Child food insecurity in the UK: a rapid review

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Plain English summary

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Food insecurity (FI) involves difficulties accessing enough safe and nutritious food to meet people’s dietary needs and preferences for a healthy life. The consequences of FI can be particularly harmful for children. It is important to understand how FI may affect children’s health and social well-being, and what can be done to tackle it successfully. To understand the nature and consequences of the problem in the UK, we conducted a rapid review to identify studies that assess FI in children. As we knew that there were not many studies from the UK, we reviewed the literature from other high-income countries (Canada, the USA, and Australia, New Zealand, and other European countries). We found 109 studies that measured FI in children up to 18 years old and reported its relationship with children’s health and social well-being. Most of the studies were from North America and only five were from the UK. The results were not consistent across studies. Nevertheless, we identified some factors that may be linked to child FI, such as low family income, being deprived, living in public housing or low parental education level. In children, FI may affect general health, social well-being, mental and emotional health, and school performance. Food assistance programmes were generally found to mitigate FI and reduce hunger in the short term, but did not eliminate FI or improve academic performance. We also identified some limitations in the way this topic was addressed by researchers. Studies differed in terms of their characteristics and methods, and care should be taken when considering their findings. In particular, the measurement of child FI varied across studies. Hence, there is a need to develop a reliable method to measure it. Information on the extent of child FI in the UK or on the costs of interventions for reducing or eliminating FI was not available, and this is needed.
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This report

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