

Too Poor to Eat

Food insecurity in the UK

By Anna Taylor and Rachel Loopstra

KEY INFORMATION

- New UN data show that an estimated 8.4 million people, the equivalent of entire population of London, were living in households reporting having insufficient food in the UK in 2014, the 6th largest economy in the world.
- 5.6% of people aged 15 or over in the UK reported struggling to get enough food to eat and a further 4.5% reported that, at least once, they went a full day without anything to eat.
- The UK ranks in the bottom half of European countries.
- The Food Foundation calls on the Government to urgently instate regular measurement of food insecurity, which was last measured over ten years ago.
- Government must also conduct research into who and why certain groups are affected, how food insecurity impacts food choices and health, and develop long term policy measures to tackle the problem.

Summary

This briefing provides new data gathered for the United Nations on levels of household food insecurity in the UK. It uses nationally representative data gathered through a telephone survey of 1000 adults. The method used to measure food insecurity has been rigorously tested and is used by Governments in other countries such as the United States and Canada, for regular monitoring. The findings underline the importance of accelerating action to prevent households from becoming food insecure. The limitations of the survey point to the need to incorporate measurement of food insecurity in the UK into existing national survey instruments so this problem can be better understood and tracked. Established measurement methods makes this task relatively simple and the cost would be marginal.

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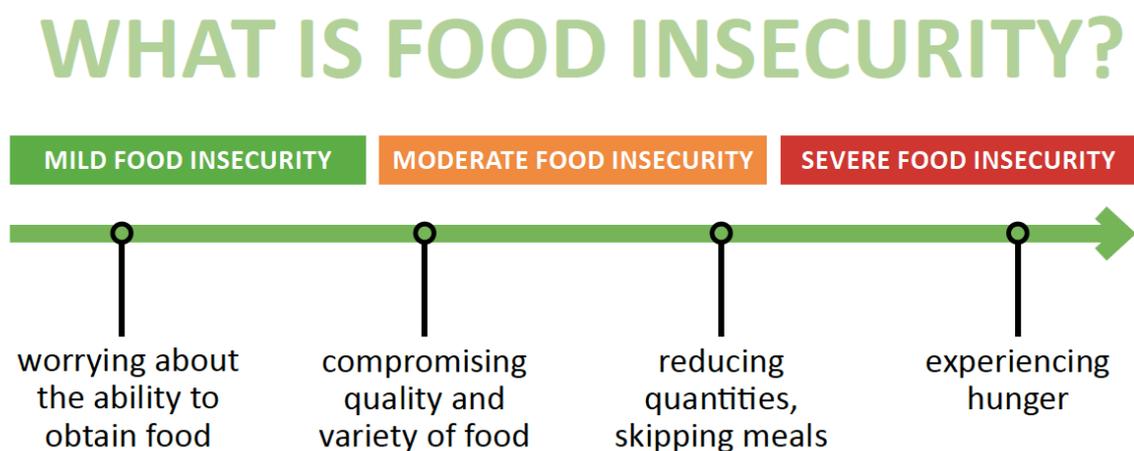
What is food insecurity?

Being food secure means being sure of your ability to secure, at all times, enough food of sufficient quality and quantity, to allow you to stay healthy and participate in society. Food insecurity is defined as:

“ Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g. without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing or other coping strategies)¹”

Food insecurity has varying degrees of severity. Early stages involve worry about whether there will be enough food, followed by compromising quality, variety and quantity of food. Going without food and experiencing hunger are most severe stages (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Method

The data reported here come from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) developed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which directly measures household experiences of food insecurity (Box 1). The scale used to measure food insecurity was validated in countries across the world and consisted of asking people eight questions about their ability to get enough food in the past year, consistent with scales already in use in other countries and similar to questions used in the 2003-5 Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey.

¹ While there is not an official government definition of food insecurity used in the UK, this definition is drawn from guidance on measuring food insecurity in the USA and was used for the UK's Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey, 2007

To measure food insecurity across over 140 countries, the FAO had the FIES included in the Gallup® World Poll in 2014. In the UK, 1000 people were interviewed by telephone or mobile phone. The survey was nationally representative, but because the sample size was relatively small, the UN refer to these as “preliminary” data. The methods used to conduct the survey and develop the scale are described in detail in <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4830e.pdf>.

