaged £29,600 (FYE2019), stalling since 2017 at a growth of 0.4%.<sup>22</sup> Across all income bands, median income is lower than before the 2008 financial crisis, which bodes unfavourably for immediate, and medium-term post-pandemic recovery. Intra-household income inequality remains lower than levels reached prior to 2008<sup>23</sup>, with a slight increase from 2011 to reach 34.7% at the end of 2019.<sup>24</sup> The modest changes in median income, combined with a slight reduction in intra-household inequality, could reflect a period of growth in real earners and more people in employment, according to the Office for National Statistics. However, it is difficult to measure if in fact, inequalities between income bands are contracting given:

- the value of some working-age benefits, including Child Benefit, which represents more than half the income of the poorest fifth of households, remain at 2016 cash values;<sup>25</sup>
- the cost of living – rent, food, fuel, transport and utilities – has increased threefold in the period to December 2019, year-on-year.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> With poverty measured using household income, either all the people in a household are in poverty or none are.

<sup>22</sup> Office for National Statistics (2019) *Average household income, UK: financial year ending 2019*.

This report also shows the gap in median income between the richest quintile and the bottom has been decreasing since 2017. The median income for the bottom quintile has decreased, year-on-year since 2017 by 4.3%.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householddisposableincomeandinequality/financialyearending2019> [Accessed 20 April 2020]

<sup>23</sup> Office for National Statistics (2019) *Income and wealth*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth> [Accessed 20 April 2020]

<sup>24</sup> The gap between the highest income bracket and the rest of population has narrowed over recent years; the income share of the richest 1% fell from an average of 8.8% between FYE 2007 and FYE 2009 to 7.6% between FYE 2017 and FYE 2019.

Office for National Statistics (2019). *Household income inequality, UK: financial year ending 2019*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2019>

[Accessed 20 April 2020]

<sup>25</sup> In February 2019, following the visit to the U.K. by the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on Poverty, the Work and Pensions Secretary acknowledged – after a stream of Government denials to this report, and to other evidence-based data that revealed mechanisms of welfare programming were invariably linked to food poverty – that problems accessing welfare payments had led to an increase in food bank usage.

<sup>26</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (2019). *Worldwide Cost of Living 2020 Survey*

The statistics might change significantly once the cost of the coronavirus pandemic is realised. With the uncertainty of Great Britain leaving the EU it is also hard to gauge what the rise in cost of living would be but typically prices rise in line with inflation, 2-3%. A rise in wages as a result of a more generous personal tax allowance and a rise in the living wage could offset the rise in consumer prices. Certainly food, fuel, rail and transport, the cost of childcare and utilities had risen by the end of 2019.

#### IV. Household Poverty

The devastating consequences of austerity were laid bare in a 2019 report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Poverty. It says poverty in the U.K. is the result of ideological and political choices. Despite economic prosperity<sup>27</sup>, one fifth of its population – 14.5 million people – live in poverty.<sup>28</sup> Four million of these experience destitution, and are unable to afford basic essentials<sup>29</sup>.

Employment is the platform for household prosperity. Those living in families where no adult worked were more likely to be in poverty than those living in households where at least one adult works.<sup>30</sup>

<u>% of household members in poverty</u>	<u>Living in a household where no one works</u>	<u>Living in a household where at least one adult is employed</u>
Working-age adults	38%	10% <sup>31</sup>
Children	56%	17%

*Poverty in the UK: statistics 2019*  
Before housing costs

Since 84% of working-age adults live in a household where at least one adult is employed, this means that there are more people working than there are households where no one is working. In March 2020 there were more households in work than there were workless

<sup>27</sup> September 2019 Budget Speech, Sajid Javid, Chancellor of the Exchequer <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spending-round-2019-sajid-javids-speech> [Accessed 22 October 2019].

<sup>28</sup> Relative low-income (year on year comparison). Calculated after housing costs (AHC) Francis-Devine, Brigid (2020). Poverty in the UK: statistics: Briefing Paper 7096 (House of Commons Library). April <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/> [Accessed 12 May 2020].

<sup>29</sup> On material deprivation see Francis-Devine, Brigid (2020).

For a wider understanding of poverty and social exclusion see:

Dermott, Esther and Main Gill, eds. (2018). 'Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK: The nature and extent of the problem', Vol. 1. (Bristol University Press: Bristol).

