

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

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# Executive Summary

## 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.

# 1. Introduction

In the last decade, rising food bank usage has become a source of escalating public concern in the United Kingdom (UK), where it has come to symbolise the country's problems with poverty, destitution and inequality (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018).

The UK's largest provider of food banks, the Trussell Trust (2020a), recently reported that they had distributed a record 1.9 million food bank parcels in the financial year 2019-2020. The significant increase in food bank usage, and what it implies about levels of hunger in the UK, has seen food insecurity become the subject of increasing scrutiny from researchers, policymakers, and the media; a focus that has intensified further under Covid-19, the economic consequences of which have triggered further alarming rises in food insecurity (Power et al., 2020; Trussell Trust, 2020b). This report is focused on the experiences of young people, a group that has been largely overlooked in growing debates and coverage about rising food insecurity and food bank usage in the UK.

Young people's omission from this coverage is surprising, given research evidence that demonstrates their enhanced exposure to poverty, destitution and homelessness (New Policy Institute, 2015; Watts et al., 2015; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018), which all carry high risks of food insecurity. Young people are also disproportionately exposed to other risk factors associated with food insecurity, including discriminations in the labour market, housing market, and social security system, which place distinctive limits on their ability to experience economic security (Goulden, 2018; Homeless Link, 2018; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2020; Trading Economics, 2020). These discriminations are particularly damaging and influential in the context of economic downturn, which affects young people more significantly and enduringly than all other age groups (Major and Machin, 2020). This has been exemplified recently under Covid-19, which has disproportionately affected people under the age of 25 in terms of job losses, lowered incomes, decreased labour market opportunities, and rising food insecurity (Connors et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2020; Joyce and Xu, 2020; Understanding Society, 2020).

Rising food insecurity and food bank usage has occurred against a backdrop of economic downturn, austerity measures, and significant welfare reform. The UK's economy was severely impacted by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008, which not only caused unemployment to soar and incomes to fall, but also triggered more than a decade of substantial cuts to local authority budgets and restricted welfare spending (Hastings et al., 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2019). This combination of sustained economic downturn and deep cuts to government spending has contributed to entrenched poverty amongst Britain's poorest working and non-working households (Mueller, 2019). The extent of these cuts is significant, with research finding that, between 2010 and 2018 alone, the monetary amount of benefits received by recipients fell by approximately £14 billion (Beatty and Fothergill, 2018).

Welfare reform has been heavily linked to rising food insecurity, with the introduction and rolling out of Universal Credit felt to be particularly instrumental (Trussell Trust, 2019; Reeves and Loopstra, 2020). Universal Credit has been widely critiqued for its delayed payment structure and emphasis on sanctioning (Loopstra et al., 2018; Reeves and Loopstra, 2020). Taken together, these characteristics of Universal Credit have been found to drive debt and destitution among claimants, leading to rising rent arrears, homelessness, and increased reliance on emergency food aid (MacLeod, 2019; Trussell Trust, 2019). A recent report by the Trussell Trust (2019) directly linked the delayed payment and sanctions features of Universal Credit to rising destitution, housing insecurity and indebtedness among its food bank users.

Additionally, the GFC had a significant impact on the labour market in the UK, which contracted in response to the recession, leading to spikes in unemployment, particularly among young people (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Major and Machin, 2020). More recently, employment rates have improved (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020), but this has coincided with historically high levels of in-work poverty, with recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Innes, 2020) concluding that more than half of people in poverty now live in working households. These and other research findings (e.g. Bailey, 2016; McBride et al., 2018) suggest that there have been changes to the *quality* of employment, particularly in the lower rungs of the labour market, where young people are overwhelmingly employed.

Permanent, full-time jobs are increasingly scarce, whereas part-time, zero hours and otherwise fixed-term contracts in 'risky' sectors like non-food retail and hospitality have become more prevalent, underpinning youth employment experiences with precariousness (MacDonald, 2009; Kalleberg, 2018). Compounding this, both wages and benefits have failed to rise with living costs and, combined with cuts to social security, a shortfall between income and expenditure has crept into more working and non-working households across the UK, placing a substantial strain on people's ability to afford essentials, including food (Bramley and Bailey, 2018; House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2019).

It is in this fractured socioeconomic context that, in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and its unprecedented impact on the social and economic fabric of the UK has not only brought the UK's problems with poverty and inequality into sharper relief, but has also significantly exacerbated them (House of Lords, 2020; Parkes and McNeil, 2020). Early research evidence has highlighted the damage the pandemic is doing to the economy, with the OECD (2020) forecasting that the UK will suffer the worst slump in GDP of any country in the western world. Within the UK, evidence has indicated that the pandemic is having a proportionally greater impact in the nation's most deprived geographic areas, and is affecting women and people aged under 25 the worst in economic terms (Bramley, 2020; Joyce and Xu, 2020).

One outcome of the UK's problems with poverty and inequality that was attracting growing concern before the pandemic was rising food insecurity, as reflected in the substantial increase in food banks and food bank usage across the country (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Loopstra et al., 2015; Trussell Trust, 2019). Food insecurity is defined as 'the uncertainty and insufficiency of food availability and access that are limited by resource constraints and the worry or anxiety and hunger that may result from it' (Wunderlich and Norwood, 2006: 143). The term is often used interchangeably with 'food poverty', though the latter terminology has been critiqued for its potential to obscure structural causes and solutions (Lambie-Mumford and O'Connell, 2015). 'Food insecurity' is to be preferred as a term in that it accommodates a spectrum of experiences, including the extremes of going without food but also the experiences of being unable to afford a diet that is nutritionally adequate and the emotional impact of feeling uncertain about where the next meal is going to come from (Sosenko et al., 2019). For these reasons, food insecurity is the terminology preferred in this report.

Food bank usage is at a record high across the UK. This has worsened significantly under the strain of Covid-19, with the Trussell Trust (2020) reporting an 89% increase in need in April, 2020 compared to the same period last year, as well as a 107% increase in the number of children requiring emergency food aid. However, it is important to note that food bank usage has been rising steadily year-on-year since at least 2016 in the UK (Trussell Trust, 2020). The lockdown imposed in efforts to contain the spread of the virus has caused millions of people to experience immediate cuts to their income at the same time as panic-buying, price increases and travel restrictions have affected people's ability to access affordable food (Connors et al., 2020; Food Standards Agency [FSA] and Ipsos MORI, 2020; Power et al., 2020).

While food insecurity and food bank usage have occupied increasing research, policy and media attention in recent years, this has typically been concentrated on the experiences of family units, young children and older aged adults (Knight et al., 2018; Cardoso et al., 2019; Hodson, 2019; Purdam et al., 2019). Comparatively missing has been a focus on the experiences and perspectives of young adults, despite evidence highlighting that food insecurity is a significant problem among young people, who are more at risk of experiencing it. However, young people have consistently been found to be underrepresented among food bank users (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Sosenko et al., 2019; Trussell Trust, 2020), which may form one of the reasons that youth food insecurity has flown relatively under the radar, despite young people's high risks of experiencing it.

This enhanced risk is traced to young people's higher risks of destitution, poverty and homelessness, and to systemic discriminations against them in both the labour market, where they are paid less and are overrepresented in terms of unemployment and underemployment, and in the social security system, where their rates of support are lower and where they are the most likely to be sanctioned of all age groups (New Policy Institute, 2015; de Vries et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Homeless Link, 2018).



Despite these enhanced risks, however, very little is known about youth food insecurity, which has been largely overlooked in the UK. Particularly little is known about the lived experiences of food insecurity among young adults who are not teenagers in the UK. As evidence begins to mount about the short- and long-term impacts of Covid-19 on the already precarious socioeconomic position of young people in the UK (see, for example, Dias et al., 2020; ILO, 2020; Major and Machin, 2020), it is critical that their experiences of food insecurity be better understood and acknowledged. In order to address gaps in the current knowledge base, this study focuses on experiences of food insecurity among young people, aged 18 to 26, living in Edinburgh, Scotland and London, England.

The specific research questions explored in this study are as follows:

- What factors are driving food insecurity among young people?
- What is the impact of youth food insecurity?
- How do young people experience and manage food insecurity?
- How is support perceived, experienced and accessed by young people experiencing food insecurity?

This report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 outlines the study's research design before Chapter 3 reviews the current knowledge base on youth food insecurity. In Chapter 4, the findings of the study are analysed, drawing on the experiences and perspectives of 13 young people living in Edinburgh and London. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes and considers the implications of the study's findings for policy, practice and research.

## 2. Research Design

### Introduction

This section provides an outline of the study's research design. It will discuss: the methodological approach selected for the study; the location and timeframe of the fieldwork; the sample of young people included in the research and how they were accessed; the methods used; the ethical considerations attached to the research; and the limitations of the study.

### Methodological approach

The study's methodology consisted of three key stages. First, a comprehensive literature review of available research was conducted (see Chapter 3). Secondly, relevant statistical evidence from large-scale studies of destitution and food insecurity was reviewed. Thirdly, primary qualitative research was conducted with young people.

This study adopted a qualitative approach to exploring youth food insecurity, where the emphasis is on 'understanding phenomena from the perspective of insiders' (Lapan et al., 2012: 6). This was important for this study given its subject area, where there has been a lack of qualitative research exploring food insecurity with young people. Accordingly, in this study, the focus was less on quantifying young people's food insecurity and more on the factors driving it, how it was experienced and managed, and the impact it had on young people's lives.

In addition to its qualitative methodology, this study adopted a case study research design, with fieldwork conducted in Edinburgh, Scotland and London, England. A case study approach was selected for a number of reasons, including its capacity to produce more richly contextualised accounts and understandings of phenomena and experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2006); something that is missing from much of the available literature on youth food insecurity. Situating the research in two places also enabled any differences and similarities in experiences across the cities to be highlighted, providing a wider lens for the research.

### Location of the study

Fieldwork was conducted in Edinburgh, Scotland and London, England. These locations were chosen for both purposive and practical reasons. Edinburgh and London were selected purposively on the basis of similarities and differences in their demographic profiles and characteristics. Both are wealthy cities with sizeable youth populations, pronounced income and wealth inequalities, and high living costs (NOMIS, 2020). London is significantly larger and is more ethnically diverse than Edinburgh (HM Government, 2018). This difference is reflected in the sample, as all of the participants from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds lived in London.

The cities were also selected on the basis of more practical concerns. Edinburgh was chosen because of the researcher's existing research experience and connections in the area (McPherson, 2019), for example. London was selected because members of the wider research team, including its funder, had relevant contacts in the area who could help to expedite the research process. This was an important practical consideration for this study, given its short timeframe.

### Impact of Covid-19 on research design

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged at the beginning of this research project. Access to young people had been negotiated with a number of gatekeeping organisations in Edinburgh and London in the weeks and months before the nationwide lockdown was imposed in March, when fieldwork was originally scheduled to begin. Plans to visit organisations and meet young people that had been fostered in the early stages of the project were unavoidably cancelled, due both to the impossibility of traveling and meeting face-to-face and because gatekeeping organisations, including food banks, were negotiating unanticipated pressures on their services.

As a result, whilst several of the participants were recruited through traditional gatekeeping channels, the majority were accessed either more directly, through online advertising, or through participant referrals and connections. Gaining access to young people was more challenging as a result of Covid-19, which played a role in the study having a smaller sample size (13) than intended (20), and caused fieldwork to be delayed by several months, ultimately taking place between June and August of 2020. The Covid-19 lockdown also meant that interviews with the young people had to be conducted remotely, over the phone, rather than face-to-face.

