



## Food and coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### Summary

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, one in four adults in the United Kingdom (UK) have struggled to access food they can afford. This is likely to have left them susceptible to hunger and potential malnutrition. They are living in households with, at best, moderate food security.
- Half of all adults have tried to cope during the pandemic by purchasing less expensive food which they would not ordinarily choose to buy. That figure rises to nine in ten amongst people who live in households that are the least food secure and most susceptible to hunger and potential malnutrition.
- Nearly one in four adults looking after children have eaten less during the pandemic so they can feed the children in their household.
- Even the high use of various coping strategies such as (1) buying less expensive food, (2) borrowing food, (3) using food banks, (4) sending children to eat elsewhere, (5) restricting the food they eat at a relatively high rate, and (6) using free school meal vouchers has not enabled adults to become food secure and live free of hunger and potential malnutrition. These are often measures of last resort and do not compensate for an adequate household income and the availability of affordable nutritious food within their community.
- Adults who are the least food secure and most susceptible to hunger and potential malnutrition are also the most likely to have increased their use of coping strategies during the pandemic. Nearly one in three adults looking after children in food insecure households have resorted more frequently to eating less so that their children can eat, compared to only one in sixteen adults looking after children in food secure households.
- Adults who are the least food secure and most susceptible to hunger and potential malnutrition are also the most likely to have used coping strategies which involve wasting less food, planning meals more carefully, and cooking main meals from scratch.

### Background

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted the enforced closure of large numbers of shops and schools in March 2020, the ability of many of Britain's poorest households to afford a basic minimum food budget had already been stretched to breaking point.

Over the previous decade, the poorest households were the only group in our society to suffer a reduction in weekly disposable income. More recently, in the past five years, it is the poorest single adults who have needed to absorb the largest increase, of 3.8 percentage points, in the costs of a basic minimum food budget as a proportion of their overall income. The mean population increase was one sixth of this figure (0.6 percentage points). Meanwhile, amongst couples with two children, again it is the very poorest group who have needed to absorb an increase while all others have seen a decrease.

While hunger and malnutrition can affect any one of us, it is more likely to affect the poorest people in our country. Indeed, living in poverty often results in families having to buy goods and services through the most expensive means, and increasingly not having their rent paid in full. This combination of trends, in addition to immediate triggers such as benefit-related problems, lies beneath the rising need for food banks in our country.

During Feeding Britain's emergency response to COVID-19, through which our regional networks will have distributed a million meals by the end of June, it has become increasingly clear that a broader group of households, in addition to the very poorest, are struggling to meet their essential outgoings and still put food on the table.

Against this backdrop, Feeding Britain and the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University wished to develop a detailed understanding of households' coping strategies, as well as their ability to access and afford adequate food, since the introduction of lockdown in March.

A national representative survey was conducted in the week commencing 8<sup>th</sup> June 2020, by Prolific, and gathered 1,004 responses. The survey contained a range of questions relating to household food security and coping strategies during the pandemic.

### Findings

The survey produced the following breakdown of food security in the UK, during the pandemic:

- 71.41% of adults report living in a household with high food security, where they have no problem or limitation in accessing the food they need in sufficient quantity and quality.
- 9.36% of adults report living in a household with marginal food security, where they are experiencing a shortage of food in the house and/or anxious about their ongoing ability to access and afford the food they need in sufficient quantity and quality.
- 8.50% of adults report living in a household with low food security, where they are having to reduce the quantity and quality of their food, and consume meals which are mostly lacking in nutritional value and variety.
- 7.67% of adults report living in a household with very low food security, where they frequently need to reduce their food intake, are hungry, or regularly go without food for long periods of time.

The survey produced the following breakdown of coping strategies used by adults across the UK, during the pandemic:

- 50.5% of adults are relying on less preferred and less expensive food. 26.5% of adults have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 92.2% and 64.6% respectively amongst adults living in a household with low or very low food security.
- 10.4% of adults are borrowing food, or relying on help from a friend or relative. 4.8% of adults have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These

figures increase to 41.6% and 20.9% respectively amongst adults living in a household with low or very low food security.

- 11.2% of adults are purchasing food on credit. 4.6% of adults have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 31.7% and 18.5% respectively amongst adults living in a household with low or very low food security.
- 4.3% of adults are relying on food banks and other sources of food aid. 2.6% of adults have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 19.1% and 12.3% respectively amongst adults living in households with low or very low food security.
- 7.6% of adults with children are relying on free school meal vouchers. This figure increases to 12.1% amongst adults living in a household with children, with low or very low food security.
- 5.4% of adults with children are sending members of their household somewhere else to eat. 3.8% of adults with children have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 14.5% and 10.4% respectively amongst adults living in a household with children, with low or very low food security.
- 23.8% of adults with children are restricting consumption in order for their children to eat. 14.3% of adults with children have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 41.2% and 29.6% respectively amongst adults living in a household with children, with low or very low food security.
- 68.2% of adults are wasting less food. 41.5% of adults have relied more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 92.3% and 62.2% respectively amongst adults living in a household with low or very low food security.
- 73.5% of adults are planning meals more carefully. 52.9% of adults are relying more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 93.2% and 68.8% respectively amongst adults living in a household with low or very low food security.
- 89.3% of adults are cooking main meals from scratch. 47.8% of adults are relying more heavily on this strategy during the pandemic than they did before. These figures increase to 91.3% and 60.6% respectively amongst adults living in a household with low or very low food security.

