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Report of the BSA Food Study Group-SPERI event

Food, poverty and policy: evidence base and knowledge gaps.

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Introduction

In the current era of austerity, with high costs of living, stagnating incomes, and rising levels of inequality the question of how well all people are able to eat is increasingly urgent. The recent rise in food banks in the UK has drawn particularly stark attention to the issue of food insecurity and has initiated a heated public and highly politicised debate. There is now a considerable amount of research being undertaken into the extent and experience of household food insecurity in the UK. This itself builds on a long history of research on poverty and food poverty within British sociology generally and the sociology of food in particular. Several evidence reviews have also recently been undertaken by policy makers and think tanks (notably the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty and the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty).[1]

However, the research which exists remains disparate and some politicians still maintain that the body of evidence remains too thin.[2] This, along with the fact that there has as yet been little discussion between academic researchers themselves, or between academics, policy makers and practitioners, about what this wealth of research 'adds' to knowledge, and which key theoretical and empirical questions remain unanswered formed the backdrop to our event.

The workshop therefore set out to explore this emerging body of evidence and its relationship with UK public policy. The fact that responsibility for issues impacting on household food security in the UK is 'fractured' can make translating research into policy difficult.[3] Furthermore, underlying much of the current policy which does exist is an emphasis on personal responsibility for health and economic wellbeing – often framed in relation to personal 'choice' – rather than upstream approaches targeting the labour market or global food market, which some academics and activists suggest is crucial.

The event brought together around 60 delegates including leading researchers, policy makers and practitioners. It aimed to showcase cutting-edge findings, take stock of the field, reflect on the implications of what we know, identify the key gaps in our evidence base that need filling and explore the intersections between different disciplinary and sub-disciplinary approaches as well as between non-academic researchers, practitioners and the academy.

Reflecting the approach of the Fabian Commission, we deliberately avoided the terms 'food poverty' and 'food insecurity' in the event title. This is not only because of the lack of consistent terminology and accepted definitions in the UK, but also because the scope of our interest is broader, that is, food in the context of poverty and inequality. However the terms (food poverty and food insecurity) have salience in the UK and are used here, as elsewhere, somewhat loosely, to refer to a lack of access to affordable food for health and social participation. We return to the question of the use and usefulness of 'food poverty' and 'food insecurity' in the final section of the report.

Tip of the iceberg: Understanding the rise of food charity

The growth of food banks (a particular form of charitable emergency food provision) across the UK in recent years has been at the centre of the rise in public and political consciousness of the problem of food insecurity. Since 2010 in particular the sharp rise of charitable initiatives providing parcels of emergency food for people to take away, prepare and eat has become a hotly contested and highly politicised issue. Faced with figures from the Trussell Trust foodbank network which report a rise in the distribution of food parcels from 61,468 to 1,084,604 a year, there have been calls for evidence on the reasons for this growth and on why people need to turn to food banks for assistance.[4] From different perspectives, papers by Loosptra *et al.*[5], Perry *et al.*[6] and William's *et al.*[7] cumulatively contributed several key points to furthering the evidence base and research agenda on food banks.

Evidence presented by Loopstra et al. and Perry et al. highlight that the rise in food bank provision is driven by (growing) need for emergency help with food. Furthermore, the reasons people turn to food banks for assistance are complex and multifaceted. The analysis by Loosptra *et al.* interrogates the question of whether the rise in food bank provision is a result of supply factors or factors relating to need. Looking particularly at whether food bank initiation and food parcel distribution was related to local area unemployment, cuts in welfare spending, and the application of sanctions to unemployment claimants over 2010 to 2013, they found that each 1 percentage point increase in unemployment increased the likelihood of a food bank opening by 8% in the following year, while each 1% cut in local authority spending increased the odds of a food bank opening by 7% in the next year. Further, independent of local area food bank operations, food parcel distribution rose with the magnitude of cuts to welfare benefit spending and rates of sanctioning among unemployment claimants. Their findings therefore suggest that food bank data presenting increases in provision are indicative of rising need, linked to austerity and economic downturn.