## Sample

Participants were sampled purposively, based on their age falling between 18 and 26, and on the basis of current or previous experiences of food insecurity. The aim was to recruit 20 young people in total, 10 in each of the two case cities. As noted, lockdown imposed considerable challenges with access for this study in that it limited the role of gatekeepers in brokering dialogue with young people. Recruitment in London was particularly challenging in this respect, where the researcher had fewer established connections and less familiarity with the area.

Ultimately, 13 young people were recruited to the study; 8 in Edinburgh and 5 in London (see Table 1). All of the participants were aged between 18 and 26, with a mean age of 22 for the sample. The majority of participants were in their early 20s. Participants represented a range of households and employment statuses. The majority were employed (9) and 4 were unemployed at the time of interview. Of the 9 participants who were employed, 4 were currently furloughed due to lockdown. 5 participants were living in the private rental sector, a further 5 in supported accommodation, and 3 in social housing.

**Table 1: Participant characteristics**

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	LOCATION	HOUSING STATUS	EMPLOYMENT STATUS
Kira	21	Female	Edinburgh	Social housing	Part-time job (furloughed)
Sasha	21	Female	Edinburgh	Private rental sector	Self-employed (part-time)
Alex	22	Female	Edinburgh	Private rental sector	Part-time job (furloughed)
Cara	22	Female	Edinburgh	Social housing	Part-time job
Leo	22	Male	Edinburgh	Private rental sector	Part-time job
Lewis	23	Male	Edinburgh	Private rental sector	Part-time job
Faye	25	Female	Edinburgh	Social housing	Part-time job
Lucy	26	Female	Edinburgh	Private rental sector	Full-time job (furloughed)
Holly	18	Female	London	Supported housing	Unemployed
Stacey	20	Female	London	Supported housing	Unemployed
Rachel	22	Female	London	Supported housing	Full-time job (furloughed)
Lily	23	Female	London	Supported housing	Unemployed
Omar	25	Male	London	Supported housing	Unemployed

There are distinctions between the profiles of the Edinburgh and London samples that stem from how participants were recruited in these areas.

All of the participants in London were recruited through a youth homelessness organisation. As a result, all were living in supported accommodation at the time of interview. These participants had poorer structural outcomes than the participants in Edinburgh. All 4 of the unemployed participants lived in London, for example. Living in supported accommodation also exposed these participants to additional risks of food insecurity that are linked to environmental characteristics of shared hostels (see Chapter 4).

The participants in Edinburgh were recruited through a range of sampling techniques (gatekeepers, direct advertising, and participant referrals), and this is reflected in the more diverse profile of this group. All of the students in the sample lived in Edinburgh, for example, which presented distinctive challenges and opportunities in terms of income. All 8 of the participants were in employment, with 3 furloughed at the time of interview.

## Sample limitations

Given the profile and small size of the sample, some groups of young people have not knowingly been included in this study, including young people with disabilities, young people who identify as LGBTQ+, and those who live in non-urban geographies. Eleven out of the 13 participants were British-born, and relatively little is known about the ethnic composition of the participants as this information was not collected and interviews were conducted remotely over the phone. Young men are also underrepresented in the sample (only 3 out of the 13 were male). More generally, with just 13 participants, the numbers are too low to make any claims about sample representativeness or the applicability of the findings on a wider scale. This is therefore presented as a small-scale, exploratory study seeking to illuminate some key experiences for future more detailed examination.

## Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. Semi-structured interviews are adept at exploring ‘related and contradictory themes’ and identifying ‘the missing and the subtle as well as the explicit and the obvious’ (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: xv). These are valuable assets to this study, which aimed to explore how young people understand, navigate and manage their food insecurity. Due to restrictions associated with Covid-19, the interviews were all conducted with participants remotely over the phone.

A topic guide was developed to aid discussion, which enabled the interviews to simultaneously remain focused on the study’s key themes while leaving critical space for the interview to flow conversationally and for the interviewer to pursue ‘topical trajectories’ where appropriate (Edwards and Holland, 2013: 54). The topic guide covered the key themes of the study: (i) drivers of youth food insecurity; (ii) experiences and management of food insecurity; (iii) the impact of food insecurity; and (iv) experiences of support around youth food insecurity. Each participant was issued with a £20 supermarket or takeaway voucher to thank them for their time.

## Ethics

The study received ethical approval from Heriot-Watt University’s ethics committee and key ethical protocols were upheld throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from participants, who were advised of their rights to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw their participation in the project at any time. Participation in the study was anonymous, and participants have been provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities. In line with data protection laws, all research data was stored securely on an encrypted Business Dropbox folder on the university’s secure server, which is only accessible to members of the research team.

## Conclusion

Through the research design outlined in this chapter, this exploratory study aims to address gaps in knowledge related to young people's experiences of food insecurity in the UK, about which very little is currently known. Whilst small-scale and carrying some sample and scope limitations, this study is one of the first to explore food insecurity qualitatively with young people in the British context, and does so at a critical moment for young people, who have been the most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in economic terms, but who are perennially at a heightened risk of socioeconomic disadvantage relative to older age groups.

### 3. Young people and food insecurity

#### Introduction

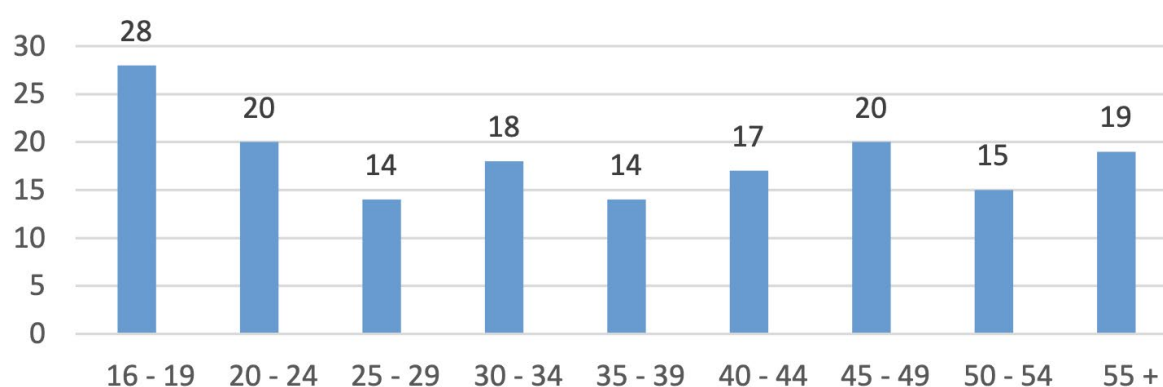
This chapter reviews available knowledge on youth food insecurity. Young people have been largely excluded from rising media coverage and policy activity around the issue of food insecurity, despite being at a disproportionately higher risk of poverty, destitution and homelessness. This chapter begins by discussing these and other youth risk factors of food insecurity. This is followed by a review of relevant research, which has unearthed some important insights into the drivers and impacts of youth food insecurity, and how it is navigated and managed by young people. The chapter then discusses some of the limitations of this knowledge base, which is restricted by its reliance on the experiences of teenagers and young people with experience of homelessness, and which is overwhelmingly located in North America. The chapter concludes by articulating both the rationale of this study, given gaps in coverage and understandings of youth food insecurity, and its timeliness, given the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on young people.

#### Young people's heightened risks of food insecurity

Food insecurity is caused by a range of factors, including low income, unemployment, sickness, and debt, which destabilise people's access to adequate food across the population (Sosenko et al., 2019). However, young people are at a particularly high risk of experiencing food insecurity, due to their disproportionate exposure to poverty, destitution, homelessness and other risks.

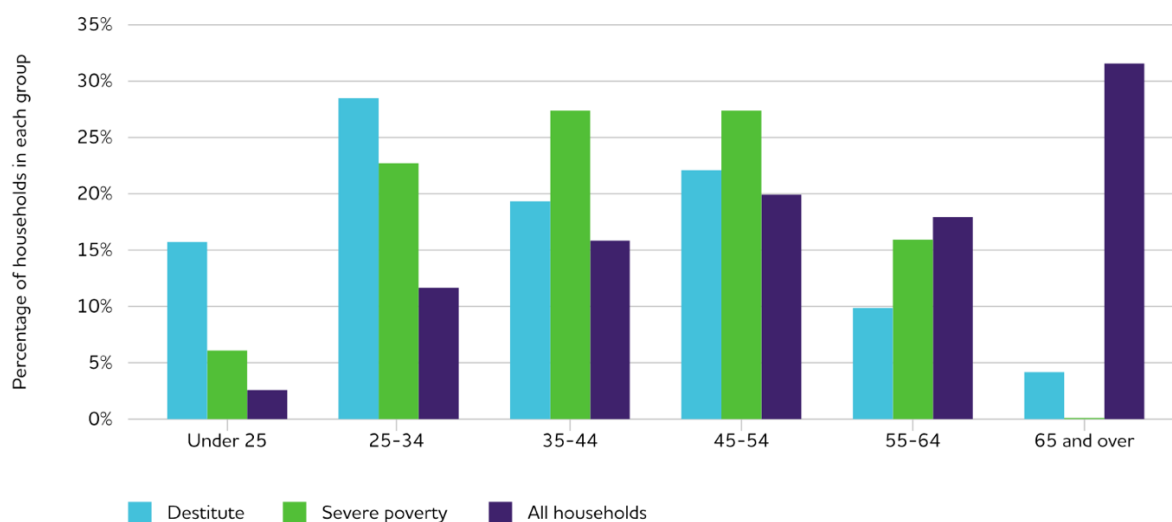
**Research demonstrates that young people are at an enhanced risk of experiencing poverty** (New Policy Institute, 2015; Eisenstadt, 2017; Whitham and Acik, 2019). A recent study found that households headed by someone aged between 16 and 24 are more likely to be living in poverty than those headed by someone older (Whitham and Acik, 2019). For example, over half (52%) of households containing children that are headed by someone aged 16-24 are living in poverty compared to 16% of households headed by someone aged 45-49. A similar situation exists with households not containing children, where households headed by someone aged 16-19 or 20-24 have a higher risk of living in poverty (28% and 20% respectively) than most other age groups (Ibid.) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Poverty rates by age of head of household (for households not containing children)**



Source: DWP (2019), cited in Whitham and Acik (2019: 13)

**Young people are disproportionately more likely to experience destitution than older age groups in the UK's general population** (see Figure 2). Young people's higher risks of poverty are reflected in their exposure to destitution. A major study of destitution in the UK found that young, single people under the age of 25 are the most likely to be destitute, triggered by a combination of unemployment, high housing and living costs, income shocks, and the costs of ill health (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018).

