

Food poverty in the school holidays

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To protect the identity of children and parents in this report, we have changed their names and omitted identifying material.

Barnardo's has services in a wide range of communities across the South West of England. Our work is based on active participation with children and parents, to ensure that their voices are heard on policy issues and their views and experiences inform the development of services.

In summer 2003 we published *Wish you were here* (Gill and Wellington, 2003), a report which explored the issues faced in the school holidays by parents dependent on income support. This report was based on interviews with parents in several different communities in the South West.

One factor that emerged strongly from these interviews was that families were worse off in the school holidays than at other times of the year. Far from having a little extra money for enjoyable activities with their children, the financial pressures on parents were at their most extreme in the school holidays.

One of the key reasons for this was that families had to find extra money to pay for food during the school holidays because of the absence of free school meals.

This current report, again based on interviews with parents in the South West, shows clearly that the absence of free school meals in the school holidays means that families experience severe hardship.

The voices of parents in this report are a challenge to government to put into place policies that provide adequate and consistent financial support for families, and specifically to compensate families for the absence of free school meals in the school holidays.

Jane Stacey

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The Prime Minister's pledge on child poverty

In March 1999, the Prime Minister pledged to eradicate child poverty 'within a generation'. The number of children living in poverty in Great Britain has decreased from a peak of 4.3 million in 1997-8 to 3.6 million children in 2002-3 (after housing costs) (Department for Work and Pensions, 2004).

The introduction of the child tax credit in 2003-4 and the extra spending announced for 2004-5, neither of which are reflected in the above data, suggest that the government is on course to meet its target to reduce the numbers of children living in relative poverty by a quarter between 1998-9 and 2004-5 using a poverty line of 60 per cent of median income (Brewer et al, 2004).

However, the government's target of reducing child poverty by a half by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020 is a much more demanding challenge. A number of commentators have stressed that reaching the initial target of reduction by a quarter has been relatively undemanding, because the children who have been lifted out of poverty have been in families which were previously only just below the poverty line. Tackling the position of those in more extreme poverty will be much more difficult (Sutherland et al, 2003).

For this target to be achieved and for there to be a lasting impact on the lives and experiences of our most vulnerable children, the focus needs to move to defining how much money a family needs to live on. Fundamental to eradicating child poverty is a defined, adequate and constant level of family income. This report argues that for families living on income support, fluctuations in income – in this case the loss of free school meals in school holidays – results in unacceptable levels of poverty and social exclusion.

This approach, which the government has resisted until now, has been advocated by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2004) which recently recommended that '... the Department [for Work and Pensions] seriously considers revising its policy on budget standards with a view to adopting them as a tool for exploring living standards and helping to fix poverty thresholds for the future strategy on child poverty'.

How adequate are income support levels?

Around 2 million children in Great Britain have parents who rely on income support (Department for Work and Pensions, 2004). At the time of the interviewing for this report (February 2004) a couple with an 8-year-old child who were dependent on income support would have received £140 a week made up of income support for themselves and their child, and child benefit. A lone parent with a child of the same age would have received £108.90. In addition both families could claim housing costs through housing benefit and would have been entitled to free schools meals (Child Poverty Action Group, 2003).

Tax credits appear to be moving some families whose income is close to the government's 'headline' indicator of income poverty (households below 60 per cent of the median household income) out of poverty. But income support payments combined with child tax credit continue to remain below this level.

Just how far income support levels have fallen below the income poverty level is indicated by the following table reproduced from Child Poverty Action Group's most recent edition of *Poverty: the facts*, based on 2001-2 figures. The table shows for example that income support for a couple with two children provided around only 70 per cent of the income poverty level.

The 2004 Work and Pensions Committee report into child poverty acknowledged the need to support children in the poorest families and stated that: 'to help reach the goal of halving child poverty by 2010, the Committee recommends that support for each of the poorest children – measured on the after housing costs basis – should be increased by £10 per week'.

