



Chapter 4

The National Food Strategy: Part One – July 2020

Jobs and Hunger

One of the miserable legacies of COVID-19 is likely to be a dramatic increase in unemployment and therefore poverty. We examine the ways in which poverty can lead not only to people going hungry, but also to them relying on diets that are more likely to damage their health.

The most effective way to relieve this situation is to save as many jobs as possible. This is, rightly, the focus of Government activity. However, given the scale of the expected increase in unemployment, there will be people who find themselves suddenly struggling to put food on the table. We propose some measures to help.



LONG after this virus has passed, we will still be able to feel its presence. It will be with us in the grief of the thousands of families who have lost loved ones. And it will have gouged an indelible mark into our economy.

As I write this, at the beginning of July 2020, the prognosis is bleak. The UK economy shrank by an unprecedented 20% in April as the country went into lockdown.⁸⁸ Every day we hear reports of well-known companies going bust or laying off swathes of their workforce. According to the latest figures, there have been 3.3 million new claims for Universal Credit since March 16th;⁸⁹ 9.3 million employees have been furloughed⁹⁰ and a further 2.4 million people have applied for the Government's Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.⁹¹ By October, when the furlough scheme comes to an end, the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that 1.6 million more people will have been made redundant.⁹²

A K-shaped scar

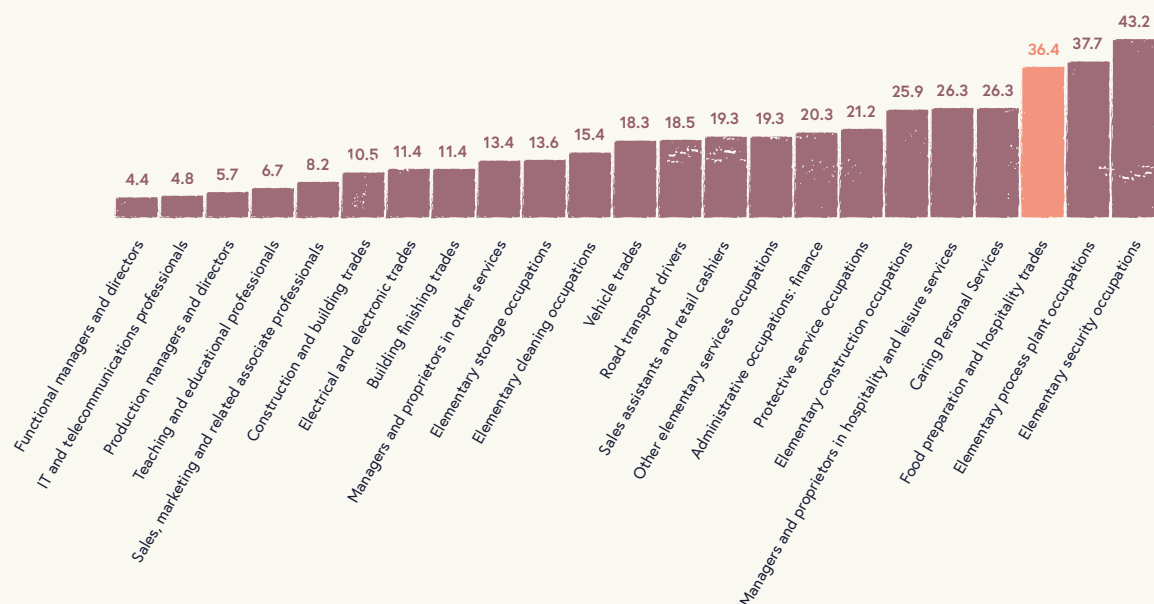
The economic burdens of the pandemic have not been, and will not be, shared equally. Some economists believe we are about to go into a K-shaped recession, with some sectors thriving in these new conditions (the upward tick of the "K"), while others sink.⁹³

This is certainly true within the food industry. Workers in supermarkets and other retail outlets have experienced an entirely different pandemic from those in out-of-home businesses such as pubs, cafes and restaurants.

