

UK Food Foundation: Four million children have poor diets

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As children return to school for a new academic year, a report by the UK Food Foundation, “Affordability of the UK’s Eatwell Guide,” reveals that nearly 3.7 million children live in families unable to afford a healthy diet.

A healthy diet is defined by the government’s Public Health Eatwell Guide. The Guide splits the diet into a five-category pie chart: fruit and vegetables; potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates; beans, pulses (legumes), fish, eggs, meat and other proteins; dairy and alternatives; and oils and spreads. Each section of the pie chart is based on the proportion of the diet that should come from each category and based on research at Oxford University.

The report shows:

- 3.7 million children in the UK are living in households earning less than £15,860 and are likely to be unable to afford a healthy diet as defined by the government.
- The bottom 20 percent of families would have to spend 42 percent of their after-housing income on food to eat the government’s recommended diet.
- As a proportion of their income, the poorest 20 percent would spend nearly four times what the richest 20 percent of UK families need to spend on food to meet the Eatwell Guide.
- 14 million households (half of all households in the UK) currently do not spend enough to meet the cost of government’s recommended diet.
- Widening inequality is leading to higher rates of childhood obesity in deprived areas, with 26 percent of children in Year 6 (age 11) obese compared to 11 percent in England’s richest communities.

The Eatwell Guide is taught to school age children. Cooking and Nutrition was introduced into the English national curriculum for pupils aged 5-14 years in 2014, following a comprehensive review of the state of food education and culture in primary and secondary schools in England.

According to government estimations, the cost of being able to “eat well” is set at just £5.99 per adult per day or

£41.93 a week. It is impossible to maintain a balanced diet on this meagre budget. The costs are played down and are calculated per portion and not by how much it costs to buy the food in question.

Currently 1.2 million children are entitled to means-tested Free School Meals (FSM), in addition to the universal entitlement of five- to seven-year-olds. With the multiple impact of the introduction of the Universal Credit benefit (devised to cut the welfare rolls), cuts in state services and increasing food prices on an almost daily basis, a meal at school—in addition to school provision of healthy snacks—can be the main source of nutrition children living in poor families receive.

The government has long raised the issue of child obesity—but only to attack the poorest and most vulnerable on the basis that families decide to eat poor quality fatty foods as a choice, as opposed to necessity.

Dr. Megan Blake, a senior lecturer of food security and justice at the University of Sheffield pointed out in an interview with *Good Housekeeping* magazine, “People trade down when their budgets are tight, looking for food that will fit in the budget but also that their families will actually eat and that will fill them up. A £1 pizza will be eaten and not wasted while a £1 cauliflower will need to have other things put beside it to make a meal and may not be enough. What I do see is that ... people do choose the fruits and vegetables once these basics are met and if there is enough money. We see from research that parents (particularly mothers) will go without to ensure their children are fed.”

The situation worsened during the summer school holidays, with an estimated 3 million children nationwide at risk of going hungry and having no access to a school meal for at least six weeks.

According to FareShare, the UK’s largest food redistribution charity (who redistribute surplus food from the food industry), they are helping to feed at least 50,000 children across the UK each week—an increase of 150 percent from 2017. This follows their launch of ActiveAte, a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of holiday hunger

and increase its provision of meals for children at risk of food poverty.

FareShare Chief Executive Lindsay Boswell, while pointing out the situation during the holiday, said, “Even more alarming, support provided through FareShare Go, our scheme which brings together charities and retailers to reduce in-store surplus food, increases the total number of beneficiaries receiving food each week to over 160,000 children—and over 1,000 holiday projects nationwide.”

Combined with the massive increase in the regular use of food banks, which the food charity Trussell Trust says has hit a record high due to Universal Credit’s introduction—especially in areas where this has been in place for a year—four times higher with a 52 percent increase in uptake.

The Trussell Trust gave out 204,525 three-day supplies between July and August last year with 74,011 heading to children. By comparison, the previous two months saw 70,510 packages supplied to families with children.

A joint National Education Union (NEU) and Child Poverty Action Group survey of almost 1,000 union members carried out in March 2018 reported that 830 see children showing signs of hunger during the school day. Hunger not only has a negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of children, it also impairs learning by reducing children’s ability to concentrate.

Lisa, a learning mentor at an inner-city school in Sheffield told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Children can often come to school without breakfast. This has a huge impact on their learning. They often present as tired, complain of feeling ill and struggle to concentrate. This can lead in some cases to children being labelled as having behavioural or learning problems if their family situation is not known or misunderstood by school staff.

“Cuts to benefits, benefit sanctions or waiting to access benefits, often means children can miss out on a hot school meal. Parents can struggle to provide a healthy lunch. Lunch boxes in such circumstances rarely contain a balanced meal. Cold chips [fries], a bar of chocolate and a slice of bread are some examples of the contents of lunch boxes we have seen. Access to food and the difference in the standard of lunch boxes highlights the social inequalities amongst peers and children in these circumstances become very quickly aware of the difference, which can impact on their social health and wellbeing by causing embarrassment and stigma.

“Without access to a balanced and nutrient providing diet children can present as malnourished but also we are seeing many more children with obesity problems. There is also a rising number of pupils suffering with dental decay and diabetes.”

A snapshot survey conducted in July 2018, found that

more than half (59 percent) of NEU members polled said that children in their school experienced holiday hunger. Of these, 51 percent said that in the last three years the situation in their school was worse.

Despite the efforts of various charities and groups increasingly working in schools, like the Real Junk Food Project, Healthy Schools Initiative, these cannot address the reality of a stark social divide in society resulting in many working-class families becoming ever poorer.

Projections published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (before the release of the latest poverty estimates for 2016/17) indicate that the share of children in relatively low-income families will increase sharply between 2015/16 and 2021/22, assuming no change in government policy.

The Food Foundation report makes calls for a national measurement of food insecurity and the need for further investigation into children’s access to healthy food in the UK, to be led by the Children’s Future Food Inquiry it is running.

This parliamentary inquiry, while gathering evidence from those who have witnessed or experienced children’s food insecurity in the UK, is joining calls for a national measurement for food insecurity—as outlined in a Private Members Bill introduced by Labour MP Emma Lewell-Buck. The bill is to be discussed in October but calls for nothing more than “to require the Government to monitor and report on food insecurity; to make provision for official statistics on food insecurity; and for connected purposes.” Next year, the inquiry will present recommendations to policymakers for understanding and tackling children’s food insecurity and its consequences in the UK.

There is no mystery why food insecurity exists in the UK or internationally. It is the outcome of the increased drive for profit by the food companies, under conditions of savage austerity measures that have pauperised millions and made a healthy diet unaffordable to many.



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