

From: O'Connell, Rebecca <rebecca.oconnell@ucl.ac.uk>
Sent: 14 September 2018 19:21
To: Special Rapporteur On Extreme Poverty And Human Rights OHCHR
Cc: Brannen, Julia
Subject: Extreme Poverty in the UK

Dear Professor Alston

Last month we wrote a short Opinion piece for the BMJ that was published online. I have pasted the article below. The findings from our study, as it suggests, are relevant for your inquiry.

The article includes a link to our study website where further publications may be accessed.

One issue we found but do not touch on below is the destitution of families who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Children in families with NRPF told us that they go hungry not only home, but also at school, since free meals are a 'passported' benefit. As Maud Pember Reeves wrote over 100 years ago, a hungry school child is both a disgrace and a danger to the state.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to discuss any of our research.

We wish you all the best with your important visit.

Kind regards

Rebecca O'Connell and the Families and Food in Hard Times research team

Holiday hunger requires radical long term solutions

<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/08/15/holiday-hunger-requires-radical-long-term-solutions/>

Last month the UK government announced [£2 million of funding for free holiday activities and meals](#) for disadvantaged families, with children and families minister Nadhim Zahawi noting: “For most pupils, the end of the school summer term signals the start of holidays, days out and a chance to make memories with friends and family. Other families, who might rely on the support provided by schools, are not so lucky.” Luck has nothing to do with it. The reason children are going hungry in [Breadline Britain](#)—not only during the holidays but all year round—is that they are structurally disadvantaged by a shrinking welfare state and a government that refuses to take responsibility for the health and wellbeing of its children. Food “solutions” like the above initiative meet an immediate need but cannot solve food poverty; rather, they risk further stigmatising and excluding families from “[ordinary living patterns.](#)”

Having enough to eat of an adequate quantity and quality has long been a minimal expectation of what it is to live in a western country. But our study, [Families and Food in Hard Times](#), found that there were families in the UK on low incomes who were unable to feed themselves properly and others who were barely able to do so. Reflecting the findings of [previous studies](#), some parents often went without food so that their children did not go hungry, while in other families both parent and child suffered.

The harmful consequences of insufficient food or food of poor nutritional value, particularly for children, [are well established](#) and have [immediate](#) and [long term](#) implications. These include poor growth; overweight and obesity; and the [growing incidence](#) of coronary heart disease, type II diabetes, and cancer. Suboptimal diets and food habits such as [skipping meals](#) are also associated with poor cognition and lower academic achievement. Moreover, [food poverty has social and psychological dimensions that are especially important for children](#). While parents’ sacrifices can protect their children from food shortages, the indirect effects of food poverty [penetrate deeply into the “emotional heartland” of children’s personal and family lives](#). As one girl [told us](#):

If there isn't enough food we'll get it and sometimes mum will go hungry and starve and stuff. Even if it's not that much food for me and [my brother], it's enough that we've actually had something, whereas mum hasn't, and it gets a bit to the point where we'll start feeling guilty because mum hasn't had anything and we've had it.

(Bryony,* aged 13, coastal town in the south east of England)

The school holidays bring [greater financial and social pressures for families](#). However, “[there are a range of structural causes of poverty that increase the vulnerability of children and families to experiencing hunger in the school holidays, and in that sense, holiday hunger is not a discrete issue to be considered in isolation](#).” Additional funds to help disadvantaged children with “food and fun” over the holidays are welcome. But given the scale of the problem, this solution goes nowhere near far enough and cannot address the underlying factors that lead to the food poverty of children and their families.

A week after the government announced funding for additional school holiday provision, [it was revealed](#) that it is commissioning research into the relationship between its own policies and the rise in food aid. Yet there is plenty of evidence already that this growth is [the predictable, and some suggest intended, result](#) of policies that have taken away from those who had least to begin with. Food aid, including school holiday provision, is an inadequate response that is “susceptible to four particular challenges: [it] can be [inaccessible, unreliable, unaccountable, and socially unacceptable](#).”

To address the food poverty of children and families, the government should make use of research on [budget standards](#) to ensure that wages and benefits, in combination, are adequate for [a socially acceptable standard of living and eating](#), which recognises the fundamental role of food in health and social inclusion.

In the UK, we are living in a period of deep political and economic uncertainty. Given the UK’s exit from [the European Union](#), the implementation of further cuts to welfare benefits, and rising inflation (including food prices), the plight of families such as Bryony’s is unlikely to improve. Food poverty and its effects on children’s and young people’s physical and emotional wellbeing is a matter of grave concern. Yet in the face of piecemeal solutions and government neglect, the outlook looks set to remain bleak.

Dr Rebecca O’Connell

Reader in the Sociology of Food and Families

Thomas Coram Research Unit

UCL Institute of Education

University College London

27/28 Woburn Square

London WC1H 0AA

Tel: 020 7612 6458

Email: rebecca.oconnell@ucl.ac.uk

Websites:

<https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/browse/profile?upi=REOCO01>

www.foodinhardtimes.org

'Food, Families and Work' (Bloomsbury) March 2016

Rebecca O’Connell and Julia Brannen

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/food-families-and-work-9780857857507/>

Out now: Special issue of Children & Society: ‘[Children’s and young people’s food practices in contexts of poverty and inequality](#)’ edited by Wendy Wills and Rebecca O’Connell

*New article: O’Connell, R., Owen, C., Padley, M., Simon, A. and Brannen, J. (2018). [Which Types of Family are at Risk of Food Poverty in the UK? A Relative Deprivation Approach](#). *Social Policy and Society*.*