Those in retail, and in food manufacturing and logistics, had to keep working during lockdown, while much of the rest of the nation sheltered at home. They risked their health to keep the cogs of the food system turning, and were rightly clapped as key workers. Among men, four of the top ten occupations with the highest COVID-19 mortality rate were in the food system.⁹⁴

Figure 4.1

COVID-19 death rates have been higher among male food workers⁹⁵



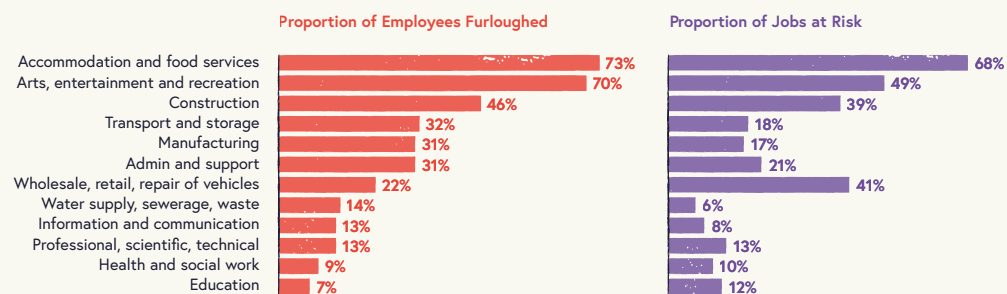
Males only, due to data gaps for females. Age-standardised rates per 100,000 population, standardised to the 2013 European Standard Population.

In the hospitality industry it was, and remains, a very different story. Sales in the hotel and out-of-home food sector dropped by 88% between March and April,⁹⁶ with 81% of these businesses ceasing to trade⁹⁷ during lockdown. A third of the UK's total fall in GDP was caused by reduced demand in hospitality, highlighting the UK's reliance on this sector.⁹⁸ 73% of employees were furloughed, more than in any other

sector (see Figure 4.2). In many cases, furlough has just delayed inevitable redundancies. McKinsey & Company estimates that 68% of jobs in this sector are at risk,⁹⁹ a much higher percentage than in any other industry. For the hospitality trade, which relies on large numbers of customers to compensate for narrow margins, it will be a long and painful road to recovery.

Figure 4.2

Impact of COVID-19 on employment¹⁰⁰



The experiences of farmers have been different again. The rapid shift in consumer behaviour caused all sorts of upheavals during lockdown, and highlighted the fragilities of the farming sector. There was a sudden glut of milk¹⁰¹ and potatoes¹⁰² as people stopped buying takeaway coffees and ordering chips in restaurants. Demand for mince – easy to cook at home, and to freeze – soared, while more expensive cuts of meat went unsold.¹⁰³ Farmers' markets and street food events were cancelled, and many of the supplemental incomes that farmers depend on, such as camping or bed and breakfast offerings, stopped abruptly.¹⁰⁴ With margins already low, many farmers have struggled to make ends meet.

Helping businesses get back on their feet – thereby both saving and creating jobs – is the most important thing the Government can do right now. Higher employment means less poverty; less poverty means less food insecurity.¹⁰⁵ The Government has produced the biggest peacetime support package in UK history, trying to protect jobs and incomes through an array of loans, grants, rate relief, the furlough scheme and benefit changes, as well as providing targeted support to specific sectors. The cost of all of this (at the time of writing) is £132.5 billion.¹⁰⁶ over 15% of its total 2018-19 annual expenditure.¹⁰⁷

But however Herculean the efforts of the state, many people will find themselves out of work. Poverty will almost certainly increase and with it the number of people going hungry.

Is "food poverty" simply poverty?

While researching this strategy, I travelled all over the country visiting organisations that help feed people who might otherwise go hungry. I went to food banks and charities, a community shop in Grimsby selling discounted food to the unemployed, a cafe that feeds the homeless for free in Thanet, and a refuge for women who have just been released from prison in Birmingham. I wanted to better understand whether "food poverty" is in fact simply poverty by another name, or whether there are specific aspects of the food system that make it hard for people on low incomes to eat well.

At the First Love Foundation food bank in Tower Hamlets, I was offered the chance to work as a volunteer, registering new clients as they arrived. That Friday, the mobile drop-in centre – which is run by one of my Advisory Panel members, Denise Bentley – was being held in a low-rise, brown brick community centre on the doorstep of Canary Wharf, London's financial engine room. Glittering skyscrapers loomed over us as we pulled into the car park.

Everyone visiting the drop-in centre had been referred there – by a GP or social worker, the Citizens Advice Bureau or the local Jobcentre Plus. They were all given a food box, but the most critical service dispensed was advice. Every client was interviewed and triaged when they arrived and then they got to see a project worker, benefits advisor or housing expert, depending on the situation that had brought them to the food bank.

My job was to ask them what food and other essential supplies they needed. You could tell in many cases that it had taken courage to come to the food bank. They were careful to take only what they needed. "Do you want shampoo?" "No, I have enough to last a week, thank you."

