



The Food
Foundation

Food insecurity among single parent families

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SUMMARY

- 35.0% of the single adult households with children reported experiencing food insecurity in January 2024, compared with 17.6% of multi adult households with children.
- High food insecurity levels among single parent households are driven by higher levels of financial instability and lower incomes.
- Expensive childcare can keep single parents out of the workforce which reduces their income and increases their risk of food insecurity.
- Government interventions to tackle food insecurity are inadequate and fail to address the challenges of affording a healthy diet. More action is needed to support single parent families to protect them from food insecurity and diet-related poor health.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated food insecurity, with rising food costs leaving many families unable to afford sufficient food. Food insecurity levels began increasing drastically in mid-2021, now affecting 14.8% of households in January 2024 ([The Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracker](#)).

The impact of rising food costs is being widely felt but not all households are affected equally. Households with children are at greater risk of food insecurity with 20.0% of them reporting experiencing food insecurity compared to 12.7% of households without in January 2024 ([The Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracker](#)). Rising food prices also have a greater relative impact on lower-income households, who spend a higher proportion of their disposable income on food and energy ([ONS, 2022](#)).

This pressure on food budgets has a knock-on effect on children's health. More healthy foods are over twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods ([The Food Foundation, The Broken Plate 2023](#)), and when food budgets are under pressure, there is evidence to suggest that households cut back on more healthy foods, like fruit, vegetables and fish ([The Food Foundation & City University, March 2023](#)).

This briefing will provide insight into the scale of food insecurity specifically among single parent households, as well as some of the driving factors that puts these families at greater risk. It will share case studies from single parents facing the daily reality of not having enough to feed themselves or their children. Finally, this briefing recommends interventions for government that are needed to reduce the heightened levels of food insecurity experienced by single parent households.

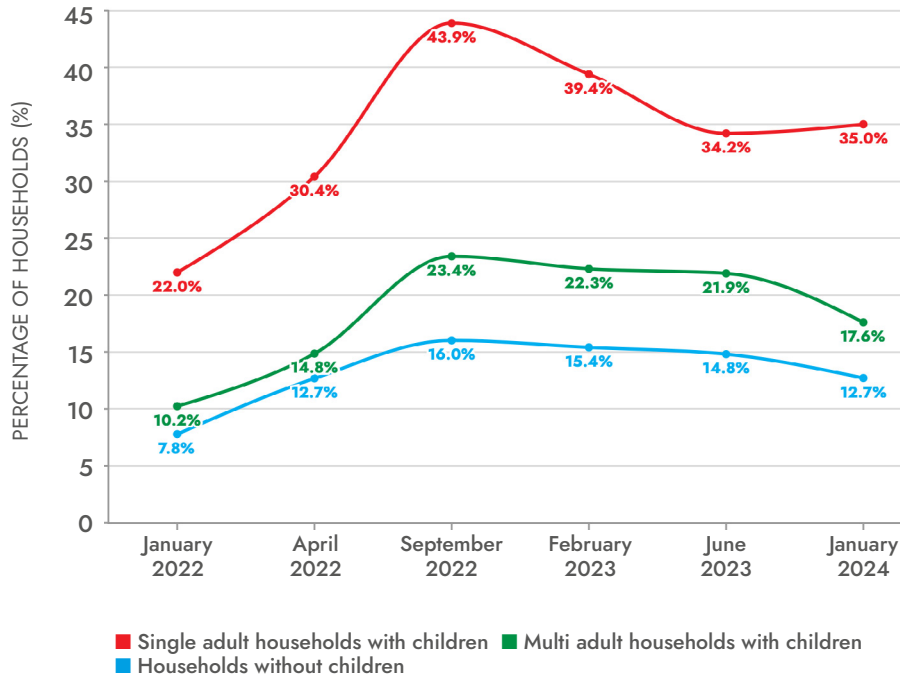
Profile of single parent households in the UK

- In the UK, 15% of families are headed by a single parent ([ONS, 2022](#)).
- The percentage of single parent households in the UK has increased since 2020 by 4.5% ([Statista, 2022](#)).
- The majority of these single parents (84%) are mothers ([ONS, 2022](#)).
- Over half have one dependent child (54%) and 31% have two dependent children ([Gingerbread 2023](#)).
- The highest proportions of single parent households are based in London (13%) and the North West of England (12%) ([Gingerbread 2023](#)).
- The proportion of single parents identifying as disabled has significantly increased from 23% in 2017 to 33% in 2022 ([Gingerbread 2023](#)).