In a study which sought to explore the drivers behind food bank use through collecting data at an individual level, Perry et al. showed that most food bank users are facing an immediate and acute financial crisis, but that this was set against a backdrop of complex, difficult lives that made them more vulnerable to life shocks, including experiences of ill health, bereavement, relationship breakdown, substantial caring responsibilities or job loss. Issues with social security were also prominent in their findings which, overall, highlighted the complexity of the reasons that lead people to need to turn to foodbanks.

The paper by William's et al. reminds us that **food banks are also political spaces**, and spaces in which beliefs and discourses are formed, experienced and lived – particularly discourses of deservingness and dependency. Focusing on volunteers in food banks, their ethnographic research highlights how – by providing a melting pot of political beliefs and spaces of encounter (between clients themselves, clients and volunteers and volunteers from different political spheres) participation in these organisations may generate new, or reinforce existing, ethical and political attitudes, beliefs and identities.

The strength of the cumulative evidence across these three papers also serves to highlight **the importance and utility of drawing on a variety of robust methodologies to form a rounded evidence base on this complex phenomenon**. Loopstra et al.'s paper drawing on national data sets, together with Perry et al.'s in-depth interview data, administrative data relating to individual recipients and welfare advisor case load data come together to provide a compelling set of evidence. Williams et al.'s ethnography of volunteers also highlighted the multiple actors involved in these systems and the importance of the experience of them all – in this case particularly volunteers – in addition to studies which focus on clients or national personnel or policy makers.

All three papers highlight the different scales and sites at which these organisations can be studied and experienced – so the food bank site itself, as well as at the site of the individual or local area or nationally. Finally, these papers also draw attention to the fact that **whilst the study of food banks is important, it is limited in what it can tell us about food insecurity, which in turn requires its own focus and study**.

Methodological Developments: Measuring household food insecurity

In the UK, unlike the US, Canada and Australia, data about food insecurity at the individual and household level are currently not routinely collected or monitored. The Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey[8] that was conducted between 2003-2005 collected this information but has not been repeated. The Food and Agriculture Organisation 'Voices of the Hungry'[9] study now includes the UK, but results are not yet available. In the absence of systematic data, research on the growth of emergency food provision and food charity is therefore an important source of evidence. However, since the numbers turning to 'emergency food' provision represent the 'tip of the iceberg', researchers have addressed the question of what we can learn about the depth and extent of UK food insecurity from secondary analysis of the available data.

Drawing on routinely collected data on household income, expenditure and consumption, analyses presented by Douglas *et al.*[10], O'Connor *et al.*[11] and Smith *et al.*[12] **contribute to knowledge of the nature, extent and geographical distribution of household food insecurity in the UK**.

Food quantity and quality are fundamental to food security. Analysis of the Scottish Health Survey (SHS) and Kantar World panel (KWP) by Douglas et al. found that the **reported food purchase and intake of low income households were further from national recommendations for healthy diet than those of households with or above the average income**. Differences in foods and beverages purchased were reflected in the energy density of the overall diet, which was slightly, but statistically significantly, more energy dense in Households Below Average Income (HBAI) than the Non-HBAI. SHS analysis comparing fruit and vegetable intake compared to the national recommendation also found that a larger share of Non-HBAI reach the 5-a-day fruits and vegetable target.

Among the aims of the All-party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK was the identification of the geographic distribution of food poverty in the UK. Evidence presented by O'Connor *et al.* and Smith et al. found that **food insecurity in England may be more concentrated in particular areas in the North of the country and parts of London**. There are divergences between the papers, however and, in addition, it is acknowledged that mapping the geographical distribution outside of England is more difficult. As Douglas et al. note, since Scotland is considered a region, Scottish households tend to represent small numbers in UK wide datasets and more detailed regional data are needed to understand within country differences.

