

# Young people, food insecurity and Covid-19: A qualitative study in Edinburgh and London

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Introduction

Even before the coronavirus pandemic struck in early 2020, food insecurity was rising steadily and attracting growing concern across the UK. Under Covid-19, which has caused the UK to enter its worst economic recession on record, food insecurity has worsened significantly. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted young people under the age of 25, whose overrepresentation in precarious, poorly paid jobs in volatile labour market sectors and lower rates of social security protections have left them particularly exposed to the vast economic penalties of Covid-19, including food insecurity. Interviews were conducted with young people living in Edinburgh and London about their experiences of food insecurity before and during the pandemic. This research makes recommendations to policy and practice that would mitigate against youth food insecurity at what is a critically challenging time for young people across the UK.

## Key findings

- **Youth food insecurity is driven by a range of both common and more age-specific factors.**  
As with food insecurity among other age groups, its primary causes are low income and problems with welfare benefits. Critically, however, these common drivers featured alongside more distinctively youth-specific factors, including leaving the family household for the first time and living in shared living environments.
- **Covid-19 has had a significant impact on driving/worsening food insecurity among young people.**  
Their greater likelihood of being underemployed in precarious, poorly paid jobs and/or being full-time students has meant that key policy interventions designed to mitigate against economic hardship under Covid-19 have applied to, and been experienced differently by, young people.
- **Youth food insecurity carries significant penalties for mental and physical health and wellbeing.**  
Subsisting on nutritionally inadequate diets or insufficient food lowered mood and caused stress, anxiety and depression, as well as physical exhaustion and ill health. Young people with pre-existing health conditions, including eating disorders, were the worst affected.
- **Young people draw on a range of strategies to manage their food insecurity.**  
These include shopping for cheap food in budget stores, rationing food and skipping meals, seeking ad-hoc earning and eating opportunities, and careful budgeting.
- **Accessing and accepting formal and informal food support is challenging for young people,** who have a strong sense of independence and personal responsibility for their lives, and who can often feel undeserving of help, and/or unsure how to access it.

These findings carry significant implications for young people and a strong national policy response is required in order to address youth food insecurity and its structural causes. This research also makes recommendations to practice, which can help to mitigate youth food insecurity and improve young people's access to existing support.

## Background

This research draws on interviews with 13 young people (aged 18-26) living in Edinburgh and London conducted during the nationwide lockdown, as well as a comprehensive review of existing evidence and relevant statistics. It explored their experiences of food insecurity before and during the pandemic, examining its causes and impacts, how they managed hunger, and their experiences of informal and formal support around food.

## Why this research is important

Despite escalating public concern about food insecurity and rising food bank usage, very little research has been conducted into young people's experiences in the UK. Studies that have explored youth food insecurity in the UK are overwhelmingly based on the experiences of young homeless people. At the level of policy, food insecurity among young people has also been largely overlooked.

There is often an assumption that young people are less at risk of experiencing extreme economic hardships like food insecurity because it is assumed that they can return to or remain in the family household and/or receive financial support from parents and caregivers. This assumption is reflected in policy with lower National Minimum Wage rates and social security allowances for young people. Moreover, existing research has highlighted that food insecurity among young people is often hard to identify, because young people go to great lengths to conceal or downplay their struggles to friends and family. Taken together, these assumptions and evidence point to youth food insecurity being a neglected and poorly understood phenomenon.

This is problematic for numerous reasons. Research has consistently demonstrated that young people are the most likely to experience poverty, destitution and homelessness, for example. Their ability to build financial resilience is constrained by their greater risks of unemployment and underemployment, their lower wages, and by their access to reduced rates of social security protections. People under the age of 25 are also the worst affected by economic recessions, as is currently being vividly exposed under Covid-19.