**Figure 2: Broad age groups of destitution, severely poor and all UK households**

Source: Fitzpatrick et al. (2018)

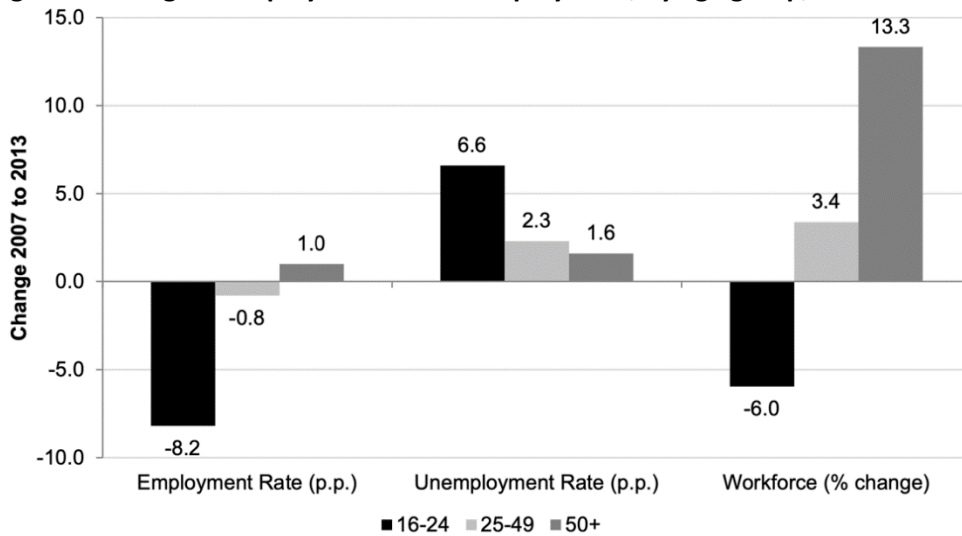
**A wealth of research evidence indicates that young people experience discrimination in the labour market that contributes to their poverty.** The youth unemployment rate currently stands at 11.6 per cent, significantly higher than the general unemployment rate of 4.1 per cent (Trading Economics, 2020). Before the impact of Covid-19, youth unemployment had been falling in the UK over the last several years, but has remained consistently higher than the unemployment rate for older working-age people (House of Commons Library, 2020). Moreover, the relatively healthy employment rates of late have masked the nature of this employment, with young people disproportionately likely to be underemployed in jobs that are low paid, insecure and offer little in the way of opportunities for career progression (Schoon and Bynner, 2017; Kalleberg, 2018).

**Young people have been disproportionately affected by welfare benefit reforms.** Young people receive lower allowances of income support within Jobseekers' Allowance and Universal Credit, and their Local Housing Allowance rate is capped (Watts et al., 2015). The rolling out of Universal Credit has been widely linked to rising food insecurity (Loopstra et al., 2018; Trussell Trust, 2019). This is significant because Sosenko et al.'s comprehensive study on food insecurity in the UK found that a significantly higher proportion of young people (50%) receive Universal Credit as opposed to other income support benefits than over-25s. Research has also indicated that other reforms to social security, namely the increasing emphasis on sanctioning, is disproportionately affecting people under the age of 25 (de Vries et al., 2017).

**Young people are three times more likely to have experienced homelessness in the last five years than are older members of the general population in the UK** (Watts et al., 2015). Although rates of youth homelessness are difficult to concretely quantify, data from a range of studies indicates that homelessness is particularly high in this age group, due to disproportionate experiences of poverty, and discriminations against young people in the housing market (Watts et al., 2015; FEANTSA, 2017; Homeless Link, 2018). In Sosenko et al.'s (2019) recent large-scale study of food insecurity in the UK, 4 in 10 18 to 24-year-olds surveyed had experienced homelessness in the last 12 months. Young people who are homeless are significantly more vulnerable to food insecurity (Priestley, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019).

**Evidence has demonstrated that young people are the worst affected age group by economic downturn** (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Bivand, 2012). The damage inflicted by recessions on young people is typically enduring, often unfolding over a number of years (see Figure 3). This was evident in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, which caused youth unemployment to spike at 20% in 2012 (Major and Machin, 2020). The disproportionate impact of economic downturn on young people is driven by their overrepresentation in elementary positions in sectors of the labour market themselves particularly vulnerable to recession (e.g. non-food retail and hospitality) (UKCES, 2014).

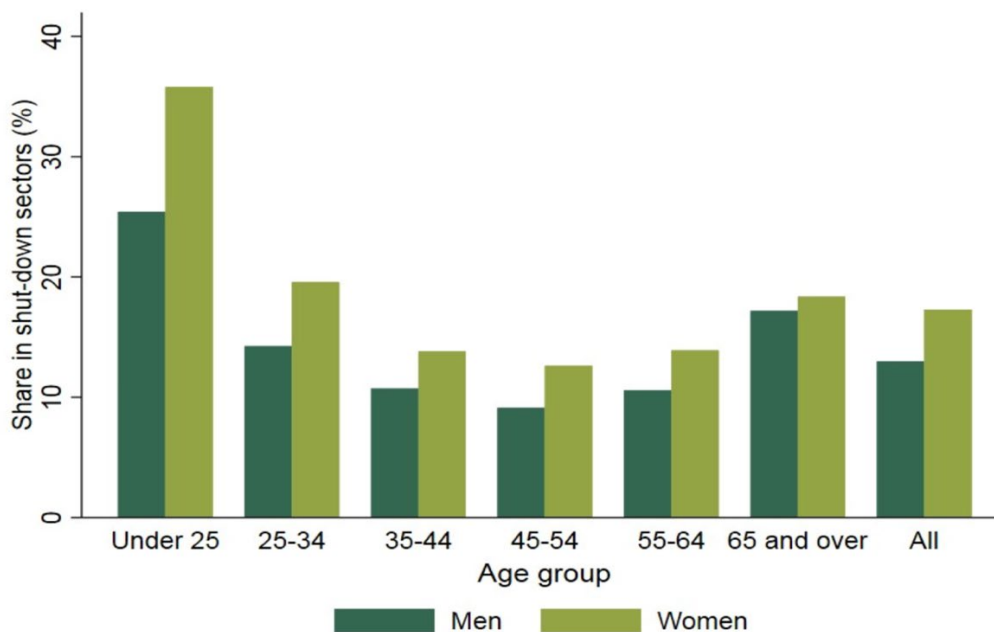
**Figure 3: Change in employment and unemployment, by age group, 2007-2013**



Source: UKCES (2014)

The implications of young people’s long-term disadvantage in the labour market, and their vulnerability to economic downturn, has recently become apparent under Covid-19, with the nationwide lockdown on the majority of the economy most severely impacting people under the age of 25, who are overwhelmingly employed in ‘lockdown sectors’ (Joyce and Xu, 2020) (see Figure 7).

**Figure 4: Share of employees in shut-down sectors (by gender and age)**



Source: Joyce and Xu (2020)

In reviewing the impact of Covid-19 on young people, Gustafsson (2020) found that one-third of 18 to 24-year-old employees who are not students have either lost their jobs or been furloughed since March, compared to 1 in 6 adults between 25 and 54. Connectedly, the number of young people aged between 18 and 24 claiming Universal Credit or Jobseekers’ Allowance has doubled in the UK between March and June in 2020 (Lynch and Wainwright, 2020).



Despite evidence of young people's heightened risks of poverty and destitution, youth food insecurity has garnered very little attention from policy or the media, where the focus has disproportionately been on the experiences of families, young children, and older age adults (Cardoso et al., 2019; Purdam et al., 2019). Research that has been conducted in this field with young people is typically limited to the experiences of teenagers or young people experiencing or recently homeless, is overwhelmingly situated in North America, and tends to be located within the health sciences. However, this knowledge base has generated some important insights into young people's experiences of food insecurity.

## Youth food insecurity: a hidden and relational hardship

Young people are the least studied group in terms of food insecurity, but may be the most vulnerable to experiencing it (Dush, 2020). Evidence has suggested that younger children are better protected by adults from the consequences of food insecurity than older children or young adults (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013; Dush, 2020), with research by Backett-Milburn et al. (2006: 629) finding that the eating and diets of older aged children ranked relatively low on parents' 'hierarchies of risk and worry' within socioeconomically disadvantaged families.

Youth food insecurity can also be harder to detect for a range of reasons, with Popkin et al. (2016) noting that 'many food insecure [young people] may go unnoticed because of the great efforts they make to hide their hardship'. It has been argued that the often hidden or obscured nature of young people's food insecurity can be traced, at least in part, to young people's uniquely emergent position in the life-course, with youth a time of life that is particularly devoted to establishing independence and autonomy (Arnett, 2000), and where peer approval is especially important (Johnson et al., 2019). These values coexist uneasily with seeking food aid, with research pointing to a deep-seated reluctance to engage with food banks amongst young people for these reasons (Priestley, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019).

Cairns (2018: 174) and others (Wills et al., 2008; Gilson, 2015) have argued that young people's food insecurity should be understood relationally as well as individually, meaning that it is unavoidably connected to their peer and familial relationships. Critically, this can not only shape and compound young people's food insecurity, but can also contribute to its concealment. Research has found that young people often prioritise the food needs of their siblings, parents/caregivers and friends, and actively work to acquire food for their household while simultaneously hiding and mitigating against their own hunger by eating in other people's homes; a strategy for managing and concealing food insecurity not as easily available to other age groups, and which again contributes to youth food insecurity staying relatively under the radar (Waxman et al., 2016; Cairns, 2018).

## Young people's management of food insecurity and experiences of support

Food insecurity is a significant stressor that demands a behavioural response from young people (Popkin et al., 2016). Studies that have explored young people's experiences of poverty have revealed a range of 'sophisticated coping and mitigating strategies' intended not only to sustain themselves, but also to support friends and family members that are struggling (Farthing, 2016: 2018; Popkin et al., 2016; Cairns, 2018).

### **Formal support: Perceived and practical barriers**

Young people are generally underrepresented in the usage statistics of food banks and other relevant support agencies (e.g. Sosenko et al., 2019; Trussell Trust, 2020). Rather than this signifying a lack of need among young people, however, research evidence suggests that this is linked to young people preferring to conceal or alternatively manage their food insecurity (Waxman et al., 2016; Priestley, 2018). Studies have also found that young people's low engagement with formal support is linked to more practical factors, including a lack of awareness about the availability and location of these services, confusion about how to access them, and misconceptions about their eligibility or deservingness of such support (Waxman et al., 2016; Centrepoint, 2019). Young people often presume that they are ineligible for emergency food aid, which they perceive to be intended for more obviously 'vulnerable' or 'deserving' groups - i.e. young children, single parents, or older-age adults (Waxman et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2019; Connors et al., 2020).

### **Informal support: Friends and family**

According to existing research, the most common strategy for managing food insecurity among young people is to access food socially, by eating at the homes of friends or relatives (Popkin et al., 2016; Priestley, 2018; Centrepoint, 2019). Across numerous studies, this emerges as the most socially accepted means of managing hunger, in that it can be easily disguised as a conventional social activity, occurs away from the household, and carries less stigma than seeking formal support from food banks (Dachner and Tarasuk, 2002; Booth, 2006; Bowen and Irish, 2018). In their ongoing research of food insecurity during lockdown in the UK, Connors et al. (2020) reflected that:

*Conversations with participants about food banks and other food-specific support schemes felt very different from the ways people talked about informal friend, family and community support. Providing for neighbours or loved ones felt as if it was about looking after each other; food aid felt like charity. Even under Covid-19, asking for help to eat and feeling 'like a charity case' was stigmatising and kept people away.*

### **Additional management strategies**

In addition to eating in the homes of friends and family members, research has uncovered a range of other strategies deployed by young people to manage their food insecurity and acquire food without engaging with formal support. These include:

- Borrowing money from friends and family (Hughes et al., 2011);
- Buying and consuming foods that are cheap, filling and heavily carbohydrates-based, and so can be 'stretched' over a number of meals (e.g. rice, pasta, noodles) (Crawford et al., 2014);
- Rationing food and reducing portion sizes (Connors et al., 2020);
- Skipping meals, particularly breakfast (Pendergast et al., 2019);
- Adopting grazing eating patterns, with snacks substituting for main meals (Priestley, 2018);
- Shopping in budget food outlets (Connors et al., 2020);
- Smoking to reduce appetite (Priestley, 2018);
- Stealing food (Booth, 2006).

