Children's centres, families and food insecurity in times of crisis

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We examine how children's centres in a major city in England responded to food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic by helping to run 'FOOD Clubs' to support families. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with children's centre staff, we analyse how clubs were organised, why people joined them, and the range of benefits parents derived from them. We extend the literature on food insecurity which focuses heavily on the rise of foodbanks. Our data also informs broader policy debates around supporting parents in poverty, effective early years provision and the challenges facing families experiencing food insecurity.

Key words food insecurity • poverty • early years • families • COVID-19

Introduction

In the UK, 10 per cent of all children experience food insecurity – defined as those who have limited or unreliable access to food due to a lack of financial resources (Power et al, 2020). This amounts to 2.6 million children living in food insecure households (The Food Foundation, 2022). Food insecurity is pervasive, has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and inflicts damaging consequences on parents and children (Aceves-Martins et al, 2018; Heflin et al, 2020; Loopstra 2020; Parnham et al, 2020; Power et al, 2020). This is deeply concerning, and a major social policy issue not least because food insecurity has damaging effects on children’s development, educational attainment and life-chances (Jyoti et al, 2005; Heflin et al, 2019, 2020; Melchior et al, 2012). Children’s lack of access to adequate food has come to recent public and political prominence following Marcus Rashford's campaign to end child food poverty and extend free school meal coverage.
This article provides important new evidence on food insecurity among young families by showing how children’s centres have supported families experiencing it during the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw on qualitative data from a larger study of children’s centres to examine how children’s centres staff, in conjunction with a range of partners, have organised and run ‘FOOD (Food On Our Doorstep) Clubs across Bristol in response to growing food insecurity during the pandemic. These clubs provide regular and fresh food at heavily discounted rates – most of which is acquired through the national charity FareShare; as we show in this article, they have been a critical source of support to families with very young children during the pandemic.

This article extends research in four important ways. First, we extend research on food insecurity in families. In recent years, a rapidly growing body of research has examined the growth of food aid and charity across the UK in the form of foodbanks (for example, Garthwaite, 2016a; Ghys, 2018; Price et al, 2020; Parr et al, 2021; Pybus et al, 2021). While important, this literature has focused less systematically on food insecurity among young children, its connections to educational inequalities and systems, or given sufficient attention to the emergence of charitable, institutional and organisational responses to food insecurity beyond foodbanks. We offer a different but still complementary perspective by focusing on FOOD Clubs – a relatively new and understudied response to food insecurity. A distinctive feature of this ‘model’ is that clubs are often located in established community institutions – in this case, children’s centres.

This focus helps to extend research on food insecurity in several interlocking ways. First, it highlights the growing diversity of responses to food insecurity beyond more traditional foodbanks – understanding the scale of food insecurity in the UK, and responses to it, requires research to explore this growing heterogeneity. Second, the development of FOOD Clubs further demonstrates how food charity continues to become a normalised response to food insecurity in rich nations, partly as a response to weakening social safety nets and precarious labour markets that perpetuate poverty and hunger (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). Third, it suggests a broader trend of food insecurity becoming institutionalised and normalised within the education system. A worry here is that this situation may depoliticise debates about food insecurity if teachers, parents and children increasingly see charitable food giving as one of the primary ways in which hunger can be solved (Fisher, 2017). Finally, this ‘spillover’ into the education system indicates that schools are increasingly acting as a ‘fourth emergency service’ that are dedicating significant time and resources to ensuring that children’s most basic needs are being met (Adams, 2019).

Our second major contribution is that we provide new evidence on how children’s centres acted as a crucial front-line service throughout the pandemic and were a protective bulwark against some of the damage done by the pandemic and the policies developed in response to it. Throughout this period, there was rightly a focus on the negative consequences of school closures, ‘lost learning’, and how this may entrench existing educational inequalities (Engzell et al, 2021; Major et al, 2021). However, the early years and important anchor institutions such as children’s centres received less political and scholarly attention. This relative neglect is significant because research has clearly established how critical the early years are for positive child development, promoting educational opportunities, cognitive development and supporting families (Heckman and Mosso, 2014; Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017). Indeed, recognition of the foundational importance of the early years played a key role in the development of one
of New Labour’s flagship policies designed to tackle child poverty: the development and expansion of Sure Start Children’s Centres (Waldfogel, 2010; Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). By showing how children’s centres, as places of education, learning and care, supported vulnerable families in a period of acute national crisis, we contribute to broader policy debates and research about the importance of the early years and how best to support families in poverty.

