

Children's experiences of food poverty in Portugal: findings from a mixed-method case study approach

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Abstract

While observers acknowledge that the 2007-2008 crisis increased food insecurity, few studies considered how being food poor affects children's daily lives. In this paper, I discuss how children from low-income families in Portugal experience food and deal with food scarcity. I draw on data from a larger European study, which employed a case study approach with a combination of semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation. Children's accounts reveal how food poverty is embedded in their lives, affecting the quality and quantity of food, reducing opportunities to socialize with kin and friends, and creating emotional stress. Visual methods added depth to our understanding.

Key words

Children; Food; Poverty; Portugal: Qualitative: Photo-elicitation

Background: austerity, food poverty and children in Portugal

When the 2007-2008 global financial crisis hit Portugal, the country entered a recession. In 2011, the government, led by the centre-left Socialist Party (PS), asked for a conditional bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission. Among the conditions were a set of austerity policies, namely a retrenchment of expenditure on social welfare. These were ultimately implemented by the centre-right coalition of the Social-Democratic and Popular Parties that ascended to power in the same year.

Austerity policies severely affected family incomes due to the crosscutting decrease in nominal wages and social support. Poorer families were hit the hardest, despite the official rhetoric claiming “sacrifices were being shared by all” (Farinha Rodrigues et al., 2016). A widespread increase in households defined as poor was a direct effect of cuts in social transfers, namely in Family Benefits and Social Insertion Income. Emergency food initiatives reported a surge in the number of individuals applying for emergency food aid from 2008 to 2015. While material deprivation rates increased, the ability of households to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day remained stable (Farinha Rodrigues et al., 2016). Yet, there were reports of children arriving hungry at school and many canteens opened during holidays, to provide one hot meal per day for those who needed it.

While in the United Kingdom research on poverty has long focused on food (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012, Dowler, 1998, O’Connell et al., 2019, Knight et al., 2018). the same is not true for Portugal. Assessments of how food consumption was affected were scarce during the crisis and mostly came from nutritional science (Gregório et al., 2014, Graça et al., 2016). Data from the Directorate-General of Health suggested high levels of food insecurity, but suffered from several biases (Gregório et al., 2014). A large survey of school-aged children showed that 11.6% of families were food insecure (Truninger et al., 2015). Families reported changes to eating and consumption patterns: eating out less often; resorting to pre-cooked, canned and

frozen food more often; spending less on food. The more robust National Survey on Food Intake and Physical Activity concluded that in 2016, 10.1% of the households in Portugal (11.4% of those with children) struggled to obtain sufficient food due to economic or other constraints. Furthermore, 17% of all families reported fearing running out of money before affording to buy more food.

From 2014 onwards, the Portuguese economy improved, driven by increasing external demand for goods and services, including tourism. After 2015, a new PS-led government, now propped by left parties (Communist Party and Left Bloc) reversed cuts to wages and pensions. While unemployment rates fell, newly created jobs were mostly low paying, and precariousness lingered. At-risk-of-poverty rates subsided to pre-crisis figures but remained high (in 2018, 19% of children were at-risk-of-poverty after social transfers). Inequality remained a structural feature of Portuguese society, and a considerable proportion of children experience poverty during their early life.

During and after the crisis, the plight of children was mostly absent from the headlines in Portugal. In academia, a few studies took into account the impact of the crisis on children's everyday lives (Sarmiento et al., 2015, Wall et al., 2015). When surveyed, children emphasised negative impacts on income, parents' labour/employment and changes in their everyday life, either in consumption patterns, social activities and participation. Children conveyed rich and nuanced discourses and a willingness to engage in active solidarity within their family and beyond (Wall et al., 2015, Sarmiento et al., 2015). Children from families heavily affected by the crisis mentioned cuts to essential food items, while those less impacted mostly described auto-induced and preventively restrained practices (Wall et al., 2015). Economic hardship coupled with invisibility in public discourse fostered a reduction of children's rights (Sarmiento et al., 2015). Some impacts were direct, for example, through cuts to Child

Allowance or limitations in access to free school meals, but mostly resulted from diminished parental wages and rights¹.

In the present study, I examine experiences of food poverty among children in Portugal. The data was drawn from the Portuguese subsample of a larger European study on food poverty, which used a case study approach and a combination of semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation interviews². Although the problem of food poverty has been sparking interest, its consequences remain under-examined, specifically concerning children. I argue that food poverty, being closely related to material deprivation, may compound experiences of social exclusion and have detrimental effects on children's sociability with peers. Moreover, children are often aware of the cost of living and economic hardship in their families. Such awareness has serious consequences and may ultimately influence children's outlooks on school and work.