The proportion of income, or total consumption expenditure, spent on food has also been considered an indicator of food insecurity. Households where this is high are more sensitive to food price rises and those in the lowest income groups have little room to 'trade down', since they are already on the most basic of diets.[13] Confirming results presented in Defra's Family Food Survey, evidence from the analysis of the Living Costs and Food Survey is that, in Scotland, HBAI food spending as a proportion of income is twice as large as Non-HBAI (23% compared to 11%). As O'Connor et al. note in their application of fuel poverty measurement methods to the issue of food insecurity, there are important connections between food and fuel poverty, but there are also important differences.[14]

Overall the three papers contribute to wider debates concerning the conceptual and methodological complexities involved in conducting secondary analyses as well as the definition and measurement of food insecurity. All three papers also highlight the potential for existing data to illuminate the relationship between food and poverty, beyond direct measures which focus on reported behaviours. However the papers all acknowledge limitations in conducting secondary analyses of existing data, with a clear message being the need for direct measures of food insecurity to measure and monitor severity and extent, as well as for use of alternative sources and types of data to be brought together to shed light on its different dimensions.

Taking the papers together an important consideration concerns the divergence between questions, data and results. Whilst the different methodologies used to address emergency food provision produce findings which confirm and complement one another, the differently framed questions, conceptual and methodological approaches of these secondary analyses do not corroborate one another so neatly. Although this is understandable given the different disciplinary concerns, epistemologies and datasets employed by the researchers, the lack of consensus is potentially unhelpful to policymakers looking for clear evidence about the nature and extent of food insecurity.[15]

Delving Deeper: Lived experiences of particular groups across the life course

Whilst it is recognised that the diet and nutrient intake of the general population fall short of government recommendations[16], 'longstanding socioeconomic differentials in household consumption patterns and individual nutrient intakes' are also

acknowledged in the UK.[17] An emphasis on personal responsibility for health means that the poor may be blamed for making unhealthy 'choices' about their food purchasing and intake, whilst the complexities of their lives and conditions in which foods are selected and eaten, remain obscure. Whilst it is important to estimate the extent of food poverty, research that measures, counts and maps tells us little about the meaning of food insecurity itself or how those living on low incomes negotiate food and eating in their everyday lives. Qualitative research across the life course and in different regions of the UK provides insights into these lived experiences.

In adopting qualitative approaches to examine the social conditions in which food and eating are negotiated by low income and disadvantaged individuals and groups, **contributions from Fairbrother** *et al.*[18]**, Gombert** *et al.*[19]**, and Garratt-Glass** *et al.*[20] **problematized the concept of 'food choice' that dominates government discourse**.

Research presented by Gombert et al. highlighted how food selection may be motivated by a wide and competing range of factors which may be unrelated to health and which reflect the many needs that food meets in social life, beyond nutrition. Action research based on observations and interviews with vulnerable young people (aged 16-25) in Aberdeenshire reveal how the reality of young people's lives conflicts with public health messages in relation particularly to cost, accessibility, the social meaning of food and the temporal structures of daily life.

The papers also demonstrated that **children and young people were well aware of how food selection is constrained by the cost and availability of food**. Adopting a social studies of childhood approach that grants agency to children and young people, Fairbrother et al. examined children's understanding of family finances and their impact on eating healthily. Children incorporated a variety of media information into their understandings and sought explanations from their personal experience. They had sophisticated ideas about the interrelationships between diet, cost and health and were acutely aware of how family finances influenced food purchase. Children proposed different strategies to facilitate eating healthily on a budget, but prioritised state and corporate responsibility in ensuring that eating healthily is affordable.

The issue of where responsibility for healthy eating resides was also raised by Garratt-Glass et al. who used a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine food insecurity amongst older people. Analyses of national-level survey data, case studies of foodbanks and interviews with older people using foodbanks, found that increasing numbers of older people were constrained in their spending on food and were skipping meals in order to help their children and grandchildren. Some older people were too embarrassed to visit a foodbank and were having food parcels delivered by volunteers. Highlighting the impact of food insecurity on the health and well-being of vulnerable populations and the follow-on costs to the public purse, the researchers' conclusions echo those of other conference papers in raising questions about the present policy approach and the responsibilities of the UK government under international law.

Taking Stock

In the closing session Elizabeth Dowler, Geoff Tansey and Niall Cooper reflected and elaborated, in discussion with the audience, on the history of food insecurity in UK public policy, the relationship between evidence and policy in this field and the increasingly important role of civil society organisations in influencing the agenda. The discussion revealed some key insights and some important challenges for researchers in the area of food and poverty that are discussed in this final section.