The scale of food insecurity amongst single parent households

The risk of food insecurity for single parent households with children is more pronounced than for multi adult households with children. The Food Foundation’s latest Food Insecurity Tracker survey conducted in January 2024 found that 35.0% of single adult households with children experienced food insecurity, compared to 17.6% and 12.7% of multi adult households with children and households without children respectively.

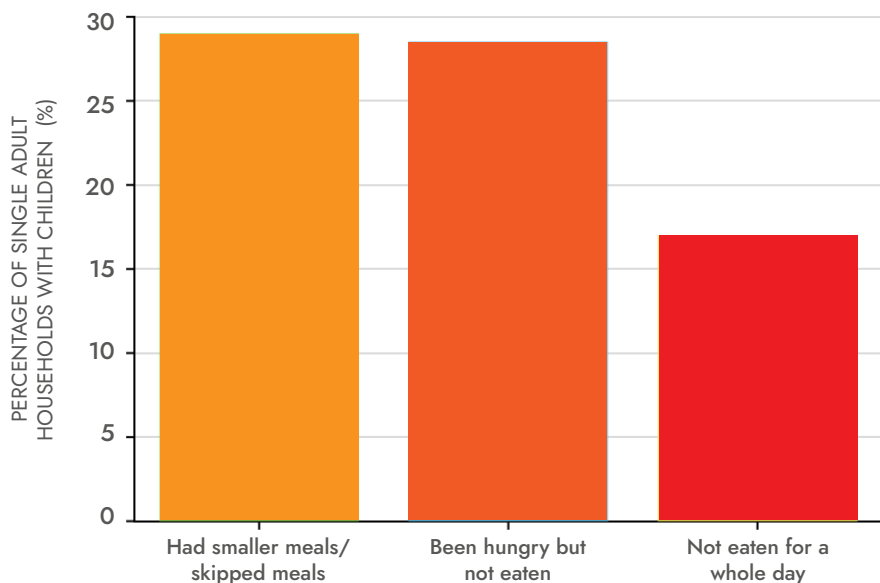
FIGURE 1
Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity by household type



Source: Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracker

Of single adult households with children, 29.0% reported having smaller meals than usual or skipping meals and 28.5% reported not eating despite being hungry because they were unable to afford or access food. Furthermore, 17.0% reported having to go a whole day without eating.

FIGURE 2
Experiences of food insecurity by single adult households with children



Source: Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracker

MEASURING FOOD INSECURITY

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations states that a person is food insecure when 'they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life' (FAO, 2023).

The Food Foundation have been conducting nationally representative surveys on food insecurity since March 2020 (The Food Foundation, Food Insecurity Tracker). Three questions are asked to assess whether people were food insecure. If a respondent answers yes to any of these three questions, they are classified as food insecure:

In the last month, have you/anyone else in your household:

1. had smaller meals than usual or skip meals because you couldn't afford or get access to food?
2. ever been hungry but not eaten because you couldn't afford or get access to food?
3. not eaten for a whole day because you couldn't afford or get access to food?

These questions are part of the United States Department of Agriculture's Food Security Survey module. This is a validated survey tool, used to measure and monitor household food insecurity in many high-income countries, including the UK. These questions capture moderate and severe experiences of food insecurity.

The Government's measure of food insecurity shows similar trends. The Family Resources Survey conducted by the Department of Work and Pensions found that in 2021-22 single adult households with children were three times more likely to be food insecure (22%) than two adult households with children (7%) (Family Resources Survey 2021-22).