Researching food poverty among children: methodological affordances and limitations

In recent years, scholars have argued in favour of voicing children's opinions. The theoretical premise is that they are competent experts on their own social and interactional worlds (James, 2007, Christensen and James, 2008, James and James, 2004). That line of inquiry has been followed concerning many issues, including food and eating practices (Knight et al., 2018, Wills et al., 2008). Scholars are wary of using children's voices to confirm stereotypes about children, bracketing them into an entity without acknowledging their heterogeneity as a social

¹ Austerity measures included: cuts to wages and pensions; simplification of dismissals; reduced overtime compensation; dismantling of collective bargaining; higher taxes on individual income; increased costs in transportation, health and education.

² The paper draws on the same data used on the Cardoso et al. (2019) study, which was published in this journal.

group or underplaying the politics of representation at play when research “voices” children (James, 2007). Inevitably, as scientific research provides partial accounts of reality, academics must be aware of their role in producing and representing children’s voices (Komulainen, 2007, Alldred and Burman, 2005). Broader developments in social epistemology, namely critiques of realist or positivistic paradigms, led to a shift from ‘objective’ representations to ‘collaborative’ or ‘constructed’ representations, undertaken the researcher and the researched. Awareness of epistemological and methodological concerns led research on children to go beyond standard interview techniques and employ innovative (often participatory) methods. Some include ‘the possibility of visualization’, heralded as a useful resource in overcoming challenges in verbalising memories and differences in terms of linguistic competence or cognitive ability (Zartler and Richter, 2012, Clark, 1999, Cappello, 2005). Among these, photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) are a widely used visual method that resorts to visual data (Croghan et al., 2008). Photographs or other visual stimuli are taken (or collected) by participants and later discussed with research teams.

Photographs and other visual stimuli are currently a staple in qualitative research with children (O’Connell, 2013, Clark, 1999, Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, Croghan et al., 2008), often used as a means to access their more sheltered lives, including how they relate with food. Proponents of PEI and related methods support that they ‘bridge’ the culturally distinct worlds of the researched and the researcher and are useful in overcoming issues of cognitive development and linguistic ability (Croghan et al., 2008, Harper, 2002). Meaning-making with PEI is a ‘negotiated’ practice, which is not pinned exclusively on how images are categorised and interpreted by research teams. Another rationale for using a method that includes participant-produced visual materials and verbal accounts is the potential to empower children. As children have an opportunity to make their points and drive the narrative, power imbalances may be tapered. Lastly, it is argued that these methods can help in engaging children with research

because they use a mode of representation that best suits children's interests and reduces the 'oddness' of being interviewed by adults (Zartler and Richter, 2012, O'Connell, 2013, Clark, 1999).

A few critical issues persist when using PEI and related methods. While methodologists often advocate the merits of triangulation, as a strategy to reveal different aspects of empirical reality, some assumptions are debatable. Visual and linguistic data are not necessarily mutually enriching. Moreover, we cannot assume that visual elements necessarily induce reactions, discussions and emotional responses or that they yield more 'concrete' information. Images and text correspond to different modes of representation (Hall, 1997). Engaging in callous triangulations of visual and linguistic data or using images as 'proof' is likely to foster a form of 'naïve realism', which subscribes the idea that there is a definitive account of the social world (Bryman, 2004). Finally, visual methods are not inherently participatory. Children's contributions depend on the specific procedures adopted and on their role in the research process. Hence the term 'interactive' is sometimes used to describe such approaches (e.g. O'Connell, 2013).

Awareness of that these concerns calls for a reflexive stance when conducting research. As stated above, this study draws on verbal and visual data from a study on food poverty, which employed a combination of photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews. Addressing food poverty at the household/individual level is challenging, as individuals might feel embarrassed to share information they consider shameful. Moreover, food practices are embodied and embedded in social relations, which may render them less accessible to conscious reflection (O'Connell, 2013, Sweetman, 2009). In this sense, visual and verbal accounts may provide different contributions, complementary in some cases and contradictory in others, that can be used to enhance our understanding of how children experience food poverty.

