TIME TO MEASURE AND MONITOR LOCAL FOOD INSECURITY:

The case for a harmonised approach across local authority areas

FILL
FOOD INSECURITY MONITORING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Foreword

The UK is currently experiencing growing and very high levels of food insecurity. Local authorities, local food partnerships, food poverty networks, and frontline charitable food aid organisations are working to meet escalating levels of need by offering a range of financial or food assistance and other support and advice.

While food insecurity is now consistently measured in a UK-wide survey, highly varied attempts to estimate or measure local level food insecurity have emerged. There is widespread use of proxy data to estimate levels of food insecurity including tracking the distribution of food parcels from food banks. However, these fall short of providing consistently accurate measures and can potentially result in inaccurate assessments of local levels of food insecurity.

This briefing is shaped by a workshop held in June 2022 devoted to discussing these issues. The workshop was attended by over 70 stakeholders invited from across the four nations and from governmental and non-governmental organisations. The briefing includes content from presentations on methods for measuring and estimating food insecurity at the local level, and the benefits and drawbacks of different methods. We have also included the views of attendees, who shared a strong interest in understanding the extent of food insecurity in their local areas. We heard about the wide range of methods being used in attempts to understand the prevalence and problem of food insecurity in local areas from the use of proxies to direct surveying of residents. While many attendees expressed interest in direct surveys, a good number were cautious about what might be practical and repeatable in individual areas. There also was concern about whether local authorities would commit to funding regular surveys of residents and the importance of buy-in from local decision makers, local partners and local people. We heard that it is vital that measurement of local level food insecurity supports and links to long-term policies, strategies and actions to address this issue.

Reflecting on discussions from the workshop, this briefing presents a series of recommendations for measuring and monitoring local level food insecurity. Direct measurement and monitoring of local level food insecurity using the validated USDA Survey Module would provide comparable, reliable and robust data to inform and evaluate local strategy and responses to address food insecurity and its root causes. Regularly measuring and monitoring local level food insecurity would provide data to enable local authorities to develop effective local strategies to address downstream

needs and upstream drivers of food insecurity at a local, national and UK-wide level. This type of measurement and monitoring would further enable understanding of how risks for food insecurity may differ across local areas, and what interventions work for whom, why and where. Local measurement of food insecurity would help local authorities, their delivery partners and other stakeholders to answer these questions. It would also allow for more effective targeting and evaluation of the impact of local interventions aimed at reducing food insecurity. Regular local level food insecurity measurement may also help local authorities to forecast future levels of need.

The **FILL** (**F**ood **I**nsecurity monitoring at the **L**ocal **L**evel) Consortium is keen to support local authority teams to measure food insecurity locally and to co-develop a method to enable harmonised measurement across local authority areas.

We welcome your feedback on this briefing and are grateful to everyone who participated in the workshop in June 2022 who helped shape its contents.

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Dr Rachel Loopstra
Prof Greta Defeyter
Prof Paul B. Stretesky
Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford
Sabine Goodwin (IFAN)
fill@liverpool.ac.uk

Introduction

From the earliest weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, responding to concerns about food insecurity was a key priority for all levels of government across the UK.[1] The most recent data from the Department for Work and Pensions' Family Resources Survey showed that in 2020-21, across the UK each month, 7% of households experienced insecure and insufficient access to food due to a lack of finances, and a further 5% experienced marginal food insecurity.[2] Food insecurity data based on different measures and released over the course of the pandemic from the Food Foundation,[3] however, suggested that at some points over the pandemic, and in some places, the problem was much more prevalent.[4] More recent data suggest that the current cost of living crisis is causing more and more households to not have enough money for food.[5]

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project, "Food vulnerability during COVID-19" documented how local authorities and third sector organisations engaged in numerous interventions intended to prevent and alleviate rising food insecurity over the pandemic. These variously included food and financial support for food banks, food and financial investment in community food pantries or similar models, establishing or strengthening local welfare emergency cash payment or voucher schemes, providing free meals during school holidays, and establishing or strengthening income maximisation activities, among other examples. Many of these continue to be invested in and pursued, especially in the face of rising costs of living. **However, a key project finding was that there was a notable absence of monitoring of the impacts of these interventions in local populations or regular collection of quantitative data to inform their development and evaluation**.[6]

