

Research report

Young, homeless and hungry:

The impact of food insecurity on vulnerable young people



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a future



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700

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Report author:
Emily Cretch - Centrepont, 2022

Executive Summary

Over the last decade, recorded levels of destitution and food insecurity have risen sharply across the UK,¹ while the cost of food and basic goods has increased significantly in the last six months due to high inflation. Access to enough safe and nutritious food for health, wellbeing and development is essential for young people as they transition into adulthood. However, this research shows that some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in our society are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.

Food insecurity and homeless young people

- Young people (aged 16-25) living independently are some of the most financially vulnerable groups in society;^{2,3} **1 in 4 (26 per cent) vulnerable young people have £20 or less of monthly income** left after rent and bills, leaving them to live off **£5 or less a week** – this data comes from a survey of 209 young people with experiences of homelessness.
- **3 out of 5 (62 per cent) vulnerable young people believe they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.**
- **A third (30 per cent) of vulnerable young people often go without food for a whole day** due to lack of money.
- **Lack of a healthy and balanced diet has led to a variety of health problems**, such as loss of weight, poor eating habits, mismanagement of existing health issues and poor mental health. In the last 12 months, **3 out of 5 (63 per cent) vulnerable young people lost weight** because there was not enough money for food.
- An indicative sample of **food diaries** revealed that many of the **young people who took part were nutritionally compromised with heightened risk of malnutrition and dehydration.**
- **Food insecurity can negatively impact a young person's mental health**, making them more susceptible to stress, anxiety and depression.
- **Engagement in education and employment is negatively impacted** as food insecurity can effect energy levels and concentration.
- **Local welfare assistance is not reaching vulnerable young people**, largely because around half are unaware of the financial support that is available to them. Young people are more likely to rely on their **support network** when struggling to afford food.
- A national poll of a representative sample of 2000 young people also found high levels of food insecurity for **the general youth population** across the country – suggesting that many thousands of young people may be struggling to access the food they need, regardless of whether they have family support or not; **nearly half (49 per cent) say they have gone to bed hungry** in the last 12 months and **more than a third (35 per cent) say they have gone a whole day without food** due to a lack of money.

Drivers of food insecurity for young people experiencing homelessness

- **Low income**, whether this be through **employment or the benefits system**, is at the root cause of food insecurity in young people - young people under the age of 25 receive around a quarter less than someone over the age of 25 when claiming Universal Credit.
- **The benefits system, including the way it is paid and managed, plays a significant role in the difficulties young people are facing** in terms of managing their finances, including the low rate of benefit, the five week wait, sanctions and deductions, administrative errors and the rules for working whilst living in supported accommodation.
- **Many young people are in incredibly high amounts of debt**, particularly with Universal Credit, council tax and individual people from their support network.
- **High energy costs** mean vulnerable young people are unable to use their cooker or turn on their fridge, meaning that they have to rely on takeaways which are usually more expensive and/or lack the nutrition needed for a healthy diet.
- Homeless young people are often placed **in insecure and temporary accommodation with inadequate cooking facilities.**
- **Shared living spaces in homelessness accommodation create additional barriers**, including items being stolen and lack of cleanliness.

Recommendations

For the Department for Work and Pensions:

✓ **Uprate benefits to reflect the real cost of living** to ensure vulnerable households do not face a real-terms cut to their incomes.

✓ **Introduce a new Youth Independence Payment** of £16.06 per week for young people living independently without family support. This would raise their overall Universal Credit entitlement to the rate that over 25s receive in recognition that they face the same living costs.

✓ **Reform the social security system** to ensure claimants are able to afford the essentials and are not pushed into poverty. This includes removing the five week wait for first benefit payment, proactively offering the choice of more regular payments and reforming the sanction process so it is proportionate and does not push claimants further into food insecurity.

✓ **Restore local housing allowance rates** to the 30th percentile as a minimum, to reflect the real cost of renting and prevent young people from falling into rent arrears.

✓ **Increase the applicable amount within Housing Benefit**, so that residents in supported and temporary accommodation do not face steep cliff edges when moving into work, and are not disadvantaged compared to those not living in supported accommodation.

✓ Provide more targeted support to **young people living independently to protect them from fuel poverty**, such as by extending winter fuel payments and working with energy providers to target support for young people.

✓ **Reform Government debt collection practices so they are clear, flexible and sensitive** to people's experiences - learning from best practice in the private sector. This should include reducing the maximum cap on Universal Credit debt deductions from 25 per cent to 15 per cent and a maximum cap for state debt deductions at 5 per cent.

For local authorities and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities:

✓ **Local authorities in England should work together to share best practice and offer a more uniform cash-first approach** in regards to local welfare assistance so that young people in every area can get the help they need. Signposting should be improved so that vulnerable households know what support they can access.

✓ **Immediately exempt care leavers under the age of 21 from council tax payments** to ensure uniformity across local authorities and seriously consider extending this to all young people.

✓ **Ensure that all supported accommodation residents have access to adequate kitchen facilities** by using the ongoing plans to regulate supported accommodation and set minimum standards.

✓ **Improve access to emergency food support** for young people whilst working to remove the systemic need for food banks.

For the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs:

✓ **Build on the recent UK Food Strategy and the Food Insecurity index to develop an action plan on lowering food insecurity among young people**, including exploring the introduction of a legal right to food.

For supported accommodation providers:

✓ **Provide targeted support around food insecurity** by ensuring there is awareness and knowledge amongst professionals that work directly with young people.

Introduction

Access to sufficient and nutritious food is critical to the health, wellbeing and development of teenagers and young adults at a critical point in their lives. However, for those experiencing homelessness and other severe disadvantage, this research shows that getting enough food to eat is a major challenge.

Over the last decade, research has shown that the number of all households living in destitution has increased sharply,⁴ with food insecurity becoming a serious public and political concern, especially in the face of rising food, energy and general living costs. This has coincided with a rapid growth in the number of food banks across the country, with many people unable to afford even the most basic items, such as food.

Young people have been disproportionately impacted by the rise in cost of living as they are more likely to be working in low paid roles, in sectors that are dominated by zero hour contracts,^{5,6} and face lower benefit entitlements purely because of their age.

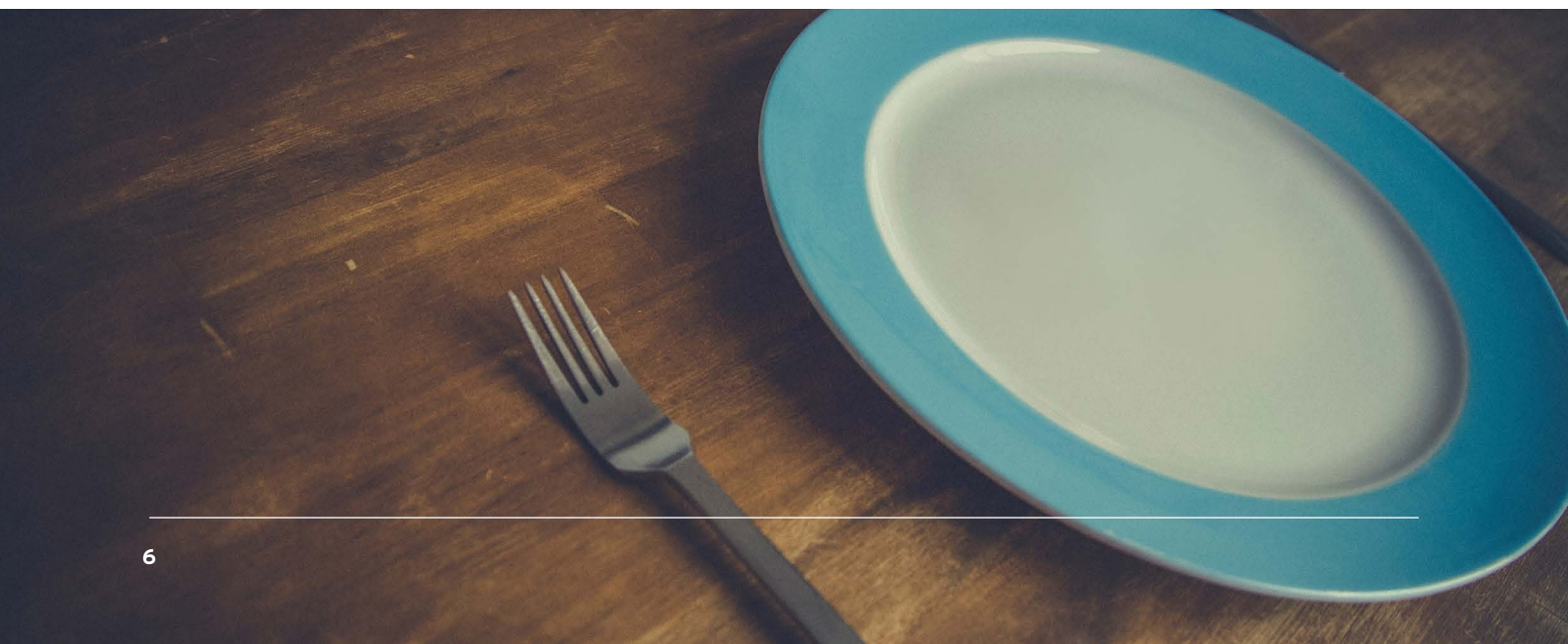
However, even prior to COVID-19 and the significant rise in cost of living, young people, particularly those without family support, were experiencing high levels of poverty and destitution, linked to austerity measures and reforms to the social security system over the last decade.⁷

Despite reporting high levels of food insecurity, the number of young people referred to food banks remains fairly low in comparison to other age groups.⁸ In addition to the shame and stigma of not being able to afford food and the lack of awareness as to how to access food banks, research has found that young people are more likely to rely on their support network or simply go hungry when in financial hardship.

Our research found how food insecurity can negatively impact a young person's mental health, their engagement in education and employment, and over time contributes to nutritional deficiencies and health issues, further impeding homeless young people's ability to move out of poverty. Despite these concerning findings, young people are typically under-represented in food insecurity research which mostly focuses on families, children or food bank users.

Our research highlights the challenges faced by homeless young people and the need for additional support to meet rising living and housing costs. Alarming, our poll of a nationally representative sample of the general youth (16-24) population also found high levels of food insecurity for young people across the country – suggesting that many thousands of young people may be struggling to access the food they need.

This report, kindly funded by the abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, looks into the impact of food insecurity in homeless young people. It explores their experiences through in-depth interviews with young people and stakeholders, focus groups held at homelessness services across the country, surveys, and analysis of the nutritional intake of young people's food diaries to reflect the challenges of this age group and the issues they are facing living on a low income.



Methodology

This research was carried out between November 2021 and June 2022 using the following methods:

A policy and literature review to develop wider understanding of the existing literature and evidence around young people's experiences of food insecurity.

