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Maternal and infant food insecurity in the UK: a problem hiding in plain sight?

DOUGLAS, F., MACIVER, E., DAVIS, T. and LITTLEJOHN, C.

2023

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Maternal and infant food insecurity in the UK. A problem hiding in plain sight?

6th Maternal and Infant Nutrition Conference
April 2023

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Presentation Overview

- Background context
- Methods
- Key findings
- Context update
- Conclusions and implications

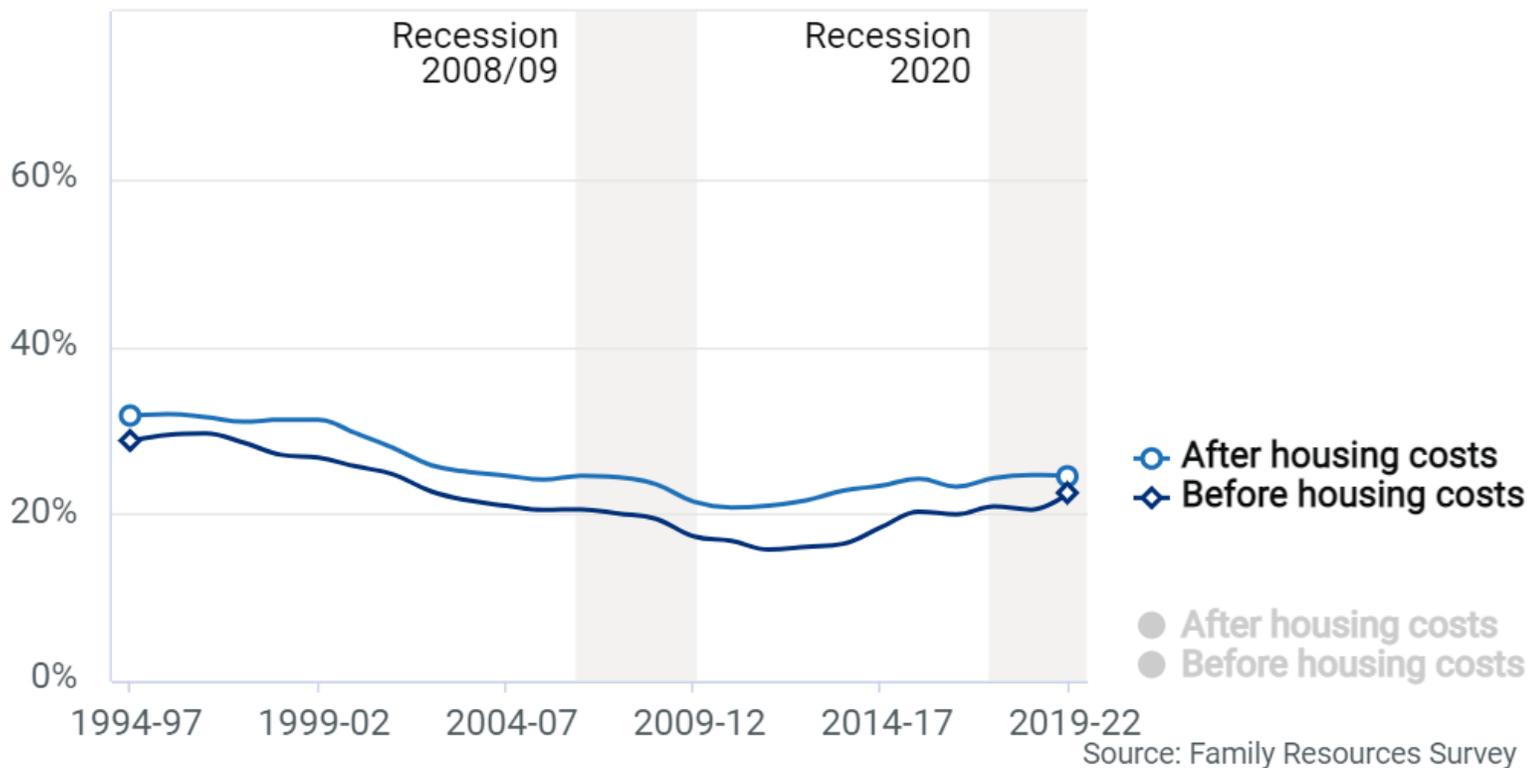
Children and families living and **growing up in poverty experience significant disadvantage in terms of poorer child health, developmental and educational outcomes, poorer health and life chances in later adulthood.**

Child health inequalities are considered an outcome of two distinct but related pathways involving low income.