The study: contexts and methods

As part of the Families and Food in Hard Times project, a European Research Council-funded study that is concerned with food and poverty in families in three European countries, semi-structured interviews were carried out in three areas within the Greater Lisbon area during 2016 and 2017. Forty-five cases were collected, with 15 cases from Lisbon boroughs, 15 cases from a Lisbon suburb and 15 from a rural area 40kms west of the Portuguese capital. These areas were selected to ensure diversity in socio-economic status, housing and ethnicity. Each case includes interviews with the main caregiver and with a child aged 11 to 15 years old. In 41 cases, mothers were the main caregivers.

Fieldwork was conducted by members of the Portuguese research team, of which I was part. We ensured that ethical standards were thoroughly followed. Before fieldwork, we sought and obtained ethical approval from the National Data Protection Commission (CNPD), the national agency responsible for implementing and monitoring of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the research institute's Ethics Committee. The source of funding and research timeline meant that the provisions of GDPR were thoroughly followed, even though the project started before it came into force. Submissions to both entities included documentation on the recruitment strategy, procedures to ensure informed consent for participants (adults and children), data anonymization and confidentiality, and data storage and transfer.

The overall majority of participants were recruited via self-completion questionnaires sent to parents via schools in the three areas. In one area, a handful of families were referred by a local NGO and parish council social services. This option was used only as a last resort, as referral by institutions would likely reinforce the stigmatization of poverty.

Information leaflets for parents and children were provided with the questionnaire. Interviews were set up by phone and took place in locations agreed with the participants (mostly at home). Participants were only contacted after expressing interest. The aims of the study were explained to parents before the interviews. Parents were asked to give informed consent and

for permission to seek consent from their child. Participants were informed that consent could be revoked at any point, including after the interview. Confidentiality was assured, and participants informed about anonymization procedures. A leaflet was provided with information about the research and research team's contacts. Those that participated in visual methods were informed that only images that protected their anonymity would be kept and considered for analysis.

Generally, adults and children were interviewed separately, as this approach facilitated a more confidential atmosphere. On a few occasions, this was precluded by a lack of space in families' homes. Interviews schedules followed a semi-structured script. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews with adults lasted two hours on average and interviews with children forty-five minutes.

A subsample of 12 families was selected to participate in the second stage of the research. This included a second interview and a kitchen tour with parents and photo-elicitation interviews with children. The objective with visual methods was a means to get insights about everyday food practices that *confirm*, *complement*, *elaborate* or *contradict* data generated by qualitative interviews (Brannen, 2005).

Children were asked to take a maximum of 30 photos of whatever they ate and drank, at home and outside, over a period of two weeks. The cameras were gifted as compensation for their work in the research, along with €15 gift voucher. After two weeks, a member of the research team returned to interview the child about the photos he or she took. Children were asked about the contents and context of the photos (location, type of food, who bought it, who prepared it, how often they did eat it, did they enjoy it, among others).

Children's accounts of food poverty: case studies using photo elicitation interviews

The research project utilised a case study approach for the analysis. It entailed developing case summaries for each case (parent and child). Summaries were developed by the research team

and organized according to themes and dimensions related to the research questions (current family circumstances, life history, eating patterns and food preparation, household division of work, income and outgoings, food and wellbeing, representation and expectations concerning the future). Cases were then compared by the author, aiming to identify similarities and differences, concerning the themes (Yin, 2018).

In the overall sample, it was possible to identify different dimensions of food poverty within the overall spectrum of poverty. Two contrasting profiles stood out: situations unleashed with the economic crisis; and cases with a lifelong experience of income poverty and deprivation. Such diversity would have been unlikely if cases had been exclusively referred by NGO's and institutions. Overall, families with longer experiences in poverty often reported a lack of quality or compromised access to sufficient food, while cases spawned with the crisis mostly reported budgetary constraint and changes to social participation around food.

For this paper, I selected three case studies as a way of presenting in-depth accounts of the several dimensions of food poverty and its embeddedness in children's everyday lives, at home and beyond. The cases chosen are from some of poorest families, one from each research area, but all with long experiences of poverty and deprivation. Pseudonyms were attributed to ensure anonymity.