To discuss a way forward to fill this evidence gap, a workshop was convened by the FILL Consortium,[7] on 27 June 2022, to bring together local authority and third-sector staff working on food insecurity to discuss local level food insecurity measurement and monitoring. The objectives of the workshop were to:

[1] http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/
[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2020-to-2021
[3] https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking
[4] Some of the reasons for differences in prevalence rates between the Food Foundation's data and Family Resources Survey data are discussed later in this briefing and in the presentation by Rachel Loopstra.
[5] https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/press-release/millions-adults-missing-meals-cost-living-crisis-bites
[6] http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Comparing-local-responses-to-household-food-insecurity-during-COVID-19-across-the-UK.pdf
[7] The FILL Consortium is a newly formed group working to support local authorities to measure and monitor food insecurity. It includes Dr Rachel Loopstra, Prof Greta Defeyter, Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford, Prof Paul B. Stretesky and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN). This workshop and preparation of this briefing was also supported by Simon Shaw, a freelance researcher with expertise in food systems and food insecurity.

- Discuss reasons for measuring and monitoring food insecurity at the local level and benefits and drawbacks of different approaches.
- Hear from researchers, local councils, local food poverty alliances and food partnerships about their approaches to food insecurity measurement and how it can contribute to their understanding the problem and impacts of local-level interventions.
- Chart potential actions to move towards measurement and monitoring by local authorities.

This briefing covers the content of presentations at the workshop on measuring food insecurity at the local level and the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches, details of a recent local level food insecurity measurement pilot, and arguments for measuring food insecurity to evaluate the impact of local interventions. We share key points of discussion gathered from participants over the course of the workshop, highlighting invaluable insights on local authority priorities related to food insecurity, current challenges and opportunities for monitoring food insecurity locally, and how to build the case for measurement in local authorities in particular to access funding. Based on learning from this workshop, we detail recommendations and next steps to take local level food insecurity measurement forward.

Why measure and monitor food insecurity at the local level?

National governments are increasingly passing funding on to local authorities to support households facing financial insecurity and struggling to afford food stating that they are 'best-placed' to make decisions on how to use funding. This approach was certainly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic with relatively high levels of funding for local support distributed with limited notice and restrictive guidance on how the funding should be spent. **However, local authority decision-making is hampered by a lack of robust data on the extent of local food insecurity, the local populations most at risk and residents who may miss out on support.**

UK-wide measurement of food insecurity

The case for UK-wide level measurement of food insecurity was first set out in the Time to Count the Hungry (2016) briefing. This briefing made the case that it was, and continues to be, relatively easy to add validated monitoring questions to existing national surveys. It also outlines how food insecurity measurement questions are distinct from income-based measures of poverty and other deprivation measures in the UK.

As a result of campaigning and awareness-raising, governments and governmental departments in the UK measure food insecurity. From 2016, the Food Standards

Agency (FSA) included the USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module in the Food and You survey, covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The module has continued to be included in the subsequent Food and You 2 survey from 2020. In 2019, UK-wide measurement using the USDA module was adopted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in the Family Resources Survey (FRS). This survey reports on the prevalence of food insecurity for each UK nation and each region in England. It is important to note the differences between the FSA data and DWP data; the FSA measures food insecurity over the past 12 months, whereas the DWP measures food insecurity over the past 30 days. They also use different survey methodologies.[8]

The Scottish Government and Welsh Government have included some items from different food insecurity modules in their Scottish Health Survey[9] and National Survey for Wales,[10] respectively. In Wales and Northern Ireland, data from the FSA's Food and You survey have been used to monitor and report on food insecurity,[11],[12] but these nations have also used indicators of food hardship from the EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions survey.

The inclusion of these measures in national surveys has been important for tracking how the prevalence of food insecurity has changed over the past 6 years. One example is a forthcoming analysis of the FRS data. Researchers have used these data to identify a significant drop in food insecurity among Universal Credit claimants the year that the £20 uplift was introduced, whilst in comparison, benefit claimants that did not receive this uplift experienced no change in their food insecurity.[13] Without these quantitative and representative data, the case for the importance of this intervention would be harder to make.