Third, the pandemic and the growth of FOOD Clubs brings into analytical focus what children’s centres are and can be good at; our article therefore has significance well beyond tracking the immediate consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting the specific processes that enable children’s centres to effectively support families and children, we extend research on children’s centres and early years education. We do so by examining the micro-level processes – the expertise, knowledge, emotional labour and routine practices – that help us to understand how staff and children’s centres as institutions are able to make a difference to parents’ and children’s lives. Therefore, rather than only describing what children’s centres do, we help identify the mechanisms that can help to explain how they can be effective. This complements previous quantitative work that focuses on evaluating their effectiveness but often lacks the fine-grained information provided by foregrounding the perspectives of children’s centres leaders and staff (Sammons et al, 2015; Hall et al, 2019). Clubs therefore act as a critical case study of what children’s centres are most effective at doing and how they do it.

Finally, we make a significant theoretical contribution to research on social capital and social networks by examining how people form beneficial social ties in organisational settings (Small, 2006; Small and Gose, 2020). Our data shows that clubs are important not only because they directly respond to food insecurity but because they transform people’s social networks. Joining a FOOD Club enmeshes families in new relationships and creates supportive social ties with other families and children’s centre staff; what is also important is that they are also used by staff as a means to connect families to other relevant support services. In this way, we are able to highlight how children’s centres are effective ‘organisational brokers’ (Small, 2009). Moreover, we show how building network connections between parents and professionals and to relevant organisations through club membership was often a deliberate and skilfully achieved strategy rather than an unintended secondary outcome. This draws attention to how responses to food insecurity are often about more than just food.

Background and literature review

We begin by clarifying what children’s centres and FOOD Clubs are. Sure Start Children’s Centres were introduced two decades ago in England as a key part of New Labour’s approach to reducing child poverty and educational inequalities (Eisenstadt, 2011). Now often known simply as children’s centres, these key anchor institutions work with families to reduce inequalities in child developmental outcomes, promote school readiness, and foster parental aspirations, skills and family health (Sammons et al, 2015). They do so by providing a range of services to families with young children (0–5); these range from stay and play groups, advice on mental health and child development, and more structured parenting programmes for those who have been referred. Similar to other early years and educational settings, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the
provision of services and working practices of children’s centres. As we show later in the article, children’s centres in Bristol responded by supporting the most vulnerable families and prioritising a small number of core activities focused on trying to ensure families’ ‘basic-needs’ were met.

One particularly important response was trying to ensure that families with young children had adequate access to sufficient food. The development, and scaling up of FOOD Clubs was a deliberate strategy adopted by children’s centres and other stakeholders in Bristol. These clubs have been launched in various parts of the UK by the charity Family Action; those at risk of food insecurity are invited to join the club for £1 and then pay £3.50 a week to receive approximately £15 of produce from FareShare – the UK’s largest charity that focuses on food waste and hunger. Research has shown how FareShare works with key business and organisations in the food industry (for example, Tesco), to distribute both surplus fresh and dry food to organisations and charities seeking to alleviate hunger and food insecurity (Caplan, 2017). FareShare operates distribution centres across the UK and delivers food to partners for a fee (Alexander and Smaje, 2008; Caplan, 2017). Increasingly, they also provide food for both breakfast clubs and holiday hunger clubs (Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018). The FOOD Club model was first developed in Manchester by Family Action but has since spread rapidly to other towns and cities across the UK, including Bristol where they are predominantly based in children’s centres and also community settings. There are currently almost 50 clubs operating across the country. This was done deliberately to target parents with young children who may be experiencing food insecurity; since 2020, there are 17 clubs across the city which are run by Family Action, volunteers and children’s centre staff. There is currently no systematic academic research on FOOD Clubs, making this the first article of its kind.

Linking research on food insecurity and children’s centres

Exploring the links between food insecurity, children’s centres and early years education is critical because a growing body of international evidence shows that food insecurity is damaging for young children as hunger and poor diet negatively impacts on a range of developmental, psycho-social and educational outcomes (Jyoti et al, 2005; Melchior et al, 2012; Heflin et al, 2019). Poor nutrition, and a lack of access to food, compounds the broader negative impacts of poverty on children’s life chances, educational attainment, and well-being (Howard, 2011); it also has a negative effect on parents’ mental health which in turn negatively impacts on parents’ relationships with their children (Goodman et al, 2011).