A survey by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), conducted between February and May 2023, found that single parent families were being harder hit by the cost-of-living crisis than the general population. As many as one in four (28%) households with one adult and at least one child reported that in the past two weeks they had ran out of food and were unable to afford more, compared to one in twenty (5%) in the general population (ONS, July 2023). Similarly, in September and October 2022, *Which?* found that 31% of single parent households reported skipping meals due to rising food prices, compared to 15% of all those surveyed (*Which? Consumer Insights Tracker, 2022*). In May 2022, a Joseph Rowntree Foundation survey found that 70% of single parent households had gone hungry and skipped meals, compared to 55% of dual parent households (*One Parent Families Scotland, 2022*).

In the last four years, the Covid-19 pandemic, food inflation and the wider cost-of-living crisis have worsened food insecurity and financial pressures among single parent households. However, single parents were at higher risk even before the pandemic, with 1.5 million children of single parents living in relative income poverty in 2019-20 (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022). In 2019-20, 29% of single parent families reported experiencing food insecurity compared to 6% of dual parent



households (Resolution Foundation). In 2018, a report published by Trussell Trust indicates that single parent households are two times more likely to use food banks than rest of the population (Trussell Trust, 2018).

Many of the factors that drive food insecurity for single parent households pre-date the pandemic and therefore, whilst immediate cost-of-living support is welcome, long-term policy changes and greater government intervention are needed to address the barriers specifically faced by this group of the population in affording sufficient food.

Drivers of food insecurity among single parent families

Single parent families are more likely to experience financial instability

According to the latest Family Resources Survey UK (2021-22), 44% of children in single parent families are living in relative poverty compared to 25% in dual parent families. ([Family Resources Survey financial year 2021 to 2022](#)).

Single parents' also have less ability to save and have been found to have 20 times less savings than all other household types (2018-2020) ([ONS, 2022](#)). This makes crises and additional financial pressures, like the recent food price inflation, harder to weather.

The recent cost-of-living crisis has further exacerbated the financial insecurity of single parent households. In a survey conducted in May 2023, shortly after food price inflation hit a 45 year high of 19.1% in March 2023 ([ONS, April 2023](#)), an Action for Children survey found that single parent families were being hardest hit by financial pressures compared to any other family type, with 26% reporting 'serious financial difficulties' ([Action for Children, October 2023](#)).

Financial instability among single parents is driven by lower incomes and lower employment levels

These high levels of poverty arise from lack of sufficient income. In the UK, single parents are less likely to be in full-time work ([ONS, August 2023](#)) with the employment rate of single parents at 69%, much lower than married/cohabiting mothers (80%) and fathers (93%) ([Gingerbread, 2023](#)). Single parents are also more likely to be on lower wages and use credit to pay household bills ([Gingerbread, 2023](#)).

On average, single parent households have a 23% lower median net household income than dual households ([Department for Work and Pensions, 2023](#)). A lower income places them and their children in greater risk of poverty and food insecurity, as food budgets are squeezed.

The income inequality experienced by single parents is linked to the rising cost of childcare compared to wages, which has potentially kept many single parents out of the workforce. Recent data reports that 30% of women (from single and dual parent households) want to work but can't be due to family responsibilities ([ONS September, 2023](#)). Many single parents who are in work want to work more hours but face other barriers, including a lack of flexible or part-time roles, concerns about how to manage childcare during the school holidays ([Gingerbread, 2023](#)), or employment discrimination ([Single Parent Rights, 2021](#)).

Single parents have less disposable income for other essential costs

Because single parent households are on an average lower disposable income than dual parent households, they spend a higher proportion of their weekly budget on essential items, including food and fuel. This also means that they had proportionately higher housing costs in the financial year ending 2021. Single parents spent more than 25% of their average disposable income on housing costs compared to 15% for two parent households ([ONS, 2022](#)). Food budgets are also squeezed more, with research finding that single parent households spend 12% of their average disposable income on groceries, compared to 10% for dual parent households ([ONS, 2022](#)).