In other words, young people's management of food insecurity involves considerable work and an acquired savviness, often learned through the experience of managing chronic deprivation (Waxman et al., 2016). Importantly, the availability and effectiveness of these strategies, including informal food support, varies dependent on individual circumstances and in ways that track with wider socioeconomic inequalities in the UK (Connors et al., 2020).

## **The impact of Covid-19 on young people and food insecurity**

Critically, under Covid-19, many established strategies for managing food insecurity have been stretched to the limit or have become entirely unavailable. Connors et al.'s (2020) exploration of the management of food insecurity during lockdown found that established strategies for stretching limited incomes and food budgets were now regularly failing, for a range of reasons. Rapid response survey data from the Trussell Trust (2020) found that most households (56%) needing to use a food bank during the pandemic had experienced a drop in income, with over two in five (43%) people were referred by agencies because their incomes were insufficient to sustain a minimum quality of life.

Pressure on food budgets has been compounded by essential utility bills rising during lockdown, due to people being confined indoors, often with children, causing electricity and gas usage, as well as food consumption, to rise (Connors et al., 2020; FSA and Ipsos MORI, 2020). Additionally, panic-buying in the early stages of the pandemic has restricted people's ability to purchase the cheap, filling food staples they rely on, which have increased in price during lockdown (Chakelian, 2020). Moreover, travel restrictions and limited opening hours have prevented people from shopping in preferred budget outlets (Connors et al., 2020). Lockdown has also largely eliminated the practice of sharing food and eating at the homes of friends and relatives, something that is known to be among the most common strategies for managing food insecurity among all age groups, but particularly young people (Priestley, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019; Trussell Trust, 2020).

Given the links between poverty and financial instability with food insecurity, Covid-19 has brought new light and attention to young people's food insecurity in ways arguably not seen before in the UK. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) recently commissioned research exploring experiences of food insecurity in the UK during lockdown. Data from this research appears to indicate that survey respondents aged 16-24 reported the highest levels of food insecurity of any age group during lockdown (FSA and Ipsos MORI, 2020). Findings also imply that respondents aged 16-24 have accessed food through food banks more than any other age group during lockdown. However, there are serious doubts about the accuracy and reliability of these findings, which are surprising, given that young people have consistently been found to be underrepresented among food bank users (e.g. Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Sosenko et al., 2019). Further analysis of this evidence indicates that these findings have been obtained through online panels, rather than probability sampling, an approach widely critiqued for its lack of 'representativeness' (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2010). As a result, this data is not presented as evidence in this report.

However, analysis of survey data from a more reliable source – the *Understanding Society* (2020) survey – does indicate a notably higher prevalence of hunger among young people aged 16-24 in April 2020 than all other age groups, and that this difference in prevalence is statistically significant. Moreover, the qualitative aspect of the FSA's research on food experiences during lockdown (see Connors et al., 2020) did uncover distinctive impacts of Covid-19 on the food insecurity of young people. It found that young people aged under 25 had already been living with considerable financial insecurity before the Covid-19 pandemic, with the outbreak and subsequent locking down of the economy tipping them into poverty and pronounced food insecurity (Connors et al., 2020). The young respondents described having particularly minimal, if any, cash reserves to fall back on when they were displaced from their jobs or their incomes were reduced through being furloughed, with spending on food the only outgoing they were able to reduce from already tight household budgets.

This is an important point because, as with poverty and wider inequalities, Covid-19 has exacerbated problems that already existed, including young people's food insecurity. Food insecurity was rising in the UK prior to the pandemic. Controlling for socioeconomic variables, the probability of low-income adults experiencing food insecurity rose from 27.7% in 2004 to 45.8% in 2016 (Loopstra et al., 2019). It has more than doubled during lockdown, however, with 1 in 4 young people under the age of 25 now affected (Connors et al., 2020).

## Impact of youth food insecurity

It is important to better understand youth food insecurity because of the particularly acute penalties it carries for young people, who are at a higher risk of long-term damage from inadequate food and nutrition than older adults (Centrepont, 2019; Dush, 2020). As with the more significant and more enduring scarring effects inflicted by unemployment on young people relative to older working-age groups (McQuaid, 2017), extensive research suggests that the impact of experiencing food insecurity during youth carries both short- and long-term disadvantages for young people (McIntyre et al., 2013; Bocquier et al., 2015; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). These penalties are typically concentrated around young people's physical and mental health and wellbeing, and include higher risks of:

- Malnutrition;
- Weight gain;
- Exhaustion;
- Low mood;
- Elevated levels of stress, anxiety and depression;
- Smoking and drinking alcohol.

Studies have also identified significant links between experiencing food insecurity at a young age and lower educational attainment, and a greater likelihood of experiencing other social problems, including restricted access to healthcare, poor housing outcomes, and worse income security (Baer et al., 2015; Bocquier et al., 2015). Indeed, researchers have argued that youth food insecurity carries so many severe mental, physical and social penalties that it should be screened for in health and education settings to enable early intervention (Baer et al., 2015; Dush, 2020).

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the current knowledge base on youth food insecurity. Youth food insecurity shares a number of commonalities with general experiences of food insecurity among other age groups, particularly in terms of it being a problem rooted in low incomes or problems with welfare benefits. However, research evidence also suggests that not only are young people disproportionately more likely to be exposed to these and other risk factors of food insecurity, but also that there are distinctive drivers of food insecurity that are linked to being young, including heightened exposure to homelessness, discriminations in the labour market and social security system, a perceived lack of budgeting and food experience, and the disproportionate amount of damage inflicted on young people by unprecedented economic downturn (e.g. Covid-19).

Young people are therefore more at risk of experiencing food insecurity and of being impacted by it in particularly negative and enduring ways that link with other aspects of youth socioeconomic disadvantage. At the same time, however, youth food insecurity can be harder to identify, due to a range of factors, including young people's commitment to independence and autonomy, their tendency to downplay or conceal their food insecurity while prioritising the food needs of other members of their household, and because they prefer to manage their food insecurity, where possible, through informal social support or through a range of strategies that are underpinned by independence and resourcefulness. As a result, young people are underrepresented among users of food banks and other emergency food provision, further concealing their food insecurity.

Despite this, significant gaps exist at the policy and practice levels, where there has been an apparent lack of interest or intervention in youth food insecurity in the UK. There has also been a pronounced lack of media coverage of youth food insecurity, despite mounting public concern about rising food insecurity and food bank usage across the country. These gaps are striking when compared with media and policy activity around youth homelessness, for example, a problem based on an equally essential human need but that has garnered substantially more activity and interest among policymakers and practitioners than has young people's access to food.

Moreover, while numerous insights have been gained from previous studies, there are some limitations to the current knowledge base. There are two broad bodies of work on youth food insecurity. One is a largely quantitative literature located within health sciences that is focused on youth food insecurity's physical and mental health implications. The other is more policy-orientated, and is overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of homeless young people. Cutting across both literatures is a disproportionate focus on the experiences and outcomes of teenagers, and a lack of work in the UK context, with most studies based in North America or Europe. As a result, a lot of young people are not included in this knowledge base, and qualitative research is particularly thin on the ground. Moreover, there is a lack of research with young people that speaks to the influence of Covid-19, despite its disproportionate impact on this group. This study therefore adopts a qualitative approach to exploring youth food insecurity in the UK with young adults living under Covid-19.

## 4. Findings

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research. It draws on the data generated from 13 qualitative interviews with young people, aged 18 to 26, living in Edinburgh and London. The interviews addressed the study's research questions and findings are therefore focused on these key themes, which form the sub-sections of this chapter: the driving factors behind youth food insecurity; young people's experiences and management of food insecurity; the impact of youth food insecurity; and experiences of food-related support.

### Driving factors behind youth food insecurity

This study uncovered a range of drivers behind youth food insecurity. These included both those that are widely recognised to trigger food insecurity more broadly across a range of age groups, but also some that appear to be more distinctively tied to youth experiences and circumstances.

#### **Low incomes and high living costs**

Low income was the root cause of all the participants' previous or current food insecurity, and this was the case before the Covid-19 lockdown, even for the employed participants. Numerous participants' incomes were simply insufficient to reliably meet essential needs, with food insecurity the most common outcome. For example, Lucy, a 26-year-old living in Edinburgh was experiencing chronic food insecurity, despite being one of only two participants in the sample to have a full-time job:

*All the money that I earn, like, my whole salary, just goes to bills that I have to pay, so there is nothing really left for shopping, or not enough to eat well, let me put it that way, to eat healthy. So, that money comes from my dad and that's what I use for food shopping; I need that to buy food.*

A key difference in the sample was that all of the students lived in Edinburgh, and these participants were able to access additional sources of income beyond employment. During the academic year, they were in receipt of student bursaries and loans which topped their part-time incomes up to full-time and largely guarded against food insecurity. In London, however, all but one of the participants were unemployed, and derived their income exclusively from Universal Credit. This difference largely stems from how the participants were sampled in London (through a youth homelessness charity), so is not representative of a difference between the cities per se. However, it did mean that opportunities for increasing income were significantly more restricted for the young people living in London, with ramifications for their food insecurity.

Participants who were not students and who were employed on a part-time basis or derived their income from welfare benefits just did not have sufficient incomes to feel financially secure and evade intermittent bouts of food insecurity:

*I guess just the food prices and also the wages that I get... When you pay all the other bills off, there's not very much that you're left with at the end of the month. (Cara, 22, Edinburgh)*

*It's hard... It's like, with the money you get, it's literally you just have to buy essential food... You have to be really economical with your money as well. (Stacey, 20, London)*

Those in employment were heavily dependent on overtime, the unpredictable unavailability of which – whether through lockdown or at other times – triggered severe economic hardship:

*I was only on a part-time job, but I was getting overtime for the first two months. Then they cut all our overtime, and so that was my moment I was living on £400 a month, paying all my bills and contributing towards gas and leccy, and sofa-surfing, as well as having to travel to work every day. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

*I was only doing maximum of like 20 hours a week paid, the rest of it was unpaid. It definitely didn't make it easy to be able to afford food. I say food, I mean proper nutritious food that's actually healthy and it's going to meet the requirements of the human body's nutritious system. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

In the case of this study, which was located in Edinburgh and London, these low incomes were mixed with the high living costs associated with living in these cities, and this was another contributory factor to the participants' experiences of food insecurity. Participants described battling against high housing and food costs, with some having moved into these cities from smaller towns or different cities in Scotland and England, triggering food insecurity:

*I came to Edinburgh and just didn't really properly think things through... I really didn't have money because of the expensive rent... I didn't realise how expensive food shopping was here, compared to in smaller towns. It all just took me a bit by shock and I kind of got myself in a financial rut. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

Indeed, one driving factor behind many of the participants' food insecurity was moving out; a good example of a risk factor to food insecurity that is more distinctively tied to youth. When participants were asked if they could pinpoint the beginning of their food insecurity, many pointed to them leaving their family household for the first time:

*I would say since I moved in... When I became a bit more independent, it was a bit of a struggle, just because I wasn't living in a family household where I would have to just do the shopping with money that had been given to me. I actually had to do my own shopping. I had my own money to budget with. I feel like it was fine when I was working and living at home, but then it got really downhill when I moved to supported accommodation. (Stacey, 20, London)*

*I was living with my aunt and my mum, so I didn't really have to contribute that much toward food; there was always food there. Obviously, since I've started living on my own, it's obviously been a little bit more difficult... The money just goes. (Rachel, 22, London)*

Numerous participants had been shocked at the expense of housing and living costs, causing them to reduce their food bill; the most flexible of their budgets:

*I wish I had all the money in the world... But of course, you don't have a choice in paying your bills, like, I need to pay the rent, I need to pay my electricity, my gas, water, council tax, all that. There's no choice in that, and the food bill is the only thing you've got a little bit of control over in the sense that... If I need to do with £10 a week, I can make do. (Lucy, 26, Edinburgh)*

Accordingly, youth food insecurity was the product of the participants' low incomes, which were regularly insufficient in the midst of the high living costs associated with living in Edinburgh and London. Importantly, being employed did not automatically protect against food insecurity for the participants, largely due to the nature of their employment, which was typically part-time and/or low paid. In this sense, there was not much difference between the participants in employment and those who derived their incomes from welfare benefits in terms of being able to afford food, aside from having the option to increase income through overtime for those in employment.