Bramley, Glen and Bailey, Nick, eds. (2018). 'Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK: The dimensions of disadvantage', Vol. 2. (Bristol University Press: Bristol).

<sup>30</sup> *Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families*, April 2017. The indicators include parental worklessness; parental conflict; poor parental mental health; drug and alcohol dependency; problem debt; homelessness

<sup>31</sup> However, of this 10%, 56% remain in relative low income. Francis-Devine *et al.* IBID

households, as evidenced by tax filings.<sup>32</sup> Wages are the strongest predictor of child poverty, but with one in five workers earning below a decent wage nearly 60% of children living in families where at least one adult is at work still live in relative low income. <sup>33</sup> The policy directive of reducing worklessness is flawed if income earned is insufficient to escape poverty.

At the end of 2019, almost 15% of families in the United Kingdom were lone parent families, 86% of these of these 2.9 million households, were headed by women, an increase of 13.4% since 1999. Over the past 10 years, the number of lone-parent fathers has increased by 22%.<sup>34</sup> Approximately 47% of children in lone parent families in persistent low income . <sup>35</sup> Other, intersectional and concurrent factors, entrench the cycle of poverty:<sup>36</sup>

- **Low-income, high-insecurity jobs:** Fall in real wages and unsecure employment characterised by the gig, or informal, economy and by the prevalence of zero-hours contracts.
- **High national income** overall. Yet income per person is still lower than the during the period before the 2008 financial crisis.
- **The rising cost of childcare,** running parallel to cuts in Government provisions of early-years education, such as nurseries or state-funded childminders.
- **Increase in housing costs;**
- **and stagnating living standards.**
- **A reduction in – or difficulty accessing – benefits,** and other forms of emergency assistance.
- **The over-reliance on other forms of voluntary assistance,** such as food banks, to make ends meet.

Relative child poverty had been predicted to rise by 2020<sup>37</sup>, even before the disruption to the economy occasioned the pandemic. At the start of 2020, there were approximately 4.2 million children experiencing poverty <sup>38</sup>; 1.5 million of whom were in persistent low income and

<sup>32</sup> Pascale Bourquin and Tom Waters (2019) *The effect of taxes and benefits on UK inequality*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, May.

<sup>33</sup> Statistics from: Francis-Devine, Brigid; McGuinness, Feargal; Booth, Lorna (2019). *Poverty in the UK: statistics* (House of Commons: London). September.

<sup>34</sup>Over the last 10 years, there has been an increase of 14.5% in this figure.

Office for National Statistics (2019) Statistical Bulletin: *Families and households in the UK: 2019*, 15 November 2019

<sup>35</sup> Statistics from: Child Poverty Action Group (2019)

<https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures> [Accessed 16 May 2020]

<sup>36</sup> Francis-Devine, Brigid; McGuinness, Feargal; Booth, Lorna (2019). *Poverty in the UK: statistics* (House of Commons: London). September.

<sup>37</sup> *IBID*, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Relative low-income (year on year comparison). Calculated after housing costs (AHC)

Department of Work and Pensions (2019) *National Statistics Households below average income: 1994/95 to 2017/18*. March

material deprivation; and more than two-thirds of whom live in households of financial precarity.<sup>39</sup>

The above represent useful statistics, but they are merely quantitative, demonstrating how poverty alleviation measures leave unaddressed - despite relative country wealth - the intersectional dynamics of poverty. A more visceral approach to understanding how poverty is manifested is to see the problem through a specific material outcome to policies that overlook the ramifications of malnutrition and hunger, and how these might impact how children learn and develop.

Learning provision during the national emergency needs to be contextualised in light of relative, yet piecemeal, underfunding in the education system. Government expenditure in education makes up 11.9% - or £87.8 billion - of total Public Expenditure (PESA) for 2018-20.

- 4.3% of national income (GDP) is invested in the education system, compared with 5.7% of GDP in 2010 (at 2018-2019 prices, for comparison).
- Nearly 80% of this figure is allocated to primary and secondary schools.
- The U.K. is placed in 12<sup>th</sup> highest position in terms of education investment, out of the 34 OECD member states whose average is around 4% of GDP.

The education sector, relative to other similar-sized European economies, is not critically underfunded,<sup>41</sup> though there is scope for improvement, for example in: teacher training and support; pay; technology and innovation; and infrastructure. Despite the 2019 Government pledge to inject more than £7 billion into the school system,<sup>42</sup> some teaching unions and

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201718> [Accessed 18 April 2020].

