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Sheffield

The Rise of Food Insecurity in England:

Using *Food Ladders* to overcome
the barriers



Dr Megan Blake
Department of Geography



UK Research
and Innovation

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Dr Megan Blake, Department of Geography, University of Sheffield

Key points

Problem: Household food insecurity is rapidly increasing in the UK, affecting 1 in 4 adults. This means they can't afford or access healthy food.

Two approaches:

Current Approach: Solutions like food banks and 'cash first' provide emergency help, but don't address long-term needs nor are they preventative.

Social Development Model: This approach sees food insecurity as a lack of resources (money, skills, knowledge, health, wellbeing). As food insecurity rises, these resources decline, creating a cycle of poverty and poor health.

Food Ladders: This community-based strategy offers a three-pronged approach:

- **Catching:** Immediate support (food parcels, mental health help).
- **Capacity Building:** Skills training, food clubs, voucher programmes to increase food knowledge and access.
- **Self-organising:** Community gardens, urban agriculture projects to create sustainable food systems.

Solutions:

- **Community Support:** More resources and industry collaboration needed for community food programmes that help to build resilience.
- **Local Authority Action:** National mandate and funding for local food strategies.
- **Data Collection:** Improved tracking of food insecurity at the local level.
- **Levelling-Up Strategies:** Invest in social development programmes to ensure people have the capability to live a healthy life.
- **Adequate Income:** Businesses need to offer living wages and advancement opportunity, and government needs better income support for those unable to work.

Problem: The rapid increase of household food insecurity in the England

Eradicating hunger is one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, yet there is a myth that wealthy nations have no food insecurity. Rich countries can produce or import enough food, this is borne out by the new UK government's Food Security Indexⁱ. The UK Food Security Index includes measures of consumer confidence, production, investment, and trade. However, unequal income distribution, lack of local access, and various personal circumstances give rise to household food insecurity. At the household scale, food insecurity is the inability to have the food necessary to live a healthy life. This understanding underpins the UN sustainable development goal but is not included in this new index. The UK has rising food insecurity rates at the household scale, whereby one in four adults is food insecure. For those experiencing food insecurity, mental and physical health suffers, which in turn creates further demands on the public purse.

Rates of food insecurity in England have increased since before the pandemic. In 2018ⁱⁱ about ten per cent of the adult population were skipping meals or going without food. By the summer/autumn of 2020 the rate was sixteen per cent. In the autumn of 2022, the rate was twenty-four per cent. In 2022, those who struggle most are adults living in the most deprived communities (40%), those on incomes less than £32k per year (46%), and those who are not employed (45%). Although impacted less, the rate of insecurity for those who earn more than £32K per year more than doubled between 2020 and 2022 (from 7.9% to 18.7%). By 2022, one in four adults in work are also food insecure, up from sixteen per cent in 2020 (see data table at the end of this report for more detail).

“I skipped meals because my cupboards were bare. Even if you've got a tin of beans then you can always have beans on toast, can't you.” Lilly (55, August 2020)

For many, accessing help is difficult. Many who use foodbanks report feeling embarrassed and ashamed. Their self-esteem is negatively impacted, and the ability to know that their current situation does not have to be permanent is damaged. People in these communities

“I just don't want people to feel sorry for me because I've never been that person. I've always been that upbeat sort of guy and I hate to think people are trying to offer me something. Liam (40's, August 2020)

seek dignity, reciprocity, and a say in their lives. They also feel political actors are letting them down. While we often assume those struggling to be politically apathetic, a recent survey of *The Bread and Butter Thing* members (n=4233)ⁱⁱⁱ, an affordable food club operating across the north of England in more than 120 sites, revealed that 74% (n=2659) intend to vote in the next general election, the majority of whom have voted before (97%). Of those who intend to vote, the majority of these (67%, n=1801) said that they think the community is worse off now compared to when they were children, and just over half (55%, n=1484) think living standards are worse now than when their parents were at the same stage in life as they are.

Most (89%, n=2104) think the main political parties need to understand the cost-of-living crisis better. The majority (79%, n=1457) also believe that voting in the general election will make little difference to the investment and support that their community will receive.

Two approaches to the issue

There are two ways we approach this problem. The first is by seeing this as an inability to afford food and the second is by adopting a social development model.