Table 1: Income support and income poverty levels

(defined as below 60 per cent of median income after housing costs)

Situation	Income support (IS)	Income poverty level (PL)	IS as a % of PL
Couple with 1 child age 3	132.90	195.00	68.2%
Couple with 2 children aged 3, 8	166.40	233.00	71.4%
Couple with 3 children aged 3, 8 and 11	199.90	282.00	70.9%
Lone parent with 1 child aged 3	102.20	120.00	85.2%

Source: Flaherty et al (2004) (calculations based on income support level 2001-2 and HBAI figures for 2001-2)

Nutrition/health outcomes

The links between poverty and health inequalities has been clearly established. Children born into poverty and disadvantage miss out on important opportunities for health gain, and accumulate health risks as they grow into adulthood (Roberts, 2002). A number of diseases and health conditions are seen more commonly in lower socio-economic groups in the UK. These include: low birth weight or anaemia in children and adults, dental disease, obesity and insulin-dependent diabetes. Poor nutrition and diet play a key role in these adverse outcomes. Poor diets can also have a significant impact on the mental well-being of children (Bradshaw, 2002).

The findings from two national surveys published in 1995 (younger children) and 2000 (older children) looked at food eaten by children living in families who receive benefits (Dowler, 2001). Poorer children were more likely to eat 'unhealthy' foods such as foods with excessive amounts of sugar, starch and sodium.

All surveys show that there is less variety in dietary patterns and more monotony of foodstuffs in poorer households. At all ages, people in poorer households have lower nutrient intakes than people in richer households and the gap between them has widened over the last 20 years (Dowler, 2001).

What is happening to address food inequality?

In 1997 Sir Donald Acheson's report *Inequalities in health* (Department of Health, 1998) recommended that a high priority should be given to the health of families with children and that steps should be taken to reduce income inequalities and improve the living standards of poor households.

More recent government documents such as *Saving lives: our healthier nation* (Department of Health, 1999), and the NHS Plan 2002 have acknowledged the links between poverty and deprivation as prime causes of ill health and mortality. The NHS Plan led to the School Fruit Scheme, which entitles every child aged 4-6 to a

free piece of fruit each day. Milk tokens for poor families available under the Healthy Start Scheme (formerly the Welfare Food Scheme) can now be used to buy fresh produce as well as milk. However, the value of vouchers, £2.80 a week to families with children aged over 1 year and £5.60 a week for families with children under 1, is clearly insufficient to tackle growing health inequalities.

Despite increasing concerns about obesity, as well as malnutrition, the government has continually rejected calls for the establishment of a minimum income or budget standard which would indicate how much money a family needs to maintain the health and well-being of their children.

The importance of free school meals

School meals have long been regarded as important for children – especially children from poor families. Dowler et al (2001) state that: '[school meals] have always been viewed as important for social, nutritional and educational reasons. Concerns about the health and welfare of children, particularly those from low income households, formed a focus of the original pressures for the introduction of free school meals and are still prevalent today' (p30).

There seems little doubt that free school meals are highly significant for parents on low incomes. Flaherty et al (2004) for instance note that: 'Although the risk of stigma is apparent, many children and parents view free school meal provision as a valuable resource. It enables children to have an adequate main meal when there may be cutbacks at home' (p150). They are also an important part of government policies towards the health of children.

But if both parents and the government consider free school meals highly significant for nutritional and general support for those on low incomes, what happens during those times in the year when they are not available – the school holidays? We can logically assume that the absence of free school meals at these times is correspondingly significant for children and their health.

The experiences in our projects in the South West and our structured discussions with parents strongly confirm this. The importance of this issue is also supported by recent work on children's perceptions of poverty and social exclusion by Ridge (2002). She notes (p83):

During the school term the provision of free school meals serves not only to ensure that children from low income families have a nutritious meal, but also as a budgeting mechanism for parents. For these families the issue lies not with the free school meals as such, but with the lack of additional financial support for children during the summer holidays, when there are extra mouths to feed.

Equally importantly, the lack of money for food may have a powerful impact on children's social lives and networks. For instance, if there is no food in the house it is very difficult for a parent to invite other children around.