However, whilst we now have estimates for each of the UK nations and for the 9 regions in England, there may still be a significant amount of variation in food insecurity rates at a local level.[14] At present, national-level surveys do not

[8] See forthcoming paper by Loopstra, R. Making sense of food insecurity data in the UK.
[9] The Scottish Health Survey has included 3 items from the FAO's Food Insecurity Experience Scale. https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-telephone-survey-august-september-2020-main-report/pages/8/
[10] The National Survey for Wales has variously used items from the USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module and EU-SILC food hardship indicators since 2016. https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales
[11] https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fy2-wave-1-ni-food-security-short-report-doi.pdf
[12] https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-and-you-wave-5-wales-report-english-version.pdf
[13] Forthcoming analysis from Loopstra, R, Baumberg-Geiger, B, and Reeves, A.
[14] For estimates of the potential differences in prevalence across local authorities in the UK, see this report from researchers at the University of Sheffield. Though estimates imprecise and confidence intervals are overlapping, this was an important "proof-of-concept" paper showing the potential for wide variation in food insecurity across different places. https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSI8Pa97QXlzWT6Lm-NUzxhn7-q5ZG4aoH2f60ZC3O74MIfoRUFuieentUMYEXdJQ/pub

have large enough sample sizes to provide robust annual data on local level food insecurity prevalence.

Why is it important to understand food insecurity at the local level?

Local authorities are increasingly needing to identify and respond to growing food insecurity in their communities. Better understanding the scale of the problem and which types of households are at risk in local populations is key to evaluating interventions – both for understanding what types of approaches to take and if they are working.

Local level food insecurity trends and the groups at risk in specific areas may differ from those captured by national and UK-wide surveys. Local-area factors, such as transport costs, local factors affecting the costs of living and specific pockets of deprivation, may influence risk of local level food insecurity. Local-area services and interventions may also influence levels of food insecurity. For example, access to benefit entitlements may differ due to different types of local advice available, and the type and availability of crisis grants and/or local welfare assistance may also impact on food insecurity levels. When survey modules measure a range of food insecurity experiences, local level interventions can also be examined in relation to their impacts on severity of food insecurity as some people may not move out of food insecurity entirely but may report a lesser degree of food insecurity.

Approaches to measuring and monitoring local level food insecurity

To date local authorities and local organisations have used a range of data sources in attempts to understand the scale of the problem of food insecurity in their local areas and to inform their decision-making. Sources have included data on food bank use, estimates from national surveys and research, and proxies such as benefit receipt, indices of multiple deprivation, free school meal or Healthy Start uptake data. There are also some examples of local authorities surveying households or individuals sampled from their local populations, where questionnaires have included validated food insecurity modules or similar questions intended to capture people struggling to afford sufficient food. There are pros and cons to the different approaches, and some of these are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Methods being used to describe food insecurity in local populations.

Method	Pros	Cons	What can we learn from measure?
Survey of food insecurity in local population using experience-based measure	● Can use validated measure of household food insecurity ● Can add measure to pre-existing local household surveys ● Can design a questionnaire with local interests in mind ● Can measure use of local interventions ● Can examine how risk factors may be differently associated with food insecurity at local level ● Controlled at local level	● Costs of designing, implementing, and analysing a survey ● Requires specialist knowledge of survey methodologies ● Need large sample size to obtain reliable estimates, especially for ward level ● Surveys come with their own limitations: ○ Inclusion/exclusion criteria and who represented ○ Non-response ○ Response bias	● If sample is large and representative of local population, provides reliable data on level of food insecurity in local population ● If repeated using same methods, allows change in time to be tracked ● Risk factors at individual level for local population can be explored ● Potential to evaluate impacts of local level interventions on food insecurity
Food bank use	● Data can be available very quickly (i.e. monthly) from local food banks ● Comparable measures across food banks if collecting data in the same way as in the Trussell Trust network or if common measure can be used as IFAN has done	● Underestimates food insecurity, even most severe experiences in population ● Collection of data not necessarily possible or standardised across all food banks (people, the number of parcels, size of parcels) ● Need data from all food banks in a local area for it to be accurate level of use of food banks in local area ● Use of food banks can be subject to restricted access rules so is not complete picture even for those who use food banks ● Does not usually include data on other food parcel distribution activities (e.g. from schools or hospitals)	● Levels of use of food bank ● Characteristics of people using food banks and how often if these data collected ● Reliance on food banks by service providers or councils (i.e. by providing referrals and signposting to food banks) ● Indicator of potential strain on food banks
Use of other types of food or food aid projects use	● In addition to food bank use, adds to picture of services being used by people facing food insecurity	● Projects offered in variety of ways and wide variety of data collected; difficult to harmonise a measure of use across a local area ● Lack of continuity/ seasonality of some projects	• Levels of use of specific food or food aid projects and characteristics of people using them
Extrapolated data from national surveys	● Makes use of direct measure of food insecurity	● Relies on data release cycle of national survey ● Doesn't account for local area factors and local population characteristics that influence risk	● If local population looks the same/has same risk of food insecurity as national/regional population as a whole, would provide roughly accurate picture of food insecurity in local area, but this unlikely to be the case