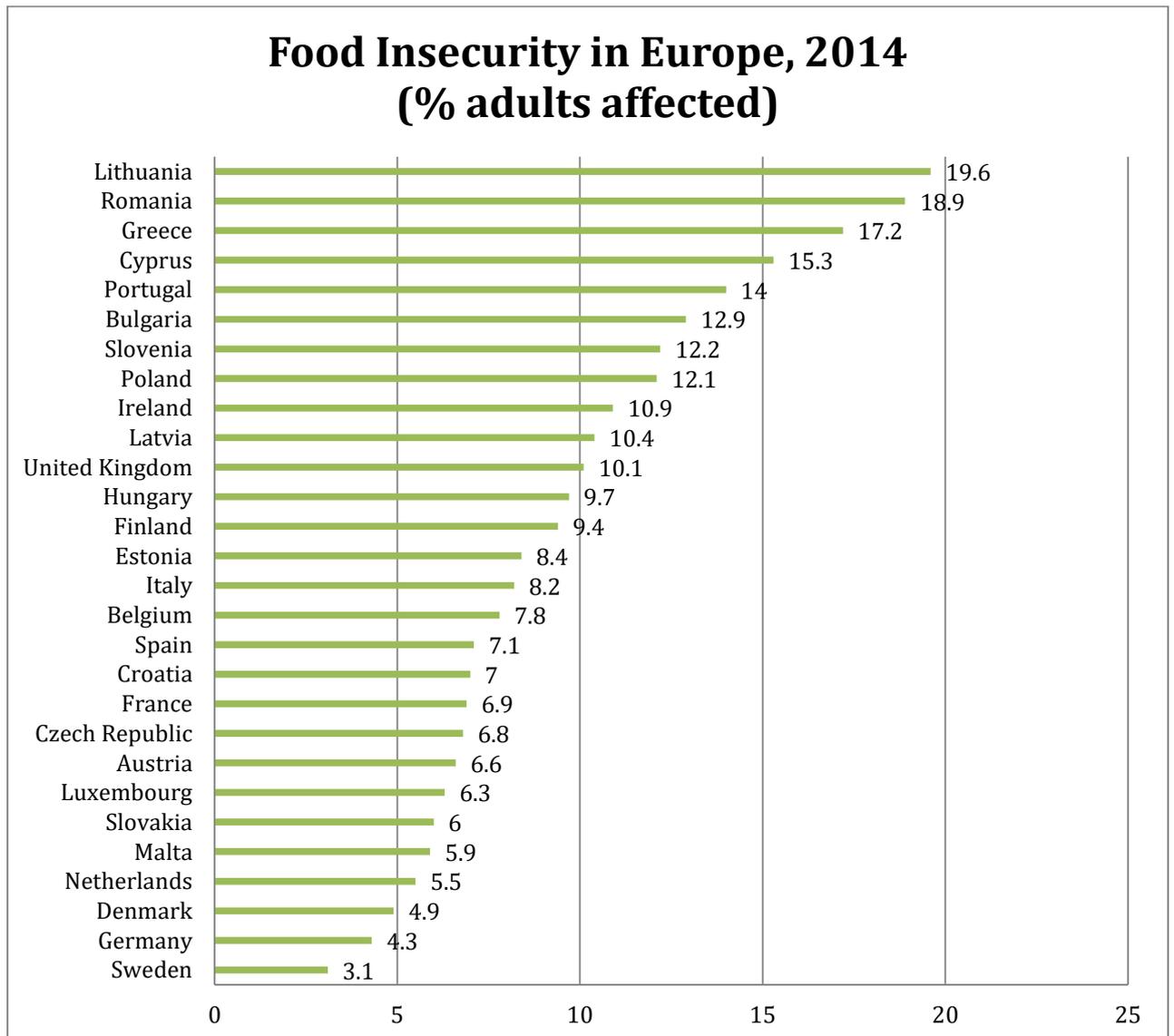
Levels of food insecurity in the UK in 2014

The data show that 10.1% (CI \pm 2.9%) of people aged 15 or over in the UK were food insecure in 2014. This means they reported experiencing a struggle to get enough food to eat. Among these people, 4.5% (CI \pm 2.1%) experienced a severe level of food insecurity, typically having gone a whole day without eating at times during the year because they could not afford enough food. On the basis of these figures, FAO estimates that 3.7 million people in the UK were living in moderately food insecure homes and 4.7 million people were living in severely food insecure homes in 2014, totalling 8.4 million. There are no comparable sources to determine if and how the situation has changed over recent years.

