

DIGITAL DIGEST

“HOW CAN THE RIGHT TO FOOD ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF MARGINALISED AND UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS?”

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Hunger and inequality in the UK

There is sufficient food supply in the UK to feed everyone, yet some people don't have enough money to put food into the cupboard. Instead, they must ask their friends, family or go to food banks or other food relief projects to feed themselves. In 2019, over a one million food parcels were given out by the Trussell Trust's food banks; this does not include figures from other food relief projects and thus the number is far higher¹. Clearly, welfare provision does not stretch far enough and leaves people vulnerable to hunger.

Looking at who uses food banks reveals a picture about inequality, unfairness, and poverty in Britain. For example, single males, single females, single female parents, and the disabled are more likely to be in receipt of food parcels than other sections of society². It has also been well discussed that the rise in food banks correlates with the introduction of universal credit, low wages, and rising living costs, particularly around housing and energy. This has led to calls to reform universal credit alongside reexamining the minimum wage.

Whilst these reforms are much needed, especially changes to universal credit, it will do little to reduce the disproportionate use of food banks by asylum seekers and other migrants, as a) many asylum seekers are denied the opportunity to work and b) denied access to universal credit and other welfare provisions. It is our intention, therefore, to bring further attention to the way in which immigration status unfairly causes hunger in the UK, and to find ways to tackle this inequality, given that universal credit reforms and raising wages, would not necessarily apply to this group.

¹ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2019/04/25/record-1-6m-food-bank-parcels/>

² <https://www.trusselltrust.org/oxford-university-report/>

Immigration status and food insecurity

There are thousands of children in the UK who, because of their parents' immigration status, are forced to live in extreme poverty. These children are affected by an immigration policy that denies their parents access to social housing and most welfare benefits, such as child tax credits. This is called the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) condition. The NRPF condition affects undocumented migrants – those who do not have a visa to stay or work in the country – and people with visas that allow them to stay in the UK for a limited period of time, including those on a 'route to settlement' (people who will be given several grants of time-limited leave before being allowed to stay indefinitely in the country). Many people struggle to regularise their immigration status due to complicated and hostile immigration rules, a lack of free immigration advice and representation to navigate the system, high fees, and poor Home Office decision-making. Research has found that black and minority ethnic women, the disabled, pregnant women and children are most negatively impacted by the NRPF condition.

Families with NRPF are often living in severe poverty and are heavily reliant on food banks, charities, friends and faith groups. In many cases, food insecurity is exacerbated by families living in unsuitable accommodation, without access to adequate cooking or washing facilities and storage. At Project 17 we regularly see families skipping meals and unable to afford fruit and vegetables, mothers who are unable to breastfeed because they cannot afford to eat enough, and children who develop health problems due to poor diet and high levels of hunger.

Where families with NRPF can access some form of state support – either asylum support, which the government provides to 'destitute' asylum seekers in the form of accommodation and money, or support from social services under what's called 'Section 17 support' (Children Act 1989) – they receive around half the amount, and in many cases far less, of what a family entitled to benefits would receive. Some families supported under section 17 are living on as little as £1.60 per day. It is also difficult for families to access these types of support, with 6 in 10 families who try to access Section 17 support refused, and many applications for asylum support being wrongly refused by the Home Office. In such situations, families may be left homeless or without enough money to eat or get to school.

Although many children affected by NRPF will be some of the poorest in the country, because of their parents' immigration status, they are excluded from a number of measures that exist to help alleviate food insecurity amongst families. The government offers Healthy Start vouchers – which can be spent on milk, fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables and infant formula milk – to pregnant women

and parents with children under four who are receiving 'qualifying' benefits (e.g. Universal Credit). Similarly, in order to be eligible for free school meals after the universal provision (which only covers the first three years of primary school) a child's parents need to be in receipt of a 'qualifying' benefit or what's known as 'Section 95' asylum support, which is only available to some asylum-seeking families. This will be the case regardless of a child's own nationality or immigration status, so British children whose parents have NRPF are excluded.

Beyond Charity: The right to food

The charity and faith sector have provided food for people who need it most; this is commendable and undoubtedly needed. Yet, it is our view that the government has failed to adequately respond to food insecurity in Britain. For example, the government does not measure incidents of food insecurity, so other than figures from food banks and the like, we have no clear picture on the state of hunger in the UK; clearly this is unacceptable. Furthermore, there is no state-led legal framework to prevent and respond to food insecurity. We suggest therefore, the introduction of a new human rights legislation which would guarantee, universally, the legal right to food in the UK.

Whilst the right to food is already implemented in other countries, further research is required to understand the ways in which the government would provide entitlements for it in the UK. Nonetheless, we suggest that the British government respect, protect and fulfill the right to food for all people who reside in the UK. And importantly, develop policies and entitlements that guarantee adequate access to foods. For example, children whose families cannot afford the cost of school lunches are often faced with the stark choice of skipping lunch or being pushed into debt. Earlier this year, however, Hackney Council took steps to ensure that families with NRPF supported under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 received additional money to cover the costs of school meals. More recently, Lewisham committed to providing free school meals to children affected by NRPF. There are also some London boroughs like Southwark, Islington, and Newham that provide universal free school meals to primary-school-age children in order to ensure that children don't go hungry during school-time or face the stigma for not being able to afford meals. These actions show that access to school meals in a targeted or universal way provides a way to tackle food insecurity and hunger for children. Enshrining in law, the right to food, could be a way to persuade all schools to take a similar approach.

We also, perhaps hopefully, suggest that the right to food could act as a counterbalance to the immigration policies of no recourse to public funds more generally, which clearly undermines food security for asylum seeker, migrants and their children. Or in other words, the universal right to



foods applies to everyone, regardless of their or their parents' immigration status. And perhaps this universal principle is what Britain needs to heal from the divisive politics of recent times.