Traditional approaches, like food banks, adopt the affordability model and focus on immediate solutions to hunger. More recently, this has transitioned to a “cash first” approach, where cash payments are given to people so that they can purchase food. Sometimes these are limited to use in the supermarket. This approach works for some. When cost-of-living payments were provided, food banks reported a decline in use. However, research also shows that food bank use is not a good indicator of food insecurity^{iv}. People still must travel to access food because the availability of good food has not improved in the places where they live. Moreover, people use the supermarket vouchers to buy more of what they have been used to or treats. They buy shelf-stable items because they can be saved for the future when money is inevitably tight again, and they purchase treats because life is hard and to express love and care. We saw this in the pandemic with the free lunch vouchers. Cash transfers can also go toward other priorities, such as debt or rent, rather than food. When cash transfers stop, evidence suggests their situation return to pre-transfer levels^v. While some can save money, jobs prospects and income in the long term are not improved for most recipients.

The second approach, the social development model, recognises struggle as a lack of resources and opportunities. Resources include money but also include food skills and knowledge, social connections, physical health, and mental wellbeing. These factors deteriorate as food insecurity increases. As financial worries intensify, diets narrow to include only those foods that fill the stomach, and are frequently highly processed, which in turn contributes to diet-related ill health. As health deteriorates, people’s ability to travel to the shops and carry home groceries declines. Poor health also impacts people’s ability to cook food because the strength needed to stand at a cooker or lift a heavy pan is undermined. It also impacts on the ability to work. Limited health can also limit people’s ability to participate in social activity, leading to isolation and compounding ill-effects on mental and physical health.

Poverty and deprivation affect not only people but also the places where they live. It hollows out community resources such as the availability of healthy food, collective food knowledge, and social infrastructures that build resilience^{vi}. Within these contexts, people make choices about the food they eat. These contexts also become hostile; people have become afraid to leave their homes, because of isolation and fear. This also impacts their ability to access food because they avoid going out. To address poverty, we also need to repair the places where people live by improving the resources and infrastructures that are available in those places. By reconnecting people to each other, resilience is built, and knowledge is shared.

“I’ve kept away because there was an incident. He threatened me a bit. I have seen him a few times since and he is always threatening me. He lives in the area where I live and when I go out I am a bit on edge” Gerald (38, August 2020)

“I’ve had two new hips fitted in the last two and a half years. I am still apprehensive about going out. I can look where I am going, its other people you have to worry about”. Randy (66, August 2020)

Food Ladders as a tool for repairing the damage caused

One example of the social development model is the Food Ladders approach^{vii}. It is a community-based strategy that works alongside efforts to increase the availability of jobs that provide a living wage and adequate benefits for those out of work. It aims to build resilience and long-term solutions. The food ladders approach emphasises food's social and cultural aspects and nutritional value. It encourages communities to unite, share resources, and build skills to improve food security. Food Ladders highlights three rungs of support:

- **Catching:** This first rung provides immediate support for those in crisis. It might involve emergency food parcels, cash payments and supermarket vouchers, mental health support, or referrals to social services.
- **Capacity Building:** This rung focuses on helping people who aren't currently in crisis but may struggle to afford or access good food. Activities can include shared cooking and eating, food clubs with a wider variety of healthy options, and additional support. Targeted voucher schemes, such as Alexandra Rose or Fresh Street, can also be mobilised within these spaces to help increase food knowledge through food talk, particularly when they link to locally based food outlets. Evidence from the Fresh Street place-based voucher scheme also shows that it helps stabilise markets in places by supporting a consistent demand for fruit and vegetables because it creates sufficient demand.
- **Self-organising:** This top rung aims to create a more sustainable food system within the community. It might involve community gardens, urban agriculture projects or cooperative activity to increase access to affordable, healthy food options in the local area. These operate alongside and intersect with the established commercial supply chain to create a more diverse food system to overcome situations when a pure market produces perverse outcomes, such as the overconsumption of highly processed foods.

“[The Food Ladders are] incredibly helpful to help us think about how to cater not only for individuals in crisis and severe need around food but also how to build community capacity and encourage self-organising in an intentional way, making the very best of local strengths and energy. This means that at any one time in any given place, it is possible to build local food access provision such that different people can get the support they need. Importantly, they can also contribute, feel connected and feel increasingly resilient because the ‘foodscape’ in that place supports such a journey.”