The role of academics in this field of evidence generation and policy making was discussed in this session. Researchers can play a range of roles including providing evidence and indicators, being careful and cautious about what is presented, delving into the empirical complexities, drawing on a range of methods, and working on how the evidence all fits together (not just on how it trades off against itself). The role of the researcher who wishes to provide evidence for policy making is also inherently political. This becomes particularly salient in this highly politicized field, with many calling for the government to collect systematic data for measuring and monitoring food insecurity.

The papers and discussions from this event highlight the diverse range of evidence being developed across the country, from different disciplines. The evidence highlights that experiences of food insecurity and need for assistance from a food bank (or other charitable emergency food provider) are urgent issues requiring robust academic exploration and which increasing numbers of researchers are undertaking. At a time when policy makers continue to insist that there is a lack of evidence – particularly relating to emergency food provision – it is more important than ever that we assess what we know, and what remains to be done.

Reflecting on the state of the field, key findings drawn from the papers and discussions were that:

- Food insecurity is widespread, with concentrations in deprived areas;
- Food bank provision is increasing because of rising need;
- Food bank recipients are in desperate situations;
- There are different and distinct lived experiences throughout the life course;
- Choice-based discourses that shift blame from the state to individuals are inadequate for addressing the real barriers to food access that people face.

In looking to the priorities for next steps in the research field, the papers and discussions that the event generated indicates that three key areas are likely to be particularly important.

1. Achieving conceptual clarity on the ('food poverty' / 'food security' / food and poverty) problem.

Arguably the most pressing conceptual challenge in this field is the ambiguity surrounding, and inconsistent use of, terminology, particularly 'food poverty' and 'food insecurity'. Agreeing a consensus on the precise nature of the 'problem' being explored will therefore be a critical next step in the progress of this agenda. More than this, speakers emphasised that it will be vital to find meaningful ways to con-

nect these concepts with the exploration of other, related, social challenges, particularly environmental sustainability, that are often left out of questions of food and poverty. Building on consensual measures to form robust baselines for notions of food adequacy and acceptability could form another important avenue for work to establish what we mean by constrained or unjust food experiences.

2. Moves towards direct measures of food insecurity and placing a high value on the experiences of those directly affected.

Given the inability of foodbank data to provide representative and holistic knowledge about wider experiences of food insecurity and the divergence of findings resulting from secondary analyses of food insecurity proxies, a key question for researchers to explore now is the direct measurement of food insecurity in the UK. At the same time, a point discussed at length in the plenary session was that research (and policy making) needs to be rooted in real life with people's experiences at the forefront, so, researchers also need to explore how they can work more fully alongside people experiencing poverty and food insecurity.

3. Maintaining and promoting methodological and disciplinary variety in the field, in the pursuit of a highly rigorous evidence base.

One aspect of this research area particularly worthy of celebration is the interdisciplinary and multi-method nature of the work being carried out – by researchers from health, social policy, anthropology, geography, and elsewhere, using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods – which is beginning to build a vibrant body of evidence. However, it will be important for work from different disciplines to be brought together, not reside in silos. Furthermore, given the range of interest in evidence on these issues, the intersections between research carried out by academics and non-academics (for example NGOs), as well as the ways in which academics and NGOs can best work together to inform public policy, must also be considered and how these form a wider body of evidence to inform policy and practice. Methodologically also, research needs to be designed with rigour in mind and needs to capture the range of issues and dynamics of concern, applying a variety of methods to the many questions raised by the intersection of food and poverty.

Altogether, this event highlighted the range of research being conducted in the area of food and poverty and the extent of engagement with it from policy makers, NGOs and other researchers. Dealing with urgent social issues which impact on the lives of people in poverty every day, this research agenda has the potential to provide policy makers and other stakeholders with invaluable evidence on how best to promote a justice and fairness. The challenge for researchers is to come together around some of the key issues identified above, to produce a body of evidence which is robust, relevant and has the potential to affect real change.

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