A national survey of 209 young people being supported by homelessness organisations across England, conducted between February and May 2022. Participants were recruited through Centrepoin and Partnering Services. The survey design was informed by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Household Food Security Survey Module, as well as the 'Food and You Survey' created by the Food Standard's Agency. Further information regarding the survey can be found at the end of the report.

In-depth interviews conducted with 20 young people being supported by homelessness charities across England. We spoke to eight young men, nine young women, two non-binary people and one transgender male between February and May 2022. Interviews were largely conducted over the telephone, with a small number conducted face to face.

In-depth interviews with 23 key stakeholders working to support vulnerable young people. These included support workers and homelessness charity staff, policy professionals working in the area of hunger and food poverty, local authority and social services professionals, food bank staff and other emergency food providers.

Six focus groups with young people being supported by homelessness charities in London, Bradford, Blackpool, Sunderland and lastly with Centrepoin alumni – a group of young people that have moved on from Centrepoin accommodation. The focus group held in Sunderland was at a young parent's service. In total, 23 young people took part in focus groups.

Analysis of food diaries completed by 17 young people. Each young person completed a 24 hour dietary intake across four non-consecutive days using specialist dietary analysis software.

A national poll of a representative sample of 2000 young people from the general population to determine the level of food insecurity among the wider age group. Opinium conducted this national poll between 28th March and 5th April 2022.



Background

What is food insecurity?

Being food insecure encapsulates a range of experiences, including skipping meals, attending food banks, lacking a nutritious diet and worrying where your next meal will come from. Some young people were unsure of the meaning of the term food insecurity and were more likely to understand the term when it was used interchangeably with food poverty. It was described by some young people as anxiety towards food, usually in relation to eating disorders; this was typically due to an assumption that the use of the word insecurity was in relation to a lack of confidence.

“Someone that is not confident to consume food and I think that to be insecure in food is either, they don’t have confidence in eating food or they don’t have any food.”

Tom, Yorkshire

However, many young people were able to describe what it means to be food insecure, often referring openly to their own experiences.

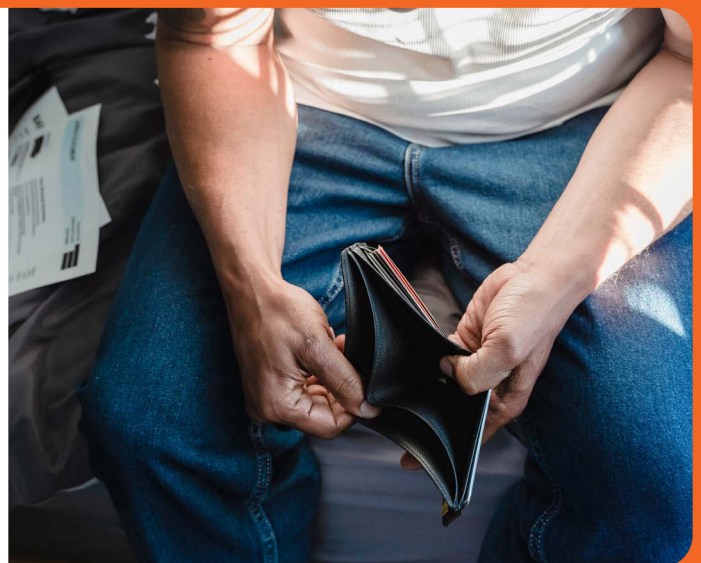
“Not knowing where your next meal is coming from, using food banks, not being able to provide for yourself, it’s a horrible feeling.”

Aisha, Yorkshire



Food insecurity measurement

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) definition of food insecurity has formed the foundation of this research and has been used by The Trussell Trust and other UK bodies to help understand the concept of hunger and food insecurity: *‘Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food’*.⁹ This definition helps to conceptualise food insecurity as a systematic problem, predominantly driven by low income and a lack of affordability.





Food insecurity in the UK

Over the last decade, recorded levels of food insecurity in the UK have risen significantly, becoming a major political and public issue.

An estimated 7.3 million adults and over 2.6 million children in the UK experienced food insecurity in April 2022,¹⁰ meaning that many households all across the country cannot afford to feed themselves.

A major driver of this increase can be linked to a rise in absolute poverty and destitution, where a household lacks two or more of six essential items (including shelter, food and toiletries), or their income is too low to be able to afford these items themselves. Evidence has suggested that even before the COVID-19 outbreak, levels of destitution were increasing at a significant rate: research by the Joseph Rowntree foundation (JRF) estimated that the number of households experiencing destitution between 2017 and 2019 increased by 35 per cent.¹¹

With food prices continuing to rise and inflation hitting a 40 year high of nine per cent, it is highly probable that many more households will be plunged into severe food insecurity.¹² In the year to April 2022, food prices were

6.7 per cent higher, with predictions this could increase to ten per cent later this year.¹³ The steep rise in inflation has been explained by a number of factors, including high consumer demand following the pandemic, rise in the cost of fuel due to the war in Ukraine, supply chain challenges and global and national labour shortages.^{14,15}

Energy prices have seen even steeper increases, putting pressure on households. As of April 2022, the UK's energy price cap, which sets a limit on how much households can be charged for energy bills, rose by 54 per cent, with predictions it could rise again in October by over 50 per cent.¹⁶ For low-income households, energy costs take up three times as much of household budgets as higher-income households, and in turn these households are far less able to deal with the rise in cost of living.¹⁷ Research carried out by The Social Market Foundation found that households on a low-income pay a £490 'poverty premium' per year on their goods and services.¹⁸ This term refers to the additional costs that low-income households incur when buying the same goods and services as those on a higher income.

Recent sharp increases in the cost of living have affected households across the country. However, young people with experiences of homelessness are particularly vulnerable to the increase in the price of food, energy and essential items due to their already low income.

Increase in emergency food provision

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced by David Cameron's Coalition Government was part of a programme of austerity that would see a £18 billion cut to public spending by 2014-15.¹⁹ Significant policy reforms, during this period, have been linked to a substantial rise in the number of food banks, with emergency food provision perceived by some as a symbol of austerity Britain.^{20,21}

In 2010/11 The Trussell Trust's network of food banks distributed 61,000 emergency food parcels, rising to 1.9 million in 2019/20, reflecting a significant increase in the number of households in crisis.²²

Added to this number is the distribution of food parcels by the 1172 independent food banks operating across the UK, as well as other types of charitable food aid, including community meals, soup kitchens, social supermarkets and breakfast clubs.²³ Analysis by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) found that there was a 110 per cent increase in the number of emergency food parcels distributed by 83 independent food banks between February 2019 and November 2020.²⁴

Not having sufficient income through the social security system is the main factor in somebody being referred to a Trussell Trust food bank, and is often due to the

way Universal Credit (UC) is paid and managed.²⁵ In particular the following policies have contributed to an increase in food bank referrals: the five week wait for the first UC payment, the low rate standard allowance, debt deductions, local housing allowance rates, benefit caps, the 'bedroom tax' and the structure and process of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessment.

While public concern about food insecurity has risen, there is still a powerful narrative by some media outlets regarding personal responsibility and lack of budgeting skills.²⁶ These persistent stereotypes ignore the many structural and systematic factors that are at the root of poverty whilst exacerbating the stigma of food bank use. As a result people may not feel comfortable reaching out for help when they are most in need.²⁷

While providing vital support to households in crisis, the substantial increase in the distribution of emergency food aid does not solve the deep rooted structural issues of poverty and food insecurity that are created by rising living costs, low pay, insufficient job opportunities and an inadequate social security system.²⁸ To tackle food insecurity, both for young people and the wider population, the Government needs to remove the need for food banks altogether by ensuring people have enough money to feed themselves.

COVID-19

The pandemic exacerbated and shone a light on levels of food insecurity across the UK.^{29,30} Panic buying and stockpiling during the early stages of the pandemic meant that there was a lack of cheap, economy branded food available in supermarkets; this resulted in people needing to use smaller, often more expensive independent shops.³¹ The increase of food prices coupled with restricted travelling measures compounded this issue further.³² Likewise, Government enforced lockdowns made it difficult to access food bank referral agencies, especially during the initial months of the crisis.³³

The Department of Work and Pension's (DWP) Family Resources Survey found that in the year before the onset of Covid-19, 43 per cent of UK households on UC were food insecure.³⁴ Following the £20 increase to UC, there was a 16 per cent reduction in severe and moderate food insecurity. Despite widespread calls from Centrepunt and others in the sector to make the

uplift permanent, the Government chose to withdraw the extra money, impacting millions of vulnerable households across the country. The UC standard allowance for under 25s is over £16 less a week than that for over-25s. Hence, the withdrawal of the £20 UC uplift disproportionately impacts young people as it has resulted in many of them losing more than a quarter of their current income.

"Honestly, it completely like ruined my entire routine. I had a set amount of money for shopping, I had a set amount of money for electric but after that it just completely knocked me back. I've literally not been the same since, I've been in debt, I've been behind on rent. That's really where most of my problems came from because I did not know how it was before having that so for me to have it and then just have it just taken away, like even though they warned me, there was nothing that could have really prepared me."

Sara, East Midlands

Government response to poverty and food insecurity

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent increase in prices, the Government announced a £37 billion support package. These measures mean that millions of the most vulnerable households will receive at least £1,200 of support in total this year.³⁵

As part of the package, the Government announced that more than 8 million households on means-tested benefits will receive a £650 cost of living payment; all domestic energy customers will receive a £400 grant to help with the cost of their energy bills; and households liable for Council Tax in Bands A-D will receive a £150 Council Tax Rebate.³⁶

These measures are hugely welcomed and will ease the financial strain on vulnerable households, however, the £650 payment excludes those who are not claiming means-tested benefits.³⁷ In addition, for some young people living in supported accommodation and working,

they will not be eligible as they are in receipt of Housing Benefit rather than UC. It is critical that those on a low-income receive long-term support rather than one-off payments when they are in crisis.

Furthermore, the Household Support Fund has been extended to March 2023 with new funding bringing the total to £1.5 billion. However, as explored later in the report, evidence has suggested that this money is not reaching vulnerable households.

Lastly, the UC taper rate, the amount that a person's UC is reduced when their earnings are more than their work allowance, has been reduced from 63 per cent to 55 per cent, with work allowances increased by £500. While this policy change is a positive step for young people who are working, it fails to support those who are out of work and most in need.

Why are homeless young people more susceptible to food insecurity?

Young people (aged 16-25) living independently are some of the most financially vulnerable groups in society.^{38,39} There are a wide range of complex and overlapping reasons why homeless young people are more susceptible to food insecurity, however, the fundamental factors include low income, issues with the benefits system, minimal financial experience and limited support networks.^{40,41}

Despite these additional vulnerabilities, they face among the lowest entitlements to financial support through the social security system.⁴² Due to their lower benefit rate at the outset, young people have been disproportionately impacted by the rise in cost of living and the ending of the £20 UC uplift. Many young people who are in work, are employed in low paid and part time work and make up the key demographic of those working on zero-hour contracts.^{43,44}

Furthermore, homeless young people can be placed in insecure and temporary accommodation which can often lack the basic amenities to cook and store food, resulting in many spending money on expensive takeaways or

needing to use food banks.⁴⁵ Similarly, many young people living in their own flat may not have the means to cook, whether this is because they do not own white goods or their energy costs are too high.