The stories these people had to tell were varied and sometimes heart-breaking. One elderly woman had cancer, learning difficulties, severe depression, and no family. She was simply incapable of navigating the system to get the help she needed. I met two women, one Bangladeshi and the other Finnish, both struggling with difficult partners. (One was a violent binge-drinker, the other had manic phases during which he spent all their money on cricket memorabilia.)[†] Both women had failed Habitual Residence Tests, which meant their partners could claim benefits, but they couldn't.

There were many people who simply couldn't find ways to match their expenditure to the benefits they were receiving – due to sudden unemployment, for instance, or because they were being pushed gradually into poverty as their rent rose above their housing benefit cap and they couldn't bare the idea of moving to a more affordable area.

The roll-out of Universal Credit was a recurring theme, as people struggled to make ends meet while waiting five weeks for their first payment. Even after the Government introduced a 100% advance payment to help bridge this gap (in January 2018)¹⁰⁸ many people

decided they would rather go without in the short term than have to pay back the advance in the form of lower payments in the longer term.¹⁰⁹

These people's stories had nothing to do with the food system: they were problems of poverty, mental illness, domestic abuse, and often revised or delayed benefits claims. A surprising number were able to solve long-running problems – such as difficulties with claiming benefits – with help from one of the advisors. This help is at least as important as the food: more so in most cases, because it helps people re-establish their independence.

But what I observed at that drop-in centre is backed up by the many studies done on the reasons for food bank usage.¹¹⁰ When funds run short, it is often spending on food that gets cut first.

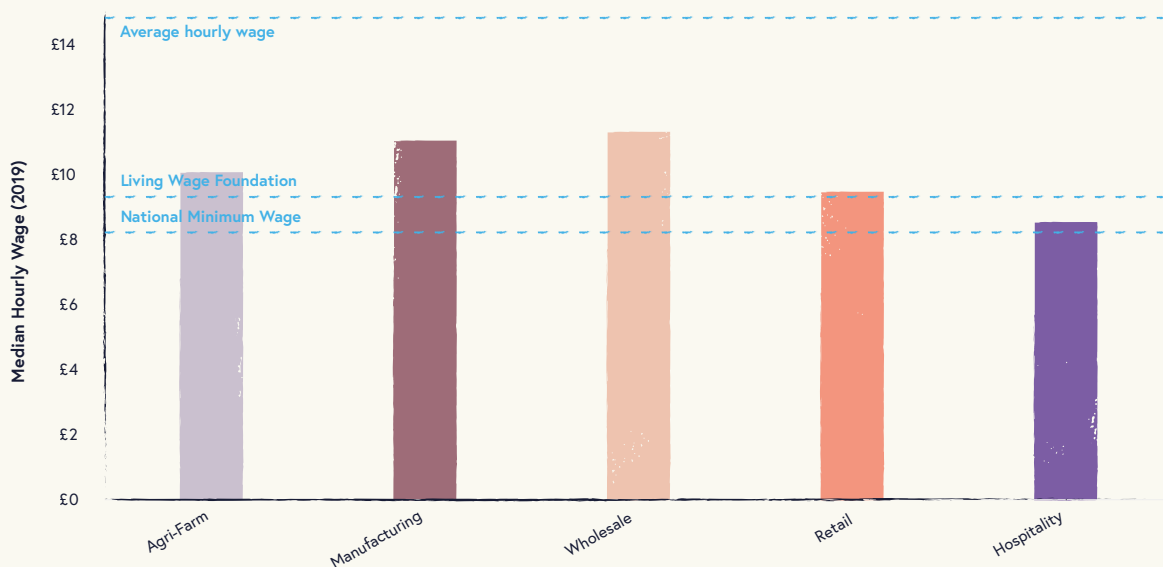


Hunger and the pandemic

Before the pandemic, four in ten working-age people in the UK (almost 17 million people) had less than £100 in savings available to them.¹¹¹ Without any financial buffer to protect them from the approaching wave of unemployment, many of these people are in danger of falling into serious poverty. In its report on the likely impact of COVID-19 on employment, McKinsey & Company predicted that most job losses will fall in sectors of the economy where workers are already low paid.¹¹² (See Figure 4.2 above.)