Joana

Joana is a 15-year-old black girl, born in Cape Verde. When her parents separated and migrated to different countries, she stayed with relatives in Cape Verde. She later joined her father in France but eventually joined her mother in Portugal. Currently, she lives with her mother, stepfather and two younger brothers (aged 11 and 4). They rent a flat in a western suburb of Lisbon. The place is off the main road, in an area with plenty of shops, stalls and grocery shops. Their meagrely furnished and poorly lit flat is a fourth-floor walk-up a dilapidated building. Conditions in the kitchen were dismal: furniture was rotten; the basin lacked direct plumbing

and water has to be removed with a bucket after every use. Furthermore, they have just a few appliances and a handful of kitchenware. The rent costs €300, about one-third of the monthly income. Isabel (Joana's mother) is a cook but had to take a part-time job as a cleaner to increase earnings. Her partner is a bricklayer and works in several construction sites. Only Isabel's work as a cook is declared, all other sources of income stem from the informal economy.

Joana attends 8th grade at a public school, a 20-minute walk from home. She has been placed in a class with students at risk of dropping out because she was grade retained twice in early schooling career. Joana described her school as a hostile environment, where "there is a lot of fighting, a place where when you express something, someone might not like it and beat you up just because of your opinion". All her photos, about a dozen, were taken at home. She was fearful of taking the camera to school, and never ate out during the research.

On school days, Joana prepares her siblings' breakfast. Often her mother can only buy one type of cereal and favours the toddler, to her dislike. She started skipping breakfast some time ago and "grew accustomed" to going without food during the morning. Not without consequence: she no longer attends skating and gymnastics classes, as she was fainting. Usually, her first meal is lunch, taken around 1.30 pm at the school canteen when there are afternoon classes. She is entitled to free school meals, but the food at school is "bland and flavourless", often boiled meat or fish with mash potatoes, prefaced by vegetable soup and followed by a piece of fruit. She prefers eating dinner leftovers at home. Only one photo showed lunchtime food at home. In this instance, there were no leftovers, and she had "milk and cookies from Cape Verde". These are wheat flour cookies, with high caloric value, a version of the Marie biscuit, which is popular in Portugal. On weekends, she attends catechism (Catholic religious teaching, usually given at church) and a girl scouts meeting from 11 am to 6 pm. On these days, her first meal is taken after returning home, sometimes just a cup of instant soup.

During school, Joana's friends and colleagues often go out for burgers, pizza and kebabs. She goes along and hangs out. Since she does not have any pocket money, her snacks are taken at home. Snacks can be crackers or cornmeal. Dinner is the main meal of the day for Joana and family. It usually consists of rice with chicken, legumes or eggs. Occasionally, they will eat fish broth. Less frequently, they will all have cereal for dinner. Joana enjoys all family dinners because they are together and share their daily activities: "I don't like eating alone (...) I feel lonely, don't have anyone to talk to and I like to talk when I'm eating".

Occasions for social participation around food beyond the nuclear family are sporadic. They seldom eat out or have take-out food. Once a month Joana hangs out with her cousin. She told us that enjoys home-cooked food and associates it with love and care: "it is much tastier, because it's warm and has more flavour and our mother never forgets anything, neither salt nor olive oil". Joana's account of her family's favourite foods is revealing.

Interviewer: And what are your favourite foods/meals at home?

Joana: Mine, at home? I don't have any, it's whatever there is to eat.

Interviewer: Let's say you could choose what to eat, what would you like to eat?

Joana: Rice with chicken.

Interviewer: And what about your family?

Joana: Mom enjoys a burger, but for her and we don't eat that at the house, she can't, most times we can't buy that, so her favourite food is also rice with chicken, my step-fathers' favourite is the same, my brother's favourite is also the same, my sister likes rice with fries and meat, she likes all types of meat.

When on vacation, Joana prepares dinner and often cooks traditional Cape Verdean food. Year-round, she does a lot of housework, including cleaning, ironing, paying bills, shopping and preparing food. Consequently, she is aware that house and food management is problematic.

Their food budget is about 150 euros per month and there is a money squeeze towards the end of every month.

She has a looming fear of running out of food but hides it from her relatives. Her fears are not unfounded: she described an episode of hunger, “we had at least one day when we didn’t eat because (...) the house was completely empty, because she (mother) was not paid and my stepfather’s salary payment was delayed, and so she was always returning home sad because she had no money to buy anything for dinner and we had to find a way. And I was always sad because she was sad and that made me even sadder”. She wanted her mother to be “able to buy more things, that basic shopping that she does, I would like it to last until the end of the month. Instead of 3 or 6 kilos of rice, I would like her to commandeer at least twice”.

When asked about who holds the responsibility to ensure families have enough food, Joana named the “President”, who should “create an association for those who are struggling to go. Imagine someone who couldn’t eat anything for breakfast or lunch, they would go there have breakfast and return home”. However, Joana is optimistic about her future and foresees a general improvement in the next years. Changes will be related to age and especially her (expected) participation in paid employment. Should the household income allow, Joana would like to buy more meat and ‘cook whatever I want, whenever I want to’.