Existing research into this age group found that the majority of young people are more likely to manage their food insecurity within their own social network; for example by borrowing money or regularly eating at other people's homes - where they could also disguise their food insecurity as simply engaging in a social activity with friends or family.⁴⁶ Evidently, this was made more challenging during the pandemic when limitations were placed on households mixing.

Although young people may be at an increased risk of food insecurity, research suggests that many food insecure young people may go under the radar because they will go to great lengths to hide the financial difficulties they are facing, even going hungry rather than seeking support.⁴⁷ This may help to explain why their use of food banks is significantly lower than other age groups.⁴⁸

Drivers of food insecurity for young people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity

High costs of living

For young people experiencing homelessness, our research found that the high cost of living, coupled with low incomes, left many struggling to afford essential bills, with over a quarter living off less than £5 a week.

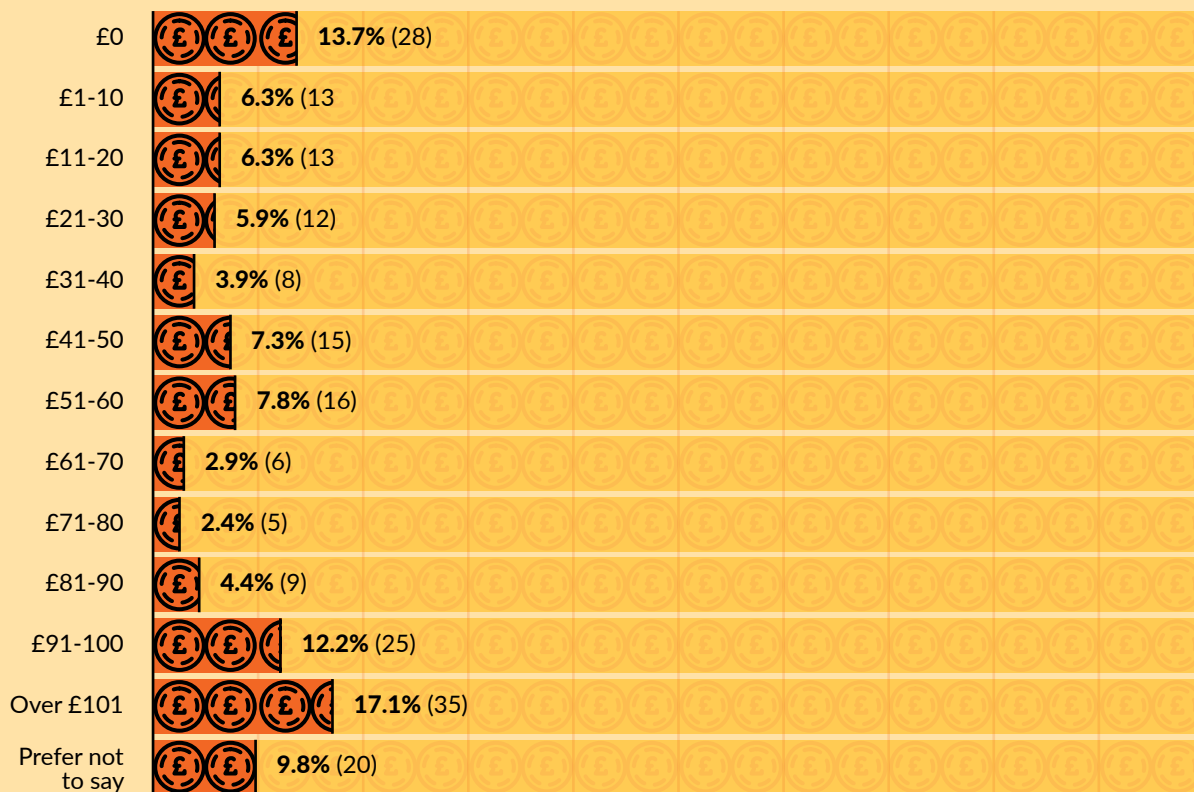
Due to the significant rise in energy costs, our research found that many young people have been unable to use their cooker or turn their fridge on because they simply cannot afford it. It has even resulted in some young people having to decline food donations because they could not afford to heat up the food.

Two fifths (41 per cent) of young people supported by homelessness services reported high costs of living as a reason why they could not afford food; **38 per cent** reported low benefit rates; and **25 per cent** said that having debt or owing someone money was a factor.

“I always run out of money before the end of the month. I don’t have the money to survive. I have to skip meals sometimes because I have other priorities to pay like gas and electric. It’s a lot.”

Lena, London

How much monthly income do you have left over after your rent and essential bills (e.g. service charge, energy bills, phone bill) have been paid to pay for food, travel and leisure activities?



Total: 205

It was a common experience for young people to sacrifice something in their budget if they needed to use their cooker.

“Sometimes we've got into a situation where we could not physically cook our meal because we would not have enough electric to keep the heating up and we would have to go weeks without showering.”

Michael, North West England

“The food situation is the biggest situation for me, because it's like, your rent is one thing...food is surviving. Is it worth it? Really? To have heating and hot water but no food.”

Clara, London

Furthermore, a number of young people spoke about being placed into accommodation with prepayment meters which are usually more expensive per unit of energy than most other tariffs. One young person explained how his landlord sets his own tariff and charges him double for the energy he uses. Other young people were blocked from changing their meter to a cheaper option because they were already in debt with their utility supplier.

“But they're stuck, they can't get richer...they can change to a different supplier but they're still stuck with its prepayment tariff. And that's a killer for them...I remember one of the young people telling me their unit tariff...their unit tariff on the prepayment meter was almost double my unit costs.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, London

Social security issues

Despite living independently and facing the same living costs as someone over the age of 25, young people are disproportionately affected by the benefits system due to the lower rate they receive. Previous Centrepoint research highlights the challenges young people face, and how the benefits system is too often falling short of meeting their needs.⁴⁹

Lower benefit rates for under 25s:

Young people under the age of 25 receive around a quarter less than someone over the age of 25 when claiming UC.⁵⁰ The Government justifies the lower benefit rate on the grounds that most young people under the age of 25 do not live independently, have fewer financial responsibilities and should remain living with parents if they cannot afford to live on their own.⁵¹ However, there was a general consensus amongst young people and stakeholders, that this policy was unfair and did not reflect the experiences of vulnerable young people who are unable to return home due to safety issues or family breakdown. It was widely recognised that this group of young people face the exact same living costs as someone over the age of 25 and are likely to face additional challenges, such as limited experience of budgeting or a difficult transition moving into adulthood following a traumatic upbringing.

“Young people on benefits really really struggle, and especially the under 25s because they get a lesser amount. And that is a real kick in the teeth. For anyone who has food to put on the table, it's a big issue. You can't live on nothing. You've got to have enough money. You've got to be able to live.”

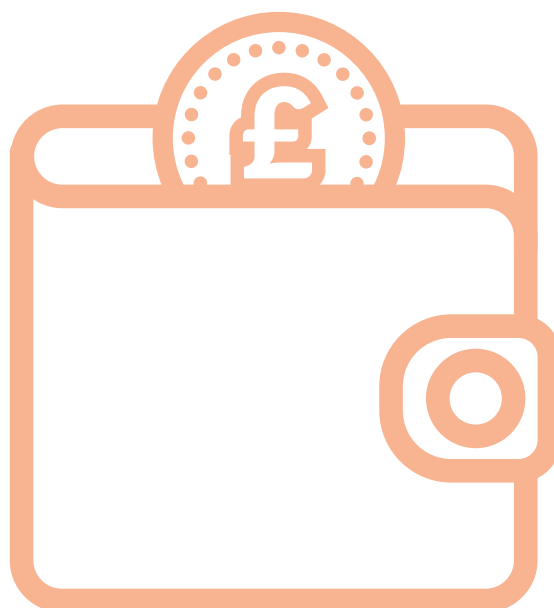
Liam, Yorkshire

“Every human being deserves a minimum amount to be able to live. And it shouldn't be age related. Because if you're 16, and you've been booted out from home, or you're not able to live at home, why are you getting less money than a 25 year old? Your rent's the same, your council tax is the same, your food's the same. And if that person ends up in really, really bad debt, or ended up going the other way into other crime? How's that helping anybody?”

London food bank

“For the past three months, I've had no food and I have had three meals probably a week every week.”

Zach, North West England



Five week wait:

The five week wait for the first UC payment can lead to immediate financial hardship, pushing people into food insecurity.⁵² For young people who are already more vulnerable to food insecurity, features such as the five week wait puts them at an even greater risk.

Whilst a claimant waits for the initial benefit payment, they can get an advance loan from the Jobcentre which has to be repaid from future payments. Recent research carried out by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) estimated that 1.8 million households on UC are living on less than they are entitled to because the DWP is deducting debt repayments.⁵³

We heard from a number of young people that it was not fully explained to them that the advance payment needed to be paid back and the debt that they accrue – not only with the DWP, but through their landlord, utility providers and other bills - can impact their financial security in the months to come.



44 per cent of vulnerable young people reported that a non-repayable advance loan during the five week wait would help ensure they could afford to eat.

“...and we're saying, 'Why can't you afford food', and then they're explaining to us that they're receiving less than they should because they're paying back their advances. So when their money's tight with no room to manoeuvre and then they're paying back any advances, then there really is no room to manoeuvre.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, North West England

Use of sanctions:

Another contributing factor to young people experiencing food insecurity is the use of sanctioning. According to research from the Social Security Advisory Committee, young people living independently are nearly four times as likely to receive a sanction compared to older claimants.⁵⁴ When young people are already receiving so little, sanctions can push them into serious levels of financial hardship and unable to afford basic items, such as food. Research suggests that there is a strong dynamic relationship between the number of sanctions in a particular area and the number of distributed emergency food parcels.⁵⁵

“Sometimes the fear of being sanctioned by UC, on top of the fact that I physically cannot afford to get the bus, puts a massive tonne of stress on my shoulders and at times I have had to wait two days to eat due to how little money I have left from UC, this on top of the fact that I am moving to a new accommodation where I will have to pay more money to live is going to make surviving even bigger of a challenge.”

Rachel, Yorkshire

“Sometimes they would come to us really desperate looking for help. And, you know, I'm not afraid to admit, they've had all the food bank vouchers there, there was nothing else we could do, me and my council colleagues have sat and we have handed our lunch over to people. Because if we did not do it they weren't going to eat...it shouldn't be our responsibility, it shouldn't be the responsibility of frontline library and council workers to feed people because the DWP is not.”