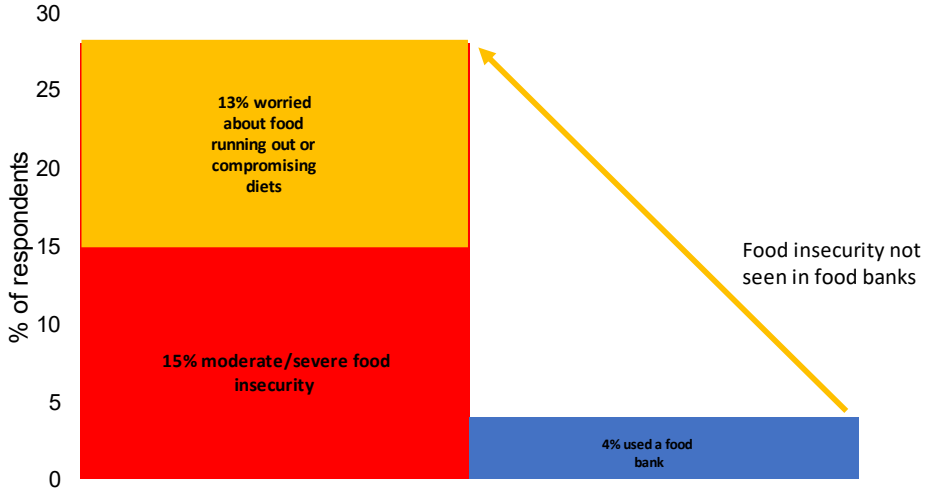
Proxy measures: benefit claimants	• Official statistics available monthly/quarterly at local authority and smaller area levels. • Based on known risk factors for food insecurity • Robust measures which allow change over time to be monitored	• Likely to focus more on those people out of work and under-represent levels of in-work food insecurity where people receive limited or no social security • Unable to explore how local-area factors may modify risk of food insecurity for groups at-risk at national level	• Combined with information on prevalence of food insecurity for different risk groups and local area data on proxies, can provide good estimates of problem in population, but do not allow for exploration of local level variation in risk of food insecurity
Proxy measures: indices of multiple deprivation	• Available at small-area level • Likely associated with food insecurity	• Can be particularly misleading in rural areas, as will not highlight specific areas of deprivation within a dispersed population • Though based on composite of different risk factors, none directly associate with food insecurity • Unable to explore how local-area factors may modify risk	• Tell us about other deprivation/socio-economic factors that are associated with food insecurity, but not about local levels of food insecurity specifically
Small-area estimation methods	• If based on estimates from large dataset, can provide robust estimates of relative rankings of food insecurity across local authorities (and potentially smaller geographies) • Ideally based on experienced-based measures of food insecurity in national surveys	• Relies on special access to large nationally representative dataset that is geo-coded (i.e. FRS) • Does not allow for exploration of risk factors at individual/ household level and how these may differ by local area • If wide confidence intervals – not great at measuring area-level change over time. • Requires someone with these statistical skills to produce	• Provide comparable estimates of food insecurity that are good for ranking food insecurity levels across local authorities

In general, data reliant on proxies runs the risk of underestimating or overestimating food insecurity. A commonly used proxy for food insecurity data in local areas is data on food parcel distribution. These data are often only from local Trussell Trust food banks, as these data are available publicly from the Trussell Trust for local authority areas their food banks operate in. [15] This excludes 81 of 374 lower tier local authorities across the UK.[16] However, in 2017, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) first put together a list of independent food banks operating outside of the Trussell Trust network, underscoring that usage of Trussell Trust food banks does not nearly capture the scale of food bank usage. Today, IFAN has identified as many independent food banks operating as Trussell Trust food banks. In addition to thousands of food banks in the UK, there are thousands of charitable food aid providers and food projects supporting people struggling to afford food. Since 2018, IFAN has reported on food parcel distribution data collated from independent food banks [17] [18] and has used a common measure to analyse figures collated in multiple ways from samples of independent food banks operating across the UK. However, IFAN is a keen advocate for local level measurement of food insecurity with the USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module recognising the inadequacies of both Trussell Trust and IFAN data in representing the true scale of food insecurity at both local, national and UK-wide level.[19]