Joana: In five years’ time, basically I’ll be... let me see... how old am I going to be this year, mom? Sixteen. So, in five years I’ll be twenty-one basically. So, it won’t be the same thing.

Interviewer: What’s going to be different?

Joana: To start with, in two years’ time I will have my job and I will be able to help my mother. We can move to a new house, we can change our eating, we will have better conditions, so it won’t be the same thing...

Maria

Maria is a 12-year-old white Portuguese girl. She lives with her parents in a two-bed apartment in Lisbon. The area has some food outlets, mostly groceries and smaller supermarket shops. Teresa (Maria's mother) described the neighbourhood as impoverished and riddled with drug-related issues.

The family has been renting their flat for over 20 years and currently pays 255 euros per month. Inside, it felt like a lived and cosy house, full of photos and mementoes, even with the timeworn furniture. The kitchen was equipped with common appliances. However, Teresa commented that a few were broken. Also, she mentioned that the chimney lacked an exhaust fan and sometimes rubble falls. Moreover, the kitchen lacks storage space, which is an issue for food management. The family spends 200 euros on food per month.

Teresa has been unemployed for a long time and lost entitlement for unemployment benefits. Her lack of qualifications makes it difficult to find a job. Occasionally, she does some cleaning and gets groceries for elders around the neighbourhood for money. Her husband works fulltime as a lorry driver and receives minimum income. Overall, their monthly income is roughly 650 euros (net income of 509 euros plus 105 euros as food income plus family benefit is 37 euros). Maria attends 7th grade. She walks about 20 minutes to get to the public school in a neighbouring borough (parents cannot afford bus fare). She also walks twice a week to attend swim class, which is subsidized by the city council.

Maria took over 70 photos, providing an extremely visual account of daily food and drink intake. During school, Maria has breakfast at home. It usually consists of fruit flavoured yoghurt with cereal or a ham sandwich. If she has early classes, she takes it along and eats at school. She eats mid-morning snacks, either at school or at home. On Mondays, she often eats leftovers from Sunday, for example, rotisserie chicken with pasta and fruit. Other lunches are eaten at school, where menus are similar plus the soup. In fact, on weekdays much of her eating takes place at school, including two free snacks (a sandwich and a small milk carton). For

dinner, the family gathers around the kitchen table. Dishes are similar on weekends, even if routines are somewhat loosened.

Many dinner photos consisted of soup, followed by a piece of fruit and water. Occasionally, they will eat pork ribs, a hamburger or canned sardines. Before going to bed often Maria eats a snack (yoghurt and small sandwich). Even though they can mostly eat canned fish, Teresa makes an effort to buy a specific brand of tuna for Maria, who does not like sardines or mackerel, which are cheaper. Commenting on the several photos of soup, Maria reckoned that it makes up a big part of her food intake. Maria made a distinction between mother's soup and her soup "(...) my soup can take the same things but they're all crushed, so I don't see them". When thinking about the future, while not foreseeing any significant change to her food practices, Maria anticipated that she will convey the importance of soup to her offspring, "I think when I have my own home, I'll ask my mother for advice on how to make soup and all... I'll teach my daughters or my sons that soup is good." Asked about favourite foods, Maria pointed to photos of roast chicken and rice (leftovers from the roast chicken) and pasta with grilled chicken steak.

Maria is aware her parents struggle to make ends meet. She associated lack of money with lack of food: "there isn't much money, sometimes I ask for pork chops and she has less money and can't buy them". Family circumstances deteriorated with her mother's unemployment, but Maria granted that things were not great before "now she is always out on the look for promotions, it changed a bit but not that much". Maria sometimes helps with food shopping. She took photos of items purchased from the supermarket and was eager to enumerate all the items bought on this occasion. However, Teresa intervened to say that this abundance was due to a promotion.

Maria wants to help and does so by not demanding much from her parents. While she thinks families have the largest share of responsibility in ensuring there is enough quality food, she

also mentioned that if both parents are employed, there is more food. She estimates that half-priced school meals and free snacks are a relief for her parents, “I think... it’s a good way for my mother not to spend money on cookies and things like that. I think it’s good to have the free snacks because this way my mother doesn’t... for example, she does not have to spend money on cookies and brioche bread, that’s it.”

