

Food Insecurity in Children in the UK: Prevalence, Causes and Policy Solutions

Dr Sinéad Furey

ms.furey@ulster.ac.uk

[@DrSineadFurey](https://twitter.com/DrSineadFurey)

Overview

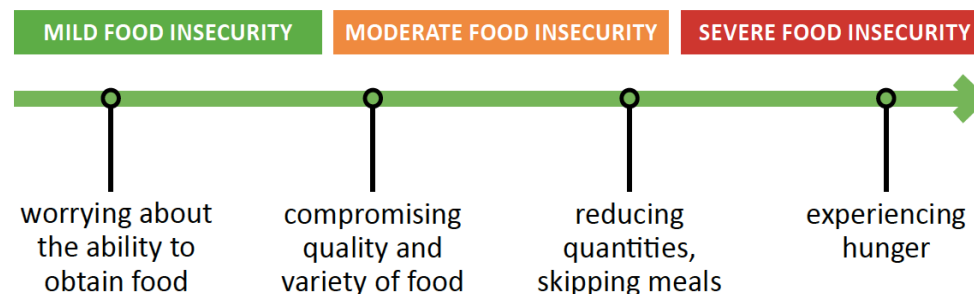
- Child food poverty/insecurity prevalence
- The nutrition paradox (coexistence of food poverty/malnutrition and obesity)
- Child food poverty/insecurity causes
- Current and possible policy solutions



What is food poverty/insecurity?

- Food poverty refers to “*the insufficient economic access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory and socially acceptable diet*” (O’Connor et al., 2016, p.429).
- The term “food insecurity” is becoming increasingly familiar in the UK literature (see Dowler & O’Connor, 2012, Kneafsey et al., 2013), and both terms are now often used synonymously (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Borsch & Kjaernes, 2016; Thompson et al., 2018; Vaughan et al., 2024).

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?





Prevalence of food insecurity among children in the UK

- Households with more children is an indicator of increased risk of food insecurity (Furey *et al.*, 2019).
- Food poverty was not officially measured in the UK until 2019 – first data available from April 2021 via the **Family Resources Survey**
- Most recent data (DWP, 2023-24) reported how **11% of households experienced food insecurity**: low household food security (5%) or very low household food security (5%).
- **Households with children were more likely to be food insecure** (8% low; 8% very food security) compared with households without children (4% low; 4% very low).



Prevalence of food insecurity among children in the UK

- Almost one in 25 (3.6%) households reported accessing food banks in the previous 12 months.
- **Presenting to food banks was also more likely for households with children** (2% within the last 30 days; 6% within the last 12 months), compared with households without children (1% within the last 30 days; 3% within the last 12 months).
- Trussell food banks distributed over 14,000 food parcels for children in the first six months of the year – the **second time this has happened in Trussell's NI history** (Trussell, 2024).

Food insecurity and obesity: Hidden Hunger

Food insecurity can present in the short term as hunger and in the longer-term as malnutrition.

- NI has the highest level of obesity in Primary 1 children in the UK (PHA, 2025):
 - More than one-quarter (25.3%) of children measured in Primary 1 are considered overweight or obese [cf. 22.1% in England and 22.3% in Scotland; and 24.8% in Wales was 24.8% (2022-23)].
- Obesity increases with age and deprivation (PHA, 2025):
 - Over a quarter (27%) of children measured in Year 8 were overweight (21%) / obese(6%).
 - Almost one in three (32.3%) children living in the most deprived areas of NI were measured as overweight/obese compared to 22% of children from the least deprived areas.

Humanising the statistics...

*“I had split up with my children's father and then lost childcare so couldn't work... I think I was working three jobs at the time; lost all three of them... Things were quite difficult, and I was being switched to Universal Credit as well, at that time. So, there was like a period **without any money coming in for about a five week-six week wait.**”*

*“And also, whenever times are hard as well, and your lifestyle completely flips... **It wasn't just food...** So, for the kids there in the summer, then the church that's connected to the social supermarket ran a summer scheme and were able to get the kids out and interacting with all the other children.”*

*“I think the biggest thing for somebody in my situation would be looking at **barriers to work and childcare...** I mean, there's no way as a single person, I could go and work full time... At the minute I'm using it for Universal Credit for childcare. But I think we should be pushing more people to be moving off it but still allowing them to have enough to live on... Because if I was to do that, **all my money would go on childcare, if it would even cover it. And then how would you buy food?**”*

*“And like everybody just gets, like, randomly packed bags ...and it was I was really, really grateful for it. But see, by the time you got home and **you know there's nothing there to give to your child** who's 14, who is such an easy child and so easy pleased and you couldn't feed him. Yeah, you were feeling so powerless and stuff...”*

*“A fully funded and fully implemented anti-poverty strategy immediately. What ties into all that as well is a childcare policy. You know, we see that most people using here have children, have families. And **that's the most expensive time in your life...**”*