As shown in Figure 1, when food bank use was measured alongside food insecurity in the FSA's Food and You 2 survey in 2021, there were far fewer adults using food banks than who were classified as food insecure. This is even true among severely food insecure adults: among those with most extreme experiences of going without food for a day or more in the past 12 months, fewer than 50% reported using a food bank in this same time period.[20]

[15] For local authority breakdowns of Trussell Trust food parcel distribution, see link at bottom of page here: https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/
[16] Derived from Trussell Trust End of Year Stats for local authorities in 2021-22. Food parcel distribution was recorded from food banks operating in 293 lower-tier/unitary local authorities of 374 total.
[17] https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/independent-food-bank-survey
[18] https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-data-since-covid-19
[19] https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog/ifan-response
[20] Loopstra, R. Unpublished analysis of Food Standards Agency Food & You 2: Wave 3. Data from April-June 2021. The questionnaire captures any food bank use, whether from a Trussell Trust food bank or other emergency food parcel provider.

Figure 1: Data on food bank use underestimate the problem of food insecurity in the population.



Source: Loopstra, R analysis of Food Standards Agency Food & You 2: Wave 3. Data from April-June 2021. Question asked: "You or any other adults in your household received a free food parcel from a food bank or other emergency provider in past 12 months."

Estimates based on national measurement figures do not take account of local factors. Whilst applying national- or regional-level figures on food insecurity to local level populations may give an idea of the potential scale of the problem, extrapolating from this level does not allow the influence of local-level factors to be captured, nor local-area variability. Small-area estimation methods are a promising avenue for providing estimates at the local level, as suggested by the proof-of-concept work conducted by researchers at the Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Sheffield.[21] Small-area estimation methods combine information from the local level with information on national data to estimate the prevalence at the small-area level, but for robust estimates to be produced, a good number of data points are needed from every local authority and local authority identifiers need to be available in national datasets. Importantly, whilst able to provide comparable high-level estimates between local authorities, this method does not allow for exploration of place-specific risk factors or mitigators for food insecurity at the individual level.

Though not covered here given the focus of this briefing on prevalence of food insecurity and trends from one year to the next, it is important to highlight the role for qualitative data to balance against quantitative data sources. People's lived experiences are important, providing rich data on the real-life impacts of food insecurity and galvanising action.

As we heard in our workshop, there are valid reasons for why some methods are more commonly used to estimate food insecurity in local areas than others.

[21] Moretti, A., Whitworth, A., Blake, M. UK Local Food Insecurity Methods Briefing. https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSI8Pa97QXlzWT6Lm-NUzxhn7-q5ZG4aoH2f60ZC3O74MIfoRUFuieentUMYEXdJQ/pub

However, given that different methods tell us different things, **it is essential to be clear on what measures do, and do not, tell us.** For example, there are valid reasons for mapping and monitoring food bank project use in local areas. Though these data do not tell us the scale of food insecurity or who is at risk in a local area, they can tell us about the scale of food parcel distribution and drivers of this type assistance. But others experiencing food insecurity in the population may be accessing other hidden or more informal support or may be accessing no support at all. Care should therefore be taken to be clear on what data is being collected, for what purpose and what it can be used for.

Watch Dr Rachel Loopstra's presentation on the pros and cons of different approaches to estimating or measuring local level food insecurity. The presentation runs from 00:00:30 to 00:27:39 in the recording of the workshop, available here: https://youtu.be/Bf_A7Fsv97E

Using a local level household survey to understand food insecurity in a local area: a case study

In our workshop, Prof Greta Defeyter and Prof Paul B. Stretesky (Northumbria University) shared details of their recent co-developed research project on measuring food insecurity in Redcar and Cleveland. The project was led by Northumbria University in collaboration with Redcar and Cleveland Council, Newcastle University, and Teesside University and was an NIHR ARC North-East and North-Cumbria project.[22]

To gain a better understanding of the local variation in food insecurity and knowledge about food resources in Redcar and Cleveland, this pilot study used a self-administered food security questionnaire to collect data on (1) household food insecurity and (2) the knowledge and use of food aid resources in the community. The food insecurity and knowledge questions were distributed to a random sample of 2,500 households in five diverse Redcar and Cleveland wards (Grangetown, Loftus, Belmont, Hutton and Guisborough) in mid-June, 2021. The questionnaire used the USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module (FSSM) to measure the prevalence of 'low / very low food security' over the previous 12 months. Observations were weighted using standard cell weighting procedures for age and gender to conform to the population proportions in the wards and then statistically analysed using simple frequency distributions and logistic regression. Greater detail about measuring food

[22] Project number RF20_02. Film captures the stark realities facing local foodbanks as they deal with increasing demand. - ARC (nihr.ac.uk)

security, selecting wards, sampling households, questionnaire return rates and statistical analyses are provided in the full report.