<sup>39</sup> The Children Society estimates this number to rise to 5 million children at the end of this year.

<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty/what-is-child-poverty> [Accessed 27 April 2020].

<sup>40</sup> HM Treasury (2019). *Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses 2019*. (24 January 2019)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-public-spending-was-calculated-in-your-tax-summary/how-public-spending-was-calculated-in-your-tax-summary>

Expenditure on welfare amounted to 23.8% of the total, with health accounting for 19.9%, state pensions and education for 12%.

<sup>41</sup> 2010-2011 spending represents the highest budget allowance for education since the mid-1970s.

Bolton, Paul (2019). *Education spending in the UK* Briefing Paper 1078, October. (House of Commons Library: London)

<sup>42</sup> With a further £14bn more allocated to schools over the next three years to 2022-23.

Department for Education

<https://skillsfunding.service.gov.uk/national-funding-formula/2020-2021/start> [Accessed 16 May 2020].



associations estimate 80% of state schools will have less funding per pupil than in 2015, with a £2.5 billion shortfall overall,<sup>43</sup> likely to increase as national income shrinks in the coming financial year. Government was managing debt <sup>44</sup> at 80.6% of GDP at the end of 2019<sup>45</sup> to which have now been added £132 billion in provisions to support the national emergency effort.

## V. How is Child Poverty Manifested? The Experience of Food Poverty

Outside family or household networks, schools are the primary spaces where some of the vulnerabilities and deprivation occasioned by poverty might become known. Being vulnerable is a personal condition. It might involve living in a home where one parent is coerced; it might mean not being able to heat a home, or to even having a secure living space; or being left alone while parents work; or acting as carer to a parent or siblings. There might a reason beyond the obvious, but the outcomes are predetermined by the nuanced complexities of being in poverty.

There is scant Government-led research<sup>46</sup> on the consequences of food insecurity<sup>47</sup> to the health and nutrition of low-income children, specifically on learning and cognitive

<sup>43</sup> School Cuts coalition supported by the National Education Union, the National Association of Head Teachers, the Association of School and College Leaders, Unison, Unite and GMB <https://schoolcuts.org.uk/story/funding-crisis-explained/> [Accessed 15 May 2020].

<sup>44</sup> Though the current budget deficit stood at £2.5 billion, as at December 2019, Net Investment has not risen proportionally to the levels of borrowing, and while this is due to remain constant at around 2% of GDP over the coming two fiscal years, subject to tax receipts, it is not enough to meet current, or projected levels of spending, particularly with the support measures brought in during the pandemic.

See also: Pascale Bourquin, Agnes Norris Keiller Tom Waters. (2019) *The distributional impact of personal tax and benefit reforms, 2010 to 2019*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, November.

<sup>45</sup> Office for National Statistics, November 2019.

<sup>46</sup> In July 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) censured the U.K. Government for a lack of systematic data on child food insecurity. The same year, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) rebuked the U.K. for not prioritising a national strategy to address the increasing reliance on food aid. IBID, Human Rights Watch (2019).

<sup>47</sup> In 2018, the National Institute of Health Research commissioned a literature review into the extent and consequences of child food insecurity. However it is riddled with problems, not least of which is agreeing on the definition of food insecurity.

Aceves-Martins, Magaly., *et al.* (2018) 'Child food insecurity in the UK: a rapid review'. *Public Health Research* Volume: 6, Issue: 13, November.

development.<sup>48</sup> More than two-thirds of five year olds who are eligible for school meals are not school ready<sup>49</sup>. Over half of children on free school meals underachieve in their GCSEs grades.

Until 2019, the approach of the Department for Work and Pensions was simply to deny the problem of food insecurity as a significant aspect of poverty, noting food banks do not form part of the state welfare programme .<sup>50</sup> This suggests an ideological objection to maintaining and monitoring such data rather than a practical one, given the sophisticated systems of reporting utilised by charitable organisations. Charities regularly monitor the socio-economic impact of government policy on the most disadvantaged demographics, in order to develop practical, community based strategies to tackle food insecurity.