With regard to food insecurity in the UK, recent scholarship has focused heavily on the growth of foodbanks across the UK which provide emergency food parcels to individuals. This important literature has been critical in showing how a decade of welfare state retrenchment known as austerity led to growing economic precarity and drove increased usage of foodbanks (Loopstra et al, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016a; Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Loopstra et al, 2019). Qualitative studies have explored how foodbank usage can both be highly stigmatising and a key source of social and practical support (Garthwaite, 2016b; Loopstra et al, 2019; Beck and Gwilym, 2020). Research drawing more normative conclusions has been highly critical of the development of foodbanks for entrenching poverty and hunger. For example, Fisher (2018: 262) has argued that:
the anti-hunger industrial complex’s positive efforts to reduce food insecurity are offset by the collateral damage it causes to the health and dignity of the poor. The Band-Aid approach of the charitable food sector largely fails to address the root causes of hunger.

By focusing more heavily on the symptoms rather than the causes of hunger, it’s argued that foodbanks undermine social solidarity and the ability to create the political and economic changes to achieve food justice and tackle the root causes of food insecurity (for example, Riches, 2018).

FOOD Clubs can be understood against this backdrop but have so far received much less attention and represent a different response to food insecurity. They differ because they a) provide regular rather than emergency access to food; b) provide subsidised rather than free food; and c) focus heavily on food insecurity among families with young children. Our focus therefore helps to extend the literature on food insecurity and build bridges between this area of research and food insecurity among young children and families.

Existing scholarship on children’s centres shows that they help improve parent–child interactions, health outcomes, and the quality of the home learning environment – an important influence on social and educational outcomes (Hall et al, 2016 and 2019; Cattan et al, 2019; Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). Use of children’s centres is also associated with lowering preschool behavioural disorders (Hall et al, 2019). Understanding how children’s centres have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore an urgent task. What is significantly underrepresented in the literature on children’s centres, however, are rich and theoretically motivated qualitative studies that foreground the experiences and perspectives of staff and parents. Moreover, as FOOD Clubs are a new development, understanding how they work and how they fit into the broader mission of children’s centres is an important substantive and theoretical issue. It is also an important policy issue given the introduction of ‘Family Hubs’ which are a new early-years policy development aiming to integrate family services in order to support parents and children.

Central to the analytical and theoretical approach of this article, is situating the issues just discussed within their shared political and economic context. The rise of ‘foodbank Britain’ has been attributed to a long period of welfare retrenchment known as ‘austerity’ that significantly weakened the UK’s social safety net, made accessing welfare support more conditional and punitive, and increased levels of poverty (Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018; Loopstra et al, 2018). A consequence of this has been increasing levels of food insecurity across the UK. Similarly, and across this same period, there have been major funding cuts to local authorities’ budgets and children’s centres, which resulted in the number of children’s centres declining significantly. Evidence suggests a significant reduction in their number and funding as the ‘early intervention’ allocation fell by 64 per cent between 2010/11 and 2017/18’ (ibid: 4). Up to 1,000 children’s centres may have closed from their peak in 2009 (see also Hall et al, 2016; Smith et al, 2018). The Social Mobility Commission (2019: 31) noted its significance: ‘These closures… risk isolating the least advantaged in society and risk the funding for the home learning environment, missing the families that need it most.’ In our analysis, the impact of COVID-19 on education, young children and families, the growth of food insecurity, and the changing fortunes of children’s centres, can only be understood in relation to the political context of austerity, long-term cuts to local authority budgets, and reductions in many key public services, including children’s centres.
Children's centres, social capital and organisational brokerage

A further perspective we bring to bear is derived from scholarship examining the central roles that organisations play in shaping interactions, the formation of new social ties, and the network advantages that can flow from them (Small, 2006; 2009; Small and Adler, 2019). A key contribution in this regard is provided by Small’s seminal study of childcare centres in New York – which offer a similar range of services to many children’s centres in the UK – and more recent theoretical work that builds from it. Small argues that they are often beneficial for parents with young children because parents form friendships with other parents and are better able to access resources and information from a wide range of organisations. According to Small (2009: 22), childcare centres:

> tend to be remarkably effective brokers for the mothers they service. They broker social and organisational ties and their brokerage is associated with greater material and mental well-being, bringing to light the concrete implications of organizationally embedded networks.

