



Nearly half of parents are struggling to afford food for their children more now than five years ago

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Food shopping

New research warns that [family hardship](#) has deepened despite years of post-pandemic support measures, worsening child food hunger.

The survey of 2,500 UK parents, which Opinium carried out for the Social Market Foundation, found that nearly half (44%) were struggling more today to afford food than five years ago.

In addition, 1 in 5 (21%) parents reported their children regularly experiencing some form of food insecurity. This included being unable to access balanced meals, or relying heavily on cheap foods.

[The Social Market Foundation report](#) comes at a time when the [cost of living](#) remains among the top issues for the public.

The Social Market Foundation notes that existing official statistics still fail to show children's experiences of hunger adequately and are calling for a renewed focus on the scale of family hardship across the UK.

Even with positive recent developments (including the lifting of the two-child benefit cap and move to expand free school meal eligibility), the scale of the challenge is such that further action is likely to be necessary.

Food insecurity hits parents as well as children

Among parents who reported not having enough food over the past year:

- 9% said their children are often or always unable to eat enough due to a lack of food.
- 10% reported being unable to feed their child a balanced meal.
- 15% said they relied on only a few low-cost foods.

And of parents' own eating habits:

- 83% said they had eaten less than usual.
- 77% reported skipping meals.
- 59% said they had gone an entire day without eating because they couldn't afford to.

Food insecurity varied sharply across regions and household types. London recorded the highest levels, with 27% of parents reporting child food insecurity, followed by the North West and Wales at 22%.

The report defines food insecurity as parents / caregivers experiencing either a lack of food for their children, being unable to provide them with a balanced meal, or relying on a few low-cost foods for their children "always" or "often".

Those who are renting, whether from a local authority (31%) or from a housing association (28%), were far more likely to be experiencing child food insecurity than those who own their own home with a mortgage (17%).

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Social Market Foundation findings also indicate a concerning reliance on emergency food aid. Among households using food banks, nearly three-quarters said they accessed them at least monthly.

But while uptake of free school meals, breakfast clubs and holiday food schemes was higher among food insecure families, the Social Market Foundation also found support services may not be reaching all the families that need them.

1 in 5 such families said they had not accessed any formal support services in the previous year, suggesting an unmet need or an untapped access to support.

Solutions have to tackle the cost of living

The Social Market Foundation is calling for a whole-of-government, long-term approach to address the underlying drivers of poverty and food insecurity, including action to reduce wider costs for families, including high energy bills and housing costs.

The thinktank is also calling for action to improve food access, such as introducing auto-enrolment for free school meals, and tax incentives to increase food donations and redistribution.

Jake Shepherd, senior researcher at the Social Market Foundation, said:

Few issues deserve greater urgency than hungry children. While the government has taken important steps to address the challenge in recent years, including expanding free school

meals and publishing its landmark Child Poverty Strategy, our findings show that family food insecurity is so widespread that further action is likely needed.

The most effective way to reduce child food insecurity is increasing the amount of money families have in their pockets. This means ensuring households can afford the basics through strong social security and adequate incomes, as well as through new policies that help keep food accessible. While the current fiscal climate is challenging, there is scope for a more ambitious response.

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By [The Canary](#)

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