Having less money in the school holidays

There was very general agreement from the parents we talked to that they had less money in the school holidays than in term time. This seemed to be regarded as a natural part of life on income support. There are several reasons why parents on income support are worse off in the school holidays. These include the extra demands for entertainment and activities for children and the need to save for the beginning of the new school term. But, talking to parents, the most significant reason is the absence of free school meals and the extra expense of providing food for their children during the school holidays. The following two case studies illustrate this.

Julie Neate

Julie Neate is a lone parent with four children Liam (10), Sean (9), Tomas (6) and William (1). Julie receives income support. In addition she receives housing benefit and so pays no rent charges. The older three children are all getting free school meals which have a weekly value of £ 23.25.¹

Julie says she has less money in the school holidays:

'Because I have to find an extra 15 meals a week. They never stop eating. They're always eating from the moment they get up to the moment they go to bed.'

She goes on to say:

I have to save up during the term for the school holidays. At the end of each week I put any money I've got into a money box for the school holidays... I'm always having to save in the school term time.

Later Julie says:

I have a box under the bed. I fill it up with extra food for them when I can afford it. But I don't tell the children about it.

Tania Ettridge

Tania Ettridge is a lone parent with two children aged 13 and 11. She is on income support and the value of her children's free school meals is £16.25 a week – money Tania has to find in the school holidays. She is certain that she has less money in the school holidays:

You can see the difference when they're on school holidays. As soon as they're on school holidays I have to stock up. When they're at home I have to give them a cooked meal. You're basically skint in the holidays...

You've got to feed them. That has to be your number one priority...

Especially in the six weeks' holiday it's awful. You've got six solid weeks. You've got no choice. You've got to feed them...

¹ These figures for free school meals are based on current charges in Wiltshire schools. In the senior schools pupils entitled to free school meals are allowed food from the canteen to the value of £1.70 a day. In the junior school there is a set meal which costs £1.55 for pupils who do not receive free school meals.

Financial pressure and poor quality food

There are of course several contributing factors to children having a poor diet, which leads at its most extreme to illness and obesity. The parents we come into contact with attribute poor children's diet to factors including advertising pressure and peer pressure. Not least parents tell us that they face an 'uphill struggle' in trying to get their children to eat healthily. But there is little doubt that a lack of money means that parents are more likely to be in a position where providing a decent diet is much more difficult.

The following case descriptions illustrate the link between financial pressures and inferior quality and unhealthy food. These pressures exist throughout the school year but are likely to be more extreme in the holidays. This is particularly important when children are not getting a relatively good quality meal in the middle of the day at school.

Jean Matthews

Jean Matthews is a lone parent with three children aged 13, 9 and 6. The family's free school meals are worth £24 a week. In effect, Jean has to find food to this value in the school holidays. So it is no surprise that in answer to the question: 'Do you find you have more or less money available in the school holidays than in term time?' Jean says 'definitely less'. She says:

The shopping bill goes way up in the school holidays. It's not just lunch I've got to buy. It's at 10 o'clock they're saying 'I'm

hungry – what can I have?' Or they just go to the cupboard and get it themselves.

Jean also makes a direct link between the cost of food and whether it is healthy:

Stuff that is not good for you is cheap. Stuff that is good for you is more expensive.

She talks about the food she buys which she knows is unhealthy but says she has no option:

They had an offer in Iceland the other day. It was £4 for a packet of oven chips, a packet of battered fish, battered onion rings, peas and sweet corn and six vanilla slices. I bought it because of the good price, but I don't want my children to end up my size.

Jean also talks about the other pressures on low income families during the school holidays:

School holidays you're thinking about the next school uniform. They bring their PE kit back and you realise they've been playing around with something halfway up their chests.

Marcia Britton

Marcia Britton, a lone parent with two children told us:

Jason (her 16-year-old son) is in and out of the cupboard the whole time.

Talking about the quality of food she could afford Marcia said:

You buy fizzy drink instead of orange juice. Both of them would prefer orange juice but I can only afford fizzy drinks. I don't buy a joint of meat or chicken. You just buy the bulk stuff ... the food you can get in offers is not good for them.

