Covid 19 has had a devastating impact on household food security with 5 million families now food insecure and 200,000 children missing meals (Food Foundation 2020: <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/may20_children_skip_meals_in_covid19_lockdown/>). There is evidence that children who are living in food insecure families are more likely to suffer from education losses (Food Foundation 2019: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Childrens-Future-Food-Inquiry-report.pdf> ). Research also highlights the importance of eating between five and ten portions of fruit and vegetables each day (<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/177778/eating-more-fruits-vegetables-prevent-millions/>), yet over a quarters of UK children eat less than one portion a day (Food Foundation 2016: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FF-Veg-Doc-V5.pdf>

Prior to COVID 19 the impact of ten years of austerity had has its impact on the poorest populations in society. In 2018 one in five people were living in low-income households (McGuinness, 2018). IN 2017 2.7 million children (19%) were in relative low-income households and 4.1 million (30%) after accounting for housing costs, which demonstrates that the proportion of children in relative low income is higher than it was five years ago in the UK (Tower Hamlets National Data, 2018).

Food insecurity has also been associated with detrimental effects on children’s mental and social health as well as educational performance. Prolonged hunger has also been correlated with increased risk of depression, substance abuse disorders, and suicidal tendencies. In children, this may lead to lowered earning potential later in life further perpetuating the FI cycle

There is increasing evidence to support the negative impact of summer holidays on academic progress (KIngston 1997, Heyns, 1978; Entwisle & Alexander 1992; Cooper et al., 1996; Downey et al, 2004). In the OECD countries only Norway has a legal duty to support children with food, during the summer holiday period. Much of the UK provision of support comes from food banks and charities, however in 2014 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Feeding called for resources to be invested in protecting the poorest children during the summer months to advert this learning loss.

Assuming no change in government policy, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Joyce, Mitchell and Keiller, 2017) have estimated that the share of children in the bracket of relative low-income will increase between 2015/16 and 2021/22; poverty trends demonstrate a gradual decline of people in relative poverty since the 1980’s, however poverty rates for children are higher than they were 50 years ago (fuelled by the economic downturn in 2008).

Since 2010, the government has failed to acknowledge the root causes of poverty, resulting in policy responses which attempt to lift those just below the poverty threshold to just above it. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 removed four child poverty targets previously set out in the 2010 Child Poverty. The government is now only required to report the number of children living in workless households and the educational outcomes at GCSE level.

The Government froze benefit rates in 2016, whilst enabling inflation to continue, resulting in a systematic way of reducing the value of benefits, however, this has resulted in poorer families having less whilst the price of goods has gone up and value of income has declined (Corlett, 2018)

The most recent UN statement (Alston, 2018) highlights the issue of child hunger, “children are showing up to school with empty stomachs, and schools are collecting food on an ad hoc basis and sending it home because teachers know that their students will otherwise go hungry”. Families living paycheck to pay check are just one crisis away from falling into poverty through no fault of their own. The severity of food poverty in the UK can be shown through the increase of food banks; use is up to almost four-fold since 2012 (The Trussell Trust 2018).

Evidence indicated that families with two adults both earning a minimum age are still falling short of an adequate income needed to raise a child (Child Poverty Action Group, 2018).

The 1980 Black Report was the first official publication which truly publicised health inequalities in the UK, highlighting the unequal distribution of ill-health and death amongst the population, suggesting that there is a growing gap of inequality which can be attributed partly to social inequalities influencing health; such as income, education, housing, diet and employment. The Report recommended broader strategies relating to social policy measures which would combat inequalities in health.

A more recent publication from The Food Foundation (Scott, Sutherland and Taylor, 2018) identified the affordability of the UK Government’s Eatwell Guide. The guide outlines a diet required to meet population nutrient needs, however research indicates that low income households in the UK are struggling to meet these the recommendations due to cost. For families that earn less than £15,860, it is estimated that 42% of the after-housing disposable income would have to be spent in order to meet the Eatwell guidelines cost.

UK policies offer support in the form of meeting the nutritional needs of children (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013) by providing universal benefits in the form of free school meals (must meet food-based guidelines) to all 4 to 7-year olds in state-maintained schools.

Many families are heavily reliant on school support and often struggle during the holidays. A recent finding showed that parents must find an additional £10.20 per child, per week to feed their children, considering the mean price of school lunch is £2.04 (Wollny et al, 2015). Sustain (2018) recently published a toolkit to ensuring children’s access to food 365 days a year which identifies the need for strategic food provision during the holidays, highlighting the risk of food insecurity during these periods and the contribution this has to anxiety, stress and learning and educational attainment outcomes (Alaimo, Olson, and Frongillo, 2001). The toolkit also questions the role of the council in terms of leadership, coordination and support for the implementation of programmes with food in terms of finance and facilities (space & catering facility).

Studies show that children from low income families experience decreases in spelling ability (Shinwell and Defeyter, 2017) and a reduction in fitness levels (Brodersen et al, 2005). For some children, the holidays will increase sedentary behaviour if environment, accessibility, and affordability are and issue (safety of local parks, single parents working, living conditions in small apartments with no garden).

Currently in the UK, major research associated with food insecurity is focusing on the use of food banks which show a positive association with government welfare cuts, benefits sanctioning and unemployment (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2015)

A recent study (Mann et al, 2018) has outlined the similarity of food banks and holiday clubs in response to food insecurity run by third sector organisations and charities as a result of the government’s failure to adequately address the topic of food injustice/insecurity. The distribution of holiday clubs is an issue due to the financial resources required to operate a club. The children living in the most deprived areas are therefore excluded from participating in such clubs which are inaccessible and would provide an additional financial burden on low-income families to access a club outside of their area.

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