Social participation around food is restricted and mostly happens at home. Sometimes, a friend comes over after school. They eat yoghurt with cookies or a bread roll, but she rarely reciprocates the visit, because the friend lives far away. Maria only eats out when she is invited to attend birthday parties, often to eat pizza or a burger at a restaurant. The money she gets is to pay for the discounted school meals and so she does not join her friends. Maria recalled the experience of feeling excluded from their outings.

Maria: Hum, I have seen them go a few times.

Interviewer: You don’t mind not going?

Maria: Hum, because I know food is the best, but I, for example, wouldn’t enjoy a hotdog.

Interviewer: Aham.

Maria: (...) its Epicaril (*curry shop*) and I think “it’s too expensive and mom’s is tight on money”

Interviewer: Aham.

Maria: And she has no money because she already spent it on me and so I lose any will to go.

Interviewer: Aham.

Maria: It’s not envy, it’s just “ah, they go and I don’t”.

Pedro

Pedro is a 13-year-old Portuguese boy, from a white and black African background. He lives with his mother, stepfather and an older brother (aged 18) in a small hamlet near the sea, about 45 kilometres from Lisbon. The family rents a renovated old rural house, consisting of a kitchenette, two bedrooms and a toilet, plus a small patio with a barbecue. It looked modern and in good condition, decorated with works of art created by Pedro's stepfather. The kitchen was well furnished with appliances and kitchenware. It had plenty of storage space, with cupboards above and below a large marble counter that extends to both sides of the stove. This area was separated from the living room by a peninsula that serves as the table for meals. Rent costs €250 a month, half of which is being paid by Pedro's maternal grandparents since his mom lost her last job.

Eleven years ago, after separating from Pedro's father, Sofia became depressed and quit her job as a qualified child educator. Finding work has been hard. She was collecting Social Insertion Income, but it was rescinded as a penalty for missing a job interview. In late 2017, she was about to start working as a cook. Her partner retired with a disability. Their income is about €850 (€575 from the pension, 102€ from child allowance and €175 from maintenance by Pedro's father).

Pedro attends middle school. He rides the bus to the parish council seat about 9kms away (fare is paid by the municipality). Currently, he is not involved in extra-curricular activities. Pedro eats breakfast before leaving for school, usually a bowl of cereal with milk as he "always wakes up starving". There have been situations when he went hungry because there was no cereal. He always eats a mid-morning snack (cake, cereal bar or small sandwich) during recess. Sometimes he brings these snacks, others he gets them from the cafeteria. His father or grandparents give him money to do so. He is entitled to free school meals and always eats lunch at the canteen. Menus include soup, fish or meat with potatoes, pasta or rice, plus fruit. As Pedro is not very fond of fish, he asks for more fruit. Pedro says, "I try to eat as much as I

can (in school) to get myself full until I get home”. Once home, he eats a snack, like bread with Nutella or cheese and ham.

Pedro wanted to explore the camera and changed the settings. He ended taking only a few blurred photos. In any case, the photos taken by Pedro show the family seldom eats together at dinner, contrary to Sofia’s account. They eat the same foods except for fruit and salad. Pedro skips those at home, only caring for cucumber, which he likes to eat with ‘salt and a lot of vinegar’. He places the food on a Pyrex-type plate and takes it to his room, while the others eat in the living room.

Interviewer: Do you always have lunch in your room?

Pedro: Almost always.

Interviewer: And why do you prefer to have lunch there?

Pedro: It’s more comfortable. And also, our schedules, they’re... they’re weird.

Sofia cooks all the food at home. In fact, she does all the housework. Pedro documented common dishes, including pork ribs with mushrooms and chips, pasta with minced meat and cheese, and cheeseburger with chips. He was unsure what type of meats he ate, but his stepfather intervened to say that they only buy pork. According to Pedro, meals are identical on weekdays, weekends and during vacation: “It only varies depending on money. When there is more ... it also depends on the amenities. For example, if there is little fish and if there is more meat it is meat more days or ... vice versa.”

When asked if he worried about running out of food, Pedro straightforwardly described an actual situation of hunger.

Interviewer: Have you ever worried about not having food?

Pedro: Yes, Because I (once) was really hungry. And there wasn’t anything to eat. And I was really starving.

Interviewer: And this was a long time ago or a short time ago?

Pedro: It was last year. I believe it was in November or Decem...November or December.

