

Over 5 million live in families with hungry children since UK lockdown

Harvey Singh
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A Food Foundation (FF) report has found that 5.1 million people in the UK are living in households with children who have experienced food insecurity since the lockdown began.

Up to 1.8 million of these experienced food insecurity due solely to a lack of food in shops. This means that 3.2 million people—or 11 percent of households—are suffering from food insecurity due to other issues such as loss of income or isolation.

These figures register a doubling of the level of food insecurity among households with children reported by the Food Standards Agency in 2018.

The FF is a research body, and this latest is its third report based on surveys into how the population is struggling to secure enough food during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In April, as the lockdown began, the FF found that more than 3 million people in Britain (6 percent of surveyed adults) were going hungry because of the coronavirus crisis. Sixteen percent of respondents (equivalent to a total of 8.1 million people) had faced food insecurity of some kind as a result of the pandemic.

The FF's recent study was informed by a survey conducted during April 24 to April 29—exactly one month after the March 23 national lockdown was put into effect—and focused exclusively on households with children.

The report found that children are at higher risk in families with members who are self-isolating, medically vulnerable, single parents, where a child has a disability, and in large households.

Significantly—in light of the hypocritical and nauseating praise routinely heaped onto workers in the National Health Service (NHS) by a government that has done everything possible to undermine the NHS for decades—the report found that households which included NHS workers and their children also had an “elevated

risk.”

Before the lockdown, schools—especially in the most deprived areas of the country—provided the threads of a safety net for struggling families through free school meals and breakfast clubs. This provision has been shredded.

The FF found that almost a third of children entitled to free school meals (half a million children) are still not getting any substitute. Of the 621,000 children who were accessing free breakfast clubs before the crisis, only 136,000 are getting a substitute.

On March 19, as it closed schools and imposed lockdown restrictions, the government announced a free school meals voucher scheme. School headteachers using the scheme were told to order supermarket vouchers—worth £15 a week until schools reopened—for the 1.3 million eligible families using a portal created by the French corporate services group Edenred. The site was designed to generate a code that parents or teachers could redeem online for a supermarket gift card.

From the outset the scheme was beset with IT glitches and delays sometimes lasting weeks. There have been many instances of school staff having had to stay up late into the night to access the online system, while many parents have been unable to download the vouchers at all. Some schools unable to access the scheme have had to turn to charity instead.

In Bodmin, Cornwall, school catering manager Jo Wotton told BBC News that she had to pay for a family's shopping after the mother's voucher code failed at a supermarket till and she was left with only £3 in her purse.

The checkout worker told her the supermarket had seen several vouchers fail the same day.

Michael Tidd, headteacher of East Preston Academy junior school in West Sussex, told the *Financial Times* how he had input his first voucher requests on April 6 and

the first redemptions only started arriving on April 20.

Tidd said: “One parent logged on last week and the website told her she was number 200 in the queue. She tried an hour later and was told she was number 137,000.” The Edenred site has since stopped disclosing an applicant’s queue position.

On April 30, the Department for Education admitted it did not know how many vouchers for free school meals had been delivered to parents over the past month.

A snap survey conducted by Channel 4 News and the National Association of Head Teachers sheds more light on the additional levels of frustration and anxiety experienced by schools and parents of school children. The survey found that of the 932 school leaders who responded, 96 percent said they had experienced problems with the government scheme; 86 percent said that parents had struggled to access the vouchers; 83 percent said they were concerned about the welfare of pupils who were yet to receive the vouchers; 58 percent said they had had to make other provisions for families due to problems with the system.

To give a sense of the difficulties faced by those administering the scheme and the indifference of the government, Channel 4 News interviewed a number of head teachers across the country. Each told a story of unrelenting frustration and anguish in the face of the real possibility that families of school children will go without food.

In a now familiar story replicated throughout much of the country, the programme heard how Stephen Donegan, the headteacher at Malmesbury Primary School in Morden, south London, and his staff input each of their allocated 170 vouchers, each with a 16-digit code to access the payment. All the codes failed. The website was frozen. There was no number to phone. And there was no response to repeated e-mails. Eventually, Donegan and the deputy head at the school had to use their own credit cards to buy food for the increasingly desperate families.

Emily Smith, a learning mentor who works with children with medical needs in South Yorkshire told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “This has been particularly distressing for parents whose children have life-threatening illnesses. Due to the circumstances, whole families are in isolation for 12 weeks as advised by the NHS. If they have children at different schools, this means sorting out with a number of schools where many don’t even have an answer machine.

“Many of the vouchers have been sent electronically but are no use to someone who is in isolation, as they can’t

transfer them or get out of the house. It’s taken schools weeks to get the vouchers so they can send them out in paper form, and many have had to use school funds or drop food parcels. I know a number of schools business managers have been trying to gain access to the Edenred system at 2 a.m. in the morning to get in the queue for the vouchers.”

The FF report noted that almost half of the food-insecure households in the survey sample had lost income as a result of the crisis—affecting 5.3 million children.

The study featured the voiced recordings of several children affected by food insecurity talking briefly about their experiences. One is Felix, 15, who lives in rural Norfolk. He is the second eldest of a family of nine children. Felix often has to make a four-mile round trip on foot to get bread and milk. His father is working overtime to help make ends meet. Felix explains how he and the other older children also have to worry about trying to complete their school course work.

The Food Foundation findings appeared as the Trussell Trust charity reported an increase of 81 percent in the number of people needing support from food banks in the last two weeks of March compared with the same time last year. Demand for food bank services for children has increased by around 121 percent.

Indicating how already dire social conditions for many families have simply been compounded by the present crisis, the Trussell Trust’s food bank network provided 823,145 emergency food parcels (over 300,000 of these parcels were for children) to people deemed in crisis between April and September 2019, a 23 percent increase on the same period in 2018.



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