The home learning environment and parental involvement are critical functions in the fruitful attainment of learning and development, and in closing the poverty gaps<sup>51</sup> but without a committed centralised framework for tackling all the dimensions of poverty, children who experience hunger do not flourish. Food assistance programmes have been found to mitigate food insecurity and hunger in the short-term only, but have little measurable impact in improving health and well-being , or having an impact on academic outcomes, in the long-term.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, there is no sustainable framework for assuring consistency, quality and sustainability of providing food aid, particularly in schools. London's food sector alone

<sup>48</sup> The Food Foundation supports the Children's Future Food Inquiry and the Children's #Right2Food Campaign, with the support of a cross party group of 14 parliamentarians and two All Party Parliamentary Groups. It also has the support of the Children's Commissioners in all four U.K. nations.

<sup>49</sup> Field, Frank (2010). *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children becoming Poor Adults* <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110120090141/http://povertyreview.independent.gov.uk/media/20254/poverty-report.pdf>

[Accessed 22 March 2020].

Field's (Labour MP) work is the result of the UK Government Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances. In it he argues for an expansion of provision for children in their early years.

<sup>50</sup> Kit Malthouse, Parliamentary Undersecretary at the DWP (in May 2018) told Parliament that "the Department has not carried out any research into trends in the number of people using food banks."

Malthouse, Kit, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions. 'Food Banks: Written question - 139374', Hansard, May 29, 2018,

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-04-30/139374/>

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010), *Poorer Children's Educational Attainment: How Important are Attitudes and Behaviour?*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poorer-childrens-educational-attainment-how-important-are-attitudes-and-behaviour>

[Accessed 15 May 2020].

<sup>52</sup> IBID, Aceves-Martins, *et al.* (2018)

contributes £20 billion to the economy and yet 400,000 children in the metropolitan area cannot access quality food.<sup>53</sup> Approximately 10 million tonnes of food is wasted every year, 20% of which comes from the food industry.<sup>54</sup> Overproduction, poor manufacturing standards, ordering or stocking expose the lack of coordination in eradicating hunger in one of the wealthiest industrialised nations in the world, with one of the most severe cases of deprivation in Europe, especially for children. Nearly 8.5 million people in the U.K. experience food poverty.<sup>55</sup> The yearly rate of death by malnutrition has been steadily rising by 92% in 2017 compared to 2001.<sup>56</sup>

These figures are proxy accounts of instances of hunger. There is no standardised measure for this phenomenon, and the shame and stigma associated with hunger dissuades many from speaking of the lived experience of food insecurity. One in three households experience at least one symptom of food deprivation, defined as eating a hot meal every second day, or going a fortnight without a substantial meal due to lack of money. One in five households regularly run out of food, or do not eat on a regular basis, or sufficiently. One in three households with children has to ration food.<sup>57</sup>

#### i. Childhood Experience of Food Poverty

<sup>53</sup> London is one of the first cities in the U.K. to study the effects of food insecurity on households. Office of the Mayor of London (2019). Survey of Londoners: Headline findings. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings> [Accessed 20 April 2020].

Conversely, the highest childhood obesity rates measured across European capitals are in London.

<sup>54</sup> The Felix Project (2020). FOOD WASTE FACTS <https://thefelixproject.org/news/food-waste-facts> [Accessed 20 April 2020].

<sup>55</sup> Caraher, Martin; Furey, Sinéad. (2018) *The Economics of Emergency Food Aid Provision A Financial, Social and Cultural Perspective*, (Palgrave Pivot: London)

<sup>56</sup> Office for National Statistics (2018) 'Deaths where malnutrition was the underlying cause of death or was mentioned anywhere on the death certificate, persons, England and Wales, 2001 to 2017', September. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/adhocs/009065deathswheremalnutritionwastheunderlyingcauseofdeathorwasmentionedanywhereonthedeathcertificatepersonsendlandandwales2001to2017>

[Accessed 20 April 2020].

<sup>57</sup> Furey, Sinéad. (2018) *Measuring the existence and extent of food poverty*. Abstract from Irish Academy of Management Conference 2019, Dublin, Ireland.

In the absence of an established indicator of food security, in 2018 Ulster University Business School (UUBS) researchers investigated the reliability and comprehensiveness of three food poverty indicators: EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions; Food Insecurity Experience Scale; and Household Food Security Survey Module. The purpose of the investigation was to contribute to evidence-based policy making for use in Government-endorsed Health Survey or Family Resources Survey for possible interventions aimed at eradicating food poverty and to support national efforts in tackling food insecurity.