How does the UK compare to other countries?

Figure 2 below shows how the UK compares to other countries in the European Union, ranking among the bottom half of countries. There is some evidence to suggest that rising food insecurity is a problem across Europe prompted by the financial crisis, but some countries have mitigated the effects of the crisis on household food security better than others².

Figure 2



² Loopstra, R., Reeves, A., Stuckler, D., 2015, Rising Food Insecurity in Europe. The Lancet Vol 385 385(9982):2041

Limitations and the need for a comprehensive UK measure

The two prevalence rates calculated by FAO use thresholds for food insecurity that indicate at least some reduction in the quantity of food below levels considered appropriate. Households who report less severe experiences of food insecurity are not counted as food insecure, for example, those who report only anxiety about food running out or having to rely on only a few low cost foods. This is a limitation to the measure reported by FAO, as even though in these households, adults and children may have enough food to eat, less severe levels of food insecurity can still have a profound effect on health. In some of these marginally food secure households, some members cannot eat the mix of foods needed for a healthy diet, cannot participate in social aspects of eating such as special meals for special occasions, and experience anxiety about not having enough food, which impacts mental health and social relationships³. Importantly the data do not capture whether people can meet their needs in socially acceptable ways, a vital issue in light of the large numbers in the UK currently having to seek free food hand-outs from food banks⁴.

A limitation of collecting data on food insecurity through the Gallup World poll is that it only surveys 1000 individuals. This is not a sufficient number for understanding who is vulnerable to food insecurity in the UK population, so the UN is publishing the data as *preliminary*. Comprehensive information on household characteristics are not collected and more people would have to be interviewed in the population to understand risk across household types and to reduce the margin of error around these estimates. Thus, while providing an important estimate of the magnitude of food insecurity in a representative UK population sample, we could not examine what household characteristics associate with greater vulnerability to food insecurity.

How do these data compare to other measures?

Numbers of people seeking charitable food assistance

Between 2008/9 and 2014/15 the country's major provider of food banks (The Trussell Trust) has reported that the number of people given 3 days emergency food bank support has risen from 25,899 to 1,084,604⁵. After accounting for people who may receive food parcels more than once, it's estimated that about 500,000 different people in the UK received food assistance in 2014/15.

It is important to point out food bank data underestimated how many people are facing insecure food access in the UK. Our data show that 17 times the number using Trussell Trust food banks are food insecure. This is because people may use non-Trussell Trust food banks, or more likely, because many people don't access food assistance at all⁶. This highlights the importance of measuring food insecurity in the whole population and not just tracking food bank use.

³ Cook, J. T., M. Black, M. Chilton, D. Cutts, S. Ettinger de Cuba, T. C. Heeren, R. Rose-Jacobs, M. Sandel, P. H. Casey, S. Coleman, I. Weiss and D. A. Frank (2013). "Are Food Insecurity's Health Impacts Underestimated in the U.S. Population? Marginal Food Security Also Predicts Adverse Health Outcomes in Young U.S. Children and Mothers." *Adv Nutr* 4(1): 51-61.

⁴ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SPERI-British-Political-Economy-Brief-No4-Food-bank-provision-welfare-reform-in-the-UK.pdf> .

⁵ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>

⁶ Loopstra R, Tarasuk V., 2015, Food bank usage is a poor indicator of food insecurity: Insights from the Canada. *Social Policy & Society*.14.

Other surveys which have asked about material deprivation and/or food insecurity

Data from the EU-wide Statistics on Income and Living Conditions in 2014 showed that 8% of individuals in the UK reported they were unable to afford to eat a meal with meat, chicken, or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent) every second day⁷.

The Poverty and Social Exclusion research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, conducted a survey in the UK in 2012 and examined access to “the necessities of life”. The survey found that 28% of adults skimmed on their own food in the last year so that others in their households could eat and that 4% of children lived in families who could not afford to feed them properly.

A representative survey conducted by Ipsos-MORI in London in 2013 reported that 42% of parents were cutting back on the amount of food they buy or the amount they spend on food and 8% reported that at some point in the last year their children have had to skip meals because they cannot afford to buy food⁸.

These data compare well to the FAO data, indicating that a significant proportion of people in the UK are experiencing compromised access to food due to a lack of financial resources.