York and North Yorkshire Covid Recovery Insight Project

(<https://www.skyblue.org.uk/foodinsecurity/communities-of-practice-place-based/>)

The Food Ladders approach is now being utilised by local authorities across the UK to inform local food strategies, by trusts and foundations to inform funding decisions, and within local communities. Where it is being used, it gives a framework within which communities can situate their activity and recognise their assets to achieve shared aims. These communities can use it to identify patterns of struggle and the necessary solutions while giving voice and agency to those having trouble. While the problems are significant,

community work reveals more hope than despair. Collaboration offers a path forward. We have been working with 20 local authorities across the UK to create a toolkit to support

“I got involved in the food insecurity work during the pandemic. The Food ladder use has come as a legacy to that work as we understood that people couldn’t just get on with free food on a regular basis. We started using it to support people back to full independence. We started to look for what might help people to be more independent and what the process might be. We came across the food ladders research and embedded it in our food security tool kit. It has shifted our thinking and helped us move away from emergency support. It is a really good way to address some of the stigma attached to food aid. It has also helped us to connect different actors in the local food system who do different things.” LA public health officer, November 2023)



implementation of the ladders.

Photo courtesy of The Bread and Butter Thing: Community food club.

Solutions: How government and industry can help

Here are five key recommendations for government and industry:

1. More Resources Needed for Community Food Support:

- Community organisations struggle with tight funding, expensive food, suitable space to operate and limited access to bulk buying opportunities.
- Industry support is needed to:
 - Offer discounted bulk and repeat purchases of healthy food for community food programmes.
 - Collaborate with food clubs to ensure those in temporary housing have access to kitchens or prepared meals.
 - Incentivise the purchase of healthy food by helping to make these foods more accessible and less “risky”.
 - Engage with local food organisations in meaningful ways by sharing resources, such as knowledge, skills and technology, that go beyond donating surplus and group volunteer days.

2. Empower Local Authorities for Food Strategies:

- Many local authorities collaborate with food networks, but this is not always prioritised.
- A national mandate and dedicated funding would:
 - Make food strategies a core responsibility of local authorities.
 - Ensure consistent action across all regions.

3. Track Food Insecurity More Locally:

- Current food security measures do not capture household struggles sufficiently.
- We need:
 - Government food security indexes to include household food insecurity data.
 - Larger sample sizes in surveys to pinpoint the worst-hit areas.
 - Regular updates of local food insecurity maps^{viii} based on official statistics to support local authorities to track and identify problem areas.

4. Prioritise Food Security in Levelling-Up Strategies that adopt a social development model:

- Levelling-up investments focus on infrastructure, but healthy workers are essential.
- A social development approach is needed:
 - Invest in programs that ensure people can afford, access, and incorporate healthy food in their diets, which are part of a social setting.
 - Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities can lead this effort. But collaboration is needed with other relevant departments.

5. Ensure Adequate Income for All:

- Businesses should offer living wages and opportunities for career advancement.
- Government needs to improve job training programs and provide adequate benefits for those unable to work or who are training or looking for work.

