Household food insecurity in the UK: 3. Executive Summary

To inform the Food Standards Agency (FSA)'s approach to future collaborations and research priorities related to household food insecurity in the UK, an evidence-mapping exercise was commissioned over September 2022 to March 2023. The exercise was designed to give the FSA an overview of household food insecurity data and the landscape of the type of research questions related to food insecurity that have been explored in the UK context. More specifically, the aims of the project were: (1) to scope the landscape of research and data on household food insecurity in the UK, covering that produced by academia, civil society, and government departments and including publicly available datasets, (2) to identify the key gaps in the research landscape and inform priorities for the FSA's work on household food insecurity going forward. Systematic searches for academic papers and reports were undertaken on academic databases, government websites and Google.

The key research themes focused on were:

1. Definition, concept and measurement of food insecurity
2. Drivers of individual/household-level food insecurity
3. Experiences of different population sub-groups
4. Outcomes/consequences of food insecurity including those related to food safety
5. Responses to food insecurity at the national/local level (including those by third sector organisations and local and national governments)

Importantly, the task was not to describe the findings of this large body of research, but rather to identify the landscape of research questions asked in relation to food insecurity and the approaches taken to answer these. In addition to identifying published papers and reports, the search strategy was also applied to major UK-wide funder databases (namely, UKRI, NIHR, Leverhulme) to identify recent/current projects funded in relation to food insecurity.

3.1 Overview of returns

Searches were conducted over October 2022 to December 2022. The largest number of search returns fell into the theme of responses to food insecurity (Figure 1). In total, 80 items were returned under this theme. A total of 59 items were returned on definition, concept or measurement of household food insecurity, whilst 44 returns fell into the theme of risk factors for individual/household level food insecurity. The theme of outcomes associated with food insecurity had 21 returns. The smallest number of returns fell under the theme of experiences of different population groups, which had 19 returns. The searches also returned a number of recently funded research projects on food insecurity. Across all themes, a total of 24 projects related to food insecurity funded over 2017 to 2022.

Figure 1 Overview of search returns by theme and publication type.

3.2 Research and data on food insecurity concept and its measurement

Research on **conceptualisation of household food insecurity and how best to measure it** has included analyses of media content and qualitative research with stakeholders to explore their conceptualisations of food insecurity and responses to the issue. Research has also reviewed different approaches to measurement and assessment of their applicability in the UK context. The FSA UK Public's Interests, Needs and Concerns Around Food project explored the use of different indicators of inadequate and insecure access to food and related food behaviours.

Survey data using experience-based measures of food insecurity has been commissioned and reported on by academics, third sector organisations and government departments. Key survey data sources include the Food Foundation's food insecurity tracking work, which involves regularly commissioned YouGov surveys that include food insecurity measures. Key national-level government surveys currently active include the FSA Food and You 2 survey, the FSA Consumer Tracker, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)'s Family Resources Survey (FRS), the Scottish Government's Scottish Health Survey, and the Welsh Government's National Survey for Wales.

Research has also used proxy measures to report on estimated prevalence of food insecurity. **Proxy measures** have included food bank use, poverty and deprivation, food spending, diet quality and dietary compromises, eligibility for free school meals (FSM) and stakeholder perceptions. To estimate local level food insecurity, indices of estimated risk for food insecurity have been developed.

3.3 Risk factors for individual/household level food insecurity

Researchers have used surveys of the general population to identify risk factors for food insecurity. Survey data from the FSA Food and You (Waves 4 and 5) have been used to examine risk factors including the relationship between disability and food insecurity. Food insecurity indicators added to the UK Longitudinal Household Survey (UKLHS)-Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey over the pandemic have been used to explore risks associated with employment transitions, financial strain and socio-economic characteristics. The Food Foundation's YouGov survey data have also been used to explore risk factors for food insecurity during the pandemic.

Proxy indicators of food insecurity have been used to explore differences in food insecurity across groups, areas and in relation to changing policy environments. Trussell Trust food bank use has commonly been used as a source of proxy data for food insecurity, and researchers have used these data to explore associations with benefit sanctioning, roll-out of Universal Credit, area-level socio-demographic characteristics and food bank operating practices. Surveys of people using food banks have been used to explore risk factors, including issues related to Universal Credit, housing, adverse life events, income and financial issues and changes or problems with benefits.

Qualitative research has also explored the risk factors for food insecurity. This has included research with participants recruited from food banks examining the reasons leading people to seek help. Qualitative research has also explored risks of food insecurity related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cross-country datasets have been used to analyse macro-level drivers of food insecurity at a country level. These have included analyses of food prices, wage levels, child benefit policies, wage setting policies and trade liberalisation.

3.4 Research focused on specific sub-groups in the UK population

Families with children, children and young people have been the focus of academic and third sector research. These have included case study research with children, surveys of families with children and a report on the Children's Future Food Inquiry. Research on food insecurity amongst disabled people and people with long-term health conditions has included the Scottish Government's analysis of Scottish Health Survey data and Trussell Trust research on disability, health and food bank use.