Food insecurity and youth employability organisation, Scotland

One frontline worker explained how one of their young people was sanctioned after missing a Jobcentre appointment despite informing her work coach she was experiencing a mental health crisis. This young person had a pre-existing eating disorder and the sanction resulted in her restricting her diet even further, going without even one meal a day.

Administrative errors:

Administrative errors can be critical when a vulnerable young person is already attempting to manage on a low budget. We often heard how young people had received incorrect information from the Jobcentre about their claim, resulting in them needing to pay back a large overpayment despite the DWP being responsible for the error. Subsequently, this heightened the young person's vulnerability to food insecurity.

“It was a lot of miscommunication and a lot of error with the system where at one point it overpaid me, and then they underpaid me...there was that one month where I did not even have any money at all. Centrepoint were supportive when I said I had no money...they would help me with food.”

Tom, Yorkshire

Young people with limited experience of the benefits system may not have the knowledge to appeal decisions and so end up dealing with the negative repercussions of administrative errors and delays. For example, one young person informed us that it took a whole month for a change of circumstance to be approved when he moved accommodation; during this time, his benefit was suspended and he was forced to use a food bank. He told us that the Jobcentre offered no additional financial support throughout this period.

Working whilst living in supported accommodation:

The complicated benefit rules for young people living in supported accommodation can add an additional barrier to accessing work, in some cases leaving young people worse off after increasing their earnings or taking on more hours. Previous Centrepoint research found how these rules can create a major disincentive for young people looking to access work while in supported accommodation.⁵⁶ We spoke to a number of young people who entered employment while living in supported accommodation who found themselves unable to manage the high rent costs and as a result built up substantial arrears. This impacted on their ability to afford food and they had to turn to food banks and/ or food donations to survive.

Nearly half (49 per cent) of vulnerable young people report that improving benefit rules for people living in supported accommodation will help ensure they can afford food.

Over two fifths (43 per cent) report better employment opportunities would help them to afford food.

“I should be able to work more hours and still receive benefits without being penalised, as it's traumatic to be going hungry especially when you go to bed and you can't sleep, not everyone has people they can turn to.”

Kathryn, London

“But it feels very counterintuitive to the young people that we work with, they want to be living a purposeful life, and they want to be achieving and fending for themselves but the system just isn't set up for that.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, North West England

Debt

The substantial rise in cost of living, coupled with low incomes and stagnant benefit rates has resulted in far too many young people struggling to manage large amounts of debt.^{57,58} The number of young people contacting the Financial Ombudsman Service for help with debt has risen by over 200 per cent over the past five years.⁵⁹

UC deductions can significantly reduce a young person's income, and can encourage vulnerable people to take on problem debt with high interest rates.⁶⁰ Research carried out by Step Change and the Trussell Trust found that as a result of deductions, over a quarter of people in debt had needed to cut back on food spending.⁶¹ As such, it is of no surprise that 9 out of 10 people who have been referred to a food bank have some form of debt.⁶² Of these people who are in debt and needing to use a food bank, the DWP is the most common creditor with the most common deductions being for advance payments, council tax and historical tax credit repayments.⁶³

“I have been paying off debts since 2016...once you get involved with it, it's really hard to get out.”

Patrick, North West England



“I have seen the issue of bills getting higher, and money depleting very quickly, and people having to be very resourceful in how they live. I have seen that amongst the people I am working with now, seen young people having to budget differently.”

Young people’s homelessness organisation, Yorkshire

“And they make it too easy to get into debt with them, they make it far too easy to get into debt with them.”

Liam, Yorkshire

Research carried out by the Lloyd’s Bank Foundation has suggested that Government debt collection practices are particularly harsh and inflexible, and that the private sector often reflects a more compassionate process of collecting debt;⁶⁴ in the private sector, it is best practice for consumer credit firms and debt collectors to complete an income assessment and set manageable repayments that do not exacerbate financial hardship. On the contrary, UC deductions can be up to 25 per cent and in most cases are taken at a fixed rate which is difficult to challenge.⁶⁵

As well as the DWP, many young people spoke about having other debts, such as with energy companies, rent arrears and owing individual people money. This corroborates JRF’s findings that 2.7 million low-income households face more than one type of debt; of them 35 per cent (1.3 million households) are in three or more types of debt.⁶⁶

! A third (32 per cent) of vulnerable young people report that more accessible debt and budgeting support would help them to afford food.

“Living in supported accommodation and only being on universal credit, like it’s really really hard balancing like buying electricity and stuff like that. Sometimes I literally just don’t have enough left over to do shopping especially if I have missed a payment and gotten myself into a little bit of debt and then I’m literally like, that’s it I don’t have any food or money to get food for the month.”

Sara, East Midlands

“I am in debt with most energy suppliers, phone contracts you name it, everything and anything.”

Chantelle, East Midlands

One particular young person was in over £10,000 worth of debt which was spread across a number of different creditors. The young person had tried asking for help from debt charities; however, he was informed that they were unable to support him as the debt was less than £20,000.



For young people who were in debt to an individual, there was a never ending cycle of borrowing and paying back money, leaving them vulnerable to predatory lenders and exploitation.

“I have to set up payment plans with them which I can never stick to because I don’t know when I’m going to have money this month or the next month so I can’t set up a proper date to pay it back every single month and then I end up in more debt with them.”

James, North West England

“I owe 70 quid this month and I haven’t even been paid yet. It’s a vicious circle isn’t it and then it’s hard to get out of that.”

Lewis, North West England

Research into food banks found that the stigmatisation of financial hardship meant that those on a low income only reach out for help if it is absolutely necessary.⁶⁷ One young person explained how asking for food or money made him feel like a ‘parasite’. A number of stakeholders reported how many young people do not disclose the level of debt they are in due to embarrassment, fear of judgement or concern it could negatively impact their housing situation. One Centrepoint Service Manager explained how this was particularly true for young people in debt with a loan shark. Similarly, another stakeholder explained how a homelessness service was unaware that one of their residents was in significant debt until he stopped paying his rent consistently.

Having said this, several young people did recognise the risks of using loan companies.

“But I’ve never got into serious debt with a loan company luckily, because I refuse. I’d rather starve. I’d rather starve and die of starvation than do that, because they’ll just never stop. I know how they work. I’ve seen it damage people before, I’ve seen it rip their lives apart, and I refuse to do it”.

Aaron, Yorkshire

Furthermore, the majority of young people recognised the importance of paying their rent and other essential bills, choosing to prioritise these payments over food. This suggests that despite young people prioritising rent and essential bills, it is still easy to fall into serious levels of debt. This is corroborated by recent research carried out by the Lloyd's Bank Foundation which found that UC deductions are primarily the result of Government policy, rather than individual behaviour.⁶⁸

"I wasn't able to cover the cost of living and accommodation which is why I had to prioritise most of my money towards my bills. It was more stressful seeing the bills constantly coming through my door that I just did not see sense in buying food because I would rather have none of these letters come through my door than live a more healthy lifestyle."

Sophia, Yorkshire

Lack of adequate cooking facilities

For young people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, not having the physical space and facilities to prepare meals is another barrier to a sufficient and nutritious diet. This includes those who may be sleeping rough or sofa surfing, as well as those who are in hostels and temporary accommodation.

A number of young people and stakeholders highlighted the challenges of living in temporary accommodation without access to adequate cooking facilities. For example, one young person only had access to a microwave; not only did this restrict what he could cook but also his ability to eat healthily.

! **Almost 1 in 4 (24 per cent)** vulnerable young people do not have access to decent kitchen facilities to prepare meals.

! **Over 1 in 4 (28 per cent)** cannot afford the energy costs to cook.

! **Over 1 in 4 (28 per cent)** do not have sufficient space to store food.

Likewise, the condition of the kitchen appliances impacted on a young person's desire to cook.

"The cooker is on its way out...even if it's on the right temperature on the box, one minute it will cook really fast...you will have it in there for five minutes and it's burnt or it's not cooking at all."

Joshua, South East England

"I just wish that I had the appliances and the ability, the space, my kitchen is non-existent, it's just a little cubby hole in my living room."

Lena, North West England

Furthermore, a number of young people had recently moved into their own property which was completely unfurnished. As they could not afford to buy a cooker or fridge, they were eating a considerable amount of takeaways and fast food which was both expensive and unhealthy. One young person had lived in her flat for five months before she was eventually able to source a second hand cooker. Unfortunately, the young person was unable to source these kitchen appliances through the council's Local Welfare Assistance (LWA) as the scheme only permits an individual to apply for a limited amount of items and she had exhausted this option already. This reinforces the research findings from End Furniture Poverty which found that as of July 2021, almost 1 in 4 people in England were unable to get any help with furniture and appliances through the LWA. Furthermore, the majority (59 per cent) of local authorities required people to make some other attempts to get the items ahead of making an application for LWA, most commonly, an advance on their benefit payments. It is extremely concerning that vulnerable young people are forced into debt when attempting to get kitchen appliances to achieve a minimum standard of living.⁶⁹

"On top of that, I also don't have any kitchen appliances in the flat that I live in so I have to buy in all of my food fresh every day."

Lena, North West England

We also heard from young people who had used creative methods to try store food for longer.

"I'll go to (local shop) when I can because they have some good deals in the freezer section. But obviously I have to eat it quick or I can turn my fridge all the way up to its highest power to keep things frozen."

Michael, North West England

Shared living spaces

When discussing shared living spaces in supported accommodation, a number of issues arose concerning the kitchen facilities, including lack of cleanliness, basic items such as food being stolen by other residents, and insufficient space to store and cook food. Occasionally this would result in disagreements between the young people who shared the kitchen, adding a further justification as to why they did not want to use the facilities.

Notably, the majority of young people reported that their kitchen space lacked adequate freezer space; therefore, many young people had no choice but to spend more money on fresh food instead of cooking in batch and freezing.

“Sometimes I feel like I can't buy a load and put in the freezer because there's no space for everyone.”

Daniel, London

Another challenge highlighted by a number of young people was how their mental health issues could restrict them from using the shared kitchen space, especially those young people suffering with social anxiety.

Furthermore, some young people with religious and cultural food requirements were uncomfortable sharing a kitchen with other residents who did not share the same cooking practices, for example not eating pork.



Impacts of food insecurity on homeless young people

Physical health

Lack of nutritional food:

This research found that for many young people, eating a healthy and balanced diet was a priority, but they were unable to afford fresh fruit and vegetables with the money they were receiving. For some young people, healthy eating was described as a 'luxury' which only some could achieve.

! Around 1 in 10 (13 per cent) vulnerable young people believe they have regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.

! 3 out of 4 (78 per cent) young people report that they cannot afford to eat a balanced meal; **nearly half (45 per cent)** say this happens often.

"She eats noodles, because they're affordable. And you think, that's not a nutritional meal, that is a snack."

Food insecurity and youth employability organisation, Scotland

For some young people experiencing the worst forms of homelessness, even being able to get the basic necessity of clean water could prove difficult.