Data on the affordability of a healthy diet

Since 2007, the cost of food has gone up by 8% in real terms⁹. Research conducted by Cambridge University shows that the price of healthy foods has gone up more in the last 10 years than unhealthy foods¹⁰. Public Health England acknowledges that the price of food is an important part of why people eat as they do¹¹. In contrast, incomes have stagnated or even declined in value. The Government’s data show that disposable income for the poorest 20% of UK households has gone down every year since 2004¹².

The 2013 Living Costs and Food Survey showed that the poorest 10% of households only spent an average of £46 on food and non-alcoholic drinks each week but that accounted for 15% of their household expenditure. In contrast, the richest 10% spent more than £80 but this amounted to less than 7% of their expenditure.

⁷ Eurostat. Eurostat Database. 2015; <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>. Accessed 15 September, 2015.

⁸ Ipsos MORI, 2013, Child Hunger in London. Ipsos MORI

⁹ DEFRA, 2015, Food Statistics Pocketbook. DEFRA

¹⁰ Jones NRV, Conklin AI, Suhrcke M, Monsivais P., 2014, The Growing Price Gap between More and Less Healthy Foods: Analysis of a Novel Longitudinal UK Dataset. PLoS ONE 9 (10): e109343. Doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0109343

¹¹ Roberts, K., Cavill, N., Hancock, C. and Rutter, H., 2013, Social and economic inequalities in diet and physical activity. London. PHE

¹² Department of Work and Pensions, 2014, Households Below Average Income 1994-5 – 2012-13

Impacts of low income on nutritional status

The National Diet and Nutrition Survey reports significant differences in nutrient intake between the poorest 20% and richest 20% of the population. The poorest people eat less fish, fruit and vegetables, fibre, alcohol, protein and saturated fat than the richest, but more sugar.

A recent study has shown that deprivation is also associated with how tall children grow. Data on children measured across England in 2012/3 showed that by the age of 10 years, the least deprived white children were more than a centimetre taller on average than the most deprived children¹³.

¹³ Hancock, C., Bettiol, S., and Smith, L., 2015, Socioeconomic variation in height: analysis of National Child Measurement Programme data for England. Archives of Dis Childhood, Sep 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

These new data show that in 2014 8.4 million people in the UK faced not having enough food to eat. Urgent action to address food insecurity needs to be taken by national and local authorities across the UK. Importantly these new data place a clear onus on the governments in the four UK nations to routinely gather data on food insecurity as more data are needed to understand who is vulnerable and what actions can be taken to intervene. There is good consensus amongst UK academics and civil society on the need for this information and the methods to use¹⁴.

Currently there is no clear government leadership on food insecurity and the absence of regular data collection means the magnitude of the problem remains hidden, allowing for government inaction. Regular measurement should be overseen by a multi-stakeholder group convened by government (like the School Food Plan) who could ensure preventive action is initiated across all relevant government departments.

In January 2015, the parliamentary Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said:

“ We recommend that the Government collect objective and statistically robust data on the scale of household food insecurity, including through the use of questions in the food costs sections of the UK’s Living Costs and Food Survey. It should also monitor trends over time so that the effectiveness of policies can be accurately gauged and any necessary changes made in response to evidence of need¹⁵.

Many others have called for similar action¹⁶. The Government’s response suggested they were not willing to allocate resources towards measuring food insecurity¹⁷.

There are a number of potential survey instruments into which standardized questions to measure food insecurity could be inserted. These include the annual UK-wide Living Costs and Food Survey, the annual health surveys conducted in each of the 4 UK nations and the biennial Food and You survey commissioned by the Food Standards Agency. The marginal cost of adding the food insecurity module to these instruments would likely be £50-70,000 per year.

Government authorities in the UK urgently need to initiate regular, robust and comprehensive monitoring so that food insecurity can be better understood and tackled comprehensively by all relevant Government departments.

¹⁴ <http://foodresearch.org.uk/time-to-count-the-hungry-the-case-for-a-standard-measure-of-household-food-insecurity-in-the-uk/>

¹⁵ Food security: demand, consumption and waste. Sixth Report of Session 2014-15. Page 21

¹⁶ <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SPERI-British-Political-Economy-Brief-No4-Food-bank-provision-welfare-reform-in-the-UK.pdf> All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, 2014, Feeding Britain, A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Loopstra, Reeves et al. BMJ. 2015.