Figure 4.3

Food retail and hospitality wages are low¹¹³

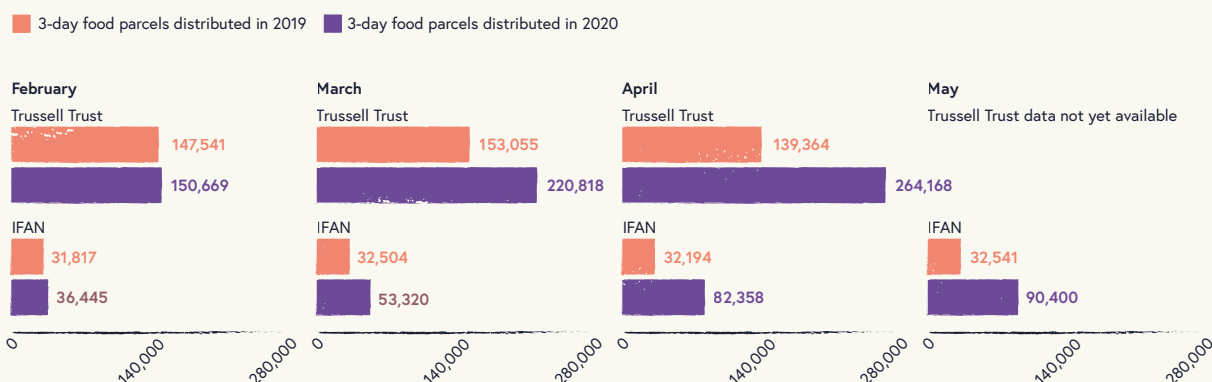


[†] Some of these details have been changed to protect the identity of these people.

The data already show an alarming increase in food insecurity. A Food Foundation survey conducted in early April 2020 found that 8.1 million adults had experienced some kind of food insecurity during the previous five weeks.¹¹⁴ This could have been anything from skipping a meal because the queue at the supermarket was too long, to going hungry for a day or more because of lack of funds.

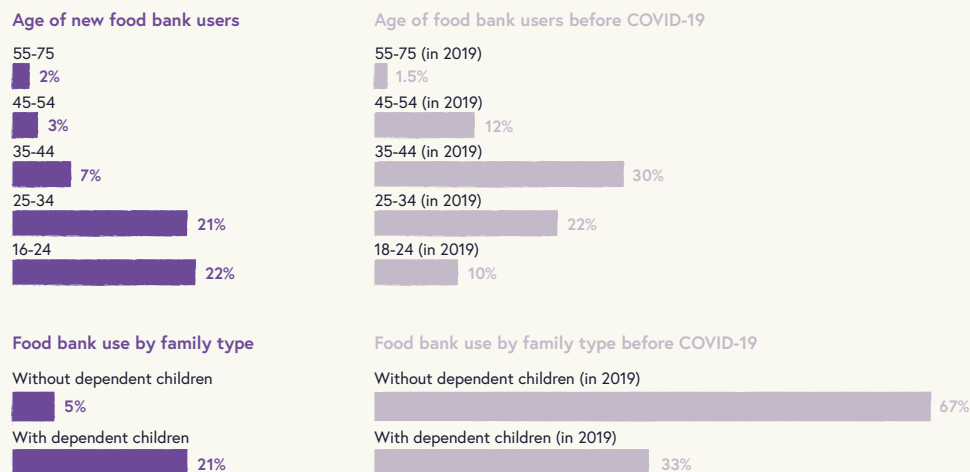
This figure dropped significantly – to 4.9 million adults – between 14-17 May 2020, once supermarket queues had shortened.¹¹⁵ But the number of people saying they could not afford enough food rose slightly over the same period, from 1.7 million to 1.8 million in May, presumably as redundancies started to be made.¹¹⁶ You can see a similar trend emerging in the increased use of food banks, as shown in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4
Total food bank use nearly doubled in two months¹¹⁷



COVID-19 has seen some Trussell Trust food banks switch to 7-day parcels, which are counted as 3-day parcels here; this underestimates the total quantity of food distributed. Due to reporting times, parcel data from 18% of Trussell Trust food banks in April have been estimated. IFAN is the Independent Food Aid Network.

Figure 4.5
New food bank users are overwhelmingly children and young people^{118, 119}



FSA-derived numbers (in purple) sum to less than 100% because "prefer not to answer" is not shown. Methodological differences between the surveys mean only relative differences between food bank users (not absolute percentages) can be compared.