Research on social networks and social capital suggests that children’s centres are fertile ground for relationships to develop: they bring together people with shared characteristics (homophily) who have chances to frequently and repeatedly interact in joint activities (Small and Gose, 2020; Small, 2021). Small highlights the importance of analysing such processes in organisational rather than strictly personal or interpersonal terms: it is typically organisations that create opportunities for people to form beneficial relationships with other individuals, social groups and organisations (Small, 2020). We extend the theoretical models developed in this literature by analysing how organisational brokerage happens in practice by demonstrating how parents form supportive social ties.

**Methods**

In support of the arguments and evidence discussed earlier, we draw on data from a larger qualitative project on children’s centres in Bristol of which there are 24. Children’s centres in the city are organised around four ‘hubs’ which help to coordinate the activities of these centres. The main goal of the project was to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s centres, giving particular attention to how the services and activities they normally offer may have been disrupted. More positively, we were also interested in the strategies they may have developed in response, in order to provide ongoing support to disadvantaged families across the city.

Our sampling strategy sought to maximise the range of perspectives, insights and experiences of children’s centres leaders and staff. We therefore sought to recruit people working in a variety of roles – from those in leadership roles to family support practitioners who worked directly with families. To be able to situate their narratives and perspectives in a broader context, a small number of local early years experts, policymakers and service providers were also recruited. This resulted in a sample of 60 individuals, the vast majority of whom were women. The age of participants tracked seniority and roles: younger participants were more likely to be in family support practitioner roles and work directly with families. In this article, we draw on
data from children’s centre staff who could provide perspectives on FOOD Clubs and food insecurity among young families.

Bristol is an ideal site to explore the research project’s aims and objectives. First, the city has retained a significant number of its children’s centres and services; in other parts of the country, centres have been closed entirely or drastically scaled back (Smith et al, 2018). Second, Bristol is a large, diverse city with an urban core and large suburban periphery, with the highest levels of child poverty of any city in south west England. The city provides sufficient scope to explore similarities and differences across children’s centres that serve a wide range of socio-economic and ethnic communities. Third, the city contains a developing network of FOOD Clubs that expanded rapidly during the pandemic.

An important part of the research process and project was that we adopted an open-ended and exploratory approach that allowed the project team to explore themes and issues as they emerged in data collection. This was particularly important in this article – at the start of project, we knew nothing about FOOD Clubs and how heavily children’s centres were involved in responding to food insecurity. From the initial handful of interviews, it quickly became clear that the clubs were absolutely central to children’s centres’ response to lockdowns and the pandemic more generally. We therefore included questions relating to them and deliberately recruited participants with experiences of being involved in them. We attempted to understand what FOOD Clubs are, how they worked and how they fitted into the broader goals and activities of children’s centres. A potential limitation of the study, and in fully understanding the perspectives of all those involved in using FOOD Clubs, is that parents were not interviewed. This is because the original scope of the study, and the resources available, was focused on experiences of children’s centres staff and their perspectives on how children’s centres had been impacted during the pandemic.

A key strength of qualitative research and semi-structured interviews is that they are able to foreground people’s experiences, actions, perspectives and the meaning that they attach to them (Gerson and Damakse, 2020). They are also sufficiently flexible to allow distinctive experiences to be explored but similar enough for comparisons across children’s centres, hubs and roles to be made (Kvale, 2007). Prior to data collection, an interview schedule was developed that covered topics pertinent to the project. This included questions relating to the impact of COVID-19 on services provided, the experience of work, the impact on families, and decision-making connected to the work of children’s centres. Specific interview schedule sections were designed for people in different roles, for example, children’s centre leaders who had a broader perspective on management and organisational issues, and family support workers who worked on the ground and more closely with parents.

Data collection ran from September 2020 to May 2021 and interviews typically lasted between 50 and 60 minutes; they all took place online using Microsoft Teams or Zoom. An advantage of online interviews is their flexibility – interviews could take place around the schedules of staff with minimum disruption. It also allowed interviews to take place if people were working from home, which they often were because of the pandemic.

As in many qualitative projects, the process of data analysis began during the data collection phase. This was done by creating interview summaries, writing analytic memos, reading transcripts and identifying broad similarities and differences across interviews. This was then followed by analysing data in the qualitative data analysis
package NVIVO. Our approach to data analysis sits within the broad approach of ‘thematic analysis’ which can be defined as, ‘a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 79). The process of coding data was approached in two ways: some codes were developed inductively through close readings of the data, others were more deductive in that they were drawn from pre-existing theories and concepts (Deterding and Waters, 2021). This allowed us to draw out the more general themes that structure our discussion here.

