

Introduction

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom concluded that hunger will be an enduring part of the fabric of society unless urgent action is taken (APP Inquiry into Hunger, 2014.) As part of the Inquiry's examination of the extent and causes of food poverty attention was drawn to hunger amongst school-age children and young people, particularly during the school holidays. The relationship between hunger and free school meals (FSM) is an important element of this phenomenon. There are approximately 170 non-school days in the year when FSMs are not available to pupils (Graham, 2014). However, holiday hunger is not limited to families who rely on means-tested financial support with many households experiencing increased financial pressures during non-term time periods. This article will explore the prevalence and impact of holiday hunger and the ways in which it may be addressed. The article draws on an interview with Ruth Smeeth (Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North) who is vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School food.

The prevalence and impact of holiday hunger

Ruth Smeeth: 'In August 2014 I blocked out ten days in my diary and the aim was to speak to 3000 people on the doorstep to find out what they thought should be the issues in my campaign and in the run up to the general election. As I was door knocking more kids were opening the back door instead of their front door and you could see what was in the kitchen, which was very, very little and that touched me. Nobody was looking after them and they don't have an idyllic summer holidays. It is seven weeks for them, which is a huge period of time without a proper meal. You very quickly realise that it is a national issue. In areas such as Stoke where their parents would be working in the pit or pot bank, kids would get a free meal at lunchtime by the dinner ladies who would work all the way through the summer. When we became more affluent and people were eating meat more and food became cheaper nobody thought about it anymore until 2010 until the new advent of food banks.'

The increase in food poverty in the UK has been well documented (Child Poverty Action Group, Church of England, Oxfam GB, Trussell Trust, 2014) and research has highlighted a complex range of contributing factors (for example unemployment/underemployment, low wages, rising fuel costs, changes to the benefit system, benefit sanctions). A joint Church Action on Poverty (CAP) and Oxfam report identified that the UK government does not have a defined measure of food poverty (CAP/Oxfam, 2013). Measurements of food poverty have often emphasised the links between low income and health. For example, the Department of Health (2005) define food poverty as "the inability to afford, or have access to, food to make up a healthy diet". The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE, 2015) state that the effects of holiday hunger have been documented for over a century, with the City of Bradford Education Committee finding in 1907 that pupils experienced significant weight loss during the school holidays.

Rigorous academic research into the prevalence of holiday hunger would be a welcome addition to the evidence that currently exists. YouGov conducted a survey (on behalf of Kellogg's) of 580 parents with a household income of £25,000 or less and with children aged 5-16 (Kellogg's/YouGov, 2015). The survey found that 60% of parents with a household income of less than £25,000 weren't always able to afford to buy food outside school term time, this figure rose to 73% for households with an income of less than £15,000. A third of parents reported skipping a meal in school holidays so that

their children could eat. Of course, holiday hunger is only one aspect of UK poverty in the early part of the twentieth first century. The YouGov/Kellogs survey also found that 41% of parents sometimes feel isolated in the school holidays through an inability to afford to go out and to entertain their children. These results are particularly striking when read alongside Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research into destitution (JRF, 2016). This research is underpinned with a methodological rigour (literature review, interviews with experts, public omnibus survey, analysis of quantitative datasets) lacking in the YouGov/Kellogg's survey and defines destitution as an inability to afford two or more of six basic essentials in one month. Food is one of the six basic essentials with destitution in this category defined as having one or no meals a day for two or more days per month. By these measurements 1.25 million people, including 300,000 children, were destitute over the course of 2015.

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger provided the most comprehensive study of food poverty in the UK that we have seen to date (with oral evidence received from 155 witnesses and 246 written submissions). The Inquiry heard how some parents "dread the coming of the school holidays, and particularly the summer holiday" (APP Inquiry into Hunger, 2014, p.31). Many of the food banks that gave evidence reported a spike in demand during school holidays. The Trussell Trust operate the UK's largest food bank network and their research in 2013 conducted with Tesco and redistribution charity FareShare found that school holidays are a particularly difficult time with more than a quarter of parents reporting that they can't provide food for all the meals their children need (Trussell Trust, 2013). The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE, 2015) conducted an online-survey of local authority councillors and officers to determine awareness of food poverty with over 70% of respondents reporting holiday hunger as a significant issue in their area.