The effects of hunger on young bodies (and minds) are serious and long-lasting.¹²⁰ Pregnancy and early childhood are periods of rapid growth and development, and nutrient imbalance during this period can alter body structure and function irreversibly, with long-term health consequences. (This is known as "nutritional programming".) Studies have shown an association between malnutrition in pregnancy and early years and chronic disease in adulthood (e.g. higher BMI, Type 2 diabetes, some cancers).¹²¹

Nutrition during pregnancy is crucial to optimal development – especially getting the right amount of iron, omega 3 and folic acid. For example, folate^{††} deficiency can result in neural tube defects such as spina bifida.¹²² Malnutrition in pregnancy and early years can also adversely affect brain development.¹²³

Adolescence is another time of rapid growth, when good nutrition is essential. Iron-deficiency anaemia is particularly prevalent in this age group, and can make teenagers feel weak, tired and irritable (as if their lives weren't hard enough already). Calcium is also particularly important in adolescence, helping to build bones strong enough to prevent osteoporosis in later life.

It isn't just children's health that is affected by hunger or poor diet. Pupils who are hungry at school struggle to concentrate, perform poorly,¹²⁴ and have worse attendance records.¹²⁵ Children who experience food insecurity – most of whom already come from the most deprived families – have also been shown to suffer more from mental illness.¹²⁶ This is both an acute and a long-term political issue: food insecurity undermines any serious prospect of improving social equality.

At the start of lockdown, Defra set up several different working groups to tackle the threat of hunger. The first (described in Chapter 1) was the Food Resilience Industry Forum, which brought together civil servants and the food industry daily to ensure that the mainstream food system – getting food to the vast majority of the population – did not collapse. This was soon followed by a temporary Food Vulnerability Directorate, tasked with working out how to deliver food parcels to people whose medical conditions meant they had to be clinically shielded.

The final group – the Food and Other Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force – first met on 2nd April 2020. Its remit was to identify and help other people who might be struggling to access basic goods due to practical or financial constraints: those who were self-isolating, such as the

elderly or those with underlying health conditions, or people at the end of their financial rope. It was led by Victoria Prentis, the Defra minister responsible for Fisheries, Farming and Food, and included ministers from every relevant government department: Defra (food), DWP (benefits), MHCLG (local authorities), DHSC (health), DCMS (charities), DfE (children and school food). Representatives of the Food Standards Agency and the devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland were also present. This was an excellent example of cross-government coordination.

As well as wrestling with logistics – getting supermarkets to free up online delivery slots for the elderly, for example – this task force has been providing direct support to people at risk of hunger. It secured a £63m payment for local councils, to be distributed as emergency grants to individuals in financial trouble.¹²⁷ It also secured £16m for food surplus charities, which have committed to delivering millions of meals to the vulnerable.¹²⁸

The sums involved may be small in the grand scheme of the Government's COVID-19 support package – which included an uplift to Universal Credit payments and vouchers for free school meals over the holidays. But they establish an important principle: that in a crisis of this scale, you need to reinforce the entire societal safety net. Central Government, local government and NGOs all have a role to play.

Clearly, the best way to tackle food poverty is to tackle poverty. The way to do that is to have a strong economy alongside a benefits system (regardless of your views on whether that benefits system is sufficiently generous). There is no dignity in people having to rely on food banks, food stamps or emergency grants from councils.

In this crisis, however, the system of Universal Credit and equivalent benefits – essential though it is – cannot carry the burden alone. It wasn't designed to deal with such a rapid surge in unemployed people, including many middle-income households for whom Universal Credit won't be enough to meet fixed costs such as rent and bills, and the many more whose finances are already dangerously threadbare.

[†] For example higher BMI, Type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.

^{††} Also known as Vitamin B12.

Recommendation for Government

There are three quick and relatively straightforward things the Government could do to provide a "nutritional safety net" for children in poor households.

1. Expand eligibility for the Free School Meal (FSM) scheme to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits).[†]

A hot, freshly-cooked school lunch is, for some children, the only proper meal in the day, providing a nutritional safety net for those at greatest risk of hunger or poor diet.¹²⁹ Only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards of a school meal.¹³⁰

Free school meals are currently provided to all children in the first three years of school, under the national universal infant free school meals scheme. Some local authorities already fund the continuation of free school meals through the remaining primary years. In the majority of schools, however, only children from very low-income households (an annual income of £7,400 before benefits) are eligible for FSM after the age of seven.

This threshold is much too low. Many of the families on Universal Credit who currently do not qualify for free school meals fall well below the government's own threshold for defining poverty. Ensuring the health and development of deprived children should be a priority.

Under this recommendation, we estimate an additional 1.5 million 7-16 year olds would benefit from free school meals, taking this to a total of 2.6 million children. This is estimated to cost an additional £670 million a year.