The Food Foundation estimates 3.7 million children are unable to access a balanced diets<sup>58</sup>, or the right types of food for healthy development, due to insufficient household income. The poorest fifth of U.K. households – earning approximately £15,800 or below – would have to spend 42% of their disposable income to meet the Government’s dietary guidelines, which include 5 portions of varied fruit and vegetables a day.<sup>59</sup> Over 40% of parents in low-income households have children who go hungry, and over half of these households are socially isolated. <sup>60</sup> Single parents, young families and ethnic minority groups are more likely to have children experiencing food insecurity. A host of **influences** (early childhood diets based on cheap, processed foods, high in sugar and bulking agents), **stressors** (low wages, lack of childcare) and **pressure points** (insecure accommodation with no access to cooking or refrigerating facilities) keep families in food deprivation. All of these pivot around low income, inadequate housing, and the high cost of nutrient-rich foods.

The Food Foundation’s **Children’s#Right2Food** briefing examines the scope and scale of food insecurity in urban areas identifies some of the main problems with respect to malnutrition:

- **stunted**, or children developing too short for their age;
- **wasted**, or being too thin for their height;
- **deficiencies** in essential vitamins and nutrients such as vitamin A, iron and fatty acids
- **obesity** <sup>61</sup>

Hidden hunger due to lack of nutrients is a burden borne by children and adolescents in the most marginalised and deprived communities and this affects children who are also obese due to improper nutrition. While it is possible to determine the long-term health effects of

<sup>58</sup> Based on the Government’s EatWell Guide  
<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>  
[Accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>59</sup> Scott, Courtney; Sutherland, Jennifer; Taylor, Anna (2018). *Affordability of the UK’s Eatwell Guide*. September 2018.  
[https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Affordability-of-the-Eatwell-Guide\\_Final\\_Web-Version.pdf](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Affordability-of-the-Eatwell-Guide_Final_Web-Version.pdf)  
[Accessed 18 May 2020].

<sup>60</sup> Food Foundation (2019). Survey of Londoners.  
Survey based on 6,601 Londoners, conducted 2018-2019. The survey was based on the research questions generated for similar field studies by the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.  
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/400000-children-in-london-cannot-afford-enough-good-food-london-young-food-ambassadors-convene-at-city-hall-to-call-for-their-right2food/>  
[Accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>61</sup> See the : Children’s Future Food Inquiry (2019). Led by Young Food Ambassadors from across the UK and coordinated by the Food Foundation  
[https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/London-Children’s-Food-Insecurity\\_A4\\_DIGITAL-spreads.pdf](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/London-Children’s-Food-Insecurity_A4_DIGITAL-spreads.pdf)  
[Accessed 20 April 2020].

persistent food deprivation, there are few studies that assess the related anxiety that leads to depression and aggressive behaviour in children and how this correlates to educational attainment. Data assembled on learning loss of vulnerable children after school holidays focus largely on lack of physical activity and mental stimulation, and social isolation, than on the effects of food deprivation on ability to learn.<sup>62</sup> School meals and breakfast programmes go a long way in addressing this gap. However, these are means tested, a cumbersome process, which in and of itself, does not deliver the proportionate monetary allowance to cover the cost of a healthy meal as one might shop for and prepare at home. It is estimated £4.5 million Healthy Start vouchers – available to young parents with children under the age of 4 – go unused. The voucher value is £3.12 a week, a value set at 2009 prices, and does not reflect the rising cost of living.<sup>63</sup>

## ii. Food Poverty and School Meals

Some steps are being taken to reboot the London Food Strategy. The Government announced plans in January 2020 to collect data on food insecurity, following the initiatives set out by the Office of the Mayor of London in place since 2018.<sup>64</sup> This is not a statutory requirement, however, as Government has not committed to legislation that specifically tackles food insecurity.<sup>65</sup> Food banks and like schemes run through charitable organisations, or voluntary efforts, and cost an approximate retail value of £9 million to feed the most vulnerable.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> IBID, The Food Foundation 2019

<sup>63</sup> However, under new Universal Credit criteria, over 200,000 children miss out on these entitlements, ostensibly because this new streamlined benefits payment goes to carers who then manage household resources. There is sufficient evidenced-based data to support the claim this type of arrangement does not always benefit children, who have little or no bargaining capabilities within households.

