



Opinion

Standing up for a Healthier Future for the Next Generation

Abstract

Food poverty is a real issue in the modern United Kingdom and one that adversely affects children leading to a long-lasting impact on their future health. This has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic,[1] the economic recession and the cost-of-living crisis. Increasing numbers of families are struggling to pay their bills whilst being forced to choose between buying essential food for their children. Many children are going hungry in schools with inadequate provisions for free meals. The concept of eating healthily is understandably low in priority, and healthy, affordable food is scarce. There is the additional element of the impact of an unequal society and inherent biases, which affects families and children from marginalised communities far more.

What is our role as young people growing up in modern, multi-cultural Britain? What meaningful contribution can we make to achieving a fair and just society, that we read about in our school lessons? This opinion piece will explore some of the ways we as young people, can make a difference in our own communities and neighbourhoods. There are lessons to be learnt from such role models as young activists such as *Malala Yousafzai*, *Greta Thunberg* and *Licypriya Kangujam*.

Key words

Free school meals, child health, food poverty, youth action, BiteBack2030

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Background

Food poverty is a reality in modern Britain and worsened significantly by the triple impact of COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession and the cost of living crisis. Securing adequate food and nutrition is essential for the maintenance of our health and function in society. Children have been disproportionately affected by the response to COVID-19 despite having a negligible risk of morbidity and mortality. Moreover, the response to COVID-19 has magnified the inequalities generated by the decade-long austerity regime imposed by the coalition, and current government. [2] A review exploring food insecurity highlighted that even where evidence may be forthcoming, there were many complexities in implementing effective solutions, in identifying responsibilities for addressing the causes, and the lack of coordinated policy framework.[3] *Zarah Sultana*, Labour MP, said in Parliament: *'Families who were forced to choose between heating and eating before, are now unable to do either,'* highlighting that 4 million children in the UK were living in poverty in 2022, and the cost-of-living crisis was predicted to push close to a million more below the breadline in the coming year.[4]

Food insecurity is defined as not always having the economic, social, and physical resources to ensure a sufficient supply of nutritionally appropriate food. Evidence suggests that food insecurity in the United Kingdom is increasing in the context of long-term poverty, austerity, insecure employment, rising living costs, low pay, and cuts to welfare and public services. [5] It is recognised that there is often little point in encouraging low-income consumers to eat more healthily if their district has inadequate local food suppliers and if shops which do offer a choice are located inconveniently for socially

disadvantaged groups such as single parents, women, the elderly, disabled individuals and the poor who tend to have worst access to cars and transport.[6]

In times of peace and prosperity, as well as times of recession, emergency food organisations are increasingly taking responsibility for protecting people against experiences of food poverty. These organisations are assuming this responsibility in parallel to the significant withdrawal of the welfare state which is impacting on both the need for and nature of emergency food provision.[7]

Organisations such as *BiteBack 2030*[8] are working to ensure that young people in the UK have access to healthy and affordable food, irrespective of their geographical location. One of the national campaigns asks for the extension of Free School Meals, increasing the eligibility criteria to all families with Universal Credit. It is estimated that almost 800,000 children living in poverty in England aren't eligible for Free School Meals. It should be easy to eat healthily. It should be even easier to eat healthily at school. Food insecurity is impacting on learning, and on mental and physical health.

Campaigning

In November 2022, I spoke at a Westminster event about the evidence supporting our mission as the *'Superpowers of Free School Meals'*[9] with the *Food Foundation*[10] and *BiteBack 2030*, as the chair of the latter's *Leeds Youth Board*. I took our mission for free school meals to many leaders, including the Chair of End Child Poverty[11] and Liberal Democrat MP *Murina Wilson*, discussing the need for change in UK government policy.

As a group of young performers, we wrote and presented a powerful narrative about free school meals from six different perspectives. Not only was that an incredible experience to have written and performed collaboratively, and shared the stage with many influential leaders including *Camilla Kingdon* from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, but also that our presentation was also followed by the most heartfelt and motivating standing ovation! We were also featured in the Sky News.

I took our campaign to the Leeds local MP, *Fabian Hamilton*. We had a fruitful discussion about the importance of free school meals, and why it should be urgently prioritised. We agreed that the government can, and must step up to make sure every child has the healthy food they need to do well at school.



What have I seen personally?

Many young people have fallen into the habit of donning a mask to hide their suffering, especially during lunchtimes at school, where they are surrounded by friends with full lunches. At school, I have personally seen the impact in class. When a student is hungry, they can't concentrate, and behaviour takes a turn for the worse. The effects of this are so widespread as it has a knock-on effect on the learning of everyone else in the classroom.

No one should be held back by hunger.

What do the Health Professionals say?

"Every day, healthcare professionals see the impact of hunger and malnutrition in their work," say a group of leaders representing

the College of Medicine and Integrated Health with more than 150,000 doctors and medical students, and over half a million nurses, midwives, dieticians and support staff. [12] Paediatricians support the *Feed the Future campaign*[13] in urging the UK Government to expand the Free School Meals scheme to all children in desperate need to guarantee them a hot, nutritious meal at school, for their health, their education, the economy and the NHS. They argue that good nutrition is essential during the critical period of rapid growth and development in childhood. Lack of healthy and adequate nutrition leads to poor growth of deprived babies and children on the one hand, and rising child obesity on the other. Many parents have no option but to buy cheaper lower quality and less nutritious food in order to feed their children and pay their bills. Malnutrition results in more children at risk of type 2 diabetes, poor mental health, [14] and weakened immune systems. Childhood obesity also generates organic changes in brain that make weight loss in later life much more difficult, making the problems worse in the long term. This results more long-term pressure on an overburdened national health service.

Schools perspective

Schools report seeing hungry children in lessons and the adverse impact on their wellbeing and learning. Almost 79% of children in a survey were found to have insufficient food in packed lunches.[15] Almost 85% agree that currently ineligible children would benefit from Free School Meals. Respondents believed that if the UK government were to increase funding for education, 68% of parents, grandparents and carers think it should be spent on school meals. In Wales, all primary school children will get Free School Meals at lunchtime by 2024. Why can't England commit to the same?

Of course, there is the economic argument. But did you know that if Free School Meals was extended to all families receiving Universal Credit, there would be a return of £1.38 for every £1 invested. Expanding free school meals to primary school children would benefit Britain's faltering economy with an £8.9 million annual boost in improved productivity and health. [16]

Conclusion

Children have suffered directly as a result of the pandemic and consequent economic downturn with lack of access to healthcare, and a decline in their mental health. Poverty, food insecurity and lack of exercise contributed to malnutrition, and increased obesity. [17] An intersectional approach, would also link the increased risk of food insecurity experienced by Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) children from low-income backgrounds to the broader experiences of racial capitalism and food oppression.[18] Researchers argue that what is required are clear rights-based policy frameworks which enable a range of actors including the state, charities and the food industry to work together towards, and be held accountable for, the progressive realisation of the right to food for all in the UK. Child feeding initiatives must be central to the critical food and poverty debate and evidence for the effectiveness of such interventions should be critically assessed. [19]

A domestic right to food enshrined in the state's duties owed to children is the most desirable legal solution; however, this must be coupled with increased welfare expenditure if BAME children from low-income backgrounds are to have any chance of enjoying their right to food. A progressive and welfare focussed government must hold itself accountable for food security of its most vulnerable as a legal right and fundamental human right.[18] We as members of the next generation of societal leaders must rise to

the challenge and join the campaign to eradicate food poverty from children in the UK.

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