In summary, the research found that food security in the wards studied varied considerably, as did local knowledge and use of food resources. Variation in the prevalence of moderate/low/very low levels of food security did not mirror the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) across the five wards. Importantly, knowledge and resources appeared to shape the prevalence of 'moderate/low/very low' food insecurity across wards and should be considered in models of food security. However, it wasn't clear which factors may influence this local food knowledge. The pilot research has these five key findings:

- There is considerable variation in food security across the five wards in Redcar and Cleveland.
- The reliance on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) could potentially lead to incorrect conclusions about the geographic distribution of food insecurity within local authorities, possibly leading service providers to exclude areas in need of food services.
- The distribution of local food security appears to be shaped by both knowledge of and levels of food resources. The distribution of knowledge and resources, perhaps, may explain why the IMD is an imperfect measure of the prevalence of 'low/very low' food security in the five wards.
- Knowledge of *existing* food resources (i.e., those that were also identified in qualitative interviews with local food champions) may impact levels of food security by decreasing moderate/low/very low food security.
- Further study of knowledge of local resources is needed to understand factors that shape individuals' knowledge.

Watch Professor Greta Defeyter and Professor Paul B. Stretesky's presentation on the local measurement pilot/ publication. The presentation runs from 00:28:40 to 00:46:25 in the recording of the workshop, available here: https://youtu.be/Bf_A7Fsv97E

Watch the project's film: Measuring Food Insecurity to Inform Future Food Provision

The need for local food insecurity measurement to understand the role of cash first interventions

Cash first responses to growing food insecurity are being increasingly championed and implemented by national and local governments as well as by national and local third sector organisations. Many people with experience of food insecurity are also calling for the continuation or expansion of local cash first responses. While there is

an emerging evidence base of the effectiveness of cash first approaches, local measurement of food insecurity could play a significant role in evaluating the impact of such initiatives.

The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) supports and advocates on behalf of charitable food aid providers operating across the UK including over 550 independent food banks.[23] The organisation campaigns to see the end for the need for charitable food aid through cash first solutions including adequate social security payments, wages and job security as well as timely, easily accessible and well-promoted crisis cash payments provided by local authorities.[24]

IFAN is working with local authorities, local advice providers and local frontline support organisations including food aid providers to co-produce cash first referral leaflets, which are now available in over 90 local authorities.[25] The co-produced resources help people struggling to afford food, and support workers, to identify local sources of advice and cash first support. These tools, in printed, interactive, translated and poster formats, aim to reduce the need for charitable food aid by promoting advice and income maximisation as the first port of call to help anyone facing financial and food insecurity.

From IFAN's perspective, it's critical that local level food insecurity is measured to better understand the extent to which local as well as UK-wide and national cash first interventions can reduce local food insecurity levels. These cash first interventions could include:

- Local authority crisis payments in cash
- Ensuring advice and support is promoted/available to prevent people from reaching crisis point
- UK Government policies such as the Universal Credit £20 uplift
- National policies/strategies such as the Scottish Government plan to end the need for food banks

In IFAN's view, it's invaluable to use the USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module questions as these focus on capturing the lack of affordability of food and lack of income for food. Critically, use of the same measurement tool in local surveys as that used in the FRS would enable comparison with national and UK-wide data.

Watch Sabine Goodwin's presentation on benefits of measurement from the perspective of IFAN. The presentation runs from 00:46:30 to 00:59:30 in the recording of the workshop, available here: https://youtu.be/Bf_A7Fsv97E

[23] Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk
[24] www.ifanuk.org/infographic
[25] www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets

Views on local measurement and monitoring of food insecurity

The workshop was an incredibly useful opportunity to understand the diverse barriers to measurement and monitoring of local level food insecurity. Three panellists from three different local authorities with active food poverty alliances and/or food security teams within public health divisions shared their approaches to monitoring food insecurity and views on the importance of this from their perspectives. In breakout rooms, we then gathered insights from workshop participants representing over 40 local authorities.