<sup>64</sup> Through the Department for Work and Pensions, data is currently being collected, through the Family Resources Survey questionnaire (from April 2019 ) on food security and due for publication in the first quarter of 2021, and confirmed in January 2020.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-01-17/4754/>

[Accessed 17 May 2020].

<sup>65</sup> The Department for Education and Minister for Children and Families fund school breakfast programmes, and holiday meals and activities schemes for eligible children, and in 2020, a universal scheme for children of migrants, or undocumented persons.

<sup>66</sup> Government focuses on combating obesity strategy through sin taxes or school-run physical education programmes, but is generally silent on food insecurity.

In the U.K., 1 in 3 children are w overweight or obese by the time they leave school . Children from disadvantaged areas are twice as likely to be obese for lack of healthy food. The so-called prevalence of ‘food swamps’ – a surfeit of cheap processed foods made with fillers and additives – drives this trend. But this is a problem, in addition to the experience of hunger, where lack of food leads to other health concerns.

These *ad hoc* measures deliver emergency food parcels,<sup>67</sup> but not necessarily a balanced diet. The support offered by food banks is conditional: time- and resource-limited; and designed to discourage long-term dependency.

Government has, since 2018, committed to bold funding measures of £1.7 billion nationwide to fund school holiday food and activity programmes, school meals and breakfast clubs. The first £20 million were to be disbursed in 2020<sup>68</sup> but there have been delays in the disbursement of funds that have unfortunately coincided with this recent period of economic uncertainty. Addressing the problem, however, is critical.

In the first weeks of the national lockdown, 3 million people reported going hungry, with one million people losing all sources of income in the first three weeks of lockdown. <sup>69</sup> The sudden economic vulnerability of those already in food poverty, combined with ; a backlog to benefits payments for 2.1 million claimants in the first month of the national emergency; no availability of school meals or equivalent replacement vouchers; illness; self-isolation; and food shortages in shops exacerbated the experience of hunger at this time. <sup>70</sup>

- **Poverty is pervasive.** A voucher with a minimum value of food allowance is not considered good policy, if the underlying causes of food insecurity are left untouched: 20% of children aged 5 years old who are eligible for school meals were less likely to have an adequate level of development than their peers, with life-long consequences for physical and mental well-being.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> There are also other schemes that function like food banks such as low-cost community supermarkets, food swaps and local authority food pantries; free or subsidised breakfast schemes at school, and afterschool healthy snack and/or meal provision for eligible children; out-of-term food provision schemes; soup kitchens; pay-as-you-feel cafes; and charities redistributing surplus or near-expiry food.

For example see: Saxena, Lopamudra and Tornaghi, Chiara (2018). 'The Emergence of Social Supermarkets in Britain: Food poverty, Food waste and Austerity Retail', Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University.

<https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/the-emergence-of-social-supermarkets-in-britain-food-poverty-food> [Accessed 2 April 2020].

<sup>68</sup> Department for Education and Lord Agnew (2020). 'Free meals and summer holiday activities for children'. January 4, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-meals-and-summer-holiday-activities-for-children> [Accessed 20 May 2020].

<sup>69</sup> Staton, Bethan and Evans, Judy (2020). 'Three million go hungry in UK because of lockdown' *Financial Times*, 11 April 2020. Research conducted for the Food Foundation, YouGov poll.

Unemployment is anticipated to rise by 10% in 2020. National Institute of Economic and Social Research

<sup>70</sup> Loopstra, Rachel (2020). 'Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown', King's College London, 14 April 2020

[https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report\\_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf) [Accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>71</sup> IBID, Food Foundation 2018.