### **Perceived lack of budgeting/cooking skills and experience**

Leaving the family household intersected with another related contributory factor to youth food insecurity amongst the participants, who felt constrained by a lack of budgeting and cooking skills and experience. This was a largely universal issue in the sense that it did not seem to affect participants significantly differently, regardless of their circumstances. All

of the participants described feeling inexperienced with money and food, and felt that this had played a role in their food insecurity.

Most had not had to balance budgets before they moved out and had received no guidance on this, making affording food on top of household bills challenging. This was typically raised in connection with participants' earliest experiences of food insecurity, though some had very recently moved out of their family households and were struggling with this at the time of interview:

*[It was] my first flat, so I wasn't really used to how to budget and how to save, so that became a problem. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

*I had my son when I was 16 and then got my house 4 months after he was born, so I was just kind of chucked in at the deep end... I had to learn how to budget when I had my wee one but obviously that was quite challenging... I'm quite on top of that [now]... Because I've been in situations like that before where I've not been able to afford food. (Faye, 25, Edinburgh)*

In addition to perceived budgeting issues, a number of participants also felt that their lack of cooking skills and food literacy was a contributory factor to their food insecurity. As with budgeting, this was typically raised in connection with their earlier experiences of food insecurity, but was an ongoing challenge for others, particularly for those living alone:

*I think definitely if I knew maybe how to cook healthier things with things that were cheaper in the shops, I don't know... I'm not really one who knows how to cook... I think if there was a way I could find out how to cook better things, that would make my access to food a bit easier. (Cara, 22, Edinburgh)*

For Faye, 25, from Edinburgh, this had at one stage been a major barrier to benefiting from food bank provision:

*I thought that [the food bank] was good but I thought that it was a bit rubbish that they gave you three days' worth of food and a lot of the stuff they were giving me... I was grateful at the time but probably now I'd be like, 'I could make this', because I have more understanding about cooking now, whereas at the time I was a bit like, 'what do I do with this?' (Faye, 25, Edinburgh)*

As with moving out, the participants' perceived lack of experience with budgeting and cooking are further examples of enhanced risk factors to food insecurity that are more closely linked with youth; a period of life marked by change, emerging independence, and learning.

### **Shared living environments**

Homelessness and housing insecurity were major driving factors of food insecurity for many of the participants, for whom it did not just affect their ability to afford food, but also posed more environmental barriers to food security. Many had previously lived, or were currently residing, in supported accommodation, and reported a range of issues that worsened their food insecurity. Having their small amount of food stolen from shared kitchen spaces was raised by many participants, for example:

*You didn't ever really leave your food in the kitchens in the homeless. Your food would get stolen, like your emotion would also get stolen. (Kira, 21, Edinburgh)*

Other issues related to the lack of clean, safe cooking spaces or appliances to cook full, healthy meals in hostel environments. Additionally, participants discussed having very limited private space for fresh/frozen foods, with the latter preventing them from building up a store of cheap and nutritious food, creating a reliance on convenience meals:

*[The hostels] just either had a microwave or sometimes you only got a kettle. Everyone had a kettle, but sometimes that's all you had, so you lived off meal deals. You'd go and buy a meal deal for your lunch and your dinner, and for breakfast you'd boil an egg in a kettle. (Kira, 21, Edinburgh)*

*I have a mini fridge and my fridge is literally the size of a drawer, so it's like, I can't store lots of food in the fridge and that's what lasts long, so yes, it's just a lot of issues... There was actually an incident where I did store some of my food in the communal freezer and my meat was going missing and stuff, so I just, I have to shop small now. (Stacey, 20, London)*

Most of the participants who were not living in supported accommodation were sharing spaces with people in similar circumstances to themselves financially, and a number of the participants' food insecurity was worsened by supporting others and prioritising other people's food needs above their own (see Cairns, 2018):

*I've got a habit of taking on a lot of people into my life if they're in bad financial situations and stuff like that, so a lot of the time I split what I earn with people who live with me. That's meant we've not had enough for the two of us or the three of us or whatever's going on at that point. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

Others had benefited from sharing flats with friends and flatmates, who would share food with them when they had run out of money.

Participants made frequent references to the impact of shared living on their food insecurity. For those living in supported accommodation, their ability to maintain nutritionally adequate diets was compromised by environmental factors associated with hostels, where there is a lack of cooking space and private food storage, as well as incidences of food theft. In this sense, participants in London, who all lived in supported accommodation, were struggling the most with food insecurity at the time of interview. Others, who were sharing flats with friends and flatmates, spoke of eating less in order to feed them during difficult times, or of benefiting from this when the situation was reversed. These findings testify to the relational dimension of youth food insecurity, particularly given the norm of shared living among young people.

### ***Covid-19 related drivers***

The interviews were conducted with young people during lockdown and Covid-19 was a key factor in many of the participants' food insecurity in a number of ways. Its impact was commonly associated with the significant reduction of the participants' income, due either to furloughing or losing their jobs during lockdown. 4 of the participants were furloughed at the time of interview and 3 had lost their jobs.

### ***Furlough and underemployment***

Findings suggest that furlough has been a more difficult experience for young people, given their overrepresentation in zero hours and otherwise casualised forms of employment. Many had experienced substantial drops in income due to being furloughed on the basis of their contracted hours; a figure much lower than their typical number of hours worked:

*If I was at work, I would, obviously, always do overtime, so I'd be making more money. Now obviously that I'm home, it's like I'm getting paid the exact amount because of my exact hours... It definitely is making it a lot worse. (Rachel, 22, London)*

Holly, 18, and Stacey, 20, both from London, had recently been made unemployed by Covid-19, and were now subsisting entirely on Universal Credit, which had significantly lowered their incomes:

*I'm so used to working – I was literally working six days a week, ten hours a day. I was so used to just grafting. 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)*



*I have less than a week's wage to last me a month basically. So, it's really hard because I am used to getting about, I would say, £600 every two weeks or something... So, it's a big difference. (Stacey, 20, London)*

Others had been impacted by a lack of employee protections associated with casualised, precarious forms of employment that are overwhelmingly occupied by young people. Holly, 18, had been working in a commission-based role doing door-to-door sales in London before the pandemic, and as such had very few employee protections or rights to furlough provisions when lockdown was imposed, for example. Some were also very unsure about whether they had a job to return to post-lockdown:

*Honestly, with [my job], they are paying us until the end of June. They could say anything. They could tell us that they don't want to pay us anymore. I just don't know. (Rachel, 22, London)*

*[I'm] furloughed, but because my dad – I work in hospitality and he's the head chef... He quite gently said to me the other day, 'you should be putting in importance of looking for another job'. So furloughed, but... I'm not really sure I'd call that employed anymore. (Alex, 22, Edinburgh)*

Young people's overrepresentation in casual, precarious jobs – and the lack of employee protections these provide – was therefore a key driving factor behind some of the participants' food insecurity. Those participants who had been able to continue working during lockdown had largely maintained their income level from before lockdown, and these were all young people who lived in Edinburgh. However, this was complicated for the students in the sample, who were unable to top up their incomes with overtime – or with their student loans – over the summer months, and were facing acute food insecurity as a result.

#### Universal Credit student furlough trap

For participants living in Edinburgh that were in post-compulsory education, lockdown had rendered an often already difficult summer period even more challenging. In Scotland, students of further and higher education are eligible for means-tested financial support through bursaries and student loans from the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). This support is restricted to the academic year, and therefore concludes at the end of spring, at which point students would typically try to top-up their incomes through paid work and overtime (Scottish Funding Council, 2020).

Lockdown conditions had made this near-impossible for the participants this summer, however, and this was raised by every student in Edinburgh as a key factor in their food insecurity. Complicating this further, some had been denied in their applications for Universal Credit, which excludes full-time students from eligibility. As such, some of the young people in Edinburgh were caught in a position of being furloughed to the value of far fewer hours than they would typically work, unable to make up the shortfall in their SAAS payments through work and overtime, and unable to claim Universal Credit:

*I applied for benefits, but they told me because I'm about to enter my fourth year of a four-year degree, because I'm still in full-time education, I don't qualify for UC. My furlough pay is 80 per cent of ten hours... which is absolutely nothing. (Alex, 22, Edinburgh)*

*I put aside some money from my last university payment, so I essentially have just been buying bare minimum... Pretty much whenever I've not got my university loan, I've just been scraping by. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

As a result, alongside participants who had lost their jobs entirely, the students in the sample, who were all based in Edinburgh, had been disproportionately affected by lockdown in terms of reductions in income.

#### Changing expenses and food availability during lockdown

In addition to reductions in their income, some participants' outgoings had increased as a result of lockdown. This most seriously affected the one parent in the sample – Faye, a 25-year-old single mother living in Edinburgh, whose expenses

had risen due to her and her son being home full-time, placing strain on the already carefully balanced and limited household budget:

*It's obviously quite difficult because you're in the house quite a lot, you're spending a lot more on food... I've spent an absolute fortune because he's obviously getting breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and supper here, so that's a massive extra cost compared to what I would normally be paying... With me being at home all the time as well, I'm eating a lot more as well, I think a lot of it is probably comfort-eating. (Faye, 25, Edinburgh)*

This is consistent with recent research data on the impact of Covid-19 on household expenses (Connors et al., 2020). Other participants described the opposite, however, and felt they were spending, and sometimes eating, less due to restrictions on their activities:

*I've not done a lot of the stuff I would usually do I suppose. So, in that sense, I've got more money to spend on food. (Lucy, 26, Edinburgh)*

*With being inside most of the day, I'm not needing to eat as much... Obviously, not doing a 13 hour shift every day, has made a huge difference on what I'm actually needing to eat. (Alex, 22)*

Some of the participants in this study were also affected by lockdown in terms of panic-buying rendering basic staples either less available or affordable. Participants described feeling concerned by the lack of cheap, economy brand food available in supermarkets during the early stages of lockdown, food that was integral to them avoiding food insecurity on an ongoing basis:

*I was at the market the other day and I found out prices had gone up for stuff like bananas... So, yes, that was definitely a shock to me, so now I'm looking for other sorts of options... where I can get [food] for an affordable price. (Lily, 23, London)*

In this sense, the participants' preferred food options, often selected on the basis of price, being filling, or being healthy, were less available during lockdown. A healthy diet was important to many of the participants, and their ability to attain this had been significantly compromised by their reduced incomes during lockdown, which was reducing the nutritional quality and variety of their diets:

*I wish I could get some more healthier stuff, but I think just now I'll go for stuff that's on the cheaper side, so I'll go for frozen pizzas and the pastas and the things that are just cheap, to save some money. (Cara, 22, Edinburgh)*

*I don't know but now I'm eating without any meat. Usually I love to eat fish, but I can't afford that right now... It's too expensive. (Omar, 25, London)*

Similarly, restrictions on income, mobility and availability had rendered some of the participants' established strategies for shopping for food cheaply more difficult.

