



LIVING HAND TO MOUTH:

CHILDREN AND FOOD IN LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

SUMMARY



Food is so much more than just the building blocks that children need to survive. Good food is fundamental to culture; it is a corner-stone of building community; it is about being able to take part in social activities with your friends.

Louise Tickle, Foreword

Living Hand to Mouth reports on the UK findings of the Families and Food in Hard Times study, highlighting the experiences of children and families in low-income households.



INTRODUCTION

Over four million children in Britain are growing up in poverty, with many at risk of going without nutritious or adequate food. As poverty has risen, families with children are among the hardest hit. Based on the first-hand accounts of 51 children, this book by researchers at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education shines a spotlight on what children say about food and how they manage their everyday lives around food. It provides vital evidence about children's lived experiences of poverty, and identifies the causes of their insufficient resources including low and fluctuating wages, inadequate benefits and high living costs.



If a child dies, the government is always serious about it. So, if the child doesn't die, they should still be serious about the child anyway.

Ayo, age 12, inner London

CHILDREN'S VOICES

Children in low-income families are going hungry and missing out on healthy food and social activities that their peers take for granted. Lack of money and food cause children physical pain, feelings of guilt and shame and a sense of social exclusion.

“

(...) I was so hungry (...) it was like I got stabbed with a knife and it's still there.'

Emmanuel, age 14, inner London

“

If there isn't enough food, we'll get it and sometimes mum will go hungry (...). Even if it's not that much food for me and (brother), it's enough that we've actually had something, (...) (but) it gets a bit to the point where we'll start feeling guilty because mum hasn't had anything and we've had it.'

Bryony, age 14, coastal town

“

I don't want to show them that, no, I don't have enough money (to eat out with friends). I say to them "no I don't really want to come"

Faith, age 15, inner London

SHARING FOOD IS ABOUT BELONGING



CHILDREN AT RISK

Children in lone parent families are at greater risk of food poverty than others, reflecting broader poverty trends. Since most lone parents are mothers, the health implications of parental sacrifice are gendered.

“

'...last week I didn't even eat for four days. (...) And (...) I have to lie to my kids and tell them I've eaten so that they're okay, because as long as my kids are eating then I'm okay.'

Lone mother of three children, including Shaniya, age 11



Most children growing up in poverty have at least one parent in paid employment. Parents in low-income working families, as well as those not in work, skip meals so their children can eat.

“

So we cut back. As long as, like I say, as long as the kids are fed, we don't care about us. We'll sit, we're happy to just sit there and have toast every evening, so we do cut back a lot.

Mother, care worker, zero hours contract lives with father, full time, food retail and two children including Owen age 12, coastal town



Free school meals are sometimes delivered in a discriminatory and stigmatising way.

They're also not usually available to children in families claiming universal credit where parents earn above £142 a week, or to children whose parents have no recourse to public funds. Some say their allowances don't buy enough to fill them up.

“

But thing about the baguettes is that if you're not free school meals then you get to have bigger food...which I don't see why. And also they have cheesecakes, so...but (...) if you're not free school meals you get to have the bigger version, and if you are you have to have the small version.'

Murad, age 12, inner London, young carer for lone mother and younger sibling

“

It's embarrassing, yeah, you have no money on your card and then you just watch them eat.

Gideon, age 15, inner London, whose family has no recourse to public funds

“

So when she (lunchtime staff at the checkout) was like "You can't get that, you're free school meals" like I was really embarrassed cos people were waiting behind me.

Maddy, age 16, inner London, receives free school meals

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

Food charity is not the answer. While food aid such as food banks can help meet the immediate needs of a minority of families, it does not address the causes of poverty and leads to further shame, stigma and social exclusion.

“

My social worker, she gave my mum some food voucher to the (food bank in the) church by Lidl's. And they gave us like noodles, like tins of tomatoes and beans. (...) we prayed...no we waited, then we prayed, then we got the food, then we went to the sermon (...) It wasn't really...I don't know how to explain it... (...) Like it wasn't really an atmosphere I would feel comfortable around.

Kasey, age 13, inner London



Healthy free school meals should be available to all children at school and provided as part of the normal school day, to mitigate some of the effects of poverty on children's health and education.



When I'm hungry I just can't concentrate, it's really, really hard for me to do that...so I just need to make my mind up and know that I will eat after five hours, seven hours when I get home (from school).

Amara, age 15, inner London, whose family has no recourse to public funds



Solutions to food poverty must address its root causes: low and irregular wages, inadequate benefits and the high costs of essentials that leave parents struggling to make ends meet.



I don't know it's kind of like parents' (responsibility to make sure the family eats well) isn't it, but then parents can't really supply you with food if they don't have like a good job, like good work and pay.

Charlie, age 15, inner London

The government should use Minimum Income Standards research to ensure that family incomes - from wages and benefits in combination - are adequate for a socially acceptable standard of living that recognises the fundamental role of food in health, education and social inclusion.

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