CASE STUDY 1

Dominic, single parent to one child, South East.

Dominic is a single dad for his ‘amazing daughter’. They live in the most deprived blocks of their council estate in Kent, and they survive on Universal Credit, child benefit and free school meals. He describes Universal Credit as a dehumanising system that doesn’t afford you enough to supply the essentials for your child, and argues that this needs reviewing as a matter of urgency. It’s nearly impossible as a single dad to get work that fits around being at the school gates on time.

As they have a limited amount to spend on food they do access support from the local foodbank at times which is helpful, but the foodbanks do not supply any fresh food or meat. Dominic hears his neighbours talking about washing their clothes less to save five pounds a month on electric and spending all day on the buses to go from supermarket to supermarket to get the best deals on microwave meals. When asked about the impact on people in his community of having to use various strategies to access adequate and appropriate food, Dominic says that, “together all of it dims our aspirations.”

“ We only have ourselves to rely on, there is no one else.”

“ It kind of feels like we don’t matter – or at least our time doesn’t.”

In terms of whether single mums and single dads have different experiences, Dominic found that being a single dad wasn’t an established status and help was less forthcoming. He is active in the media and on social media (@SingleDadSW) and often speaks at events, and believes this has raised awareness that single dads are out there.

He is currently writing his second book, with the first now being reviewed in leading academic journals and stocked in university libraries across the country.

Childcare costs place a high pressure on family budgets

Rising childcare costs have also put pressure on family budgets. The cost of childcare has been rising for more than a decade. In England between 2010-21, there was a 60% rise in cash terms for a part-time nursery place for a child under two years old; this is twice the increase of average weekly earnings or the general economy-wide growth in overall prices (IFS, May 2022).

These increasing childcare costs mean that families have to cut down costs in other areas, like food budgets. A survey conducted in 2022 found that 53% of single parents had to cut down on food, heating and clothing to afford childcare, and 13% say they had to use a food bank due to increased childcare costs (Pregnant Then Screwed, March 2022).

Single parent families are being disproportionately affected because they are on lower-than-average income and more likely to be out of work. Recent data found that a two-earner family on the minimum wage is now paying a third of their post-tax income on childcare, while single parents on the minimum wage spend over

two-thirds of their post-tax income on childcare (Local Government Association, 2023). The median net income of a single parent family is £17,900 (Department for Work and Pensions, October 2023), but to afford a minimum socially acceptable standard of living (based on the minimum income standard) that includes the cost of childcare, a single parent with two children would need to earn £43,400 a year (JRF, September 2023).





CASE STUDY 2
Stella, single parent
to one child,
Scotland

Stella lives in Scotland with her son, who is 4. She is currently awaiting the outcome of her asylum claim. She has a very limited income as she has no recourse to public funds.

The main challenge of being a single parent, in her opinion, is only having one source of income, which means a lower household income. This makes it more difficult to afford a healthy diet. She sees that being a single parent could affect someone's ability to work, as it's harder to find appropriate work that fits around childcare. Childcare is very expensive in the UK, and so you find that almost all the money you get from the work you do goes towards the cost of childcare. This can make things really difficult. She highlights that if someone has a partner, they can help with the kids. Other options, such as working night shifts, are not possible if you are on your own. You also have less flexibility around daytime working hours, if you have to drop children at school.

Once in a while Stella will go to food banks and has found this helpful. She notes that some food banks are really struggling to keep up with the high demand. Stella shops at cheaper supermarkets. She misses the food from her home country, so she sometimes buys products from African shops, but they are more expensive.

Stella is provided with a small amount of money as an asylum seeker. She does not have to pay rent and bills out of that, but this amount has to cover all of her other living costs, i.e. clothes, toiletries and food. Her son grows out of his clothes and shoes so needs new ones, and the cost of food is going up every day. She sometimes worries about being able to get enough food for the two of them, and has been supported by her health visitor, for example, by referring her to food banks.

Making childcare affordable, she suggests, would help to reduce food insecurity in single parents.