All of these factors enhance young people's risks of experiencing food insecurity, with recent rapid response data from the *Understanding Society* (2020) survey indicating that hunger was significantly more prevalent among young people aged 16-24 than any other age group during lockdown. Covid-19 has not caused food insecurity among young people, but has exacerbated it, and brought their heightened risks of poverty to the surface.

## Findings

### Drivers of youth food insecurity

Youth food insecurity is driven by a range of intersecting factors. Some of these drivers resonate with existing evidence on what triggers food insecurity in other age groups, including low incomes, problems with welfare benefits (e.g. delays and sanctions), and the various impacts of Covid-19. Critically, however, young people are more at risk of experiencing these common drivers of food insecurity. Moreover, the study identified a number of additional factors driving food insecurity that were more distinctively tied to the experience of being young. These included leaving the family household for the first time, learning how to balance household budgets, and relational and environmental factors associated with shared living environments.

Consistent with other evidence, Covid-19 had a significant impact on the young people in this study. Many had been furloughed or had lost their jobs entirely, while those who were full-time students were ineligible for Universal Credit. This meant that two key protective interventions (furloughing and Universal Credit) were being experienced and accessed differently by young people, in ways that triggered/compounded their food insecurity. A key example of this is that many of the participants who were furloughed from their jobs were furloughed to the value of their contracted hours, a number typically significantly lower than the number of hours they actually worked, creating substantial drops in income:

*I was literally working six days a week, ten hours a day... Now I'm just, like, not doing anything. The money I'm getting, it's not even what I was getting in a week... It's horrible.* (Holly, 18, London)

## Impacts of youth food insecurity

Food insecurity carried significant consequences for the participants' health and wellbeing. They described feeling exhausted, run down and physically unwell as a consequence of hunger or, more commonly, of relying on nutritionally inadequate diets when low on money. The biggest impact was observable in terms of mental health and wellbeing, with participants describing escalating levels of stress, anxiety, depression and short-temperedness. Participants with ongoing health problems were particularly vulnerable to these impacts, with food insecurity significantly increasing the risk of them relapsing into eating disorders and addictions:

*As somebody with a history of having an eating disorder... it is quite hard for me to prioritise feeding myself... Not being able to buy the kinds of food that I consider safe for me to eat all the time, and my comfortable foods, if I don't have the money to buy them, I will eat less. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

## Strategies and coping mechanisms

The majority of the participants had lived with intermittent or chronic poverty, including food insecurity, for several years. This research suggests that this experience meant that young people had become skilled and resourceful at coping with persistent poverty, and had developed a range of strategies for navigating food insecurity. These strategies included shopping for cheap food, rationing food and skipping meals, source money and food opportunistically through ad-hoc earning opportunities and social connections, and strict budgeting:

*If you go along [to the shops] at ten o'clock at night, you know what I mean, you could get a sausage roll for 3p, so I know where to get the cheap of the cheap. (Kira, 21, Edinburgh)*

## Experiences of informal support

Accessing and accepting formal or informal food support is a challenging and uncomfortable experience for young people. Consistent with the findings of other studies, the participants preferred to access support informally from friends and relatives to accessing it formally from food banks. However, seeking or accepting support informally was also resisted, because it clashed with the participants' strong sense of independence and responsibility for their lives, or could not be relied upon due to strained familial relationships or their friends' and parents' own lack of resources:

*I'm completely aware that my family 100 per cent would have supported me and helped me... I just didn't feel like I should. I feel like I was an adult, I've come into this world, I've moved up to Edinburgh... I can't then now call my mum and ask her to send me some food... I wanted to prove myself a little bit, so I didn't ask and I didn't let them know how bad my situation was. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

## Experiences of formal support

Accessing support from food banks was heavily stigmatised and felt to be a last resort, reserved for moments of acute crisis. Participants often felt undeserving of this kind of support, which they felt should be reserved for more 'vulnerable' people, and could feel ashamed and guilty if they did have to use a food bank:

*Honestly, I feel like, with every time that I need it, I just felt like I hadn't done enough... It's like, no, surely to god, surely to god there's something else that I can do so this can be left for other folks, other folks that need it more. (Leo, 22, Edinburgh)*

There were also practical barriers to young people seeking formal food support, including confusion about how or where to access it and their eligibility for emergency food aid.

