



VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Child food poverty requires radical long term solutions

The end of the summer holidays will be a respite for children experiencing holiday hunger. But as **Rebecca O'Connell and colleagues** explain, food poverty is a problem all year round

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At the start of this year's summer holidays, the UK government announced £2m (€2.2m; \$2.6m) of funding for free holiday activities and meals for disadvantaged families.¹ Children and families minister Nadhim Zahawi noted that: "For most pupils, the end of the school summer term signals the start of holidays, days out, and a chance to make memories with friends and family. Other families, who might rely on the support provided by schools, are not so lucky."

Luck has nothing to do with it. Children are going hungry in "breadline Britain"²—not only during the holidays but all year round—because they are structurally disadvantaged by a shrinking welfare state and a government that refuses to take responsibility for the health and wellbeing of its children. Food "solutions" like the above initiative meet an immediate need but cannot solve food poverty; rather, they risk further stigmatising and excluding families from "ordinary living patterns."³

Having enough to eat of an adequate quantity and quality has long been a minimal expectation of what it is to live in a Western country. But our study, *Families and Food in Hard Times*,⁴ found that there were families in the UK on low incomes who were unable to feed themselves properly and others who were barely able to do so. Reflecting the findings of previous studies,⁵ some parents often went without food so that their children did not go hungry, while in other families both parent and child suffered.

The harmful consequences of insufficient food or food of poor nutritional value, particularly for children, are well established⁶ and have immediate⁷ and long term⁸ implications. These include poor growth; overweight and obesity; and the growing incidence of coronary heart disease, type II diabetes, and cancer. Suboptimal diets and food habits such as skipping meals⁹ are also associated with poor cognition and lower academic achievement. Moreover, food poverty has social and psychological dimensions that are especially important for children.¹⁰ While parents' sacrifices can protect their children from food shortages, the indirect effects of food poverty penetrate deeply into the "emotional heartland" of children's personal and family lives.¹¹

Additional funds to help disadvantaged children with "food and fun" over school holidays are welcome. But given the scale of the problem, this solution goes nowhere near far enough and cannot tackle the underlying factors that lead to the food poverty of children and their families.

A week after the government announced funding for additional school holiday provision, it was reported¹² that it is commissioning research into the relation between its own policies and the rise in food aid. Yet there is plenty of evidence already that this growth is the predictable result¹³ of policies that have taken away from those who had least to begin with. Food aid, including school holiday provision, is an inadequate response that is "susceptible to four particular challenges: it can be inaccessible, unreliable, unaccountable, and socially unacceptable."¹⁴

To tackle the food poverty of children and families, the government should make use of research on budget standards¹⁵ to ensure that wages and benefits, in combination, are adequate for a socially acceptable standard of living and eating,¹⁶ which recognises the fundamental role of food in health and social inclusion.

In the UK, we are living in a period of deep political and economic uncertainty. Given the UK's exit from the European Union,¹⁷ the implementation of further cuts to welfare benefits, and rising inflation (including food prices), the plight of families who are struggling to feed themselves is unlikely to improve. Food poverty and its effects on children's and young people's physical and emotional wellbeing is a matter of grave concern. Yet in the face of piecemeal solutions and government neglect, the outlook is set to remain bleak.

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