2. Extend the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of free school meals.

Summer holidays are a particularly hard time for households experiencing food insecurity. An estimated 3 million children are at risk of hunger in the school holidays,¹³¹ and data from food banks show the need for emergency supplies accelerates over the summer.¹³²

In 2019, the HAF reached 50,000 children. Under this recommendation, we estimate an additional 1.1m children will participate in the programme. This is estimated to cost an additional £200 million a year.

3. Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week, and expand the scheme to every pregnant woman and to all households with children under 4 where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

I am delighted that in the last week the CEOs of the Co-op and Waitrose have agreed, in principle, to supplement these vouchers with additional free fruit and vegetables. Most of the other major supermarkets and convenience stores (with support from the Association of Convenience Stores) are keen to follow suit and we are in discussions with them to explore mechanisms for delivery.

Under this recommendation, an additional 290,000 pregnant women and children under the age of 4 will benefit, taking the total number of beneficiaries to 540,000. This is estimated to cost an additional £100 million a year, plus the cost of a £5 million communications campaign.

4. Extend the work of the Food to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force for a further 12 months up until July 2021. It should collect, assess, and monitor data on the number of people suffering from food insecurity at any time, agree cross-departmental actions where necessary to support those who cannot access or afford food, and coordinate efforts across Government, local authorities and the voluntary sector.

The problems of personal food insecurity will ebb and flow over the coming year, depending on what happens to the economy, but it seems almost certain that hunger will become more of a problem, not less. As the full economic impact of this crisis becomes clear, it will be vital for Government to track the most vulnerable groups, identifying specific problems they face and finding targeted ways to help those who are not being sufficiently supported by the mainstream benefits system.

[†] "Equivalent benefits" is a term drawn from DWP. It covers any of the legacy benefits which Universal Credit is replacing, i.e. working age Jobseeker's Allowance (income-related), Employment and Support Allowance (income-related), Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit.

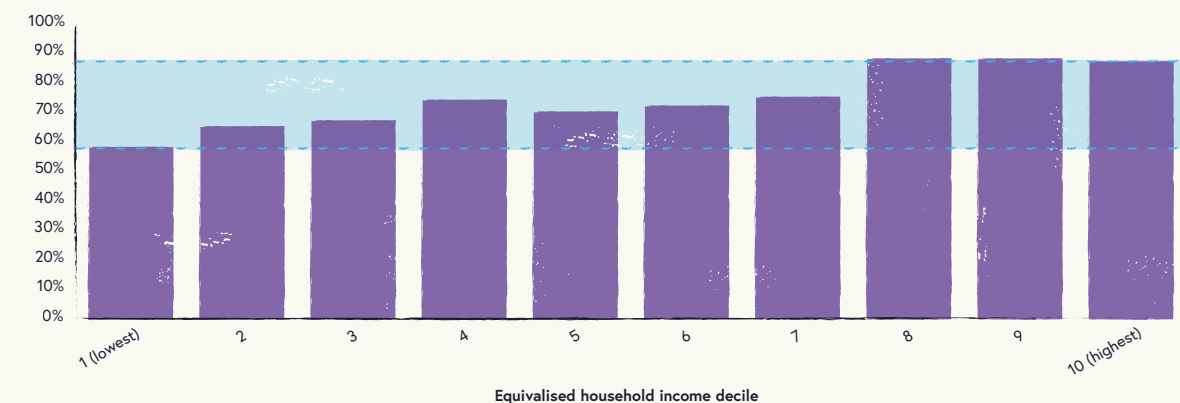
Is it possible to eat well on a tight budget?

THESE DAYS, poverty is not only – perhaps not even primarily – associated with hunger. It is also associated with eating worse food, and too much of it.

There is such a strong, well-evidenced correlation between income and dietary ill-health, as we can see in Figure 4.6, that it might seem surprising that the causality of that correlation is hotly debated.