## Policy and practice implications

The findings of this study may surprise some. There has long been an assumption that young people are protected from experiencing hardships like food insecurity because they are able to rely on financial support from their parents and can remain in or return to the family household if needed. In fact, these research findings should not be surprising for three key reasons.

First, evidence has consistently indicated that young people are at a disproportionately higher risk of experiencing poverty, destitution and homelessness than older ages groups in the UK. Second, labour market approaches to young people in the UK are a key part of the problem, with young people paid lower wages than older adults. Third, young people are entitled to fewer and lower rates of social security protections than older adults in the UK.

There is therefore a critical need for a strong policy response to the problem of youth food insecurity from the UK and devolved governments. If meaningful steps towards these actions are not taken, we can expect to see rates of youth food insecurity and poverty among young people rise further in the UK, particularly during the pandemic.

### **Recommendations for UK Government:**

- Introduce a living wage for young people and increase current Universal Credit and Local Housing Allowance rates for under-25s, to better protect them against poverty and build capacity for financial resilience.
- Reconsider the default exclusion of full-time students from income maintenance benefits.
- Retain the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit.
- Design any future furlough schemes/other work-related interventions in response to Covid-19 with the underemployment of young people in mind to prevent disproportionate income loss.
- Introduce better regulation around zero-hours employment.
- Implement active jobs creation to proactively address spikes in youth unemployment anticipated from the pandemic and recession.

### **Recommendations for Westminster Parliament:**

- Add a dedicated stream of work on youth food insecurity to the existing All-Party Parliamentary Group on food insecurity and incorporate lived experience input from young people.

### **Recommendations for or devolved governments:**

- Use devolved powers in housing, work and social security to tackle and minimise poverty among under-25s.
- Incorporate tackling poverty among young people into key policy agendas – including, for example, in the Scottish Government's current programme of Social Renewal for building a fairer Scotland.
- Provide systematic support for local actions among practitioners (e.g. youth organisations, food bank providers, supported accommodation providers and universities) to mitigate against youth food insecurity.

### **Recommendations for food bank providers:**

- Work with other relevant statutory and third sector organisations that young people have existing relationships with to ensure availability of food aid to this group and to revise how this support is provided to young people (e.g. a home delivery approach in order to address the stigma of visiting food banks in person).
- Work to improve signposting of young people to existing food aid provision.

### **Recommendations for youth organisations:**

- Strengthen partnership working with relevant charities and statutory services (e.g. food bank providers, advice services) across the local area to build a more efficient and accessible network of support around young people.

- Consider building food support into broader packages of resources and skills, and as part of an ongoing support relationship that a young person has with an organisation.

**Recommendations for youth homelessness organisations and supported accommodation providers:**

- Be cognisant of, understand and act on an understanding of environmental barriers to food security in supported accommodation, including a lack of food storage/cooking space, as well as food theft.
- Clearly communicate to service users how and where they can access food banks and support them to do so where needed, recognising the issues of stigma and making efforts to address this.

**Recommendations for universities and the National Union of Students:**

- Prepare for the reality of food insecurity among students, especially in the coming months.
- Work to ensure that student have reliable access to sufficient food on campus.
- Lobby to secure access to Universal Credit for a wider group of students.

## About this research

This research was carried out by Dr Charlotte McPherson, I-SPHERE and Oak Foundation Research Intern in 2020.

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The full report, **Young people, food insecurity and Covid-19**, is freely available on I-SPHERE, Heriot Watt's website [www.i-sphere.hw.ac.uk/research-interns/](http://www.i-sphere.hw.ac.uk/research-interns/)