



# “When I go to bed hungry and sleep, I’m not hungry”: Children and parents' experiences of food insecurity



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## ABSTRACT

Evidence demonstrates food insecurity has a detrimental impact on a range of outcomes for children, but little research has been conducted in the UK, and children have rarely been asked to describe their experiences directly. We examined the experiences of food insecure families living in South London. Our mixed-methods approach comprised a survey of parents ( $n = 72$ ) and one-to-one semi-structured interviews with children aged 5–11 years ( $n = 19$ ).

The majority of parents (86%) described their food security during the preceding year as very low. Most reported they had often or sometimes had insufficient food, and almost all had worried about running out of food. Two thirds of parents had gone hungry. Most parents reported they had been unable to afford a nutritionally balanced diet for their children, and just under half reported that their children had gone hungry. Four themes emerged from the interviews with children: sources of food; security of food, nutritional quality of food, and experiences of hunger. Children's descriptions of insufficient food being available indicate that parents are not always able to shield them from the impact of food insecurity. The lack of school-meals and after-school clubs serving food made weekends particularly problematic for some children. A notable consequence of food insecurity appears to be reliance on low-cost takeaway food, likely to be nutritionally poor.

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## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines food security as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (WHO, 2015). This conceptualisation underpins the definitions of food insecurity used by researchers in the field (e.g. Melchior et al., 2012) and was applied in this research.

Statistics suggest the number of UK children vulnerable to food insecurity is high given that 28% live in relative poverty (DWP, 2015) and 1.7 million live in severe poverty (Barnardos, 2014). Indeed, Gordon et al. (2013) show that over half a million UK children live in families unable to provide a minimally acceptable diet, defined as three meals a day; fresh fruit and vegetables every day; and meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent at least once a day. Griffith, O'Connell, and Smith (2013) suggest that the recent UK recession has had a particularly adverse effect on the nutrition of families with children, with these families reducing spending on

food and calorie intake, switching to more calorie dense food of poorer nutritional quality, and switching from fresh fruit and vegetables to processed food. This is consistent with other studies demonstrating an influence of low-income on food choice (Burns, Cook, & Mavoia, 2013; Feinberg, Kavanagh, Young, & Prudent, 2008).

Data indicating child poverty is highest in cities (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014) suggests food insecurity may be a particular problem for London families. In a recent Ipsos-MORI survey (2013) two-fifths of London parents reported cutting back on food and one fifth reported skipping meals so that their children can eat. The nutritional implications of food insecurity are demonstrated by Evans, Hutchinson, Cristian, Hancock, and Cade (2013) who, in line with adult studies (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2008; Molcho, Gabhainn, Kelly, Friel, & Kelleher, 2007), found a substantial proportion of primary-school aged children in London experience poor nutrition with 40% of boys and 29% of girls not meeting recommended energy levels, and between 7% and 18% not meeting required levels for iron, zinc, calcium and folates. These findings are also consistent with data from the NHS National Child Measurement Programme - England (2013) showing that

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malnourishment is a particular problem in London, where the proportion of underweight children is twice the national average, and the proportion of obese children is greater than across England (one-quarter vs. one-fifth). Other studies have also demonstrated a link between food insufficiency and children being overweight and obese (Dubois, Farmer, Girard, & Porcherie, 2006).

Food insecurity is known to negatively impact on a range of outcomes for children including health (Molcho et al., 2007; Weinreb et al., 2002) and health-related quality of life (Casey et al., 2005). It has been shown to independently predict emotional problems (Belsky, Moffit, Arseneault, Melchior, & Caspi, 2010; Kleinman et al., 1998; Slopen, 2010), anxiety and depression (Weinreb et al., 2002). Studies examining outcomes beyond health demonstrate its association with behavioural problems (Kleinman et al., 1998; Melchior et al., 2012; Weinreb et al., 2002; Whitaker, Phillips, & Orzol, 2007) and poorer educational attainment (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001; Jyoti, Frongillo, & Jones, 2005) perhaps via its impact on learning (Winicki & Jemison, 2003) or school engagement (Ashabi and O'Neal, 2008).