“ So some jobs expect you to be there for a certain amount of time and that might be difficult for you. For example, I might get a job which is like 7 to 4, but for me I can find that difficult because I first have to drop my kids to school, then go to work.”

Limitations of existing government support

The high levels of food insecurity point to the need for Government to do more to help families struggling through the cost-of-living crisis. The disproportionately high level among single parents shows that greater support is needed particularly for those who have reduced ability to work and support with childcare costs. There are several schemes in place designed to support the lowest income families experiencing food insecurity that could potentially help struggling single parent families. However, the persistently high levels of food insecurity shows that more support is needed and that these schemes require strengthening to support families who are experiencing food insecurity, including single parents.

Benefits

The current benefits system does not sufficiently support single parent households with the cost of essentials including childcare or food. Some government reforms to the welfare system have had a disproportionately negative impact on single parents: 70% of households affected by the benefit cap, originally introduced in 2013, are single parent families (Child Poverty Action Group, March 2023). Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) attributes this disproportionate impact of the benefit cap on single parents to the barriers they face returning to work and difficulty in meeting the earnings threshold. The two-child limit also means that the cap is the same for a single parent with two or four children (CPAG, July 2023).

Childcare costs and free nursery places

The latest Childcare Survey conducted by Coram Family and Childcare between November 2022 and February 2023 revealed that the maximum limit of support for childcare under Universal Credit and the benefits system was not enough to cover a full-time place for a child under two years old in 97% of local authorities, and not enough to cover a parttime place in 20% of local authorities ([Coram Childcare Survey, 2023](#)).

However, in 2023, the government proposed improvements to childcare provision for all families. This initiative included more funded hours for childcare settings for working parents starting from April 2024 and a nearly 50% increase in support for Universal Credit claimants. They can now receive up to 85% of their childcare costs, with the cap raised to £951 for one child (up from £646) and £1630 for two children per month (up from £1108) starting from summer 2023 ([Department for Education, March 2023](#)).

An updated study is essential to ascertain whether the recent government measures have addressed the concerns raised by local authorities regarding the affordability of childcare for families in the benefits system.

Holiday provision

School holidays are a known pressure point for families who can face increased costs, such as food and childcare, and reduced incomes. This is especially the case for single parents, who have reported that finding and affording holiday childcare is another barrier to employment ([Gingerbread, 2023](#)). A survey in 2022 found that of the 27,000 respondents, 35% reported that the cost of summer childcare was more or the same as their earnings ([Pregnant Then Screwed, 2022](#)).

Holiday food and childcare provision across the UK differs between nations. In England there is the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, which was rolled out following the End Child Food Poverty campaign taking off, spearheaded by Marcus Rashford, taking some of the pressure off parents of both providing food and childcare. All children from reception to year eleven on means-tested FSM can have a free place on a HAF scheme. These activities provide hot food, cooking lessons, sports and fun activities for children, as well as advice for families and carers on how to source, prepare and cook nutritious, low-cost food. This scheme has funding committed until 2025.

Healthy Start

Healthy Start is a government scheme targeted at families with children under the age of four and pregnant mothers on very low incomes, as well as all pregnant teenagers aged below eighteen. Eligible families get £4.25 per week per eligible individual (£8.50 for infants under one) intended for spending on fresh, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables, pulses, cow's milk or first infant formula, as well as free multivitamins for both pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and infants and children under four ([NHS](#)). In Scotland the scheme is called Best Start, and the eligibility and support differ ([MyGov.Scot, 2022](#)).

The current Healthy Start allowance has not kept pace with food price inflation, and the eligibility criteria is very restrictive: support is only available for families with children under four and a household income of maximum £408 per month, excluding benefits. There are also low levels of uptake often due to lack of awareness of the scheme (see [here](#) for further information).