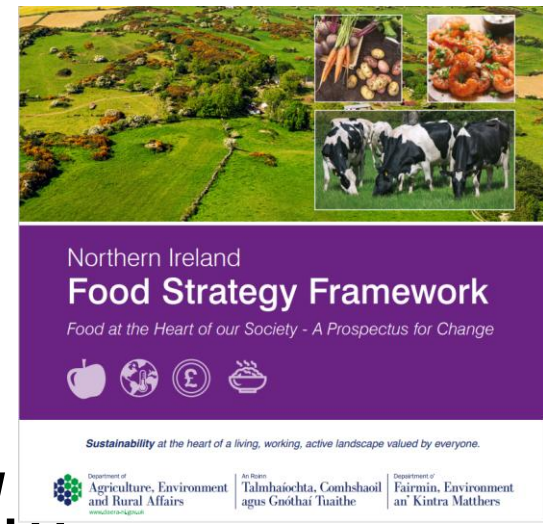
Causes of child food insecurity

The perfect storm

- Cost-of-living crisis: Rising food prices; high food inflation; rising fuel prices
- Income crisis: Reduced income; under-employment; Covid-19 pandemic; end of furlough
- UK's withdrawal from the European Union – impact on food prices and availability
- Changes to Social Security Benefits meaning reduced eligibility for free school meals in England and Wales (NI has more generous eligibility), and reduced familial income

Current / past solutions

- Free school meals – provide eligible children with one nutritious meal per day – *for some, this may be their only (hot) meal!*
- Holiday free school meal entitlement – direct cash transfers/ vouchers/ food parcels
- Healthy Start vouchers
- **BUT** it is also important not to elevate school meal provision to being the only solution.
- The **Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework** recognises children's rights: Strategic Priority One particularly refers - *Enabling improved dietary-related health outcomes through education and increased accessibility to healthy nutritious food.*