As this section has demonstrated, there are a range of contributory factors behind young people's food insecurity. Some of these are well-recognised drivers of food insecurity known to also affect other age groups; i.e. low incomes, high living costs, and various impacts associated with Covid-19. However, some appear more distinctively tied to the experiences of young people, who have less experience of managing budgets and less food literacy, and who are more likely to be underemployed, homeless, to share living spaces, and to be excluded from social security protections, all of which raise their risks of food insecurity.

## Impact of food insecurity

In line with the extensive body of research testifying to the very serious and damaging impacts of food insecurity on young people (McIntyre et al., 2013; Baer et al., 2015; Dush, 2020), the participants had been adversely impacted by their food insecurity in ways that involved their mental and physical health and wellbeing. A number of participants described the anxiety of worrying about where to source food or money, a concern that underpinned their lives with stress:

*The difference in my anxiety levels now that I've found out I'm getting my [Universal Credit] payment, is just insane... I'm a person who does stress a lot, and money is a very big stress for me... When I've not been secure, I've often relapsed into things like addiction and eating disorders and stuff along those lines, so it really has impacted my mental health. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

This consistent stress would exhaust participants, many of whom felt physically exhausted and depressed from either eating too little or from subsisting on nutritionally inadequate diets:

*It's very stressful to be honest... It has been very stressful at times and of course, when you don't eat well, I was very tired... So, yes, I was very tired, very low energy levels and very stressed, so very worried as well, very anxious. I think I was very down at times. (Lucy, 26, Edinburgh)*

*It just makes my mood quite low if I don't eat and stuff, especially because I'm in isolation. (Stacey, 20, London)*

Contrary to common stereotypes about the food choices of young adults, the majority of participants in this study recognised the importance of eating healthy, balanced diets, and when this was compromised during food insecurity, it took a significant toll on their energy levels and mood:

*I've noticed a really strong link between if I've not eaten enough of the right things in a day, I can find myself just getting into a bit of a crabbit mood and getting a lot more miserable that day and the next... That, and just general energy and lethargy... (Leo, 22, Edinburgh)*

*The way it works out is normally when I get paid, the first week, that's when I eat healthily because I can buy fruit and vegetables and I buy chicken and mince and things like that and then it's like the last week when I get paid, that's when I'll be more on the pizzas and the noodles... and that week is normally where I just feel like crap the whole week; whereas the week before that, I'm feeling like I've got so much energy and I feel like I can do anything. (Cara, 22, Edinburgh)*

The low mood that resulted from their hunger or the poor quality of their diets could often create tensions in their shared living environments:

*I've been certainly more highly strung and a lot grumpier, which unfortunately my flatmate has had to endure. (Alex, 22, Edinburgh)*

Subsisting on cheap, nutritionally inadequate foods also meant that participants felt physically unwell, which intersected powerfully with their emotional state:

*I just did not feel good at all. I feel like I was really prone to illness, as well as my girlfriend... Obviously, since that time, I've done a lot of reading and stuff about nutrition and I know that gut health is super important. So, I know that definitely had an effect on who I was as a person, back then... It definitely affects your mood, but when it is such a long period of time, it starts to feel like it's more your mood is now your personality. (Lewis, 23)*

For some participants, the impact of food insecurity was more acute in ways that linked to their backgrounds and ongoing health problems. Faye, 25, from Edinburgh suffered from Irritable Bowel Syndrome, which was aggravated when her lack of money forced her to eat cheaper 'junk' foods that worsened its symptoms. Sasha, 21, from Edinburgh was one of three participants for whom the nature and impact of food insecurity was particularly troubling due to a history of eating disorders. In Sasha's case, this meant that, during periods of food insecurity, where food choice was limited, the risk of relapsing into anorexia was high:

*As somebody with a history of having an eating disorder... it is quite hard for me to prioritise feeding myself. Not having the money to do that does have an impact on the amount I eat in a more restrictive sense of the word, because I'll think... I should feed other people before I feed myself and things like that. Not being able to buy the kinds of food that I consider to be 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.*

The participants were therefore severely impacted by their food insecurity, particularly in terms of their mental health and wellbeing, with elevated levels of stress, anxiety, depression and low mood widely reported. The tendency for the nutritional quality of diets to be severely compromised during food insecurity was particularly impactful, with participants making direct links between the quality of their food intake and their levels of physical and mental health. Participants with existing physical and mental health conditions were particularly acutely impacted by food insecurity, which significantly raised the risk of their health being seriously debilitated.

## Experiences and management of food insecurity

The participants described a range of strategies for managing their food insecurity and avoiding hunger. Participants typically utilised several or all of these tactics, depending on their availability and on their circumstances, which could change from episode to episode of food insecurity.

### **Shopping in cheap shops for cheap foods**

Buying food cheaply was a key strategy among participants for managing their food insecurity. Almost all of the participants described preferring to shop in more budget-friendly outlets, like Aldi or Lidl, for their food. They often expressed pride at how cheaply they could get a week's worth of food from these stores; something they had perfected over several bouts of financial precarity and food insecurity:

*I would say I do go to shops like Lidl... I do go there quite a lot because I've found that other supermarkets are more expensive. (Stacey, 20 London)*

*We've got loads of budget supermarkets [nearby]... So, I can very much do a weekly shop for about £10 for myself if I really put the effort in and, because I've had to live on that before, it's more so something I'm able to do. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

Over the years, the participants had grown savvy about taking advantage of offers in supermarkets, or of buying especially cheap food that had been discounted due to being close to expiry or because of faults in packaging. This was particularly important for young people during homelessness:

*The 'Whoopsies', if you go along [to the shop] 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... You learn the streets after a while. (Kira, 21, Edinburgh)*

Others were prepared to eat expired food. This was either out of sheer necessity or was a deliberate money-saving choice, with a number of participants sceptical about the validity of food expiry dates:

*There's a few different places... that give out food that's past its sell-by date. I've used those places a few times, and you just pay what you feel or however much you've got at the time... Those have been helpful in tight situations, getting things like vegetables and bread and stuff like that, because sell-by dates are just a bit of rubbish in my opinion. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

Key to all of the participants' management of food insecurity was securing cheap food, and, when budgets were particularly tight, this often meant that they were reliant upon less nutritional foods than they would like:

*A lot of what I relied on was the cheap Birdseye chicken nuggets. I remember, me and my girlfriend, at one time, ate them nearly every day for a month. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

*To be honest, I've just been eating a lot of rubbish, I've been having maybe two meals a day, just lunch and dinner, and then just eating rubbish... It's a bit easier because junk food is obviously a bit cheaper than healthy food. (Faye, 25, Edinburgh)*

Shopping for cheap food was an important strategy for all of the participants, regardless of their employment or housing status.

### **Reduced portions and skipped meals**

Another strategy used by the participants to mitigate their food insecurity was rationing portions and meals. Numerous participants skipped breakfast or had adopted grazing eating patterns, relying more on snacks than full meals, due to insufficient money for food:

*I try to [eat three meals a day] but sometimes I have to ration my portions or meals just because of the fact that I can't get that much food. (Stacey, 20, London)*

*I usually skip breakfast. (Rachel, London)*

This was a common strategy among the participants, who preferred to address their food insecurity themselves rather than seek informal or formal support. When asked how he would try to manage his food insecurity should his pending Universal Credit application be denied, Leo, 22, from Edinburgh, exhibited these sentiments:

*I'd try and ration my food to make it last as long as I could, quite frankly. I'm a very grit, barebones kind of, I will get through this, kind of person. Whilst it probably wouldn't be the best, I'd try and get some multivitamins to just keep myself going. I'd eke it out until something else turned up.*

Reducing portions and skipping meals was as common a strategy for managing food insecurity as shopping for cheap foods and was equally universal across the sample, in that it was something that could be negotiated and deployed independently on a needs basis.

### **Sourcing money/food opportunistically**

Following this trend of preferring to manage food insecurity independently, the participants described a range of resourceful tactics for sourcing food or money opportunistically during bouts of food insecurity. Lewis, 23, had moved to Edinburgh from a small town in Scotland and had immediately experienced prolonged food insecurity due to higher rents, higher living costs and the inability to access full-time employment. In his interview, he described constantly looking for opportunities to access money to pay for food and build his cash reserves, despite working a 60-hour week, 40 of which were unpaid at an internship:

*How I got over it basically just where I could I'd pick up extra shifts at Starbucks. I then started doing some, what was it, it was like an online survey type thing. One of those websites where you do online surveys and you get*

*pennies for them. I didn't get much for it, but I was able to maybe put aside £20 every month, or something like that. It was just little things like that that allowed me to save up.*

Others had benefited from sourcing food itself opportunistically, often through either their workplace (if employed in hospitality) or through their social connections. For example, Alex, 22, had eaten almost half of her weekly meals for free at her job in a restaurant, before being furloughed. While couch-surfing and severely financially precarious, Sasha, 21, had benefited significantly from her friend's employment at a local Costa café, which became her only source of food for a period of time:

*For a very long time I was living on Costa sandwiches, because my friend worked there and got all the out of date sandwiches. I just lived on Costa sandwiches and 20p microwave rice for a very long time, and that wasn't particularly nutritional.*

This strategy was particularly important and most commonly used for those participants with experience of homelessness, who had acquired a street-savviness from their often-lengthy experiences of destitution. Participants in London, who were all living in supported accommodation, described sourcing food opportunistically through their support staff and through donated food, whereas participants in Edinburgh sourced food and money through their employment or personal social connections.

### **Careful budgeting and meal-planning**

A key strategy for managing food insecurity that was consistently raised by participants was careful, strict budgeting and advance meal-planning; skills that they had actively worked on enhancing since their earlier experiences of food insecurity. Several participants directly credited their higher levels of food security to their improved budgeting and food-shopping/food literacy skills:

*I'm definitely earning a bit more, but I think I'm just better at budgeting now and I make sure that the day I get paid, I just go off and shop straight away. (Cara, 22, Edinburgh)*

*I think we're smarter with what we're buying. So, we're buying food that we can make in bulk. We buy a lot of soup, because it's quite cheap to buy potatoes, leeks, carrots and stuff like that. So, we're buying stuff so we can make multiple of it. So, I think we're just being a bit smarter about it. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

This seemed more difficult for some of the participants in London, however, who were restricted by living in supported accommodation and by what some participants described as a 'benefits trap', which hindered their ability to build up cash reserves and budget effectively:

*Where I am as well, I don't know if you know, but when you are living in a hostel, the more you earn, the more your rent will be owed, the less Housing Benefit you get... When you are in shared accommodation, you're very limited to the stuff you can do to make more money. (Stacey, 20, London)*

Moreover, improved budgeting and food literacy was often enabled – at least in part – by having an upbringing where these skills were emphasised by parents and caregivers, meaning that participants who did not have close familial relationships, or who had more chaotic home lives, often found this a slower and more challenging learning process. In the main, however, participants credited their improved budgeting skills and food literacy to significant improvements in their food security. This was something they described actively working on during their experiences of poverty.

