

The rapid rise of food banks in schools: lessons for policy and practice

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3.5 million school children in the UK live in food insecure households. Food insecurity is when people have 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or having to acquire foods in socially unacceptable ways' (Anderson 1990: 1560). Food insecurity negatively influences children's educational and social outcomes.

About the research

The research underpinning this Policy Brief explores how, in response to high levels of food insecurity, growing numbers are running food banks and providing food aid because so many families are struggling to adequately feed their children. This is important because in recent years, there has been increased public and political debate around child food insecurity, 'holiday-hunger' and the UK's 'cost-of-living' crisis. However, there is limited research on how schools have been supporting low-income families experiencing food insecurity during this period.

This research includes qualitative and quantitative data. Drawing on interview data from staff working in early years settings and primary and secondary schools, we explore how and why staff are providing charitable aid to working class and low-income families. Drawing on nationally representative quantitative data from teachers across England, which we have accessed through, Teacher Tapp, we are able to assess how many school-based food banks there are in England and the sorts of schools they are found in.

Policy recommendations

- There is a need to collect better data on charitable food aid in schools. Local authorities and the Department for Education (DfE) should systematically collect data from schools on the charitable food aid work they are doing.
- Central and local government should develop research informed guidance for all schools in the UK about providing food support to families through initiatives like food banks. This should identify best practice, with a particular focus on reducing stigma, and acknowledge that everyone has the 'Right to Food'.
- Universal Free School Meals should be provided to all primary schools across the England. This is already happening in Wales and London and is being introduced in Scotland. This shows that it can be done but requires permanent and adequate levels of further funding from central government.
- Following the Independent Food Aid Network and other organisations, we suggest a 'Cash First' approach to food insecurity is required that focuses on creating secure work, adequate wages and a fairer social security system that supports all families.
- As is also suggested by Bradbury and Vince (2023), the work schools are doing to support families with food should be acknowledged by policymakers and in school inspections.

Key findings

- Using nationally representative data (n= 8,665) from teachers in England, we show that 21% of primary and secondary schools operate a food bank. We estimate that this amounts to over 4,000 school-based food banks in total.
- This suggests that there are more food banks inside schools than outside of schools in England. We base this claim on the number above being larger than the combined total of food banks operated by the Trussell Trust (1,646) the UK's largest food bank operator and the Independent Food Aid Network run (1,172).
- Food banks are more likely to be found in schools and areas with high numbers of children from low-income families.
- School staff cite the cost-of-living crisis, poverty and increases in children arriving at school hungry as key reasons for providing charitable food aid to families. Insecure work and challenges with accessing Universal Credit are also discussed as why families turn to schools for help with food.
- Some staff feel like they are increasingly having to provide 'emergency' or 'crisis' support to families who are struggling and can't access relevant services elsewhere.



Photo by Aaron Doucett on Unsplash

Further information

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Bradbury, A. and Vince, S. (2023). Food banks in schools: educational responses to the cost-of-living crisis, UCL Institute of Education.

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