"I think they're a bit scared. Because they don't really know where the next meal is coming from. I mean, a lot of them, we give a bottled water every night as well. And I know a lot of them fill them with water from like public toilets as and when they can because they're not sure when the public toilets will close, and even when they can get a decent drink of water."

Emergency food provision, North East England

Some young people with additional physical health issues reported being told by their GP that they needed to follow a specific diet as a way to help manage their symptoms. However, this was often not possible due to their low income. For example, one young person

recently diagnosed with several health conditions which required a managed diet could only afford cheap, processed foods which worsened their symptoms. Another young person suffering with lactose intolerance explained how he had to ignore the discomfort when eating dairy foods because he could not afford lactose-free products.

Stakeholders working with young people also spoke about education and the need to support young people to eat healthily. Some young people, particularly care leavers, may not have been taught the importance of eating healthily and so spend most of their money on fast food and takeaways out of convenience, taste preferences and relative cheapness. This is not surprising when we consider the fact that young people in Britain are exposed to 15 billion ads for foods high in sugar, salt and fat every year.⁷⁰ It is important that services working with vulnerable young people are given the necessary resources to promote and encourage healthy eating.

"Before we started providing the food, they would never eat fruit or vegetables, they would have a little bit of money, and they would always go and spend it in the chicken shop. But then since we started providing the food, they changed their mindset and stopped spending the money, and was having the fresh stuff each day as well."

Community food provision service, London



Food diaries

As part of this research, food diaries were completed by 17 young people with experiences of homelessness to gather information on the average dietary intake for this demographic. They were completed using an online platform called intake24 which logged all the food and drink that was consumed over a 24 hour period across four non-consecutive days. Twelve females, four males and one transgender male with an age range of 18-24 years old completed the food diaries.

Food insecurity, malnutrition and obesity have been found to be the leading causes of poor health globally.⁷¹ Being unable to eat a healthy and balanced diet is also linked to further health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes or cancer.^{72,73}

Centrepoin't's Senior Dietician analysed the food diaries against the Government's dietary recommendations. It is important to note that the daily dietary intake is highly variable, especially with this age group, thus the average figures below do not provide a complete picture. Further assessment into young people's food intake, over a longer period is necessary to determine the detailed and thus full extent of malnutrition and dehydration. Furthermore, this analysis only covers the amount consumed not the quality of the food which is significant especially for protein and fat.

Energy:

- **82 per cent (14 out of 17)** did not meet calorie/ energy nutritional requirement
- Deficit in calories from four day average ranged from 186 - 1481 kcal

Carbohydrates (CHO):

- **82 per cent (14 out of 17)** did not meet CHO nutritional requirements
- Deficit in CHO from four day average ranged from 17 - 212g

Protein:

- **29 per cent (5 out of 17)** did not meet protein nutritional requirements
- Deficit in protein from four day average ranged from 13 - 27g

Fat:

- **71 per cent (12 out of 17)** did not meet fat nutritional requirements
- Deficit in fat from four day average ranged from 4 - 79g

Fibre:

- **None of the 17 (100 per cent)** met fibre nutritional requirements
- Deficit in fibre from four day average ranged from 9 - 28g

These findings tell us that every young person that took part in the completion of food diaries presents as nutritionally compromised which heightens their risk of malnutrition and dehydration. It is clear that each person is affected by food insecurity, with one young person recording only water for one of their food diary intakes. The negative implications on the physical and mental health of these young people are substantial, and not just in the short term. The ongoing consequences of significant malnutrition can continue throughout the young person's life.

Hunger and loss of weight:

A common experience for young people in this research was hunger, discomfort and weight loss from not being able to access the food they needed. A significant number of young people in the research reported only having one meal a day, with many eating snacks instead of proper cooked meals. One young person described going ten days without any food at all.

63 per cent of vulnerable young people have lost weight because there was not enough money for food.

68 per cent have gone without food for a whole day due to lack of money; **30 per cent** said that this often happens.

87 per cent have bought food that did not last and they did not have money to get more; **44 per cent** said that this often happens.

“...my support worker got so worried for me that they made me make an appointment at the doctors to get nutritional supplements because I just wasn't eating, right? I would just go days and days without eating at all.”

Aaron, Yorkshire

“...there's a group of young men that come, and last summer, they looked well, today they just look like they have been dragged through a hedge backwards. They have lost weight, they look unkempt, they just look lost.”

Food bank, North East England

Stakeholders reported that in recent months, in the face of rising living costs and increasing hardship, food insecurity was becoming more common for the young people they worked with. One homelessness organisation in North East England noticed an increase in emails they were receiving from young people across the last few months saying: 'I'm hungry, can you help?'

Loss of appetite can be a symptom of undereating as your body adjusts to eating a restricted amount of food; other common symptoms can include extreme fatigue, weakened immune system and impaired growth in young people.⁷⁴

“I feel like I'm so stuck in this way of like not even eating. I don't even know if I'm losing energy anymore but I'm always tired.”

Grace, London

Eating disorders:

Young people with an existing eating disorder suggested that living on a low income can exacerbate harmful eating habits and prevent recovery.

3 out of 4 (75 per cent) vulnerable young people reported that they have developed harmful eating habits due to lack of food.

“Coz of my eating disorder, how I grew up, my brain just kind of goes I can handle a few days without food; throughout the week, one meal a day is fine.”

Aaron, Yorkshire

“It kind of encourages eating disorders because you get used to not eating. And someone who struggles with food, it just gave me an excuse not to eat because it was like, well, you don't have money, then you don't have to eat. So technically, you're not engaging in the eating disorder. It's just, this is how it is.”

Abbie, London

“She does have an eating disorder. But I wonder if it is an eating disorder or if it is just that she's never really had access to food...because sometimes if they've not got access to food, it's almost like a habit that they don't eat. Yeah, it's almost like they just live with the hunger.”

Food insecurity and youth employability organisation, Scotland

Mental health

Food insecurity impacts negatively on a young person's mental health and wellbeing. Having no money for food was described as a lonely and isolating experience, with one young person attributing a period of depression to being food insecure.

Over 9 in 10 (91 per cent) vulnerable young people worry whether their food will run out before they get money to buy more; **57 per cent** often worry.

“Yeah especially with like not being able to have friends over because you don't have food in and you can't provide for them and yeah just like the low energy thing again, it makes it hard to go outside, it's just absolutely draining and knowing every month when your payment comes in that you can't even afford to go out and get food. It's really stressful”

Sara, East Midlands

“There's only so much you can rely on friends because eventually you just become a burden and it's not their responsibility. So then you just withdraw because it becomes embarrassing and then you lose out on hanging out with your friends. They want to go out for food and clearly you can't do that because it's just not in the budget. And then you are always avoiding plans, you never want to come out. I don't have that kind of money, but my parents aren't gonna give me money. But their parents are. They don't understand the financial responsibility.”

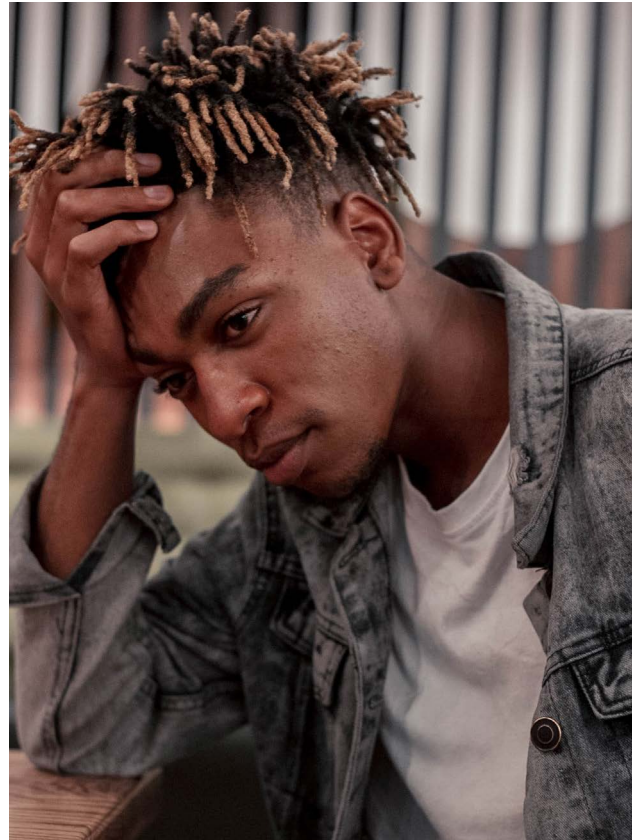
Abbie, London

“My hands were on my stomach because I was starving and I couldn't even sleep because of hunger. Everything was popping in my mind again and again. I was really depressed because I did not have food.”

Aisha, Yorkshire

“It has a massive effect on their mental health because it's a stress, it's something that's always there, they're always worrying about it. And then they're more liable to have a rage attack or a meltdown. And then they're just labelled as being difficult, but actually they're just hungry. Just feed them.”

Food insecurity and youth employability organisation, Scotland



One Service Manager described a 'two way process', in which poor mental health, often triggered or exacerbated by hunger, could also lead to the mismanagement of money and poor budgeting decisions. Stakeholders described how young people in the depths of a mental health crisis would often shield themselves away from support, and by doing so, worsened the situation even further.

Many homeless young people felt that people did not care about their situation and had a sense of hopelessness.

“If I don't eat, I don't eat. I've gone time without eating. I've been you know, the rock bottom where I was to the point where I was being tube fed in hospital because it went on for so long, so it doesn't bother me, I guess, because no one really cares what happens to us. People just assume if you're homeless, you are just lazy, you are on drugs, it's way more complicated than that. And some of us, you know, just circumstances, things went wrong or just did not have the best family life. People just don't really care.”

Patrick, London

“It just gets exhausting, constantly trying to fight for like basic needs, you just stop fighting”

Abbie, London

“I mean, because we are just used to not eating anyway. So it's regular, you know, I mean I'm not gonna complain and I don't want to feel like a burden, so I'm not gonna go tell my key worker here I'm really starving. No one wants to hear that, pretty much been neglected your whole life, no one really cares, you're not gonna ask for help because I spend my whole life asking for help and it got me nowhere.”

Abel, London

Feeling guilty when asking for help was prevalent amongst the young people interviewed for this research, especially when their social network may have limited financial capacity themselves.

“I felt awful, you feel like you put on a lot of people, and it takes out of other people's mouths. It's not a nice thing.”

Luke, Yorkshire

“Growing up, my mom and the way she raised me it was never ask for money, I never asked for money or food from other people, because it's like, they could be in a worse situation than you...even if they offered food or offered to buy me something, I just always felt really bad, this guilty feeling”

Zach, North West England

“I did not feel confident in myself to really feel like I deserved that food as I always thought of others and thought that they deserved it a lot more.”

Tom, Yorkshire

In Focus: Young Parents

One group of young people that have additional challenges in terms of affording food is young parents, particularly those without access to financial support from family or friends. Young parents engaged in this research described the difficult choices they had to make, sometimes having to limit the amount of food they ate to ensure their children could eat three times a day.