Key themes that came out of these discussions were:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and current cost of living crisis have made food insecurity a priority for many local authorities. Almost all workshop participants shared this, whereas in the past, it has been difficult to get local authorities engaged in with the issue in some areas. A better understanding of the scale of the problem in local areas was identified as a key need. This was viewed as useful because local data would be more meaningful for galvanising local action, strategic planning, targeting responses, and because it would reflect the geographical diversity of different areas.

- There are examples of local authorities seeking ways to measure the scale of food insecurity in their local populations through either conducting bespoke surveys or adding questions to that included the USDA Adult Food Security module, a subset of questions from this, or other indicators of food insecurity, into existing surveys.

- Limited resources are a key challenge to measurement and monitoring, leading to reliance on existing proxy data to estimate local levels of food insecurity. Costs include the financial costs of carrying out measurement and monitoring work, but also the limited resource of staff time and expertise.

- Workshop participants reflected that it can also be difficult to maintain sustainable access to specialist knowledge in gathering, analysing and presenting local level food insecurity data. Councils may be able to carry out one-off surveys, but securing resources for analysis and regular monitoring is particularly difficult.

- The discussion about different approaches to measurement and different attempts, and the limited resources to carry this out, revealed that efforts in the area are not necessarily being shared across different local authorities. In light of concerns about duplicating efforts and work, a need for different local food insecurity measurement and monitoring approaches to be shared across

local authorities was identified. There was also strong consensus around the need for a harmonised approach to local food insecurity measurement.

- Some scepticism was raised about measurement. For example, the use of self-reported data, as is done in the USDA Food Security Survey Module was raised as a potential concern. Because different measures of food insecurity are also being used in the UK, another concern is that more measurement adds more confusion, when so much survey data, which can suggest different prevalence levels in the population, already exists. It was emphasised that there must be a clear plan for how the data will be used to ensure it will lead to action.
- It can also be difficult for local authorities to make the case for measurement and monitoring. It might be difficult to link any changes in the level of food insecurity to any particular intervention. Local authorities and others are likely to be reluctant to invest in regular robust local measurement of food insecurity until they are confident it can help to demonstrate impact and inform decision-making.
- Another challenge is that it can be difficult to agree the priorities for measurement across local authority departments, food partnerships or food poverty alliances. For example, measurement could primarily aim to support signposting to existing support or it could be more focused on developing strategic level responses to reducing food insecurity and the need for responses.

- In addition to quantitative data on food insecurity, local authorities shared the different ways that they capture lived experiences of food insecurity. Feeding Liverpool shared an example of how stories collected from people with lived experiences of food insecurity were made into animations to tackle stigma and raise awareness. These can be viewed here: https://www.feedingliverpool.org/your-stories/

- In addition to capturing the scale of food insecurity in local areas, we heard about other indicators of food access challenges. Birmingham City Council, shared that they have worked with Dorset Public Health to adopt their approach to estimating the number of households that may not have sufficient finances to afford to eat in line with EatWell Guide, based on modelling work by the Food Foundation.[26] We heard other examples of local authorities mapping access to food outlets and community food aid projects.

[26] https://www.publichealthdorset.org.uk/jsna/insights/joint-strategic-needs-assessment-food-insecurity-panel

Approaches for effective local level measurement of food insecurity and overcoming challenges

Representative household surveys have the potential to obtain reliable estimates of food insecurity in the local population. They can also enable exploration of local level risk factors and impacts of local interventions and can reflect the priorities of local areas. Questionnaires should include a validated tool for measuring food insecurity and rigorous survey methods should be used to ensure optimal response rates and representative samples. Discussions at the workshop helped us to identify a number of ways to ensure effective local level measurement and to make sure that such measurement contributes to effective local responses to food insecurity.

Establishing a local approach

- Measurement initiatives should have senior level and cross-departmental support within the council - both councillors and officers. The questionnaire should be designed with cross-departmental input to ensure that outcomes can meet multiple departmental data needs.
- The questionnaire should be designed to reflect features of the local area that may influence food insecurity. These could include access to shops, affordability and access to local transport, and knowledge and use of local services.
- Local investment from councils should cover staff time, including the research lead(s), a data analysis team, and third sector partners.
- Where time and resources allow, designing a survey to be representative at the ward-level or combinations of wards is relevant for understanding differing levels of risk of food insecurity within local authorities. This knowledge is important for targeting interventions.