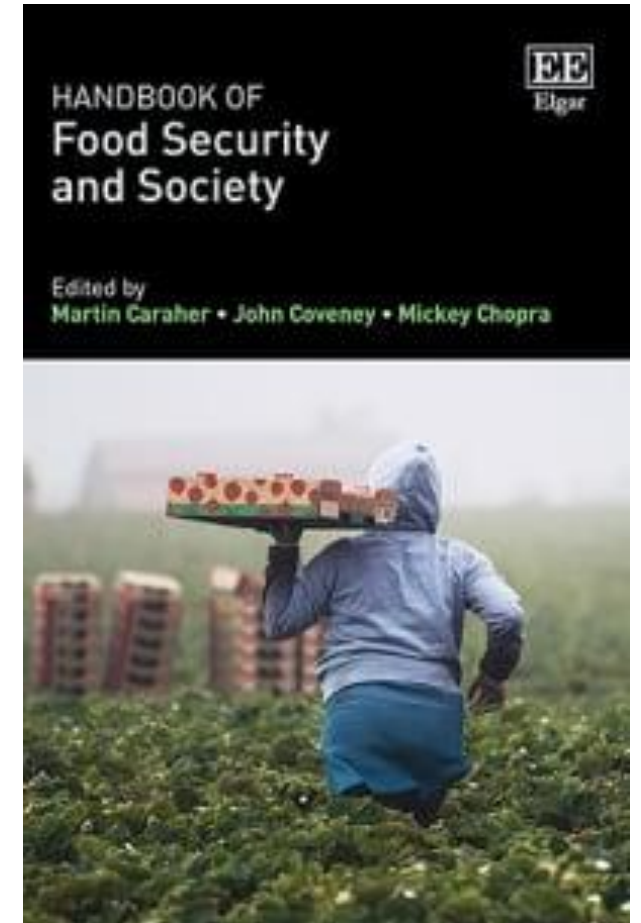
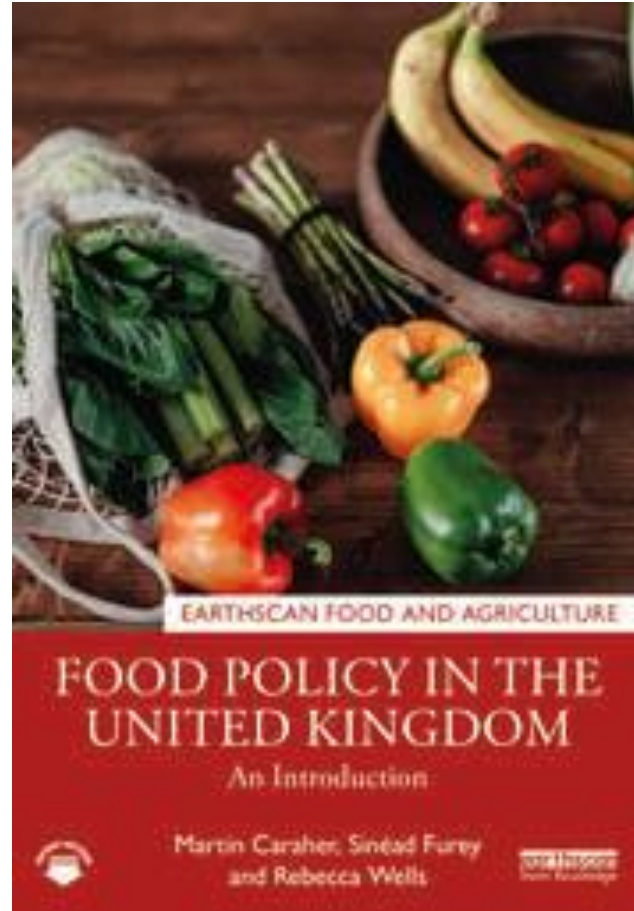
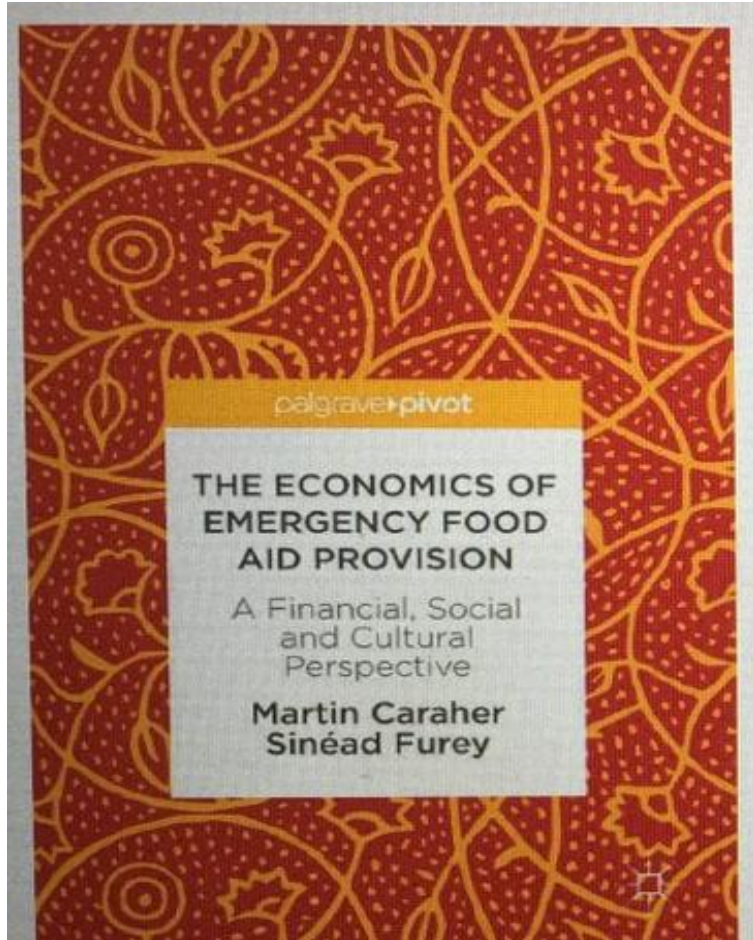
Possible future solutions

- Cash first approach
- Universal Basic Income/Guaranteed Basic Income
- Real Living Wage: work that pays – remove the gig economy and zero-hour contracts and push for a real living wage
- Jobs creation
- Support pay equity
- Welfare Reform (not mitigation)
- Invest in education and skills
- Invest in health care
- Offer affordable childcare
- Universal free school meals
- Link benefits such as free school meals and Healthy Start to changes in Universal Credit
- Monitor increases in applications for Free School Meals, breakfast clubs and holiday food provision
- Increase the free school meal allowance for secondary school children.
- Increase the value of the Healthy Start voucher which is currently “too narrowly targeted” meaning that “over 250,000 children under five living in food insecurity cannot benefit from it”
- Pursue a rights-based approach
- Social supermarkets
- Publish the Anti-Poverty Strategy

Summary

- Food insecurity is prevalent among households with children, yet the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) explicitly names adequate **food as a basic human right**.
- Need for greater emphasis on the idea of **healthy food as a matter of rights** and the rights of children to an adequate, appropriate and affordable food supply.
- **Independent monitoring and evaluation of school meals**, joined-up thinking and delivery, treating the whole child (and society) and **expanding school meals provision** in recognition of the right to food **BUT** it is also important not to elevate school meal provision to being the only solution.
- The current Food Security measurement questions in the Family Resources Survey includes the adult-only module. Consideration should be given to introducing the full **18-item measure for monitoring food insecurity** which includes children's food security measurement – what gets measured gets done!
- **Urgent action** is needed to protect our children's health and future inclusion and productivity...

Suggested reading



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Thank you for listening!

Any questions?

ms.furey@ulster.ac.uk

ulster.ac.uk