**FOOD Clubs in context**

A starting point for our analysis is to situate FOOD Clubs within children’s centres’ broader response to the pandemic and its associated consequences – something on which our respondents were well placed to shed light. Consistent with a growing body of evidence, children’s centres staff reported that the pandemic was having severely negative impact on many families, and particularly those experiencing financial hardship or dealing with the vicissitudes of having very young children (Blundell et al, 2020; Montacute, 2020). The most common concerns were centred on increasing stress and worsening mental health, growing levels of domestic violence and rising economic precarity – with food insecurity being a particular manifestation of this. The impact of the pandemic on families and how they are supported was captured by a family support practitioner who remarked: ‘It’s a huge shift, yeah, definitely. Definitely in the last six to eight months, our work has become a lot more around ensuring families have got their basic needs as opposed to before’ (Linda).

Thus, food insecurity was connected to a range of other damaging effects of the pandemic which threatened the well-being and safety of families. The focus on food was described by a family support practitioner who explained:

> We very much focused on food, as a children’s centre, so we would phone the families that we knew that would come into the children’s centre regularly, or that we had worries and concerns over, to make sure that we had done something to be able to see those children. (Sharon)

A range of interviewees discussed FOOD Clubs as fitting into a broader approach that sought to make sure vitally important services still operate and to ensure that families’ basic needs were met.

In terms of how the clubs operated, they received weekly deliveries through FareShare. For the most part, staff praised the quality of the food they received. This included a mixture of fresh fruit and vegetables and dry foods that were designed to provide families with the means to have a balanced diet. This was also supplemented by some donations from the children’s centres themselves. One interviewee commented: ‘so we get a FareShare delivery each week, so that’s been quite nice to let people know that they can come in here, grab the essentials, we get fresh fruit and veg, and potatoes and pasta, and just the essentials. And we get some milk’ (Maryam).

It was also remarked, however, that some of the food was not taken by families if it was outside of the normal range of food that they used. A children’s centre leader explained:

> you’re getting stuff like celeriac or pineapples or mangoes or sweet potatoes, that people might not normally buy themselves. What did we have the other

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day that was totally bizarre? We had venison I think in one of them, but there were only a couple of those. But it’s just things like that that families perhaps wouldn’t normally come across. (Jane)

Therefore, the children’s centre staff recognised that some of the food was not being taken or used because of social and cultural reasons and that there were constraints on the types of food that could be accessed through FareShare. This concern was particularly expressed in children’s centres serving racially and ethnically diverse populations.

It was also highlighted that although food insecurity was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a long-standing problem across the city. Having said that, it was also stressed that the number of clubs has been radically scaled up in response to it. As one interviewee commented:

We started just before COVID started, so you know, we weren’t getting as many families and then all of a sudden the amount of families we were getting and again, it wasn’t families that were on just benefits, it’s families that have been made redundant or have been on furlough. (Jessica)

Our data suggests that clubs were often significantly oversubscribed. For example, one interviewee said, ‘We’re at capacity in all of our clubs. We’re turning people away’ (Alice). While most users of FOOD Clubs were young families, some clubs were open to any member of the local community in need of support. As one interviewee explained, ‘We’ll take anybody now. It’s anybody who lives within a 15–20-minute walking distance. We’ve got a few older customers’ (Ella). Typically, families could either join clubs directly or could be referred by children’s centre staff. Staff reported that they were more often signposting and referring to the clubs as the pandemic progressed.

Clubs’ ability to operate during the pandemic was often dependent on government guidance, periods of lockdown, and the availability of staff – clubs were typically staffed by volunteers from the charity Family Action, children’s centre staff or a combination of both. In discussing how they operated, our interviewees stressed that the clubs were one of the very few services that had continually run throughout the pandemic. One member of staff reflected, ‘[its] is one thing that has run through the whole time, the only one thing that’s run consistently’ (Chloe). It was also emphasised that how FOOD Clubs ran varied significantly across the year. If children’s centres were able to have families attend, then they could come in to collect food: ‘Ours was running all throughout lockdown because it was desperately needed and it was quite evident, so our children’s centre is closed to everybody in general, like all the people coming in, but for food club, we have a separate entrance’ (Lucy).