However, it is important to note that many of the participants who described working on their budgeting and cooking skills were still experiencing food insecurity, which is unsurprising given that food insecurity is rooted in structural factors like low income, rather than individual deficits like 'poor' budgeting. Moreover, as this section has demonstrated, far from lacking in skills and experience, the participants drew from a range of sophisticated skills and strategies to manage their limited resources and cope with food insecurity.

As Ruth Lister (2004: 133) has argued, coping with poverty, including food insecurity, 'is an active process of juggling, piecing together and going without'. Over time, and under considerable pressure, these participants had had to learn complex skills of managing time, money and limited resources in order to get by. As young people navigate these experiences, they develop a refined set of strategies to manage their food insecurity. For the participants in this study, these strategies were underpinned by notions of independence. In this sense, many participants had a tendency to locate responsibility for their food insecurity, and certainly for managing it, within themselves.

## Perceptions and experiences of accessing formal and informal food support

The participants were asked about their experiences of seeking and accessing support during interviews. There was a pronounced preference for informal forms of food support – getting help from family and friends – above accessing food banks and other relevant organisations. However, even accessing support from friends and family was not without complication and discomfort for the participants, who had a strong sense of personal responsibility, and who cherished their independence.

### **Informal support experiences: friends and family**

Many of the participants managed their food insecurity, at least partially, within their social circle. Participants sometimes ate at the homes of family members or friends when they ran out of money, and for some this had become a regular fixture; something that was simply built into their typical social routine and relationships:

*I'll go to my auntie's for dinner during the week. (Cara, 22, Edinburgh)*

*My best friend is living in Shoreditch... so, when I feel hungry, I am going there to grab some meals... a few times a week. (Omar, 25, London)*

The most common form of informal support identified in this study was the gifting of food or money from relatives, however. Again, this was either something that occurred more sporadically, when money had run out, or had become more routinised, dependent on the nature of the participants' food insecurity. For example, Lucy, 26, relied on a monthly allowance from her father in order to afford food, whereas others got more periodic support:

*I'm really lucky because if [my mum] wasn't there for me then I would be rationing meals... She just asks me if I have food... I'd say, if it's not a big shop, then every, if it's a small shop, then it's every two weeks, but if it's a big shop, then maybe every three to four weeks. (Stacey, 20, London)*

*Dad has brought a big bag of shopping, which has been five kilos of rice and a ten-kilo bag of pasta and just like cupboard staples. In the last three weeks, there's been two bags of that, which has been helpful, because it's just stuff like that... that you can use for a lot of different things and will go a longer way. (Alex, 22, Edinburgh)*

Participants were more comfortable about accepting food parcels than money from their parents or other family members; with the latter often engendering uncomfortable feelings of guilt or dependence. In that sense, while accessing food or money from relatives and friends has emerged as the most common/popular strategy for managing food insecurity in other studies with young people (e.g. Popkin et al., 2016; Waxman et al., 2016; Connors et al., 2020), there was relatively low uptake of it in this study.

Participants were often very uncomfortable about asking for support, particularly from parents, and this was for a range of reasons. First, the participants' parents often had limited resources themselves, making participants reluctant to ask for, or accept, their support:

*I wasn't always ready to ask them for help... Only because I didn't want to disturb their sort of budgeting on their side. I didn't know what was coming in, what was going out, in terms of food, so I felt like if I was to ask it might just disturb their own budgeting when it comes to food. (Lily, 23, London)*

*If I was really that desperate, I would ask my dad for it, but he's never really got a lot of money either because he's on benefits himself because he's ill. (Faye, 25, Edinburgh)*

Beyond being inaccessible due to their parents' lack of resources, informal support was also not available for some participants due to them being estranged from their families, or having complex relationships with their parents. This was particularly true for those with experience of homelessness, who tended to have more strained familial relationships.

Second, and particularly key, the participants typically had a strong sense of independence, and pride, and felt that asking for support was symbolic of a failure on their part as adults who should be able to manage their problems on their own. This had sometimes stopped them from initially accepting support, even in times of acute need when this support was made available:

*I've got kind of a lot of pride, so I don't really like asking for help, but when it goes get to that point, I know I have got people that, without blinking an eye, they would help me. I'd rather see what I can really get done on my own, how far I can get it done on my own, rather than just asking for help... I was raised a certain way. You don't really ask anybody for nothing. (Holly, 18, London)*

*I know I could, 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 the world, I've moved up to Edinburgh, I'm doing this on my own, I can't then now call my mum and ask her to send me some food... I feel like 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)*

Seeking support for food from friends or relatives was therefore typically a deeply uncomfortable experience for the participants, who were committed to navigating their young adulthoods independently. These sentiments were pervasive across the sample and both case cities. These findings suggest that young people's strong sense of independence, something that is arguably particularly heightened or important during early adulthood, can act as a significant barrier to seeking or accepting support for food insecurity.

### **Formal food support experiences**

As has been found in other studies, and is reflected in usage statistics of food banks and other relevant support agencies, there was very low uptake of formal food support from the participants in this study. This was almost always considered to be a 'last resort' option, when all other tactics had been exhausted, and when in acute crisis. Participants with experience of homelessness described previously accessing other forms of formal support, including from youth homelessness charities like the Rock Trust, DePaul or Centrepont, and had an advanced knowledge of street food provision and other services (e.g. food drives and soup kitchens at churches, Social Bite, and expired food giveaways).

There was less stigma attached to accessing food through some of these services compared to from food banks. This was typically due to the participants' engaging with these organisations for issues beyond their food insecurity, and of having built up strong relationships with them over a longer period, to the point where it felt less like charity and more like part of a broader package of support, skills and empowerment:

*[Rock Trust and YouthLink]... They're also ones that whilst I was going through the hardships, there was a lot of different... Not so much direct support, but by engaging with those organisations it was setting good, positive goals and meeting them. That all helped turn my motivation into, well, getting me walking again. (Leo, 22, Edinburgh)*



Some of the participants' avoidance of food banks was due to the stigma attached to using them. As found in Connors et al.'s (2020) study, unlike sourcing food independently or, for some, from friends or family, accessing food banks felt more like accepting 'charity', which could be uncomfortable; a tension that had to be negotiated alongside their desperate need for food:

*I did feel like a bit of a charity case. It was... like at a time where I couldn't be picky, I couldn't be prideful, and the only thing I really could do was accept this piece of charity that people were offering, and take it. It wasn't exactly the nicest feeling in the world, but yes. I think mentally, I kind of said to myself that I'm going to work really hard so that I never have to do this again, or so my kid never has to do this. (Lewis, 23, Edinburgh)*

Others had been traumatised by bad experiences when using food banks in the past, when they had sometimes felt particularly vulnerable due to their age and the desperateness of their situation:

*They're horrible. At least asking your family, do you know what I mean, it's your family and that, but going to these food banks, you're going in there with not the best characters. You can be young and vulnerable. It's not a good place. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. (Kira, 21, Edinburgh)*

As with their perspectives on informal support, the participants' discomfort with using formal food support was linked to their strong sense of independence and agency, and the belief that they could and should manage their problems themselves. In the case of formal food support, however, this often manifested in the participants feeling undeserving of these services, which they felt should be prioritised for more 'vulnerable' groups. The participants often stated that they would rather scrape by or take on additional jobs to avoid taking food provision that could be used by others:

*Organisations, maybe if it was really my last resort, but I would probably think people with kids and a family could use it more than me. Like, I'll make do with what I can and maybe, I don't know, get another job, or make money another way, so that would be a really last resort... I just think... there's people that could use it so much more than me and I don't want to take it away from them. (Lucy, 26, Edinburgh)*

Accordingly, when participants had turned to food banks, it was often underpinned with a sense of guilt and failure; a feeling of not having done enough on their own:

*Honestly, I feel like, with every time that I need it, I just felt like I hadn't done enough. I'm quite a proud person and I have worked really hard to get where I am, from where I've come from. Whilst I know at that particular food bank, there wouldn't have been that many older folks using it, but at other ones, when you've got folks in their 40s, their 50s, and they're sitting there getting the same food as you. 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)*

Echoing other research findings, then, and the focus of most media coverage around the issue of food insecurity, the participants seemed to perceive of food banks as principally designed to support children, families, and older age groups.

Additionally, as found in other studies, there were also more practical barriers to some of the participants' access to formal support, particularly from food banks. A number of participants said they would have no idea how or where to access them, for example, and others had only engaged with them at the suggestion of a third party. One participant asked the interviewer to signpost her to a local food bank during the interview, for example, whilst others described simply not having that information:

*I've not [used a food bank], just because... I don't know where any are to be honest. (Stacey, 20, London)*

Others had been prevented from using food banks because of rules surrounding their usage – namely, that you must have a registered address, which is a policy in some food banks. Given the number of participants with experience of homelessness, this had been an issue for some of the young people in this study:

*[I haven't used] official food banks in the past, because I've not been at a registered address when I've been struggling. The times I've been struggling I've also not had a flat, so that's, it impacts on your use of the food banks, but I've used a lot of free services in Edinburgh, and I've had a few soups from vans and stuff. (Sasha, 21, Edinburgh)*

Those who had used food banks were extremely grateful for the provision of food in an emergency. It had often made a critical difference to their hunger and mental and physical wellbeing. The kindness of staff had also made an extremely difficult, and often personally embarrassing, situation easier for a number of the young people in this study to cope with. That said, there was a deep-seated resistance to using these services, whether because of a sense of stigma attached to accepting 'charity' or due to feeling undeserving of support that they felt should be prioritised for more obviously 'vulnerable' groups. It should be noted, however, that this aversion to accepting charity or using food banks is not limited to young people, and has been widely reported for older age groups as well (see, for example, Garthwaite, 2016). However, formal support options were also difficult to access for some of the participants, who had low awareness of their availability, location, or usage protocols.

## Conclusion

This chapter analysed the findings from interviews with 13 young people, aged 18-26, with previous or ongoing experience of food insecurity in Edinburgh and London. There was a range of contributory factors to the young people's experiences of food insecurity, some of which were more common to other age groups (e.g. low incomes, high living costs), while others were risks arguably more specifically tied to youth (e.g. leaving home for the first time, a perceived lack of budgeting and food skills/experience).

The lockdown imposed in response to Covid-19, which formed the backdrop to these interviews, had a significant impact on driving or exacerbating the participants' food insecurity and in ways that point to how substantial shocks to the economy and subsequent policy interventions (e.g. furloughing) can either disproportionately affect young people or be experienced differently by them. This was evident in terms of the significant drops in income of those participants furloughed from their jobs, for example, where they were being covered for 80% of their contract hours and not the (much higher) number of hours typically worked. This, combined with students' ineligibility for Universal Credit, the suspension of student loan payments over summer, and the inability to access overtime as normal, meant that lockdown was characterised by intensified financial precariousness and food insecurity.

Food insecurity had a significant impact on participants' mental and physical health and wellbeing, included heightened depression, stress and anxiety, low energy levels, and feeling run down. The participants drew on a range of tactics to manage their food insecurity, including shopping in low-cost supermarkets for cheap foods, reducing portions and skipping meals, sourcing food and money opportunistically through ad-hoc earning opportunities or social connections, and through careful budgeting and meal-planning. Universal to these strategies was the perceived importance of participants managing their food insecurity independently, without relying on other people or 'charity'.