¹⁷ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmenvfru/1148/1148.pdf>

Box 1: Measurement of food insecurity

Measuring food insecurity is challenging. Indicators such as food expenditure and dietary intake have been used to evaluate whether people obtain enough food, but both of these are limited. For example, there is no nationally agreed cost of a healthy diet against which household income can be compared¹⁸.

- The Government's annual Living Costs and Food Survey examines what people spend on food but it cannot tell us about affordability or the ability of households to meet their needs.
- The National Diet and Nutrition Surveys assess individual dietary intake but these surveys do not have big enough sample sizes to examine the specific characteristics of individuals with low nutrient intakes or on low income, nor do they actually investigate whether people had difficulty securing enough food. Importantly they only look at a single point in time whereas food security may deteriorate or improve at different times through a year, as a result of sudden changes in income or changes in household demand (e.g. during the school holidays).

A method which gets around these problems is asking people directly about whether they have experienced being unable to acquire and eat enough food. These experienced-based measures ask people about a range of circumstances arising from a lack of money or other resources, starting with questions about anxiety about not having enough food, being unable to afford a healthy diet, and relying on only a few types of foods. Then people are asked experiences of not getting enough food, having to skip meals, or running out of food. The most serious questions ask about

¹⁸ Although the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland has recently done this. See MacMahon, B and Weld, G., 2015, The cost of a minimum essential food basket in Northern Ireland. Pilot study for two household types. Dublin: safefood.

experiences of hunger and going for a whole day without eating (see Figure 3).

These questions have been shown to be well understood and meaningful to respondents, resonating with household experiences of what it is like to not have secure access to food¹⁹. A wealth of research has shown that households who report these problems have poorer nutrient status, more anxiety, and poorer long-term health outcomes, likely because of insufficient food intakes and because of the toll that this level of poverty has on mental well-being^{20 21 22}.

We would assume that having enough food is something most people in rich countries, where there is an abundance of food, never worry about. But through use of these experienced-based measures to monitor food insecurity in other high-income countries²³, we've learned that even in rich countries, there are people who are food insecure. The USA has, for example, been monitoring food insecurity using this method annually since 1995.

The UK has not been monitoring household experiences of food insecurity. The only time this type of measure was used in a national survey in the UK was in the 2003-2005 Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey (LIDNS)

¹⁹ Tarasuk, 2001. Discussion paper on household food security - link here: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/pol/food_sec_entire-sec_aliments_entier-eng.php

²⁰ Seligman H.K., and Schillinger D., 2010, Hunger and socioeconomic disparities in chronic disease. *N Engl J Med*; 363: 6–9.

²¹ Heflin C.M., Siefert K., Williams D.R., 2005, Food insufficiency and women's mental health: findings from a 3-year panel of welfare recipients. *Soc Sci Med*; 61: 1971–82.

²² Kirkpatrick SI, McIntyre L, Potestio ML., 2010, Child hunger and long-term adverse consequences for health. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*; 164: 754–62.

²³ Coleman-Jensen, A. Rabbitt, M.P., Gregory, C., Singh, A. (2015). Household Food Security in the United States in 2014. And Tarasuk, V., A. Mitchell and N. Dachner (2014). Household food insecurity in Canada: 2012. Toronto.

conducted by the Food Standards Agency²⁴ and published in 2007. This survey only included low-income households. Almost 40% of people included in this survey reported that in the past year, they had worried their food would run out before they had money to buy more.

Figure 3

Questions in the Food Insecurity Experience Scale Survey Module for Individuals as fielded in the Gallup World Poll in 2014	
Now I would like to ask you some questions about food.	
During the last 12 months was there a time when....	
Q1	...you were worried you would not have enough food to eat because of a lack of money or other resources?
Q2	.. you were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food because of a lack of money or other resources?
Q3	.. you ate only a few kinds of food because of a lack of money or other resources?
Q4	.. you had to skip a meal because there was not enough money or other resources to get food?
Q5	.. you ate less than you thought you should because of a lack of money or other resources?
Q6	.. your household ran out of food because of a lack of money or other resources?
Q7	.. you were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food?
Q8	... you went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money or other resources?

²⁴ FSA, 2007, Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey. The Stationery Office.

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The Food Foundation is funded through generous grants from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation.



The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org