During periods of lockdowns and when children’s centres services had been severely disrupted, however, staff also provide food parcel drops to families in need, especially to those that needed to self-isolate. One member of staff explained:

we were doing food deliveries… We just needed to know that they were okay. It was incredibly hard conversations. We had people who weren’t coming out the house. They couldn’t afford to buy nappies so they couldn’t put their children in nappies so they couldn’t take them out of the house. (Eve)
As this quote powerfully shows, food deliveries were a lifeline for families and also highlights how many disadvantaged parents were unable to access many basic goods necessary for taking care of infants. It also begins to bring into focus that dropping off food at people’s homes was a way for staff to connect and communicate with families; unsurprisingly this was reported as an emotional and practically demanding activity. One children’s centre manager reflected about delivering food and other essentials to families:

Initially, in the first few months, we actually also delivered, so that’s another strain on our staff in terms of we were taking time to box all the food up, so that would take two or three hours, and then some families were actually in isolation, for whatever reason, so we got members of staff to drive out. (Emma)

Our data also suggests that the pandemic led to greater levels of stress and workloads for children’s centres staff. As this introductory theme makes clear, FOOD Clubs offered a critical source of support to families during the pandemic and reflects a broader strategy of children’s centres to offer on-going support to families in need.

**Why do people use FOOD Clubs?**

A basic but critical question is ‘why did people join and use FOOD Clubs?’ FOOD Clubs were founded in response to two major social ills: food insecurity and large-scale food waste. It was also hoped that by having a nominal joining fee, small weekly payments and framing FOOD Clubs as a social good that helped to reduce food waste would make them less stigmatising than foodbanks (see Garthwaite, 2016a). Although our data cannot speak with any depth to this latter issue, the reflections of those involved in running clubs highlighted that parents joined because they lacked the financial resources to buy an adequate amount of food for their families at supermarkets. Thus, the primary driver of joining the clubs was food insecurity which in turn reflected high levels of poverty and destitution. This is consistent with research on why people use foodbanks (Loopstra et al., 2019; Loopstra, 2020). As one interviewee explained, ‘A lot of it is to do with low income, a lot of them have really low income and struggle to even buy food’ (Harriet). Another remarked, ‘One of my fathers was begging on the street to support his family’ (Anna).

Interviewees were acutely aware that food insecurity could not be separated from other forms of poverty and material deprivation. It was regularly noted that if parents joined, they may also be struggling to provide goods like nappies and clothes and also experience fuel poverty. One children’s centre staff member reported that:

Yeah like we’ve had quite a few families come to us going ‘oh I need to put money on the electric but I need to buy food.’ It is a very real choice for them… all she (a mum) ate one day was half a hotdog sausage and she couldn’t, she wouldn’t have been able to feed her kids, so sort of we – I said straight away like – come to FOOD Club. (Kate)

Our participants also highlight two further distinctive reasons for members of clubs not being able to afford adequate levels of food. First, evidence suggests that those
with young children may be particularly at risk from food insecurity as the first years of a child’s life are associated with increased living expenses and reduced incomes (Loopstra et al., 2019). In several interviews it was commented on that for mothers of very young children, food insecurity manifested itself in terms of not being able to purchase baby milk or baby food. This was felt particularly acutely in the early stages of the pandemic when panic buying meant cheaper brands of baby food and milk were scarcer. One member of staff discussed the situation facing one mother:

She never had any money for milk or nappies, so, I was a bit like ‘okay’! So, I went and spoke to management and we just went and got her emergency stock of nappies and milk so that was a bit of a real eye opener that people are really struggling. (Megan)

Second, while it was consistently highlighted that while poverty was a key factor associated with joining a club, often this was reflective of moving rapidly into poverty and experiencing financial disruption and deprivation due to losing a job or changes to benefit entitlements. Therefore, the economic shock and consequences associated with the pandemic, which saw rising unemployment and economic precarity were also key factors in joining clubs. This point is crucial as it highlights that the ultimate reason that people often resorted to FOOD Clubs was not straightforwardly poverty, but that they had been pushed into poverty by the government’s response to rising unemployment, the inadequacy of the furlough scheme to cover key living expenses and an often punitive welfare system that led to delays in receiving Universal Credit. These issues were discussed by several interviewees. For example, one children’s centre staff member explained: ‘I think we have noted that more and more people are using the FOOD Club because of job loss or financial difficulties obviously due to being furloughed and losing jobs and all that’ (Karoline).