Experiences of benefit claimants have been explored through surveys including one commissioned by Trussell Trust of people claiming Universal Credit. Risks of food insecurity amongst low-income women in work has also been explored through analysis of Labour Force Survey data and interviews in the Sheffield City Region. The experiences of older people have been explored through qualitative research involving interviews, visual methods, 'go-along' tours and other ethnographic approaches. Minoritised ethnic groups have also been the focus of research, including work exploring the experiences of UK white British and Pakistani women in Bradford and undocumented migrants in Birmingham.

3.5 Outcomes associated with food insecurity

Only a few studies on the **food safety implications** of food insecurity in the UK context were identified. The existing evidence on food safety in relation to food security was primarily by, or commissioned by, the FSA including analyses of data from the Consumer Insights Tracker and Public interests, needs and concerns around food across the UK, Food and You 2 and qualitative research commissioned into food safety in community food provision.

Research on **dietary and health** outcomes of food insecurity included an analysis of Food and You (Wave 4) looking at fruit and vegetable intake and mental health, and an analysis of a sub-cohort of mothers involved in the Born in Bradford birth cohort study looking at self-rated health. Surveys of adults recruited through convenience sampling approaches have also been used to collect data on food insecurity and dietary outcomes and food habits. Surveys have been conducted with food bank users to explore diet, weight and health. Health and diet outcomes for particular populations have also been explored including the impact of food insecurity during summer school holiday months on parental stress and the relationship between food insecurity

and diet in adults with primary school-aged children. Cross-country research has been undertaken using Gallup World Poll data looking at health outcomes.

3.6 Implementation and impacts of interventions aimed at reducing food insecurity and/or improving food access

Survey data have been used to examine experiences of food insecurity in relation to receipt of **free school meal** replacements when schools were closed during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Cost/benefit analyses of increasing free school meal provision have been published, as has case study research designed to showcase best practices in school food provision. Desk-based research and data collection with stakeholders have been used to explore the roll-out of **universal infant free school meal** provision and survey research has looked at the uptake of school meals. Survey data has been used to explore the impact of the Universal Infant School meals policy on dietary intake.

Experiences of food insecurity during the **school holidays and the impact of holiday programmes** have been explored through quantitative and qualitative research, including evaluation of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme. This has included parent surveys and interviews, surveys with children and participatory and ethnographic research looking at motivations of volunteers. The impact of **breakfast club provision** on academic attainment has also been evaluated.

The **Healthy Start** programme has been the subject of peer reviewed research that has looked into fruit and vegetable intake, food purchase data and the impact of universal implementation. Qualitative studies with mothers, health professionals and other stakeholders have also explored Healthy Start uptake. The Scottish government have published an evaluation of the Best Starts Foods programme (an alternative to the Healthy Start voucher scheme provided in England).

Many peer-reviewed studies and grey literature reports have focused on the activities of **food banks and other forms of community food provision**, covering a range of research questions and using a range of methods. Research has looked at the different types of provision available (mapping that provision and assessing the nutritional value of the food provided), the role of food banks and food aid (how they operate, perspectives of providers and recipients). Several academic studies have also looked at the relationship between the growth of food banks and austerity policies.

The searches returned several **multi-component/multi actor strategies** and interventions, including local food poverty action plans and a Scottish Government evaluation of the range of support available for low-income households during the COVID-19 pandemic. One example of research looking at the role of **food companies** in responding to household food insecurity was identified.

3.7 Forthcoming Research

A number of funded research projects related to each of the main themes above were identified. The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) have recently funded several evaluation studies which will be important for improving understanding of the impact of different interventions including universal free school meals (UFSM), school holiday provision and fresh food subsidies. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) funded food system trials and intervention work funded through the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Transforming UK Food Systems Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF) will add significantly to the body of research looking at the most effective ways to improve access to food. The searches for research in progress returned a

number of different doctoral projects in the field of household food insecurity including on concepts, experiences of different population groups, and the role of welfare and low income in driving food insecurity and community food assistance.

3.8 Discussion

Our searches identified a range of research and reporting on household food insecurity related to the themes explored for this review (Figure 2). There are now a variety of data and analyses of food insecurity that have used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand the experience, its measurement, what puts households at risk, and interventions that might make a difference to households' ability to access food. However, there are some important gaps in this research landscape including a need to compare different survey instruments and survey methods in use in the UK to aid in understanding of the data that they produce, better data on local level food insecurity, more research on how interconnected social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and age relate to risk of food insecurity, more research on social and development outcomes in relation to food insecurity, and more evaluation on the potential prevention and mitigation of food insecurity through various programmatic and policy interventions.

3.9 Potential future research for the Food Standards Agency

Of the research gaps identified in this landscape, the FSA could consider building on the work they already have done to:

1) Expand analyses of data collected through Food and You 2 to better understand risk factors for food insecurity and how food safety and food hypersensitivities associate with the experience.

2) Further explore the food safety-related practices of community food providers in relation to use of surplus food.

3) Further understand the use and interpretation of different survey measures of household food insecurity in the UK.

Figure 2 Key themes and sub-themes identified from searches.