He copes with fears of it repeating by “I try to not think about it. I try to distract myself and do more things that are less strenuous... also not to ...”. However, these days of food shortage seem to happen every month, which reflects on the type of meals eaten during those days. Shortages are partially compensated by food gifts brought by Pedro’s grandfather, who visits every two months, and by fish caught from the coast. Occasionally, his stepfather goes around the neighbourhood asking for food. Pedro is aware that grandparents help out and that the family struggles with money, embarrassingly recalling instances where utilities were cancelled.

Apart from visits to a café for a hot dog, a drink or ice cream “for example, from month to month or when there is money”, Pedro does not usually eat out with friends. Moreover, there are only a handful of places to eat out or buy food close by. Even for shopping, larger outlets are located closer to the municipal seat, about 12 kilometres away.

When staying with his father or grandparents, they often take him out to eat and serve foods that he seldom eats at home, “(food over) at grandparents it’s like at my parents. They have...well, they have their pension and have more possessions. So, it’s usually pizzas and burgers and all of that... “. Exclusion from food practices associated with social activities was corroborated by the absence of photos. Additionally, Pedro feared to damage the camera and did not take it to school. He also wished he took photos of his favourite meat and vegetables (‘jardineira’) but said ‘I was starving’, as a way of explanation.

Pedro thinks the government should ensure that families have enough food, adding, “I still do not know much about economy ... I do not know! Create more jobs. Why don’t they make more money?”. He believes that parents are also responsible “but because parents also cannot do much, it’s no one else’s (responsibility). School cannot do much either. (...) because as

much as they worry, they cannot give food either ... because otherwise, they cannot give to all, to all the others. Also, schools are for teaching.”

Concerning the future, Pedro says, “this country...it is getting better. Because minimum wage increase...ahn...food banks too. I wish...I hope it improves, right?” For his family, “if any of us gets a job or something like that it will be better.”. He added that he is still too young and that “mom runs everything related with food and stuff. Therefore, now she has an eye on it. She...she knows what to do.” He plans to study 3d graphic design. Moreover, later, he wants to “first, to give back. To all of those that have given me things, but it’s complicated. And (I want) to be able to buy, for example, clothing that I wish I had and can’t have. Food too. For example, have more snacks, stuff like that. For example, be able to buy...imagine we’re having fish here and I (think) ‘ah, but I can...I have money and I can get any other thing (from the store).”

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, I aimed to shed light on the implications of food poverty for children. The case studies underscore how food poverty is embedded in their lives, affecting activities at home and school, permeating or even restricting interactions with kin, friends and neighbours. The cases also show that food poverty is a multi-layered phenomenon, influencing the quantity and quality of food available, hampering social participation around food, conditioning acceptable food procurement and creating emotional stress due to the constant fear of running out of food (Dowler et al., 2001).

Overall, children conveyed rich and nuanced discourses about food poverty. Children straightforwardly gave examples of how the quantity and the quality of food were affected by parents’ current socio-economic status and often alluded to the emotional toll of constantly worrying about the availability of food. Some recalled episodes of hunger and the emotional stress of going without food and later stocking up with high-calorie foods.

Restrictions on social participation around food are pervasive, both within families and among friends. Children's accounts emphasise how social exclusion, material deprivation and food poverty are closely related. Not having enough money precludes access to material and symbolic markers of inclusion, like hanging out at the coffee-shop or enjoying store-bought snacks. Being food poor detaches children from common activities among their peer group. Often, opportunities to socialise are limited by an absence of places to go or the inability to afford travel fare. Hence feelings of exclusion from the fun and enjoyment are common. For example, Joana associates socialising with friends with a good time and even joins in without eating anything. However, she mentioned dreams of going to the mall to indulge in seafood, sweets and other treats. Conversely, Maria adds that her parent's ordeal would prevent her from fully enjoying eating at a fast-food.

Furthermore, children are knowledgeable about the cost of food or changes to the living conditions of their families. They know that the constant struggle to ensure availability of food at home takes an emotional toll on parents. For example, Maria emphasized that her mother goes to great lengths to provide for the family "she makes sacrifices for me, wears old boots, with the sole almost falling off". Some mention that parents (mostly mothers) adjusted or reduced food intake, a management strategy commonly used by mothers within deprived and food-insecure households (Tarasuk and Beaton, 1999, Knight et al., 2018).