Universal Credit in particular is highlighted as a problem because there was often a significant delay between applying and receiving payment. As Janet explained about a situation facing a young mother who used FOOD Clubs: ‘She made a change to her universal credit’s money and, because of that, it gets frozen for five weeks, so you have no money for five weeks until that adjustments come, then the money comes through’ (Janet).

Moreover, precarious working conditions associated with working on zero hours contracts, which often provide people with little job security, were also cited as a contributory factor as to why people couldn’t afford to feed their families. This was clearly highlighted in the discussion of one family’s situation:

He’s not contracted a certain amount of hours, so he might get zero hours one week and then five hours the next week and 20 hours the next week, so she was like ‘He hasn’t had any work for the last week, so whatever money’s come in covers their bills, but nothing else. We’ve got no money left.’ (Olivia)

Overall, the data clearly shows that it is too simplistic to straightforwardly attribute joining a club to poverty and the pandemic. In our view, the extent of food insecurity experienced by families’ needs to be understood just as much as in relation to the
long shadow of austerity and growing job insecurity as the short-term and immediate shocks of the pandemic.

**Other benefits of FOOD Clubs?**

So far, our analysis has highlighted how critical FOOD Clubs have been to tackling food insecurity during the pandemic, how they worked, and why people use them. A striking feature of our data is the extent to which being a member of a club provided a wide range of benefit for families and children’s centres staff that went far beyond issues of food insecurity. These included forming new relationships between parents and staff, accessing professional and emotional help and being connected to various organisations offering wider services to families (for example, relating to domestic abuse or mental health). Thus, a benefit of FOOD Clubs was that it expanded people’s social networks and generated social capital. A family support practitioner explained, ‘I think, for our families, it was that connection with somebody’ (Michelle). Another interviewee stated:

> We’ve managed to generate so much peer support within that group as well because they are queuing for 40 minutes or an hour some weeks because of the way we’re managing it to get them in and round. It’s a long wait but we have practitioners holding the queue as well so those conversations are being managed and are being held. (Julia)

What is striking about our data is the regularity with which people invoked the language of social networks, community and relationships when discussing how FOOD Clubs worked and how they were beneficial for families. For example, one interviewee stated that ‘It’s not just about the food, it’s about engagement – it’s about networking with other families’ (Alice). Another respondent remarked that, ‘Yeah, it’s been such a gateway into the Children’s Centre’ (Megan). Such comments captured staff’s perspectives on the positive spill-over effects attending clubs and drew attention to how individuals who frequently interact in such organisations are more likely to cultivate social connections that are mutually beneficial and therefore lead to the development of social capital (*Small, 2009*).

At times the literature on social networks can seem to assume that as long as people are in a shared social environment, such as a children’s centres, and have opportunities to interact then the process of forming new relationships is ‘actor driven’ and occurs in a largely organic way. It is here that our data on what staff do to foster connections between FOOD Club users is particularly instructive. Children’s centres staff frequently reported on the deliberate strategies they used to introduce people to each other. This was vividly described by a member of staff:

> [there is a] woman at the moment who’s been stood in the queue at FOOD Club who speaks Spanish and we managed to very carefully negotiate another Spanish speaker to be stood next to her and they started a conversation and this woman is living in fear with no food and no nappies in a temporary accommodation and the fact that we could link with someone that spoke her language and that they could swap phone numbers, which means that from nine till six that we’re available, we’re still really heavily supporting this woman but from six to nine that we’re not available, she has got a friend. (Anna)
Thus, staff engaged in a deliberate social choreography to make sure parents met the ‘right’ people, particularly if they need additional support. They could do this for several reasons. First, staff had extensive knowledge of the families who attended, they were able to introduce people who had a shared interest, language, culture or problem. Second, it was clear from our interviews that staff are highly skilled at recognising subtle social clues from parents if they were struggling. One interviewee commented, ‘You’re seeing someone every week and you can see if something’s different in them’ (Katherine). It is for both of these reasons that children’s centres quickly realised that clubs were more effective if they were primarily run by staff who knew those who used them and had developed relationships with them rather than volunteers.

