

Household food insecurity in the UK: 4.

Introduction

Household food insecurity is a widely used concept in high-income countries to describe “uncertainty about future food availability and access, insufficiency in the amount and kind of food required for a healthy lifestyle, or the need to use socially unacceptable ways to acquire food.” (Anderson, 1990). In the UK, research focused on food insecurity was relatively rare before the rapid spread of food banks and growing usage from 2010 but since then, has burgeoned (Loopstra and Lambie-Mumford, 2023). There was very little peer-reviewed literature on the topic in the UK when DEFRA commissioned a Rapid Evidence Assessment of evidence on food aid in the UK (Lambie-Mumford et al 2014), but there is now an established field of research on household food insecurity and responses to it that spans disciplines including public health and nutrition, social policy, politics, geography, food policy and systems. Government monitoring of food insecurity has also evolved over this time, with the FSA first including a food insecurity measure into the Food and You survey in 2016, and the DWP including the same in the FRS from 2019/20. The Agriculture Act 2020 requires the UK government to report on food security to Parliament at least once every three years, and the UK Food Security Report that is produced to fulfil this duty now includes reporting on data from these government surveys (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2021). This rapidly developing field has resulted in a varied landscape of research and evidence on food insecurity.

The FSA has an interest in advancing its research on household food insecurity in the UK as part of its strategy. The FSA works to protect consumers’ wider interests in relation to food, and the FSA strategy 2022-2027 recognises that people are worried about food affordability and insecurity and therefore they will continue to consider the impact of these issues across all work.

To inform the FSA’s approach to future collaborations and research priorities on food insecurity in the UK, it was deemed a priority to first gain greater clarity on the scope of the research landscape already in existence in the UK. Thus, this research was commissioned 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; and
2. to identify the key gaps in the research landscape and inform priorities for the FSA’s work on household food insecurity going forward.

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. The areas focused on were research on definition, concept and measurement of food insecurity, drivers of individual/household-level access to food, experiences of different population sub-groups, outcomes related to food insecurity including those related to food safety, and responses to food insecurity at the national/local level (including those by third sector organisations and local and national governments).