- **Food insecurity represents a retrogression of socio-economic and other human rights.** Until the current pandemic, children in a household that had migrated to the U.K., or remain undocumented, could not claim school meals vouchers. Many low-income and marginalised families are often unable to access emergency funding from their local council: 7 out of 10 families applying for this type of support are routinely refused.<sup>72</sup>
- **Stigma.** Punitive measures are often adopted by schools against parents who owe the balance on their school meals account, such as withholding grades, or not allowing the child to join in certain activities, thus creating a hierarchy in a place of learning where all should be equals.
- **Poor quality of life:** relying on food banks or charitable support, during school holidays or while waiting for benefits payments, has become normalised. Teachers know Monday mornings, and the start of term times are always hard. Scrounging for food, going hungry, being ill – these are conditions that contribute to the isolation and disengagement of children from their peers and the wider world.
- **Learning loss:** Children returning to school malnourished after the holidays fall behind, relative to their peers, by more than 3 months.<sup>73</sup>

At the start of the national lockdown, which saw schools throughout the country close to all but the children of essential workers, and those identified as vulnerable, the Department for Education awarded to Edenred, the tender to organise the distribution of supermarket vouchers worth £15 a week to all children in England, qualifying for school meals. From the start, parents and schools reported problems accessing the scheme. About 20% of low-income parents do not have access to a computer device<sup>74</sup>. With strict measures against being outside, many could not travel to the few supermarkets participating in the scheme. The majority of problems reported had to do with invalid voucher codes, not redeemable at check-out. By Easter, Edenred's website had to be rebuilt, with families waiting up to two

<sup>72</sup> IBID, The Children's Society

Under Section 17 of the Children's Act (1989) requires local authorities to safeguard the well-being of children in need.

<sup>73</sup> Guinness, Laurence (2019). *The Children's Summer Holiday Manifesto*. The Childhood Trust, July.

<https://www.childhoodtrust.org.uk/news/2019/07/21/the-children-s-summer-holiday-manifesto>

[Accessed 20 April 2020].

<sup>74</sup> Danechi, Shadi and Roberts, Nerys (2020). *Coronavirus and schools: FAQs*, Briefing Paper 8915, House of Commons Library, 14 May 2020.

weeks for electronic delivery of voucher codes, and schools paying for emergency parcels out-of-pocket.

By early April many schools had to systematise the provision of emergency food parcels to families, though some schools can access support granted by further emergency measures by the DfE,<sup>75</sup>. Charities have had to step up to meet the shortfall in the provision of the national voucher scheme. Independent food banks saw demand rise by over 300% in the same period, compared to the same period last year.<sup>76</sup> Over 70% of low-income families who rely on food banks, have dependents under the age of 16.<sup>77</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

With 1.3 million children qualifying for school meals, hunger in the face of a national public health emergency is all too real. The malnutrition prevalence stood at 1 in 5 children under the age of 15 years of age<sup>78</sup>, with many organisations predicting a steep rise this year, based on preliminary surveys. Hunger poses an obstacle to learning, as well as to physical and mental health.

The disjointed efforts by the Government during the national emergency to address the most fundamental elements of poverty, through institutionalised programmes such as school meals, and the delivery of benefit payments establishes a pattern of crises response, ultimately fail to consider how the underlying causes of food insecurity are ideological and political choices. There is currently no statute or mandate for government to reform low paid or insecure work; to rectify the drawbacks of Universal Credit in line with labour market and

<sup>75</sup> Department for Education (2020) *Guidance: School funding: exceptional costs associated with coronavirus (COVID-19) for the period March to July 2020*, 7 April 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools/school-funding-exceptional-costs-associated-with-coronavirus-covid-19-for-the-period-march-to-july-2020>

[Accessed 20 April 2020].

<sup>76</sup> IBID Staton and Evans (2020)

<sup>77</sup> The Trussell Trust, one of the largest charitable aid organisations, has documented a 5,146% increase in emergency food parcels distributed between 2008 and 2018, from just under 26,000 parcels a year more than 1.33 million by the beginning of 2019.

<sup>78</sup> UNICEF Office of Research. 'Building the Future: Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries', Innocenti Report Card 14, June 2017

[https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14_eng.pdf)

[Accessed 2 May, 2020]



wage statistics;<sup>79</sup> or to mitigate the experience of hunger – which hinges on employment and income – through research and targeted interventions.

Government is well placed to deliver on these conditions, through the willingness of all relevant agencies and local authorities to deploy political wherewithal and resources in the right direction. The various Government school meal schemes running in some of the most disadvantaged areas have reported – in those cases where consistent funding has been delivered – increased concentration and overall academic performance, as well as improved social behaviour.

<sup>79</sup> Pimentel de Çetin, Elizabeth (2020). *The economics of Universal Credit*, Economics Affairs Committee, House of Lords. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/31/the-economics-of-universal-credit/publications/written-evidence/?page=3> [Accessed 29 March 2020].