“When the baby is hungry and not being able to feed them, and its killing the mother because you really want to be able to give them the food that they want.”

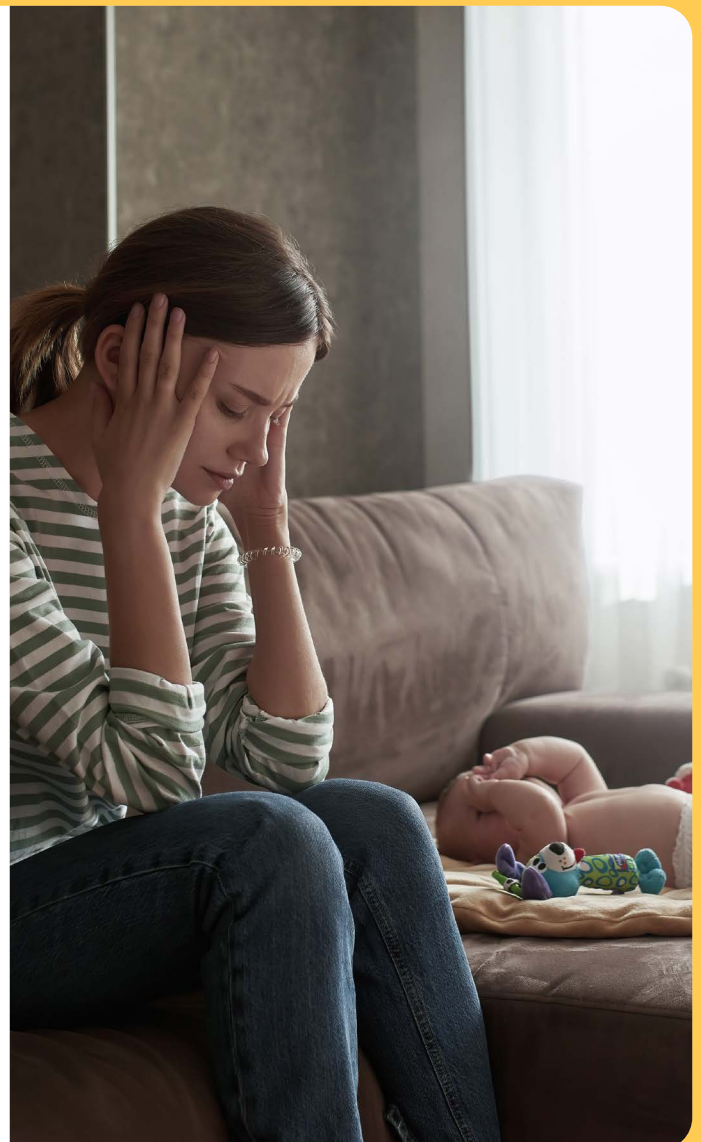
Ellie, North East England

Even accessing emergency food provision was difficult for young parents when they were accompanied by their child.

“It would be the fact that I can't get down there, it depends where it is for one and I have always got my child. And I've done it plenty of times where I'm in Tesco where I'm trying to get back with a full load of shopping because I haven't got money to get back and my pushchair has just collapsed with my child in there.”

Chantelle, East Midlands

Young parents also described difficulties accessing support through the social security system, with one reporting that she had been waiting months for a Child Tax claim to be approved.





Challenges of engaging in education or employment

Vulnerable young people already face a range of barriers to successfully engaging in education or employment. Food insecurity adds another level of disadvantage as low energy levels, lack of concentration and poor mental health are all consequences of an insufficient diet.^{75,76} Research has found that hunger can negatively impact a young person's school attendance, achievement and attainment.⁷⁷ One young person told us that she gets so lethargic at work that she fears she will fall asleep.

“I can't fall asleep, I'm at work. Sometimes I'll like sit down and go, I really need to wake up, but it's really hard. I thought my body would make up for the lack of food, lack of energy, by sleeping because that will give energy, but that doesn't always help.”

Sophia, Yorkshire

Food provision through schemes like breakfast clubs and free school meals, as well as bursaries for good attendance, were great incentives for engaging young people on college or training courses.

“We feed them in the morning because there's no point in expecting these young people to turn up at a course if they haven't eaten from the night before, if there's no food in the house.”

Food insecurity and youth employability organisation, Scotland

The sheer importance of free school meals was portrayed when a young person told the researcher that she reluctantly had to pull out of her college course

after the provider had reduced the eligibility for free school meals; this meant that she was unable to maintain her energy throughout the day and could no longer effectively engage on the course.

“There'll be times where I'd be choosing whether to go to college or work or stay at home, because I couldn't like maybe afford lunch if I went out”

Clara, London

The cost of travel was a further barrier to young people wanting to engage in education or work; paying for travel could result in having no money for food.

“That's probably quite a priority for them to buy their bus pass or their travel card, but then they can't afford to pay their rent or they can't afford to buy enough food.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, London

For young people accessing work or training, the cost of smart clothes and work attire could also mean having to make difficult financial choices. For example, weekly funding provided to two young people attending a training course was being spent on food rather than towards items relating to their training course, such as books or smart clothes. When this came to the attention of the training provider, they were able to buy clothes for the young people so that they could attend their course. In the feedback, the young people expressed: 'we're so grateful for the shoes and the jacket because it meant we were able to eat that week.'

Food insecurity in the general youth population

As part of this research, we commissioned Opinium – a market research and insight agency - to carry out a UK national poll to determine the level of food insecurity among the general population of 16 to 25 year olds. The sample consisted of 2000 young people. This was completed between March and April 2022.

The results of this national poll show that many young people across the UK are struggling to manage financially, regardless of whether they have family support or not. It is imperative that the Government recognises that this age group are disproportionately affected by economic downturns and need additional support to ensure they do not fall into levels of poverty and destitution. Some of the main findings are outlined below:



- **A third (33 per cent)** say they lack access to safe and nutritious food for normal growth and a healthy lifestyle. This rises significantly for those who have previously been in care (**61 per cent**) and for those who are receiving some sort of benefit or financial support (**43 per cent**).
- **More than half** say they have struggled to buy food in the last 12 months (**54 per cent**). The most commonly cited reason for this is the high costs of living e.g. rent and energy prices, affecting **three in ten (30 per cent)**, followed by dealing with emergency expenses (**11 per cent**) and costs of moving into new accommodation (**10 per cent**).
- **Over a fifth (23 per cent)** say they have missed work or school due to a lack of food.
- **Nearly half (49 per cent)** say they have gone to bed hungry in the last 12 months and **more than a third (35 per cent)** say they have gone a whole day without food due to a lack of money.
- **One in three** say they have gone without food to ensure they can pay their gas, electricity or council tax bills (**31 per cent**), their rent (**30 per cent**) and in order to feed someone else e.g. their children (**29 per cent**).
- **A third (34 per cent)** say they have lost weight as they did not have enough money for food.
- Problems such as lacking the sufficient storage space to store food e.g. fridge or a freezer (**21 per cent**), not being able to afford energy costs to cook (**17 per cent**) and not having access to a decent kitchen to prepare meals (**11 per cent**) all contribute to the problem.



How do homeless young people manage food insecurity?

Coping strategies

A number of coping strategies were discussed in regards to young people managing food insecurity and the associated symptoms. Reliance on family and friends was a common theme amongst young people, either financially or through the donation of food; without this support, it is likely that many young people would be plunged into even deeper levels of destitution.

8 out of 10 (81 per cent) vulnerable young people borrow money from family or friends to pay for food and/or rely on family or friends for donations of food; **4 in 10** do this often.

“A lot would have some level of support. Even though there might have been a breakdown in certain relationships. For example, a parent might still do a shop for them. They might go and eat at a relative's house every night, for example. That's what keeps them propped up. Without that they are food insecure for sure.”

Centrepoin Dietician, London

“If I must, I will call my grandma, but it's too far and if I have to go to her, I have to pay for travel and stuff. So really and truly, if not my family, then I just won't eat.”

Olivia, South East England

“Asking my best friend to raid her mum's cabinets when she's not around to bring us pasta and sauces and stuff. I ask people in university, my friends when they come around, I ask them if they can spare a couple of quid so I can get myself something to eat that day. I have a friend in Scotland who I routinely borrow about two to four hundred pounds off every single month, and then have to pay that back.”

James, North West England

The reliance on support networks was so integral to one young person's way of survival that he was forced to move in with a friend so he could eat.

“I went through a really bad patch where I had no money whatsoever and I had to physically move in with my friend so I could eat.”

Mohammed, Yorkshire

One young person spoke of the desperate situation they found themselves in in order to get food:

“Begging family to take me to the food bank. Begging for money, basically begging family.”

Olivia, South East England

For some young people, this resulted in friends and family refusing to lend any more money, and/ or relationships being put under strain.

“Because I have had to borrow money many times, no one will help me out anymore.”

Grace, London

Other coping strategies that were discussed with the research participants included finding part-time work in a restaurant in order to get free staff meals, and remaining enrolled on a college course to get food from the canteen at lunchtime – only to go straight home after receiving the food.

However, for those unable to access any support and had run out of options to obtain food, sleeping was used as a way to escape from the hunger pains, even if only for a short time.

“It takes its toll on your mental health. It drains you, you can't think straight. Stress, you stress yourself out, you stress other people out. You think about stuff that doesn't even exist. So sleep to wake up for another day...one day closer to getting some food.”

Samuel, South East England

“Sometimes it's a case of should we make the last of the pasta that we've got in or should we just go to sleep and then we've got something to eat tomorrow?”

Michael, North West England

In an attempt to minimise hunger pains, young people said that they would fill their stomachs with water or milk when they could not afford to buy food.

“And whenever I used to feel hungry, I used to drink a lot of water. So I would feel like my stomach would be filled with water. So I don't feel hungry at night.”

Aisha, North East England

Smoking was also used as an appetite suppressant when young people were in financial hardship.

For some young people in particularly precarious financial situations, they felt their only option was to turn to crime as a means to get money to buy food. Shoplifting food or shoplifting items of value to sell for food was the most common criminal activity that was highlighted by the young people involved in the research.

“I ended up getting into even worse things. Shifting drugs, shoplifting from high end clothing stores, and selling it on to make money.”

James, North West England

“I have had to do [shoplifting] when I was homeless just to be able to line my stomach with something because when you're walking and your belly hurts, like you physically can't move.”

Chantelle, East Midlands

Engaging in crime was often not done lightly and was described as a last resort. One young woman highlighted

how ashamed it made her feel when she was forced to shoplift, and the impact this will have on her future going forwards due to her criminal record.

“It's just really depressing to be honest, really dehumanising, especially at only 19 years old, you know, like I have that on my record, it's a really horrible feeling.”

Sara, East Midlands

Homeless young people dealing with food insecurity may also increase their vulnerability to risky situations by seeking support from someone they did not trust.