Data table for the state of food security in England 2020-2022

	2020 Group n	%	X ²	2022 Group n	%	X ²	% increase	Change rate
Gender			.298			5.64*		
Male	2345	15.1%		1386	22.2%		7.1%	1.47
Female	2548	15.7%		1476	25.9%		10.2%	1.65
Age			144.89**			119.13**		
Under 65 years	3755	18.9%		2219	29.2%		10.3%	1.54
65+ years old	1102	4.0%		663	8.4%		4.4%	2.10
Ethnicity			21.56**			34.38**		
White ethnic	4248	14.1%		2405	22.1%		8.0%	1.57
Other ethnic groups	539	21.7%		388	35.8%		14.1%	1.65
Marital Status			115.49**			116.14**		
Married	2542	10.1%		1468	15.9%		5.8%	1.57
Not married	2383	21.2%		1315	33.4%		12.2%	1.58
Children			87.57**			98.11**		
No children	3506	12.5%		1975	19.1%		6.6%	1.53
One+ children	1362	23.3%		855	36.5%		13.2%	1.57
LTHC			35.99**			36.81**		
No LTHC	3129	12.9%		1899	20.4%		7.5%	1.58
Yes LTHC	1498	19.6%		804	31.2%		11.6%	1.59
Household Income			217.80**			165.47**		
Less than £32K	1869	25.9%		554	46.4%		20.5%	1.79
£32K+	1893	7.9%		1620	18.7%		10.8%	2.37
Work			74.16**			78.22**		
In pd work	2788	15.7%		1671	24.7%		9.6%	1.57
Not in pd work	983	28.3%		531	44.8%		16.5%	1.58
Urban/Rural			25.85**			30.46**		
Urban	3975	16.9%		2376	26.5%		9.6%	1.57
Rural	980	10.4%		539	15.1%		4.7%	1.45
Highly Deprived			100.74**			90.46**		
Most deprived	961	26.1%		567	39.9%		13.8%	1.53
Other quintiles	3995	13.0%		2336	20.7%		7.7%	1.59
Total Population	4956	15.6%		2903	24.4%		8.8%	1.56

*Chi-Square significant at 95% (p=.05)

**Chi Square significant at 99% (p=.01)

in and out of work excludes those who are retired.

Data source Food and You 2, Wave 1 and Wave 6.

ⁱ DEFRA, UK Food Security Index 2024 available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-food-security-index-2024/uk-food-security-index-2024>

ⁱⁱ FSA data are from Food and You Wave 5 (2018), Food and You 2 Waves 1 (Summer 2020) and Wave 6, 2022. FSA data are an official government data source and are available through the UK Data Service (<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8814>). Food and You and Food and You 2 use the USDA ten question food security module to calculate food insecurity. In this analysis food insecurity includes those who are categorised by the FSA as having low or very low food security.

ⁱⁱⁱ The TBBT survey, a text-based survey sent to 29,968 members, was conducted in April 2024. For more information contact the author. There is more about TBBT here: <https://www.breadandbutterthing.org/>

^{iv} According to the FSA Food and You 2 wave 6 survey 6.4% of people who were food insecure used a food bank, 7% used a food club, and 6.6% used both a food club and a food bank in the previous year. See also Loopstra, R, Tarasuk, V, 2015. Foodbank usage is a poor indicator of food insecurity: Insights from Canada. *Social Policy and Society* 14.

^v See findings from the Leeds City Council Cash first pilot here: <https://www.governmentevents.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Grace-Lawrenson-and-Joe-Farnworth-Mayers.pdf>

^{vi} Blake, M, 2019, More than Just Food: Food Insecurity and Resilient Place Making through Community Self-Organising. *Sustainability* 11(10), 2942, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11102942>

^{vii} Blake, M, 2018, Food Ladders: A multi-scaled approach to food security and Resilience. Available online <https://geofoodie.org/2019/06/19/food-ladders/>

^{viii} See for example this map produced by Moretti, A, Whitworth, A and M Blake (2021) that provided measures of adult food insecurity at the local authority scale using data collected by the Food Foundation. <https://shefuni.maps.arcgis.com/apps/interactivelegend/index.html?appid=8be0cd9e18904c258afd3c959d6fc4d7>. This map does not use official data nor does it utilise the FSA food security index. While we current FSA data tells us what types of locations are struggling (e.g., highly deprived areas), we do not know which areas are the worst hit. With maps like this, local government can see the scale and scope of the issue in their areas, which many acted on. These maps and data also help national and regional charities identify gaps and target interventions in areas where there is struggle.



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Sheffield

About the Author:

Dr Megan Blake is an expert in household food security at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on tackling the social inequalities that lead to food insecurity.

Known for her Food Ladders framework, Dr Blake's research examines three main areas: the social and place-based factors that cause food insecurity, community organisation and resilience building, and surplus food redistribution.

Dr Blake actively engages with the public through media appearances and community events. In addition to influencing local authorities who are using the Food Ladders framework in their local food and resilience strategies, she has consulted with all the major food redistribution organisations in the UK, several commercial food retailers and producers, and grants and trusts are using her framework to structure funding decisions. Her work has demonstrably impacted policy and community initiatives. You can read more about Dr Blake's work on [Http://Geofoodie.org](http://Geofoodie.org)

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