Given many of the restrictions facing the work of children’s centres, clubs were also a conducive environment for staff to develop trusting relationships with parents who often needed extensive support; this is key for making early years settings effective. The idea of developing trust and relationships was emphasised by a family support practitioner who said:

Yeah, I also found that really positive in new referrals, because that was really hard to try and build trust and a relationship with somebody that you’ve never met face to face, but using the FOOD club and being able to go and deliver things, or even if they came into the FOOD club, if you’re there it was a good way to start to establish it, which was really helpful. (Mary)

In this way, FOOD Clubs help to support the broader aims of children’s centres in supporting disadvantaged and marginalised families. This is because they enabled children’s centre staff to form more effective relationships with parents which subsequently meant that they could also provide them with information and support. One interviewee commented that ‘We’re encouraging people to stop and talk and often the FOOD Club is just the way into other services for some people’ (Olivia). Following Small (2019), it’s important to understand much of this in organisational terms. A core function of children’s centres is to be a ‘one-stop-shop’ enabling parents and families to access a wide range of support services offered by a range of organisations; in this way – FOOD clubs provide the ideal structure to support children’s centres to be effective ‘organisational brokers’ (Small, 2019).

Conclusion

Food insecurity is a major political, social policy and educational issue. It is experienced by millions of children in the UK and across the world and is associated with a range of negative social, emotional, developmental and educational outcomes (Jyoti et al, 2005; Aceves-Martins et al, 2018; Heflin et al, 2020). Despite its obvious importance, research on the interconnections between food insecurity, families, education and key institutions such as children’s centres remains relatively sparse, particularly in the UK. We have analysed the phenomenon of FOOD Clubs – a new and distinctive approach to helping feed families unable to access sufficient food; in doing so, we have extended research on food insecurity. Primarily operating in children’s centres, our analysis shows how serious the issue of food insecurity was for many families during the pandemic and how children’s centres continued to support vulnerable and marginalised families with young children. Food insecurity rose significantly
during the pandemic and many key social institutions, including schools, responded by making food accessible to families. For example, emerging evidence suggests that increasing numbers of schools now operate their own foodbanks and plan to continue them as the cost of living crisis develops (Baker, 2022).

Our analysis helps to highlight the growing diversity of responses of food insecurity. This draws attention to the need to study charitable food giving beyond foodbanks when considering responses to food insecurity, if it is to be fully understood. Moreover, the rise of FOOD Clubs and foodbanks, can be interpreted as the continued failure of the state to meet the demands of food justice and ensure that people have the necessary financial means to provide for themselves and their families (Riches, 2018).

We have also extended research on children’s centres by highlighting how children’s centres staff skilfully continued to provide practical and emotional support to families during the pandemic. By foregrounding the voices and perspectives of children’s centres staff – which are often missing in existing studies – this article sheds new light on the micro-level processes in which staff engage to support disadvantaged and marginalised families. Understanding the importance of children’s centres and the work they do is a particularly important policy issue given the increased pressures on early years funding and children’s centres. It also provides important evidence to policymakers about what makes early years services effective – this is particularly important given the shift away from children’s centres and towards ‘Family Hubs’.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is the immediate context for this article, we have worked within a much broader analytical framework that has helped us to extend research in two other ways. First, we have highlighted that those longer-term changes in the UK’s welfare system and labour market (for example, Universal Credit and zero-hours contracts) exacerbated food insecurity in families during the pandemic. Thus, the impact of the pandemic cannot be separated from the decade of austerity and welfare reform that preceded it. Second, we have drawn attention to how children’s centres can act as effective ‘organisational brokers’ and that through FOOD Clubs, families developed valuable relationships with other parents and staff. Future research could examine these issues in more detail – a potential weakness of our research is that due to the pandemic and the scope of the project, we did not study the clubs ‘in action’ or gather data on the perspectives of parents or families.

The rise of FOOD Clubs in children’s centres, and emerging evidence that the number of foodbanks located in schools, points to a potentially important trend: how responding to food insecurity is becoming normalised and institutionalised within the education system. If schools, teachers, charities and organisations such as children’s centres, are giving greater attention to food insecurity and hunger in children, it raises important questions about the nature of contemporary schooling, child development, and how this connects to broader social and educational inequalities. We hope future research further explores this terrain.

Note

1 We have included the name of the city after considering the associated ethical issues surrounding anonymity. Participants were told that the city would be identifiable, no individual or children’s centre will be identifiable and keeping the location anonymous would have been highly unlikely given the focus/scope of the project.
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Conflict of interest
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