The issue of holiday hunger is starting to attract political attention. Ruth Smeeth secured a House of Commons adjournment debate in October 2015. This followed House of Commons debates in December 2013 and January 2014 where MPs Jamie Reid and David Winnick placed the issue of holiday hunger within the wider context of increasing levels of child poverty (House of Commons Debates, 2013 and 2014). This is important as while there can be little doubt that further research is warranted into the issue of holiday hunger, it should not be separated from a broader analysis of the impact of government policy on households with children. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2016) predict that based on current Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecasts and the government's policy plans, absolute child poverty is set to increase from 15.1% in 2015/16 to 18.3% in 2020/21. Perhaps even more striking than this headline figure is the finding that material deprivation is much higher for social renters, lone parents and disabled people, and that reductions in council tax support and the introduction of the 'bedroom tax' continue to cause financial hardship (IFS, 2015). Further research into the extent of holiday hunger must be firmly set against the backdrop of these political and economic trends.

Ruth Smeeth: 'It's quite obvious that if children are not being fed properly during the school holidays and they are not sitting down to have a meal then it is going to have an impact on them. In most schools children are 2 weeks behind where they were before the school summer holidays but if you are also not eating properly in some of our schools some kids are going back another 4 weeks to where they were in July so they are losing 6 weeks of their education. You have to re-teach them what you they were taught before the holidays. Kids have challenges anyway but if every time they

leave school then they are falling even further behind, the additional investment we need to get them up is huge. So it is about attainment and it is about their long-term future.'

The interview conducted with Ruth Smeeth clearly detailed the impact of holiday hunger in her constituency. Research around children and food poverty has tended to focus on educational attainment and nutrition. Pupil learning loss during school holidays has increasingly become a concern for local authorities, with some such as Nottingham City Council, changing the pattern of school holidays to reduce the length of the summer break. Paechter et al (2015) found that learning loss appears to be most significant for pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds. South African research by Van Stuijvenberg et al (2001) concluded that the positive effects of giving children a fortified diet during school term-times were not maintained if this diet was withdrawn during holiday periods. There is a compelling body of evidence (see for example Belachew et al. 2011, Frongillo, Jyoti, Jonesy, 2006) which links hunger to adverse educational attainment and performance. Graham (2014) identifies some of the broader consequences of holiday hunger as family budgets become more stretched during school holidays. This results in increased stress levels and problems budgeting for childcare, leisure and social activities. The latest report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC, 2015) describes schools as the 'engine of social mobility'. While the report states that increased government funding for education, started under Blair's Labour administration, has resulted in some of the country's highest achieving schools being located in poorer areas, it still remains the case that the 'English schools system is characterised by its patchiness and the continuing low attainment of many of the poorest children' and that 'attainment rises incrementally as deprivation reduces' (SMCPC 2015, p.28). Holiday hunger can be seen as one of the consequences of the inequalities in society as a whole and the education system in particular. The SMCPC notes that disadvantage in schools has a detrimental impact in later life, with those who are least successful in school being more likely to be rejected by the labour market. The Commission cites examples of two areas of the country (Portsmouth and Bracknell Forest) where no pupils eligible for FSMs went onto study at a top university.

Free School Meals (FSMs) and Holiday Hunger

Ruth Smeeth: 'I was moved by a story of a little girl who went into school on a Monday morning during term time and she collapsed. It became clear she had not eaten since her free school meal on Friday lunch time. She ate a sandwich and put an apple in her bag and the dinner lady asked her what she was doing, she was going to give the apple to her brother who had also not eaten. But what about those parents who are just above the threshold for free school meals, at every level we have got children not eating or parents not eating.'