The studies described above typically rely on data collected from teachers' or parents and focus on outcomes; few studies have given children the opportunity to describe the experience of food insecurity for themselves. This contrasts with a body of research investigating adults' experiences, which finds a range of negative emotions, for example feelings of monotony and alienation (Hamelin, Beaudry, & Habicht, 2002), and frustration with the impact of food insecurity on food choice (Lardeau, Healey, & Ford, 2011). Only two studies, Fram et al. (2011) and Connell, Lofton, Yadrick, and Rehner (2005), have asked children about their experiences directly. Fram et al. (2011) found that children aged 11–16 years are aware of food insecurity and took responsibility for managing food resources. Connell et al. (2005) found that children aged 9–16 years described food insecurity as having negative behavioural, psychological and social effects, specifically worry, anxiety and sadness about the family food supply, perceived lack of choice in the foods eaten, and shame and/or fear about being labelled poor because of food insecurity. Importantly, both studies highlight that the experiences children describe are distinct from their parents' and distinct from those their parents report on their behalf, thus demonstrating the importance of asking children directly as parents' accounts may lack adequate validity.

Food insecurity in the UK is clearly a matter for concern but little empirical research has been conducted. The majority of studies have been conducted in the USA and Canada and their findings may not directly translate to the UK context given cultural differences and differences in welfare-provision. A study of a UK population that uses a systematic and reliable measure of food insecurity and captures children's experiences directly is needed. Such a study is timely given indications that food insecurity is a worsening problem in the UK (Ipsos-MORI, 2013; Barnardos Strategy Unit, 2013; Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2013).

The aim of the current study was to gain an understanding of London families' experiences of food insecurity by describing its impact from parents' perspectives and obtaining children's narratives. To build on current knowledge and extend the findings of Fram et al. (2011) and Connell et al. (2005), participants were younger children aged 5–11 years.

## 2. Methods

A mixed-methods approach using two data sources was used:

- 1) a survey of food insecure parents
- 2) one-to-one semi-structured interviews with children from food insecure families

The purpose of using a mixed methods approach was to enhance our interpretation of significant findings (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2010). Augmenting parents' responses to closed-answer survey questions with rich data from children allowed a deeper understanding of the experience of food insecurity. Triangulating the two datasets allowed us to investigate similarities and differences between children and their parents.

The study was approved by the University of Reading Ethics Committee.

### 2.1. Survey

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Kids Company is a registered UK Charity that provides support for inner-city deprived children. One aspect of the support they provide is food, either via meals at centres, or food parcels/vouchers given to parents. Participants for this study were recruited via their Arches II centre, located in Lambeth, South London, UK. Data indicates that, compared to England, a greater proportion of children in Lambeth live in poverty (31.8% vs. 20.1%); are obese (23.9% vs. 18.9%); and are eligible for free school-meals (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2014; Department for Education, 2014). Parents receiving food parcels from Kids Company during the school Summer holiday of 2013 were invited to participate in a survey. Eighty-three parents registered with Kids Company requested a food parcel and were assessed by Kids Company staff as eligible to receive one. Of these 83 parents, 58 completed the survey (response rate 70%). Five (6%) parents refused; 17 (20%) could not be contacted using the details provided; 2 (2%) were not contacted; and 1 (1%) lived too far away to complete the survey in person and was unable to complete it over the telephone.

#### 2.1.2. Measure of food security

Food security status was assessed using the US Household Food Security Scale (USDA, 2012; Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000) which has been shown to have good psychometric properties (Carlson, Andrews, & Bickel, 1999). It has been used outside the USA, for example in Canada (Carter, Dubois, Tremblay, & Taljaard, 2012), Australia (Ramsey, Giske, Turrell, & Gallegos, 2011) and France (Martin-Fernandez, Grillo, Parizot, Caillavet, & Chauvin, 2013) and was judged by the researchers as valid for a UK population. The 18-item questionnaire comprises screening questions scored yes/no, and follow-up questions scored on a 3-point Likert-Scale (often true/sometimes true/never true). The time-frame is the preceding year. Raw scores are used to classify households into four categories using established cut-offs: high food security (0); marginal food security (1–2); low food security (3–7); and very low food security (8–18) (Bickel et al., 2000). The optional food sufficiency question was also used in this study. Participants completed questionnaires when they attended the Arches II centre.

### 2.2. Qualitative interviews

#### 2.2.1. Participants

Participants were children attending the Arches II centre in Spring 2014, and who were assessed by Kids Company staff to experiencing food insecurity using the same procedure as that used for parents receiving food parcels in the Survey sample. A pool of 38 potential families was identified. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a mix of male and female children who had a relatively broad age range (5 years - 11 years). A parent of sixteen families gave written consent for their child/ren to be interviewed. Two children declined to participate resulting in interviews with nineteen children from fourteen families. At this point theoretical

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