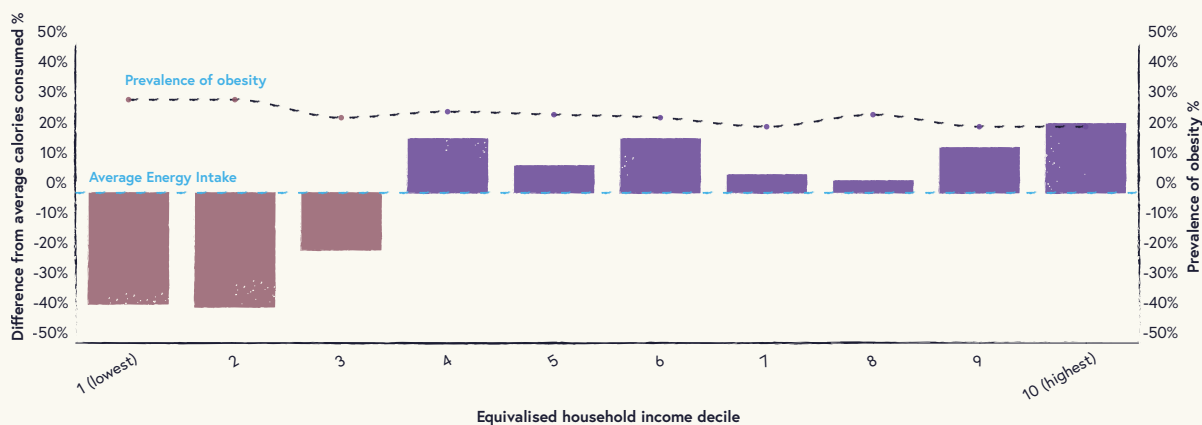
Analysis of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey shows that adults and children in the lowest income decile on average eat 42% less fruit and vegetables than recommended (the wealthiest eat 13% less). In the most deprived areas of England, the prevalence of excess weight is 11 percentage points higher than in the least deprived areas.

Figure 4.6
People on low incomes are around a third less likely to eat their 5 a day¹³³



Team analysis

Figure 4.7
People on lower incomes appear to be heavier despite consuming less¹³⁴



Team analysis of years 7, 8 and 9 of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey.

The cheapest processed foods consist chiefly of the cheapest (and least healthy) ingredients, such as sugar, vegetable oil and refined carbohydrates (mostly from wheat and maize). To this extent, there is an obvious trade-off between health and wealth. But there isn't much reliable evidence that it is impossible to eat a healthy diet on a tight budget.

I have an ongoing debate with a policy wonk friend about this question. Recently I sent him a paper by a group of academics from Oxford University which found that the cost of eating the Eatwell Plate – the Government's template for a balanced diet – was £5.99 per day. This is similar to the amount spent by the average UK citizen on daily food, but well above the average of £2.83 spent by those in the least affluent decile of the population.¹³⁵ He emailed me this response.

"I agree that western societies have a problem with poverty, but I remain unconvinced that food that is bad for you is cheaper than food that is good for you.

What evidence is there for this proposition? Veg is very cheap. Asda will sell you peas for 68p a kg, which is cheaper than their cheapest oven chips. No one thinks that there are a meaningful number of people out there who can't afford economy frozen chips.

Asda have a special offer on cheese and tomato pizza today – 70p. That is about as low as a prepared ready meal goes (their cheapest frozen ready meal is 90p).

For 70p, I can get a jacket potato (200g, 13p), 10g of butter (5p), one chicken drumstick (125g gross, 72p net, 23p), 80g of peas (5p), and 240g of broccoli, carrots and cauliflower mix (24p).

My meal would fill you up much more: it weighs 600g rather than 330g, and it has 488 calories rather than 391. It is really hard to find a cheaper thing than veg. My meal has bulk and protein (chicken, peas).

Many fruit items are cheap as well. Bananas are 18p in Iceland today, and peaches are 9p in Tesco. That is cheaper than a KitKat or packet of crisps, although I accept that there are hyper-economy biscuits that are cheaper still. Grapes are £1 for 400g in Asda today. Black or Green. I bought both! Apples are 20p each (your choice of Braeburn, Gala, Golden Delicious or Granny Smith).

Markets tend to be cheaper still for fruit and veg, so using supermarket prices means I have a bias against myself.

I was poor as a child, but that was a long time ago. It is tough being poor. You are tired most of the time. The lure of the chippy is real. But the problem – I think – is poverty and exhaustion, not the price of bread, yoghurt, or vegetables."

Strictly speaking, he has a point. Many of us know people who manage to eat healthily on a very tight budget – often highly-skilled cooks from the thrifty post-war generation. But those kitchen skills and confidence are not, now, in broad circulation.

It may be possible in theory (and for some, in practice) to assemble a healthy meal for just 70p. But the practicalities are not straightforward. You can't buy a single chicken drumstick, a handful of peas or a 10g blob of butter from the supermarket. You have to buy a pack of drumsticks and a bag of frozen peas and a pack of butter, which would immediately take you over the 70p threshold. Assuming you can pull together enough money to pay for all this, you could store the extra food to make future meals: but only if you have a big enough freezer. (Or any freezer at all.)

The dietary inequalities we see in Figures 4.6 and 4.7 are caused by many interlocking, and well-documented,¹³⁶ factors: stress, and the impact stress has on appetite and energy, lack of equipment (1.9 million people are living without a cooker and 900,000 people without a fridge)¹³⁷, poor skills, the cost of energy and a fear of waste that comes from having no margin for error.