Free School Meals



The current eligibility criteria for Free School Meals (FSMs) means that many children living in poverty are missing out across the UK. FSM provision is devolved and each country in the UK has a different system: this inconsistency creates an unfair postcode lottery. The threshold for eligibility is the most restrictive in England, where primary children from year three upwards, and all secondary school children, only qualify if their household annual earnings are below £7,400 per year (before tax and after benefits). This threshold has not changed since 2018 and is so low that 900,000 children living in poverty in England are still missing out on FSMs ([CPAG, July 2023](#)). Despite being on low incomes, the strict eligibility criteria for FSMs means that many single parent households will not qualify and miss out on saving £450 a year (for two children) on school lunches ([Feed the Future, 2022](#)).



CASE STUDY 3

Sonia, single parent
to three children,
North East

Sonia has three children, aged 7, 8 and 12. She's no longer with their dad. Sonia is a carer for her youngest child who has additional needs, and is currently going through the diagnosis process for ADHD and autistic spectrum disorder. She receives Carers Allowance and isn't in paid work.

As a result of his autism, Sonia's son has sensory issues, and can only eat very bland food of specific brands. This makes planning, shopping, and cooking food more time-consuming, as she has to buy and cook certain foods for her son, and different meals for her and her two daughters. She has to make sure she has enough time in an evening to do it and it is very tiring having to do it all herself.

Her son's needs around food also mean that he is not always able to eat the school dinners. He is entitled to Free School Meals, so it is an additional cost to Sonia if she has to send him in with a packed lunch.

Also, she is limited in where she can shop and how much she can buy at once because she hasn't got a car; this means only getting a small amount or doing a big shop at somewhere that will deliver. Buying in bulk can mean reduced prices but this isn't possible if you are on a restricted income as you have to pay more upfront.

Sonia benefited from Healthy Start and thinks that it should be available up until children are six years old and that everyone should receive it, regardless of income, as it gives them the help that they need, especially with the price of milk. She thinks that Healthy Start should fully cover the costs of formula milk. She is teaching herself to cook from scratch, but recognises that many parents aren't able to. She thinks the government should provide clear guidance on cooking for children, particularly in relation to portion sizes. Her daughter is only 12, but is as tall as an adult, and the amount recommended for her age isn't enough.

“ [Single mums and dads] are going to struggle either way; it's the financial struggle and it's also the emotional struggle of making sure they eat the right things and getting enough food in them.”



Recommendations

Single parent households face multiple barriers in affording a healthy diet, including lower average incomes, disproportionately high household costs compared to households with two earners, and rising childcare costs, all of which place pressure on food budgets. Government interventions aiming to alleviate food insecurity for families have failed to keep pace with the financial pressures, like rising childcare costs, that single parent households in particular are facing.

More needs to be done to address the barriers to employment and the rising costs of food and household essentials that disproportionately impact single parent families. The recommendations below focus on the policy change that would specifically help alleviate food insecurity experienced by single parent households:

1 Address income inequalities:

- Ensure that benefit levels (Universal Credit) take into account the cost of a healthy diet and other essentials, including the disproportionate cost faced by single parent households
- Remove the benefit cap for single parent households (and other households)
- Make a range of flexible working options easier to access for all from the first day of employment.

2 Improve nutritional safety nets:

- Expand Free School Meal eligibility to all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits as the first step towards universal provision
- Expand eligibility, improve uptake and increase the value of Healthy Start
- Commit long-term funding to the HAF programme beyond 2025 and ensure that local authorities have funding and capacity to include all children living in poverty, not just those on FSMs.

About this Policy Briefing

This policy briefing draws on research commissioned by The Food Foundation, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which focuses in-depth on the experiences of people living with food insecurity in the UK. Through this research, The Food Foundation aims to re-shape the public narrative on food insecurity and to catalyse purposeful action from policy makers and businesses.

SURVEY

- The online survey was conducted by YouGov among 6051 adults in the UK between 9th-16th January 2024.
- The figures presented from the online survey have been analysed independently by The Food Foundation and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.
- Among 6051 adults surveyed, 218 households had one adult (18+) and at least one child (under 18). This has been used as a proxy for single parents.

CASE STUDIES

Some names and details have been changed in order to protect participants' anonymity.

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About The Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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