Survey design and implementation

- Use either the 30-day USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module (consistent with the Family Resources Survey) or the 12-month USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module (consistent with Food & You 2 survey). Preferably an integrated version that uses both recall periods (as is done in the United States) would be used. Using the full module (i.e. 10 questions in the adult module) is preferable because using only some selected questions risks underestimating the true extent of food insecurity. However, the use of the Six-Item Short Form of the Food Security Survey Module is recommended if a shorter questionnaire is needed. A 2-item measure has also been developed,[27] which is useful for identifying households at any level of risk of food insecurity, though it does not identify moderate or severe levels.

[27] Hager ER, Quigg AM, Black MM, et al: Development and validity of a 2-item screen to identify families at risk for food insecurity. Pediatrics 126:26-32, 2010.

- Pilot work from Redcar and Cleveland suggested that response rates were better when requests to complete the survey were sent by the local authority. But it must be made very clear to respondents that data is anonymous and will not be used by the council to intervene in their lives. It is important to recognise that the survey questions are personal and sensitive.
- A relatively low response rate of 20-30% can be expected. This is usual for this kind of survey but means surveys should be sent to a relatively large sample to account for non-response. Where possible, non-response should be investigated.
- It is likely that different people will complete a paper-based questionnaire than a questionnaire completed online. If both can be offered, this will likely lead to a more representative sample.
- In the design of the sample frame, it may be useful to over-sample groups of the population that are more likely to be under-represented in the survey.
- Translate the survey into other languages as appropriate and plan for additional time where English is not people's first language. Translations of the USDA FSSM into some other languages are available.
- Consider asking additional questions exploring the reasons behind people's food insecurity and their knowledge of available local support, whether that be financial, food or other.

Dissemination of findings

- Plan in advance for how data will be made available and accessible to local decision-makers, organisations and communities. These different audiences will use information in different ways so it is important to present findings in diverse ways and in ways that can be shared easily with others.
- Integrate the survey findings into local food and/or poverty action plans. Ongoing monitoring of food insecurity should be a pillar of these plans, for both the purposes of informing where intervention is needed and monitoring the success of actions taken over time.

Conclusions

There is widespread interest in understanding and tracking local level food insecurity, as well as the scale, demand for and effectiveness of local level responses to food insecurity. Limited resources currently mean that local authorities regularly use proxy data to estimate levels of need and demand for local support. While this is an understandable approach given limited resources, it is important to be clear that proxy measures do not directly measure food insecurity.

Some local authorities and/ or local food poverty alliances or food partnerships are conducting direct surveying to measure food insecurity. In many cases, this is still limited by available resources meaning very few areas are able to conduct the 'gold standard' survey using the full set of 10 questions in the USDA Adult FSSM. Even when data is collected, the ability to analyse it may be limited by lack of resource and skill in this area.

It is vital that local actors are mindful of the data they are using and/or generating and what it tells us. We must recognise the limitations of any proxy data and be clear that it is not a measure of food insecurity. In particular, food bank use should not be used as a proxy measure of food insecurity.

Actual local level food security measurement can only be effectively implemented using robust survey methods at local level, rather than rely on estimation/modelling techniques extrapolated from UK-wide data.

Out of this workshop, there is a clear need to support local areas to overcome barriers to local level measurement. There are opportunities for multiple local areas to come together to measure and monitor local level food insecurity. This should foster some efficiencies and avoid the duplication of efforts, as well as generate comparator data. Efforts to measure local level food insecurity can be justified with a clear rationale of the value of measurement and monitoring and with a clear plan for disseminating findings and using them to inform action.

Next steps – piloting local measurement and monitoring of local level food insecurity

As a next step, the FILL Consortium will bring together and support a group of local areas who would like to pilot conducting a household survey to measure and monitor local level food insecurity. This will involve the co-development of methods, the sharing of tools and training. If you'd like to hear more about this pilot project, please be in touch with the FILL Consortium: fill@liverpool.ac.uk

FILL
FOOD INSECURITY MONITORING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Dr Rachel Loopstra
Prof Greta Defeyter
Prof Paul B. Stretesky
Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford
Sabine Goodwin (IFAN)
fill@liverpool.ac.uk

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