The participants' found seeking or accepting both formal and informal food support difficult, most commonly because it jarred with their powerful sense of, and commitment to, their personal independence, their agency, and their conviction that their lives, and food insecurity, were their personal responsibility to manage. This, combined with sometimes difficult familial relationships, and with the lack of resources of some of the participants' parents, meant that the young people in this study struggled to accept informal support from relatives and friends.

However, there were significantly more barriers to accessing formal support from food banks. For the participants, this was not only rooted in the stigma known to be associated with using food banks, but was also traced to a sense of not

deserving this support, with the young people inadvertently echoing the skewed focus of media coverage by feeling food banks should be prioritised for children, families, and older people, rather than young adults. This, combined with some other practical barriers around low awareness of food banks and their eligibility for them, meant that food banks, and other forms of formal food support, were underused by the young people in this study, despite often pronounced food insecurity. The findings presented in this chapter suggest, however, that this is not down to a lack of need, but rather to a complex range of perceptual and practical barriers that pertain to youth.

## 5. Conclusions, Policy Implications and Recommendations

### Introduction

This report started from the premise that despite young people being at an enhanced risk of experiencing food insecurity, there is a surprising lack of research or policy activity around this issue. This chapter provides an overview of the study's key findings, and addresses its research questions:

- What factors are driving food insecurity among young people?
- What is the impact of youth food insecurity?
- How do young people experience and manage food insecurity?
- How is support perceived, experienced and accessed by young people experiencing food insecurity?

Finally, the implications of the study's findings are considered and some recommendations are made, aimed at central government, practitioners, and the research community.

### Enhanced risk: youth food insecurity is driven by both common and distinctive factors

This study suggests that youth food insecurity is driven by a range of factors. Some of these drivers resonate with existing evidence on what triggers food insecurity for people more broadly, regardless of age, including low incomes, problems with welfare benefits, and the various impacts of Covid-19. Critically, however, young people are more at risk of experiencing these common drivers of food insecurity, which also often carry heavier penalties when experienced in youth. This was most vividly evident in this study with regard to Covid-19, where youth-specific discriminations in the labour market and social security system meant that two key protective interventions (furloughing and Universal Credit) were being experienced and accessed differently by young people, and in ways that often triggered/compounded food insecurity.

In addition to these more common drivers, the study identified a number of additional factors driving youth food insecurity that were more distinctively tied to being young. These included leaving the family household for the first time, a lack of experience with budgeting and food literacy, and relational and environmental factors associated with shared living. These were often experienced in conjunction with the more fundamental causes of food insecurity described above, and considerably enhanced young people's exposure to food insecurity. When combined with young people's higher risks of destitution, poverty and homelessness, these findings imply that young people are at an enhanced risk of experiencing food insecurity relative to other age groups.

### Youth food insecurity carries significant penalties for young people's health and wellbeing

As has been widely reported in other studies, food insecurity posed significant consequences for the participants' mental and physical health and wellbeing. Participants described feeling exhausted, run down and physically unwell as a consequence of hunger or, more commonly, of relying on nutritionally inadequate diets during periods of greater financial hardship and food insecurity. The biggest impact of food insecurity was observable in terms of mental health and wellbeing, however, with participants making direct links between the quantity and quality of their diets and escalating levels of stress, anxiety, depression and short-temperedness. Participants with ongoing or previous physical or mental health problems were particularly vulnerable to these impacts, with food insecurity significantly raising the risk of relapsing into eating disorders and addictions, for example, or jeopardising their health by aggravating the symptoms of existing conditions.

## Young people draw on a range of strategies to manage their food insecurity

The majority of the participants had lived with intermittent or chronic poverty, including food insecurity, for several years. The findings of this study suggest that this experience meant that young people had become skilled and resourceful at coping with persistent economic instability, and had developed a range of established strategies for navigating food insecurity in the process. These strategies included shopping for cheap food, rationing food and skipping meals, sourcing money and food opportunistically through ad-hoc earning opportunities and social connections, and making concerted efforts to improve budgeting and cooking skills.

The participants typically utilised several or all of these strategies when navigating food insecurity, though the availability of these tactics varied across participants/episodes of food insecurity and under the impact of Covid-19, which placed restrictions on budgets, travel and the ability to share food with other people. Underpinning their approaches to managing food insecurity was a sense of independence and agency; these were strategies they could deploy on their own as necessary, and chimed with the participants' tendency to frame their food insecurity as a personal responsibility that should be managed on their own. This carried significant implications for their approaches to food support.

## Accessing and accepting formal or informal food support is particularly challenging for young people

A common finding in previous studies of youth food insecurity and food insecurity more broadly has been the pivotal role of informal support from friends and family. This has been argued to be particularly important for young people, who have been found to eat at the homes of friends and relatives as a way of simultaneously managing and hiding their food insecurity, with informal support in this sense easily disguised as a conventional social activity, particularly for this age group.

While some participants in this study did benefit from food parcels, money and meals from friends and family, informal support did not emerge as a common, popular or comfortable experience for the participants in this study. Seeking support in this way was typically a taxing experience that challenged their sense of self, which was heavily grounded in a sense of independence, self-sufficiency and agency. Informal support was also not evenly available across the sample as some participants had strained or non-existent relationships with their families while other participants' parents or friends were unable to offer support due to a lack of resources of their own.

However, it should be noted that the sample for this study was distinctive and unusual in this sense, as most young adults can and do call on family support, by remaining in, or returning to, the family home, and through sharing meals with people in their social network (e.g. Popkin et al., 2016; Waxman et al., 2016). This is likely to be a key reason why young people are generally underrepresented among food bank users. Social support was missing or problematic for some of the participants in this study, which had necessitated their engagement with food banks and other forms of formal support.

Consistent with the findings of other studies and with the usage statistics of relevant support agencies, there was still relatively low uptake of formal support among the sample, who considered food banks to be a last resort. This reluctance to engage with formal support was linked to the stigma attached to accepting 'charity'. However, it was also strongly linked to its incompatibility with the participants' strong sense of independence and personal responsibility, and was often entangled with their sense of being somehow undeserving of emergency food aid; something they felt should be reserved for more 'deserving', 'vulnerable' people (children and older aged adults). Moreover, there were also more practical barriers to accessing formal support for some of the participants, in terms of ineligibility during homelessness and a lack of awareness about these services and how to engage with them. These findings imply that there are a range of barriers to young people accessing both informal and formal food support, including the weight placed on establishing self-sufficiency and independence in young adulthood, and that young people's relatively low use of food banks should not be interpreted as denoting a lack of need for such support.

## Policy, practice and research implications

The findings of this study, and other relevant research evidence presented in this report, 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. As this and other studies have demonstrated, however, this assumption fails to acknowledge the diversity of youth experiences and how young people's outcomes, support networks and resources are heavily shaped by social class, place, ethnicity and other key social divisions.

In fact, the findings presented in this report 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 age 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. The demographic risks of experiencing things like food insecurity and poverty are vividly exposed during recessions, and the numerous structural factors that disadvantage young people have been brought to the surface under Covid-19 across 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 under Covid-19. It is important to remember that Covid-19 has not *caused* these issues for young people, but exacerbated and exposed them. Indeed, most of the recommendations proposed below are long overdue in their applicability to pre-pandemic Britain, where weak income growth over the last 15 years has stalled typical trajectories of cohort-on-cohort wealth and property accumulation for 'Millennials' and 'Generation X' in ways currently being laid bare by Covid-19 (Resolution Foundation, 2020).

There are actions that can be taken at the local level among practitioners that can help to mitigate youth food insecurity and its effects, but without a national Government-led response, these will only address the symptoms of youth food insecurity, rather than its fundamental drivers.

### The UK Government should:

- Introduce a living wage for young people, in order to better protect them from poverty and build capacity for financial resilience.
- Revise and increase current Universal Credit and Local Housing Allowance rates for under-25s for the same reasons.
- Reconsider the default exclusion of full-time students from income maintenance benefits, given how students have fallen through the cracks between the Job Retention Scheme and Universal Credit during lockdown.
- Retain the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit and extend it to those claiming legacy benefits.
- Design any future furlough schemes and work-related interventions with the underemployment of young people in mind, in order to mitigate against substantial drops in income for young workers.
- Introduce better regulation around zero-hours employment, given young people's greater likelihood of working on such contracts.
- Implement active jobs creation across a range of labour market sectors in order to proactively and comprehensively address the spikes in youth unemployment expected from the pandemic and recession.

### The Westminster Parliament should:

- Acknowledge and prioritise the problem of youth food insecurity in the UK by adding a dedicated stream of work on youth food insecurity to the existing All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on food insecurity.
- Introduce lived experience input to this APPG (as seen in the APPG for Universal Credit, for example).

**The devolved governments should:**

- Make concerted efforts to tackle and minimise poverty among under-25s through devolved powers related to housing, work and social security (e.g. the power to top-up or adjust reserved benefits).
- Incorporate tackling youth specific discriminations in the labour market and their disproportionate exposure to poverty, destitution and homelessness in key policy agendas – including, for example, in the Scottish Government’s current programme of Social Renewal for building a fairer Scotland, and in Fair Start Scotland, the devolved work programme.
- 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.

**Youth organisations should:**

- 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 experiencing food insecurity.
- 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.

**Food bank providers should:**

- 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.
- Work with relevant youth organisations and young people to revise how food support is provided and branded to young people (e.g. a home delivery approach as a potential alternative to in person provision in order to address the stigma attached to visiting food banks).
- Work to improve signposting of young people to existing food aid provision.

**Youth homelessness organisations and supported accommodation providers should:**

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

**Universities and the National Union of Students should:**

- Prepare for the reality of food insecurity among students, especially in the coming months, and particularly given the contentious decision to keep universities and student accommodation open during the pandemic.
- Work to ensure that students have reliable access to sufficient food on campus.
- Lobby to secure access to Universal Credit for a wider group of students.

Finally, there is a need for more studies of this kind in the UK, where there has been a significant lack of youth-focused research on food insecurity. There is a particular need for research that involves important and often particularly marginalised groups of young people, including those from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds, single parents, those living with disabilities, migrants to the UK, and young people who are destitute but not homeless. Studies across a range of geographic contexts, including towns and rural areas, with a diverse representation of young people that are focused on the causes, experiences, impacts and navigations of youth food insecurity will contribute towards developing a more informed evidence base about an issue that has thus far been minimally acknowledged or explored in the UK.

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## About the I-SPHERE / Oak Foundation Internship Programme

The Oak Foundation is an international philanthropic foundation funding projects in conservation, human rights, abuse, housing, learning disabilities, and other social justice issues. In its Housing and Homelessness Programme, the Foundation focuses on preventing homelessness by funding sustainable solutions that improve the economic and social wellbeing of marginalised youth, adults and families. The Institute of Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) at Heriot-Watt University is a leading UK research centre in the fields of housing, poverty and social policy with a strong international reputation. I-SPHERE staff specialise in research on homelessness, destitution, complex needs and other forms of disadvantage. Oak Foundation and I-SPHERE run an internship programme to support the development of a stream of early career researchers to undertake high quality policy and practice applied research.

### About the Author

Charlotte McPherson was the fourth I-SPHERE Oak Foundation intern, completing her internship between January and October 2020. Charlotte's research background and expertise lies in the sociology of youth and social justice, with a particular interest in how social class, place and other key social divisions intersect to shape young people's experiences, opportunities and outcomes. She received her PhD from the University of Stirling in 2020, and is now a Research Associate at King's College London, where she is working on an ESRC project exploring the experiences of young people who do not go to university in England.

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