Children's discourses often allude to embodied experiences of social deprivation. Repetitiveness or monotony are used to describe meals. Joana's account eloquently highlights how choice and preference are often irrelevant for deprived families. Her favourite is whatever exists, while her relatives prefer the omnipresent "rice with chicken". Preferences are an *amor fati*, the forced choice of not having a choice, or the ultimate example that "taste in food cannot be considered in complete independence of the other dimensions of the relationship to the world (...), through which the practical philosophical of each class is enacted" (Bourdieu,

2003). Embodied into bodies and practices, tastes are displayed through language: the order of words is not accidental and indicates the main ingredient (rice with chicken is not the same as chicken with rice). In their early teens, some children already ponder working as soon as possible to contribute to their household. Moreover, many children identify low wages, unemployment and a lack of commitment from political officials as the key issues that lead to food poverty. As such, food poverty not only affects the present but also shapes future expectations.

What were the contributions of verbal and visual methods? And how did a mixed-method contribute to a fuller understanding of how young people experience food poverty? The verbal strategy, which relied on accounts stemming from semi-structured interviews, was essential to gain a systematic account of children's everyday lives, including detailed descriptions of food practices at home and school, participation in the household division of labour (and foodwork) and awareness of household circumstances. Visual methods enhanced findings in several ways. Comparing the photos of foods eaten at home and school was at times complementary and others contradictory. Dishes and ingredients were often similar, but proportions widely differ, with smaller protein portions and a predominance of starches at home. Conversely, a few children emphasised their adherence to "normative" discourses on healthy eating and selected photos showing variety. However, this may be a reflex of social desirability around food and dietary norms promoted through schools and by parents. Most often, going through photos with children confirmed the repetitiveness of meals, reliance on pork and chicken, and paucity of fish and fruit intake. Moreover, detailed photo accounts confirmed the extent of families' coping strategies. For example, they added depth to our understanding of creativity and inventiveness in using leftovers, with multiple usages of rice and chicken standing out. Vegetable soups emerged as a cornerstone of children's food during interviews, something also confirmed by their omnipresence in the photos. Furthermore, visual accounts were also useful

for children to elaborate on issues such as familial conflict relating to food preferences or spatial constraints to family meals, owing to wider problems of material deprivation. Finally, interpreting silences and absences was often as revealing as discussing photos taken. Such was often the case with the lack of photos from family gatherings or social outings involving food. In sum, combining semi-structured interviews with visual methods, namely photo-elicitation interviews (PEI), enhanced our understanding of everyday practices and food poverty. It proved an important addition to first interviews, enabling individuals to elaborate accounts on a sensitive aspect of everyday life (Zartler and Richter, 2012). The method was a vehicle for repeated visits and helped in developing a rapport between researchers, children and families. It created opportunities to consider change and continuity in family circumstances and eating practices. Finally, adding a visual dimension made children (and families) more familiar to members of the research team who had no contact with them (O'Connell, 2013).

However, although I argue that combining photo-elicitation with verbal strategies can be fruitful, some issues merit ongoing reflection. Methods intersect with children's agency in different ways. While photo-elicitation allows for a greater deal of participation of children in the research process, power imbalances persist, as the weaving of visual and textual data is still done by researchers. Adherence to the methodology can range widely, from methodically photographing every item of food to taking a handful of photos over a fortnight. Researchers interested in using photo-elicitation must accept that obtaining a systematic data collection within a specific time interval is unlikely. Children might drop out, refrain from using cameras in certain contexts or use them in unanticipated ways. Even when they fully engage with the method, the quality of photos is highly variable. Furthermore, there are challenges concerning data management, storage and sharing and, not the least, in doing justice to all the methods and cases within the course of a study (O'Connell, 2013). However, even if ethical qualms have been carefully considered, as in this case, divulging the photos in academic fora may be

beside the point: their affordance is foremost analytical, and they should be interpreted within the whole puzzle of data. Anecdotal usage of selected photos can be misleading. Therefore, I opted not to include photos. Nevertheless, arrays of photos have been used by the members of the research team to engage members of the community and policymakers in tackling the issue of food poverty. Ultimately, photos-elicitation and qualitative interviews allowed us to engage with participants and their food practices in different ways, and the research strategy was significantly enhanced by the combination of methods.

With the health emergency triggered by the Coronavirus epidemic, dark shadows are again casting over many families and children in Portugal, with prospects of an unprecedentedly deep economic recession and new waves of poverty. Timely and proportional policy responses are crucial to protect family incomes and ensure access to food. The approaches used throughout the article will certainly be helpful in understanding and responding to child poverty in the new context of crisis.

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Conflict of interest

I declare no conflict of interest.