

Household food insecurity in the UK: 5.

Methods

5.1 Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was used to identify published papers and reports on food insecurity in the UK. Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, third sector commissioned surveys and grey literature reports were all of interest. To gain insight into likely forthcoming publications, we also included research projects funded by national research funding bodies.

Food insecurity can be defined, referred to, and measured in different ways. For this exercise, we sought to include publications that focused on the experience of households or individuals lacking regular access to enough safe and nutritious food due to a lack of resources (FAO, 2022). As the term “food insecurity” is not always used to describe this experience, we used a wide range of key terms which have been used interchangeably with the term food insecurity in the UK context or which describe a lack of access to food, including “food poverty” and “hunger”. These were used to identify any research related to the experience in the UK context relating to measurement, understanding drivers of the experience or outcomes associated with it, and vulnerability among specific subgroups in the population. In a second round of searches, a set of keywords specifically focused on programmes responding to food insecurity in the UK context were used. These included free school meals, breakfast and holiday clubs, food banks and other kinds of community food interventions, Healthy Start vouchers, and food poverty action plans.

Key terms were agreed upon with the FSA (see Appendix A for the full list) and keyword searches were conducted (from October 2022 to December 2022) across relevant databases and search engines (see Appendix B). Key terms were truncated to provide optimal search results. This widened the search to include varied, relevant word endings. These searches were complemented by a scan of citations in returned research, as well as by scanning related articles on publisher websites.

Lastly, we also used the same search terms to search UK-wide key funder’s directories of funded research. These were: UKRI, NIHR, the Wellcome Trust, and the British Academy. We sought to identify research funded from 2017 on topics related to food insecurity and responses to it to gain an understanding of the landscape of research being currently funded on these topics.

5.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All searches were limited to the English language. Only literature published between 1st January 2017 to end of December 2022 was included. This timeframe was chosen as the FSA had a particular interest in understanding the current research landscape and data available. It was important to include studies conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and current inflationary period to understand the kinds of research being conducted before these major shocks occurred. We did not include literature reviews unless they were exclusively focused on the UK context. Publication lists from reviews were scanned and any citations that matched our search criteria were included in results of our search. We also excluded commentaries or analyses that were not based on empirical research or data.

We included research where food bank use was used as a proxy measure for food insecurity and/or where research has focused on the food insecurity experiences of people using food banks. However, it is important to acknowledge that many people who experience food insecurity do not use food banks and thus, this research may not reflect the experiences of the wider population of households experiencing food insecurity (Loopstra and Lambie-Mumford, 2023).

5.3 Screening Strategy

Each abstract or report summary was screened against the exclusion criteria. Items were not included if, for example, it originated from the UK but focused on food insecurity in other countries. Items focused solely on the food system, sustainability, food policy (other than food insecurity or food access policies aimed at households/individuals), or on improving diets/nutritional outcomes without mention of food insecurity/food access were not included. Results were filtered by the project research assistant and further checked by the research team before being added to a database. Returns were categorised into 4 groups: peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, grey literature reports or research funded by a major UK national funder.

5.4 Data Analysis

Paper and report titles, abstracts, and/or summaries were reviewed to code the publications into five pre-defined main themes:

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

Under each of these main themes, subthemes were identified based on a review of abstracts, research aims, and methods. Descriptions of publications falling under each sub-theme are grouped by the categorisation above (i.e. peer-reviewed journal articles, government report etc).

An initial review of the search results was presented to the FSA in December 2022. Search terms were then refined and adapted to make sure we had identified the full scope of available publications, and supplementary searches for government data and research and grey literature were carried out. The FSA advised on themes of particular interest at this stage. As there was little evidence on the relationship between food safety and food insecurity in the UK context, we decided to widen the search criteria to include international literature on this topic to enable a description of the types of research carried out in other country contexts on this topic.