I discussed this last point with Naomi Eisenstadt, who was the first director of New Labour's Sure Start Programme. "The women that I worked with knew what a healthy diet was, but they couldn't afford the risk of food waste," she told me. "Better-off mothers may say to their children, 'Well, try it – if you don't like it, you can have something else.' Instead, poorer mothers fed their children the less healthy stuff that was certain to be eagerly received."

Daisy Stemple – a member of my Advisory Panel – explains with characteristic eloquence the multiple pressures that shape the food choices of people living in poverty.

Daisy's Experience – 2019

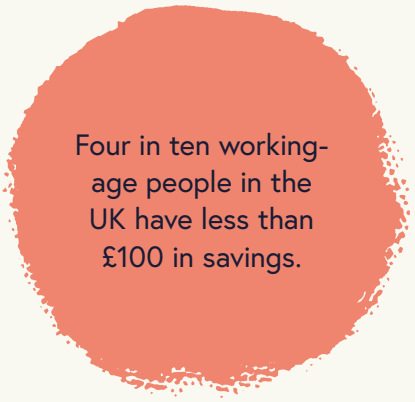
I think one of the main things I'd like people to know is that when you're poor your food budget has to be flexible. It's not always a priority. My girls can't walk around with shoes that don't fit, or no coat in the cold weather, but they can eat beans or egg on toast multiple times a week. So, if there is an unexpected expense like shoes, or an unusually high heating bill, my food budget will be the first to take a cut.

It's this that makes school dinners so important to me. If you know your child has had a big, healthy meal at school it takes the pressure off at home. Which is why during school holidays my food costs increase dramatically. This summer I was really lucky to have the Summer Kitchen at my girls' school. Three evenings a week we could go and eat for free in the school canteen and sometimes there would be extra fruit or veg or tins to take home. This was a huge help to us, and the girls really enjoyed it as there was sports equipment and craft stuff out in the school field at the same time.

In September I went on to Universal Credit, which meant for 5 weeks I had no income at all.[†] Having the Summer Kitchen in August meant I could save up as much as possible and give us a bit of a cushion for when September hit - with two lots of uniform to buy!

Another point I'd like to get across is the fact that it IS cheaper and easier to eat less healthy food. I work three jobs, and cooking from scratch around them is very hard indeed. I also have a TINY kitchen, so I don't have the storage space to bulk buy or batch cook. Healthy Start vouchers, which were fantastic, ended when each of my girls turned four, so I don't have as much to spend on fresh fruit and veg and don't have the freezer space for much frozen. But it's true that these are all choices I make, I could (and do) cook from scratch if I really put the effort in every day. It's just more effort than more well-off people need to make.

It's not just fruit and veg though. To illustrate my point, I'll give you some examples. Peanut butter with palm oil and sugar added is a third of the price of the good stuff that's just squashed peanuts. Yoghurts with sweeteners are a quarter of the price of organic no added sugar ones.



Four in ten working-age people in the UK have less than £100 in savings.

White bread that has an ingredient list full of chemicals is a quarter of the price of a store baked wholemeal loaf. A bottle of squash is cheaper than juice. I could go on and on.

Feeding my kids nutritious food is such an enormous priority for me and most of the mums I know who are in the same position. I would rather keep my heating turned off and go without three meals a day myself if it means buying better quality food for them, but I just think there must be a better way. I live in an area surrounded by farms and the sea; why is it cheaper and easier for me to feed my family powdered mash and sausages with a 5% meat content (we're actually vegetarian, but looking at my friend's shopping was an eye opener) than local veg and decent food? I know a sack of potatoes from my local farm shop is cheap and good quality, but I can't get there without a car.

One last point is that an awful lot of the women my age I know don't have a clue how to cook. This is an area of multi-generational poverty. When I was little, I didn't know any adults who weren't on the dole. The majority of my peers grew up eating crap, or very simply indeed. We've lost the skills our nans had. Women like me don't make toad in the hole anymore because Yorkshire pudding is a cheap way to bulk out a dinner. We buy frozen Aunt Bessie ones cos they're £1 in Iceland. The only reason I'm any different is because my mum's a hippy and I know how to cook.

[†] Daisy decided, in common with many recipients, that she did not want to take an advance to cover the five week wait. Source: Health Select Committee. (2020). Written Evidence from Joseph Rowntree Foundation. House of Commons. [online]. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/1908/html>