“Sometimes asking for help, someone's going to want something in return and that fear of not being able to get the help without it always having like a backfire kind of thing.”

Sophia, Yorkshire

One youth worker even described concerns that food insecurity put a young woman they worked with at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Budgeting

Low income is at the crux of debt issues and food insecurity; however, it is important to recognise that being able to budget and manage money is a skill in itself. Living on a low income necessitates strict financial management. Research undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Council in 2014 found that those living on a low income could recount the exact price of basic goods and their daily expenses to the exact penny.⁷⁸

“A couple of months ago I started a strict budgeting plan as by the end of the month I am always left with no money, but even with a strict plan, I still struggle.”

Lena, London

Young people without family support, such as care leavers, or those experiencing homelessness, can struggle to budget their money effectively as they often have not been shown how to by parents or a caregiver. Learning to manage rising costs of living at such a young age with minimal support or guidance is exacerbated when living on a low income as there is no room for error. Young people do not have the financial resilience to deal with unforeseen emergency expenses.

! Only 1 in 10 homeless young people believe their income is enough for them to get by.

“I think you have young people that need to fend for themselves and who are learning to have to adapt to being independent at a younger age than normal. Younger people don't have that network of support, so to say they have budgeted poorly, it sounds like it's their fault, but it's not, they're working with very little. And it also shows that budgeting is a skill, because you need to do it in an effective way.”

Dietician, London

“They literally get enough money to pay for their utilities and their shopping, so if they're making other unwise choices, then it tends to come out of their food money.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, North West England

“I did not have a lot of money growing up, so when I got money, I want to treat myself because I did not have these luxuries before”

Jason, London

Stakeholders raised concerns about young people who lacked adequate cooking skills to buy and prepare food on a budget.

“But I know a lot of our young people don’t have those cooking skills to be able to feed themselves those meals, really basic sort of like how to use a knife to chop an onion.”

Young people’s homelessness organisation, North West England

Another concern was around the regularity of UC payments, and difficulties managing monthly budgets. The Government stipulates that the monthly payment prepares claimants for the world of work as it mimics the payment of salaries; however, low-paid work is generally paid weekly or fortnightly.⁷⁹

While more regular payments can be requested, only 58 per cent of young people with experiences of homelessness reported being aware of this, and even if they are aware, it is not guaranteed that the Jobcentre will accept this request. One young person who struggles with monthly payments due to poor budgeting skills had not made an application for more regular payments, assuming it would not be approved if he did.

However, young people with experiences of homelessness were also described as extremely resourceful despite the many odds stacked against them. Low income is the overriding driver of food insecurity rather than poor budgeting and it is critical that we do not conflate the two.⁸⁰

“There are some young people who are eager to manage effectively, they write lists. They’re quite conscious of what they are buying, and what they shouldn’t buy...they have the right amount of knowledge to be able to spend their money effectively and make it last.”

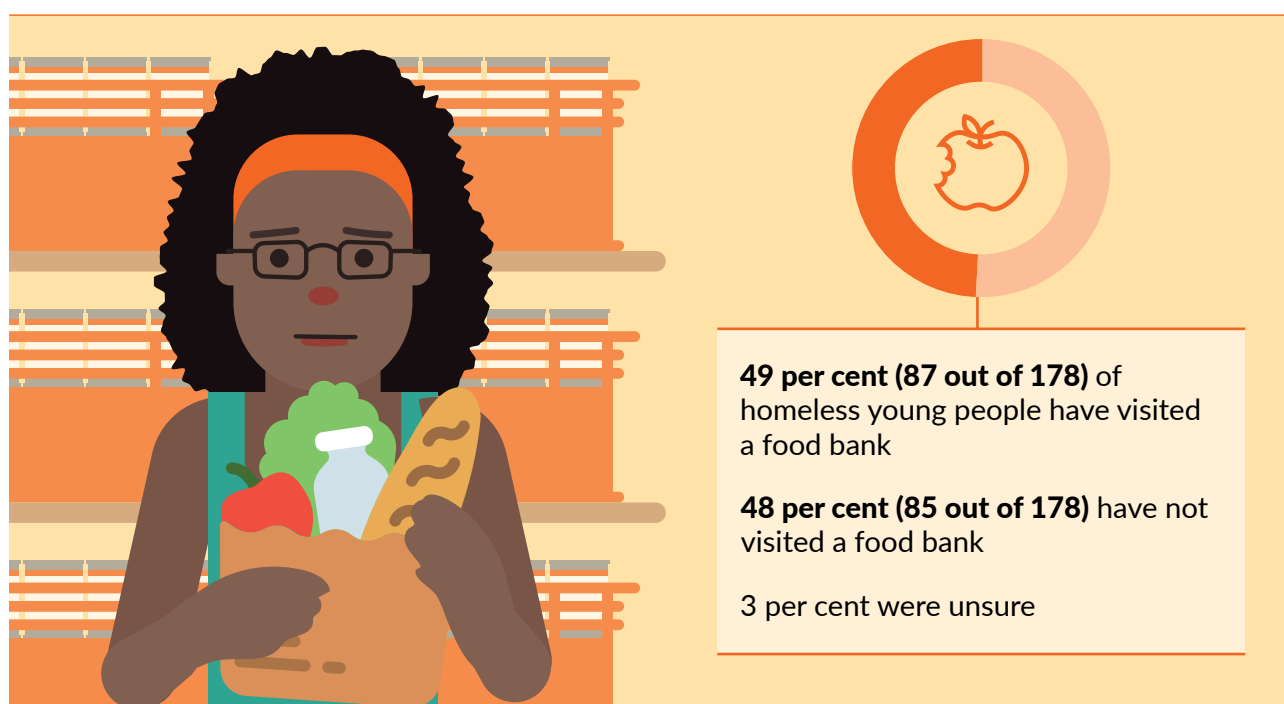
Centrepoin’s Dietician, London

“Just because we can budget, doesn’t mean we have enough money to budget.”

Michael, North West England

Emergency food provision

For young people experiencing homelessness, the support offered by food banks and other sources of emergency food provision is an essential source of help.



However, a significant number of young people reported never having attended a food bank, in spite of experiencing food insecurity. Of the 48 per cent who reported not visiting a food bank, one in three (31 per cent) cited embarrassment as their main reason. One young person told us that he would keep it a secret from his flat mate whenever he needed to attend a food bank.

Over two thirds (67 per cent) of vulnerable young people report that they have needed to rely on emergency food provision; **one third (31 per cent)** often have to do this.

“I really was ashamed taking the food from there and coming back if people see...I was ashamed you know like you are young, you are healthy, I really hate it.”

Mohammed, London

“There's that stereotypical image that people have about it and it really bothers me so much that I did not go until I had to like, force myself to go and do it.”

Luke, Yorkshire

Even when food was provided during a training course, feelings of shame and embarrassment created a barrier to young people accepting the food.

“And a lot of them it's that I don't want to be the one to go up and take it and I don't really want to eat in front of people but like it's hard because some of them you know, like they're not getting anything, yet it's like a whole other level of like anxiety on top of maybe being embarrassed.”

Food insecurity and youth employability organisation, Scotland

While many food banks operate by a referral system in which a certain level of personal information has to be provided, our research found that nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of young people with experiences of homelessness are not comfortable sharing personal information with the food bank.

Some food banks only allow a specified number of referrals in a particular time period - although many food banks do actually allow additional referrals for those who remain in crisis, suggesting there is a sustained level of need. Some young people also reported that it was normal to wait two or three days for a food bank

referral. These barriers to acquiring emergency food are an additional obstacle for vulnerable young people facing food insecurity.

“I think if food banks were just popping in and get it, you might get a bit more, but because there's a referral process, and then there's appointments, I think it probably puts people off.”

Centrepoint's Dietician, London

Having said this, it is critical that we recognise the importance of a referral system in terms of its ability to accurately demonstrate the scale of need for food banks in a consistent and robust way. Secondly, services can learn what is driving food bank use on a local level, and effectively capture people who are repeatedly referred to a food bank, to ascertain what further support is needed for that individual.

A number of young people told us that they were discouraged from attending food banks when religion was imposed onto them.

“Every time I went to the food bank, they were trying to like push me towards God and stuff like that...you can believe what you want to believe, but don't push it on me, I'm just there for my food parcel. Just let me be... it's like the one I used to go to on a Sunday, they used to make me go to church first then get food afterwards...So that's why most times I never used to go to them and I used to just beg on the streets.”

George, Yorkshire

However, many young people spoke about the kindness and lack of judgement they received from food bank workers.

95 per cent of vulnerable young people felt that staff were able to communicate with young people and that the service is welcoming to young people.

“They are all lovely people...they kind of make it so it's not a judgemental environment, make you feel at ease when you go in there. It don't feel nice that you have to go in there but when you do go in there, you are made to feel like no one is judging ya. If they were judging you when you go, you just wouldn't go would you.”

Clara, London

While some young people were really pleased with the food that was provided from the food bank, others struggled, especially in terms of the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables. Some research suggests that around 50 per cent of the food in a food bank parcel may not get used because recipients could not make it into a meal.⁸¹

“You know when you get a food parcel and it’s pasta, rice, some cooking sauces, maybe biscuits, that’s like the highlight of my week when I get this parcel.”

James, North West England

“And we had to rely on food banks. Locally, they were fantastic. And they gave a lot of good food actually. Really really good stuff. I couldn’t believe it. But it’s all dry food rather than fresh. And in order to eat a balanced diet, in order to get the nutrients that people need, you need to be able to shop for fresh groceries rather than tinned or maybe, you know, dried pasta that’s not going to give you enough nutrition.”

George, Yorkshire

“And then I started to feel like really hungry but I did not have anything else suitable for vegetarian, only pasta, all I could have was pasta. So I started to feel like... I can’t eat it. It’s making me sick. I can’t eat any of these things. Then I started skipping meals. I started to eat less food. I was battling with my mental health. I couldn’t really think straight.”

Aisha, Yorkshire

Young people without access to a cooker or microwave, as well as those unable to afford the energy to run those appliances, are sometimes offered a ‘kettle pack’ by the food bank. Within these packs are foods like Pot Noodles, packet soups and instant mash which can be prepared by just adding boiling water. However, these have even less nutritional value than a standard food bank parcel.

This research found that many young people are confused about eligibility and where to access emergency food provision, an issue identified in existing research,⁸² with one young person telling us he was unaware for a long period of time that there was a food bank that operated right opposite his flat. Some young people had not been referred to a food bank following a sanction as their work coach assumed that the homelessness provider would make the referral. Likewise, we were informed that staff working for children’s services in a London borough were unaware of emergency food provision available in their borough and did not know how to get this information for a young person with no food on a Friday afternoon. One young person suggested that emergency food provision should be made more accessible by advertising through different media channels.

Having said this, a number of initiatives have helped increase awareness and reach to young people who might be in crisis, including working with schools and universities and registering them as referral agencies. Moreover, some food banks have translated their resources into different languages to try and make the food bank experience more accessible to those for whom English is not their first language.