The causes of holiday hunger are complex and varied. However the relationship between FSMs and holiday hunger is particularly significant. For many pupils FSMs are the only hot and nutritious meal that they can rely on during term-times. Entitlement to FSMs is linked to the receipt of a number of means-tested benefits, including income-based job seekers allowance and income related employment and support allowance (CPAG, 2016). The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger (APP Inquiry into Hunger, 2014) found that in some parts of the UK up to 38% of children were not receiving FSMs despite being entitled to them. The Inquiry recommended that all local authorities should use the Department of Education free school meals eligibility checking system (ECS). This tool uses Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)

data to establish entitlement to FSMs and allows local authorities to automatically register eligible families without the need for an application form, a practice adopted by local councils in Durham, Liverpool and Sunderland.

The Inquiry identified arguably the key limitation of FSMs: poor children from working families are excluded, and this may affect up to 1.5 million children. The Inquiry made the recommendation that 'provision should be better targeted at those children most in need.' (APP Inquiry into Hunger, 2014, p.31). This more targeted approach does not draw support from all campaigning groups. Most notably Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG, 2013) urged local authorities in London to introduce universal FSMs for all primary school children. As well as the more obvious ways in which this could address food poverty, CPAG argued that this move would increase educational attainment, incentivise work, contribute to a healthy diet and reduce stigma. Section 106 of the Children and Families Act 2014 introduced FSMs for all pupils in reception and years 1 and 2. This policy, introduced by the then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, has received a mixed response. In addition to the debate about the merits of universal as opposed to targeted schemes, concerns were raised that funding to schools via the pupil premium would reduce as this funding is awarded on the basis of the number of households actively claiming FSMs (rather than receiving them as an automatic entitlement). CPAG (2012) research conducted with the British Youth Council (BYC) found that 25% of pupils were concerned about the stigma associated with receiving FSMs and thought that schools could sometimes do more to protect anonymity (this would be addressed by the adoption of a universal scheme).

Discussion about the scope of the FSM scheme is important, but of course the real issue in relation to holiday hunger is what happens to pupils outside term-time when they cannot take advantage of FSMs in whatever way they are administered. To address this the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger urged the government to consider extending FSMs in primary schools during school holidays. It is estimated that this would cost in the region of £130 million. Even if this is not a policy that is likely to be imminently adopted the Children's Society (2012) estimated that the existing cash value of FSMs is on average £370 per child per year. Whilst it is true to say this means a 'significant amount of money that would otherwise have been spent on school lunches can instead be used for other key needs' (Children's Society, 2012, p. 1), an additional £370 in the household budget of families living in poverty does not go far in meeting the costs of food for pupils during school holidays.

Addressing Holiday Hunger

Ruth Smeeth: 'As a top level strategic issue, the thing that is fascinating is that after the London Olympics in 2012 the G8 countries and Brazil had a summit to talk about poverty, they talked about food poverty. Brazil made the right to food a basic human right for Brazilians which is extraordinary and that includes holiday hunger, they are getting fed whether they are at school or not. There is a second summit after the Rio Olympics this year with the same participants and Rio are going to stand up and say we have done it and what are you doing, the right to food is fundamental and is a basic human right.'

Why do we have seven weeks' when school buildings are closed in the summer, there are other ways of doing it, schools running different kinds of classes around food, health and wellness or

whatever it may be, but schools remaining open in some form over the summer and the government paying academies to do it is an option.’

As stated earlier holiday hunger is a result of a complex range of political and economic factors. These issues must be understood if responses to this worrying issue are to provide more than a ‘sticking plaster’. A 2015 report by Church Action on Poverty (CAP, 2015) argued that a ‘functioning safety net, not food handouts, is the true long-term solution to food poverty and hunger.’ The report emphasises that people who rely on the social security system should be guaranteed an income that protects them from poverty and hunger. However, this is often impeded by bureaucratic delays, administrative errors, poor decision making, (especially in relation to disability benefits), a punitive benefit sanction regime and difficulty in appealing decisions. These issues have also been recognised by the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty in Scotland. The report “Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland” recommended that the right to food should be enshrined within Scots Law, that child benefit top-ups could be used to tackle food poverty and that the Scottish Government should invest in services providing benefits advice to maximise people’s incomes (Independent Working Group on Food, 2016). Critics who suggest that the ‘safety net’ is intended to provide only a basic minimum for relatively small numbers of people should perhaps be directed towards official statistics for people in receipt of means-tested benefits. For example, in 2014/15 1.8 million in-work families received working tax credit and child tax credit, and 1.3 million families received tax credits when out of work (HM Revenue and Customs, 2015).