## Conclusion

This paper reveals the lengths to which millions of people in our country are going to keep themselves and their families fed during the pandemic. It reveals also the uphill struggle that all too many of them have faced in doing so while attempting to maintain their dignity, independence, and self-sufficiency.

The Government has made some unprecedented moves to protect people's jobs and incomes, as part of its emergency response to the pandemic. It has also intervened directly to improve the supply of food parcels to people who are particularly vulnerable. What the data in this paper show, as the country moves from the emergency phase to one of recovery and rebuilding, is the need for new policies which safeguard every household's access to affordable food of sufficient quality and quantity. This will necessarily involve the work of many departments:

- We ask the Treasury to initiate a jobs programme that guards against long-term unemployment and the accompanying risk of hunger and malnutrition.
- We ask the Department for Work and Pensions to suspend the two-child limit on benefits and tax credits, and review its policy of deducting large sums of money from Universal Credit each month, many of which result from the initial waiting period of at least five weeks for a first payment.
- We ask the Department for Education to introduce a seamless year-round school meals programme covering breakfast and lunch during term time and holiday periods, with enriching activities and wraparound support made available to families in the annual Summer Holiday.
- We ask the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs to support innovative community food projects which build resilience, dignity, and self-sufficiency, and improve the availability of fresh produce in deprived or isolated communities.
- We ask the Department of Health and Social Care automatically to enrol all eligible families for Healthy Start vouchers and peg their value to annual increases in inflation.
- We ask the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to strengthen the protection given to low-paid and insecure workers, such as those on zero-hours contracts.

Above all else, we ask the Prime Minister to oversee and implement with urgency a national food strategy which enhances the supply, affordability, and accessibility of nutritious food to everyone in our country, while minimising the need to deploy the many coping strategies, such as the use of food banks, which we have outlined in this paper.

## Appendix

**Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Food Security by UK Adults During Covid-19 (June 2020)**

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	<u>No. Adults (<i>f</i>)</u>	<u>% UK Adults</u>
Very Low Food Security	77	7.67%
Low Food Security	85	8.50%
Marginal Food Security	94	9.36%
High Food Security	717	71.41%
Missing Data	31	3.09%
<b>Total Adults</b>	<b>1004</b>	<b>100.0</b>

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Note: Classification based on Household Food Insecurity Survey Module: Six Item Short Form, available from United States Department of Agriculture <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8282/short2012.pdf>

**Table 2. Food Coping Strategies Used by UK Adults Since Covid-19 Lockdown [1]**

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>All UK Adults</u>			<u>Food Secure Adults [4]</u>			<u>Food Insecure Adults [5]</u>		
	Average Days Per Week % Using Strategy	% Using Strategy Used	% Using Strategy More Since Lockdown	Average Days Per Week % Using Strategy	% Using Strategy Used	% Using Strategy More Since Lockdown	Average Days Per Week % Using Strategy	% Using Strategy Used	% Using Strategy More Since Lockdown
Rely on less preferred and less expensive food	50.50%	1.58	26.50%	37.80%	0.97	17.50%	92.20%	3.78	64.60%
Borrow food, or rely on help from a friend or relative	10.40%	0.26	4.80%	3.80%	0.09	1.70%	41.60%	1.08	20.90%
Purchase food on credit	11.20%	0.37	4.60%	5.20%	0.15	1.20%	31.70%	1.12	18.50%
Use food banks or any other food distribution	4.30%	0.13	2.60%	1.10%	0.04	0.40%	19.10%	0.54	12.30%
Use free school meal vouchers [2]	7.60%	0.23	N/A [3]	3.70%	0.12	N/A [3]	12.10%	0.4	N/A [3]
Send household members to eat elsewhere [2]	5.40%	0.15	3.80%	2.40%	0.08	0.60%	14.50%	0.36	10.40%
Restrict consumption by adults in order for children to eat [2]	23.80%	0.64	14.30%	6.10%	0.16	3.10%	41.20%	1.31	29.60%
Waste less food	68.20%	3.32	41.50%	61.40%	2.87	35.40%	92.30%	4.87	62.20%
Plan meals more carefully	73.50%	3.48	52.90%	67.50%	3.08	49.00%	93.20%	4.9	68.80%
Cook main meal from scratch	89.30%	4.66	47.80%	89.10%	4.68	44.00%	91.30%	4.65	60.60%
No. UK Adults in Sample	1004			717			162		

## Notes:

[1] Online survey administered 8-9 June 2020

[2] Only estimated for adults with children living in household (N=277)

[3] FSM Vouchers are a Department for Education (DfE) Response to Covid-19

[4] Those adults classified as living in high food secure household

[5] Those adults classified as living in low or very low food secure household