The impact of extra expenses on families' activities in the school holidays

As with the quality of food, many factors affect a parent's ability to provide decent experiences and activities for their children. Our previous report indicated that low general rates of benefit, lack of access, high entrance costs and variable provision of play activities all affected the quality of experience that families on income support could provide for their children in the holidays (Gill and Wellington, 2003).

But there can be little doubt that the demands of providing extra food add significantly to these pressures and make it even more unlikely that the parents can afford to do exciting, entertaining and developmental activities with their children. The paradox is that at the times of year when the most expectations are put on parents to be active and involved with their children are also the times when they have least resources to do so. The following illustrates the impact of the demands of having to buy extra food on what the family can do in the holidays.

Jenny Cole

Jenny Cole is a lone parent with a 6-year-old and a 3-year-old. She receives free school meals for her 6-year-old, Wayne. These are worth £6.75 a week.

Jenny says that she has always had less money in the school holidays:

I'm skint. I've got to pay my bills and get my shopping and then it's all gone. Sometimes I will skip a bill just to take them swimming ... so we're stuck in, as this place is such a dump. Six weeks' holiday is the worst.

Later she says:

In the end we need to eat whatever. If we've got bills they'll wait. Food comes first...

and she also says:

Yes, it restricts us, nine times out of ten we have to do things which are free: like go to the park and take a picnic. But it's not the same as going somewhere on the bus.

And she finishes by saying:

Makes me miserable. They want to go out and I can't afford it. We miss out on the treats. It's hard being a lone parent and on benefit.

The specific pressure of families on income support having less money because of additional food expenses can lead to:

- children having less healthy diets in the school holidays than they do in the term time – particularly important given the anxiety about the diet of children in the UK and increasing rates of obesity
- parents experiencing very high levels of pressure because of inadequate resources for caring for their children; these pressures may affect the quality of relationships between parent and children
- children's networks and social development being disadvantaged because of lack of available money for sharing food and entertaining children's friends
- 'knock on' effects produced by inadequate food resources in the school holidays – one of the most important of these is the probable lack of money for entertainment, treats and educational/developmental activities.

It is also important to recognise, from the parents' perspective, the connections between these different consequences of food poverty in the school holidays. One of the parents illustrated this well when she said:

When the children go out for the day and do things, then they don't get hungry. When they're home they're bored and they want to eat more. If you do things like swimming they don't always pester you for food. It's when they're bored they pester you for food.

1. Direct provision of food benefits

Families dependent on income support or income-related jobseeker's allowance should be directly compensated for the loss of free school meals in the school holidays.

It would cost the Treasury approximately £132 million a year to provide food benefits equivalent to the value of free school meals in the school holidays. This figure is based on there being approximately 1.5 million children in the UK aged between 5 and 16 who are entitled to free school meals,² 13 weeks a year of school holidays and a local median charge for free school meals of £1.35 a meal.

Government would need to address how the system is administered. One model would be similar to the Healthy Start scheme and involve issuing vouchers to families. This would avoid the complication of variable tax credits at different times of the year if payments are made through use of the tax credits system.

2. A child development grant to cover child care expenses in the school holidays

An alternative policy approach would be to recognise the general extra expenses of the school holidays (which are compounded by the lack of free school meals) and provide a grant which would be geared to allow parents to do at least some pleasurable and educational/developmental activities together with their children in the school holidays. The rate at which this would be set should be at least to provide for one day out in the shorter school holiday periods and two days out in the long summer holidays.

3. A national minimum income standard

This report also reinforces the argument for a national minimum income standard. If such a national standard existed, then anomalies such as parents being at their most hard pressed financially when their daily responsibilities were greatest could be avoided. We therefore strongly urge government to respond to the call from the Work and Pensions Committee for the adoption of budget standards.

² England 1,210,526, January 2003 (Department for Education and Skills 2003); Northern Ireland 67,490 2002-3 (Northern Ireland Department of Education 2003); Scotland 137,360 2002-3 (Scottish Executive 2003); Wales 90,456, 2001-2 (National Assembly for Wales 2003).

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