The JRF research into the causes of destitution referred to in the first section of this article (JRF, 2016) also indicates that destitution is not an issue for a marginalised few. This research found that most people experiencing destitution had been living in poverty for a considerable period of time, and only a third had ‘complex needs’ such as substance misuse or homelessness. Holiday hunger can be seen as a consequence of what the JRF research refers to as ‘income side poverty’ e.g. benefit issues, unemployment, low-pay and ‘expenditure side poverty’ e.g. high housing/energy costs and significant health-related expenses. The JRF research argues that destitution can be reduced by increasing access to secure and adequately paid work, providing better health care and transport, moving away from localised and variable emergency provision/local assistance payments and encouraging more responsible debt recovery practices in the public sector (for example in relation to council tax and rent arrears). I would strongly argue that the shifts in policy described above are also necessary if we are not to see holiday hunger as a permanent feature of UK society.

While arguing for these fundamental changes in policy, improvements in more practical ways remain important. A paper written by a range of experts who advise the APPG on school food titled “Filling the holiday hunger gap” (APSE, 2014) argues for a more joined-up approach where families experiencing holiday hunger can be referred to appropriate support services, a national register of food banks overseen by local authorities is suggested as an element of this. In line with the APPG Inquiry they recommend that local authorities should provide food programmes in the school holidays; potentially funded by the pupil premium or public health. The APPG on school food and Sheffield Hallam University held the first UK national conference on holiday hunger in June 2015. The report that followed the conference (APPG School Food, 2015) detailed some of the (many) existing holiday provision projects, for example, the Magic Breakfast 365 initiative and Birmingham Holiday Kitchen. Importantly, the report calls for a mapping of existing holiday provision projects, the sharing of examples of best practice and the development of a monitoring and quality assurance

process. The paucity of research into holiday hunger is a cause of concern for the authors of the report who suggest that there is a need to understand the provision of 'holiday feeding programmes' both in the UK and abroad, particularly in the USA. The American model has been explored in detail by Lindsay Graham, a child food poverty policy adviser, who travelled to nine US states to observe summer meal programmes (Graham, 2014). Amongst her key recommendations are that the government should formally recognise holiday hunger as an issue, target areas where FSM entitlement is 40% or greater, encourage local authorities to pilot non-term time meal provision using existing staff and resources, and encourage community projects already running in holiday times (for example sports activities) to be holiday-time meal sites. Ruth Smeeth supports the extension of food provision for pupils in holiday times and is an advocate of community supermarkets run on co-operative, not-for-profit principles. These social enterprises can be a centre not only for the purchasing of healthy, low cost food but also provide access to advice (e.g. welfare rights) and training.

Concerns must remain about the prevalence of child poverty in general and holiday hunger in particular. A report (published in June 2016) by the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of a Child into children's rights in the UK (United Nations, 2016) has only served to reinforce these concerns. The UN report drew attention to the levels of child poverty in the UK with a disproportionate representation of children with disabilities, children living in a family with disability, households with many children, and children belonging to ethnic minority groups. The report makes specific reference to child hunger and records that there is a lack of government data on food security and evidence to demonstrate that FSMs and other programmes are not doing enough to alleviate food poverty. The report recommends that the government should "Regularly monitor and assess effectiveness of policies and programmes on food security and nutrition of children, including school meal programmes and food banks, as well as programmes addressing infants and young children." (UN, p.16). The UN's recommendations are not legally binding but do add to a small, but growing, body of evidence about childhood food poverty in the UK.

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