! 1 in 4 (25 per cent) vulnerable young people did not know how to access their local food bank.

Opening times can also cause difficulties for young people living disordered lives. For example, Centrepoin’s dietician had referred one young person to the local food bank; however, because the young person had a very chaotic lifestyle and were struggling with their mental health, they were unable to attend the food bank at the specified hours of collection. Even if this young person had the capacity to attend during the allocated hours, it was unlikely they could wait in a queue for possibly up to two hours to collect a parcel anyway.

A number of young people spoke about not being able to afford the bus fare when the food bank location was not in walking distance. However, many homelessness providers were able to send staff to collect the food parcels on behalf of the young people. One housing officer explained how this was becoming an increasingly regular occurrence.

“Yeah, recently, it’s like every week, I’ve got to have to go and get food parcels. But I used to do it every two weeks, every month even. But now, I’m needing to go out every week, because they need something, they are running out...with some of the young people they may need a food parcel at the beginning of the week, come the end of the week, they’re asking for another one, because they haven’t got no money whatsoever. They’ve got nothing.”

Young people’s homelessness organisation, Yorkshire



Local Welfare Assistance

LWA in England is support provided by councils to vulnerable households that are struggling financially. The scheme is aimed at those who are facing an urgent financial crisis and/or unable to afford basic essentials. The type of support can vary but often includes cash grants, food or fuel vouchers, essential items such as white goods, or low cost loans. Those in need are required to make an application for the fund and councils are expected to use their discretion as to how this money will be distributed. When delivered well, LWA can provide a vital safety net to vulnerable households.

31 per cent of vulnerable young people believe that better local welfare provision would help them afford food.

However, through this research we found that many young people are unaware of the financial support that is available to them through their local authority or the DWP when they are in financial hardship. This supports research carried out by the JRF that LWA has not reached many vulnerable households that are financially struggling.⁸³ Similarly, research carried out by the charity End Furniture Poverty found that 1 in 5 local authorities do not even operate a LWA scheme as of 2020/21.⁸⁴

55 per cent of vulnerable young people are not aware of DWP hardship payments.

47 per cent of young people are not aware they can access assistance from their local authority, such as a loan or cash grant.

53 per cent are not aware of Discretionary Housing Payments.

52 per cent are not aware of support with energy bills including the Cold Weather Payment, Warm Home Discount Scheme or temporary credit on pre-payment meters.

“Can't get support if we don't know about it. This information should be shared to young people in a clear way.”

Clara, London

“I think if you don't have a support worker around you, or you're not engaging with a service, you wouldn't know what was available.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, North West England

It is imperative that vulnerable young people are aware of the support that is available to them and can be easily accessed without jumping through hoops. Even for those young people who are aware of the support that is available, further obstacles such as excessive amounts of paperwork and waiting on the phone for considerable amounts of time, created additional hurdles and disincentives for a vulnerable young person to access this support. One food bank manager explained how she was on hold to the local authority for nearly two hours waiting to get through to the Household Support Fund.

“So once you look, even if you know about these kind of extra funds and stuff you can get, the amount of paperwork that you have to fill out and interviews and phone calls, and they check everything. And it becomes such a hassle and you have to get all your documents and proof of this and proof of that, that it just doesn't become worth it. Wait for months and months and months and then they are just like sorry, we can't give it to ya.”

Young people's homelessness organisation, North West England

Despite local authorities receiving additional Government funding for LWA during the pandemic, research found that the majority of this funding was not channelled into LWA schemes but rather allocated to other funding avenues, for example, free school meals, local food banks, and other voluntary and community sector organisations.⁸⁵ Cash first is the most effective way of ensuring vulnerable households get the support they need and that emergency food aid is not the go to response to solving food insecurity.⁸⁶

“And they need to see the bigger picture, they need to realise that you can have as many food banks on every street corner as you like, but you still need money to survive. You still need the money to function, to get by, even for food. Even though you've got food banks. You still need the money to provide fresh food. To live properly and really live rather than survive.”

Tom, Yorkshire

“What's gonna really help someone like me is consistent payments that we can rely on and we're not wondering where the next meal is gonna come from.”

Sara, East Midlands

“But we know that people need help, not just with food, food insecurity is only one part of it. So the cash gives people the autonomy then to spend the money on what they need to spend on.”

Community food provision service, London





Conclusion

Young people have a heightened risk of poverty, destitution and food insecurity than other age groups. Amongst a variety of different factors, this and similar research has found that low income, whether this is through employment or the benefits system, is at the root cause of food insecurity. Young people without family support are particularly disadvantaged as they cannot rely on their parents to support them financially.

The benefits system, including the way it is paid and managed, plays a significant role in the difficulties young people are facing in terms of managing their finances. The low rate of benefit, the five week wait for the first UC payment, sanctions and deductions from the overall payment, administrative errors and the difficulty of moving into employment when living in supported accommodation disadvantage young people who are trying to successfully transition into adulthood.

As this research shows, the significant rise in the cost of living and the ongoing impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated these challenges. Young people are struggling with not only the cost of food but also the price of energy, often having to make difficult choices between eating and heating their home. High energy costs mean that young people are unable to use their cooker or turn on their fridge, meaning that they have to rely on takeaways which are usually more expensive and/or lacks the nutrition needed for a healthy diet. Lack of a healthy and balanced diet has led to a variety of health problems, such as loss of weight, poor eating habits, mismanagement of existing health issues and poor mental health.

Furthermore, homeless young people are often placed in insecure and temporary accommodation with inadequate cooking facilities and shared living spaces, creating additional barriers to cooking affordable, healthy meals.

Many young people, who are already limited in their experience of money management, are expected to budget effectively whilst living on an extremely low income. As such, this research has found that many young people are in incredibly high amounts of debt as a result, particularly with UC, council tax and individual people from their support network. This in turn negatively impacts their mental health, making them more susceptible to stress, anxiety and depression.

Unfortunately, this research has shown that the LWA is not reaching vulnerable young people, largely because over half of young people are unaware of the financial support that is available to them. Young people are more likely to rely on their support network when struggling to afford food.

While young people are more inclined to seek support from family and friends first, food banks still need to be made accessible for young people in crisis. However, food banks will not solve the structural factors at the root of poverty and the Government needs to ensure that emergency food provision is not increasingly institutionalised and ingrained in UK culture. Young people should be provided with a level of income that reflects the cost of living, to ensure that they can maintain a healthy lifestyle to prosper and succeed as they move into adulthood.

Appendix: Who took our survey?

Between February and May 2022, Centrepoint ran a survey of young people being supported by homelessness charities across England, to explore their experiences of food insecurity. The survey questions were sense checked by the project's advisory group and some of Centrepoint's Peer Researchers.

209 responses

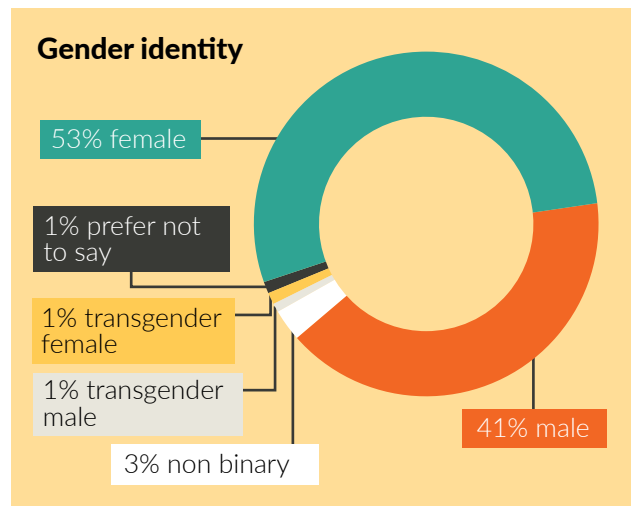
Age: Average (median) age: 20 years old. 9 per cent of respondents were under 18, and 3 per cent were over 25.

Gender identity: 53 per cent female, 41 per cent male, 3 per cent non binary, 1 per cent transgender male, 1 per cent transgender female, 1 per cent prefer not to say.

Ethnic identity: 50 per cent White/ White British, 22 per cent Black/ Black British, 18 per cent mixed ethnicity, 6 per cent Asian/ Asian British, 2 per cent Arab, 1 per cent other, 2 per cent prefer not to say.

Area: 35 per cent London, 36 per cent Yorkshire and The Humber, 12 per cent North West England, 7 per cent South East England, 3 per cent North East England, 2 per cent South West England, 2 per cent East of England, 2 per cent West Midlands, 2 per cent East Midlands.

Housing situation: 52 per cent living in supported housing, 21 per cent living in semi-independent accommodation, 17 per cent renting from a social landlord, 4 per cent renting from a private landlord, 2 per cent living with parents or other family members, 2 per cent staying with family or friends on a short term basis (e.g. sofa surfing), 1 per cent living in care or with a foster family, 1 per cent had nowhere to stay (sleeping rough), 2 per cent prefer not to say, 2 per cent other.



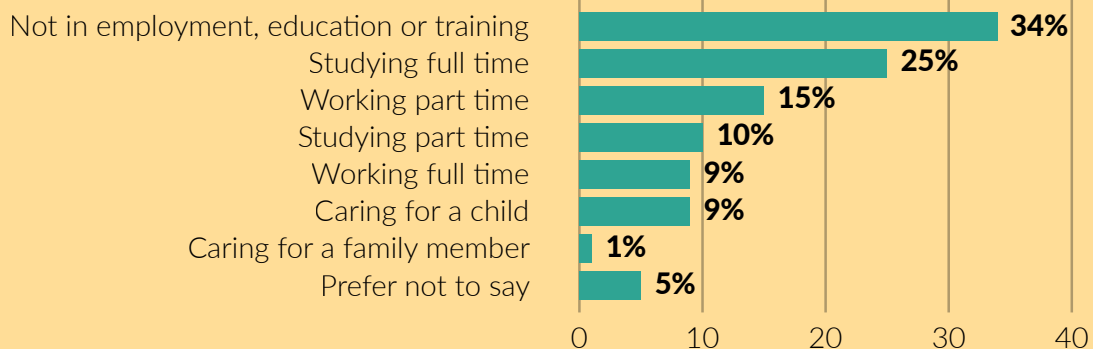
Who took our survey?

- 12 per cent reported having a **physical health condition**
- 38 per cent reported a **mental health condition**
- 16 per cent reported having a **learning difficulty or disability**

What benefits are young people getting?

- **73 per cent** receiving **Universal Credit**
- **36 per cent** receiving **Housing Benefit**
- **9 per cent** receiving **Personal Independence Payment**
- **9 per cent** receiving **Child Benefit**
- **8 per cent** receiving **support from social services**
- **3 per cent** receiving **Employment and Support Allowance**
- **10 per cent** don't receive any benefits or sources of financial support

Respondents' employment situation



End Notes

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