

# University study exposes growing hunger in South London borough of Lambeth

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A study by Dr Kate Harvey of the University of Reading reveals the devastating impact of food insecurity on a group of children and their parents in Lambeth, a South London borough with a population of 304,000.

The study interviewed 72 parents and 19 children, aged 5 to 11, who are served by Kids Company, a not-for-profit social service agency that supports more than 36,000 at-risk children and young people in London and Bristol.

All study participants experienced some level of food insecurity. More than 90 percent worried about running out of food, and 86 percent experienced the lowest level of food insecurity on the Food Insecurity Survey.

The World Health Organisation World Food Summit of 1996 defined food security as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.”

The lowest level of food insecurity denotes multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. People in the lowest category are more often without food and may experience periods of hunger and malnutrition. Most of the children told interviewers that they sometimes did not have enough food to eat at home. Many reported that food availability at home was erratic, and some reported that most often there was no food at home when they asked for it. One child responded, “If there’s no cereal, I don’t eat anything.”

When another child was asked if there was ever a time they felt hungry at home, the child responded, “Well, sometimes I’m hungry, but then ... I’ll tell my mum and she’ll say ... just like manage with what you have.”

In one distressing interview, a child shared that when the father runs out of money—twice per month—the child

doesn’t eat anything unless supplied by Kids Company. Kids Company is a limited service, and does not provide every meal.

The study reveals that more than 75 percent of parents had reduced the size of their own meals or skipped meals. Twenty percent of parents had gone without food for a whole day.

Parents worked hard to shield their children from the impact of food insecurity. In one example, a “mother ensured the youngest children in the family had home-cooked food when there was an insufficient amount for everyone.”

The University of Reading study found that for the participants, “specific psychological impacts included worry, anxiety and sadness about the family food supply, perceived lack of choice in the foods eaten, and shame and/or fear about being labelled poor because of food insecurity.”

Of the 32 London boroughs, Lambeth is one of the 10 most deprived, with the seventh highest level of child poverty, according to the End Child Poverty charity. Nearly 32 percent of Lambeth’s children live in poverty, with 22 percent of poor children coming from working families. Kids Company reported a 233 percent increase in self-referrals in the year 2012.

In response to the UK government’s 50 percent reduction in core funding to Lambeth, the Labour Party-controlled borough council announced its plans to cut services by more than £200 million between 2010 and 2018. This year alone, the council plans to cut nearly £30 million. One of the hardest hit areas will be youth services, with £6 million in cuts, which include eliminating youth clubs, closing several mobile libraries and reducing the Children’s Services Fund budget by £4.9 million. This includes £1.4 million in cuts by reducing the number of staff at children’s

centres throughout the borough.

Lambeth council has indicated that the cuts will also likely lead to nearly 1,000 local government jobs lost across the borough. The council cynically described the draconian cuts as “responsible budget management.”

In a meeting earlier this year, council leader Lib Peck said they had “prioritised services.” This included the launch of the *Do Your Part* £90 Million Challenge, calling on resident “volunteers” to clean the streets, deliver IT skills training, grow their own food, police their neighbours and maintain council estates.

In addition to asking citizens to provide their own services, the Lambeth council—like others across London—is also asking many of its poorest residents to pay council tax for the first time. For many residents, the new tax bills are the equivalent of two week’s wages, leading many working poor families to have to choose between paying rent and council tax or buying food. Many fall into arrears.

In a July 2014 *Guardian* blog post, Patrick Butler explained what can happen under these circumstances:

“A council tax support-claiming household living in a Band D property in Lambeth would have an annual bill of £197. If they failed to pay and were court summonsed, issued with a liability order and charged costs, £127 would be added to this debt. Following the implementation of new bailiff regulations in April 2014, a minimum of £75 would then be charged by the bailiffs for ‘compliance’, potentially followed by a further £235 when they first attend the household’s property. The net result would lead to an already unmanageable debt of £197 skyrocketing to £634.”

London is home to 100 billionaires, more than any other city in the world. It also has the highest rate of child poverty in Britain. According to the End Child Poverty Commission, in 2013, 40 percent of London wards had a child poverty rate of at least 25 percent.

In 2012, for the first time, Save the Children, which had previously only worked in non-G7 countries, started working in Britain because of the escalating child poverty levels. The charity’s 2014 report on poverty reveals that stagnant wages and government policies such as the “bedroom tax,” together with the lack of council tax relief, mean “the social safety net no longer acts as a sufficient backstop for poor families.”

In the Westminster borough’s Church Street Ward, the poverty rate is 50 percent—the highest in London

and Britain. Knightsbridge and Belgravia, the adjacent borough, has the lowest poverty rate at five percent. Belgravia is home to more millionaires and billionaires per square metre than anywhere on earth. Russian oligarch and Chelsea Football Club owner Roman Abramovich owns two adjacent houses in Lowndes Square, reportedly worth £150 million, a sum which would cover 75 percent of Lambeth’s budget deficit for the next four years.



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