- **Lack of money** available to families to buy goods and services such healthy diets, good quality housing and extracurricular activities (
- **Family stress** manifested by the emotional strain experienced by parents and carers living in poverty. Low income contributes to post-natal and general depression and anxiety in women.
- **Income effects are more obvious at the bottom of the income distribution**, with a noted association between low neonatal birthweight for low income households.

Figure 4: Child poverty stable

Proportion of children in relative poverty, Scotland



An estimated 24% of children (**250,000 children each year**) were living in relative poverty after housing costs in 2019-22.

Before housing costs, it and estimated 22% of children (**230,000 children each year**) were in relative poverty.

[Child poverty summary \(data.gov.scot\)](https://data.gov.scot)

Scottish Child Poverty Statistics

Figure 5a: More than two thirds of children in poverty live in working households

Children in relative poverty after housing costs by household work status, Scotland

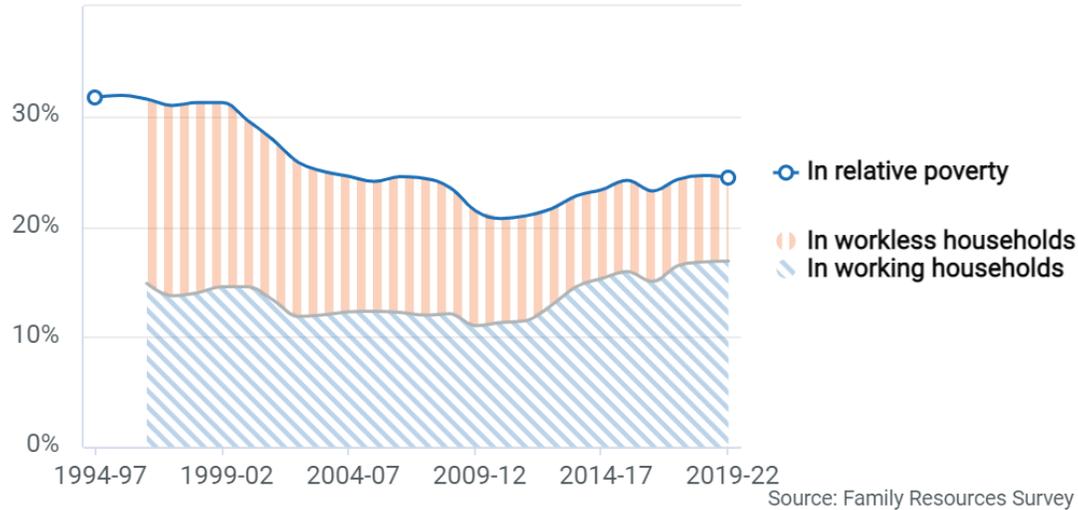
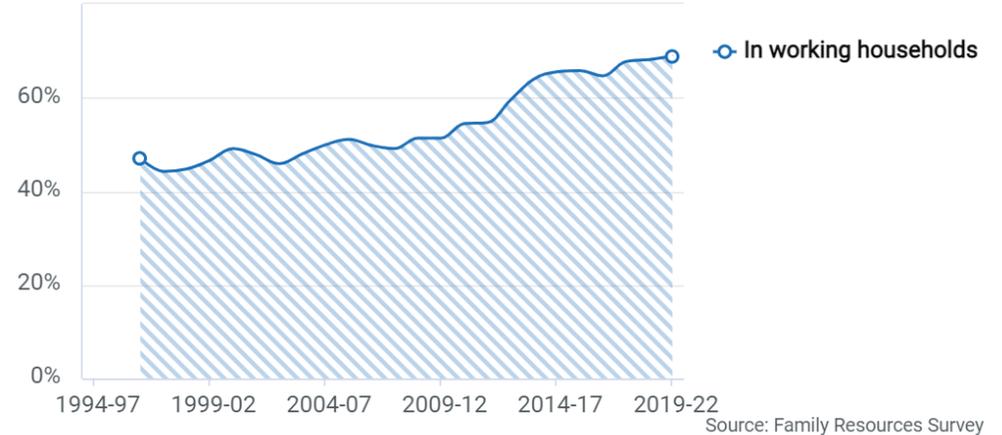


Figure 5b: More than two thirds of children in poverty live in working households

Share of children in relative poverty after housing costs who live in working households, Scotland



in 2019-22, an estimated 69% of children in relative poverty after housing costs were **living in working households** (170,000 children each year)

[Child poverty summary \(data.gov.scot\)](https://data.gov.scot)

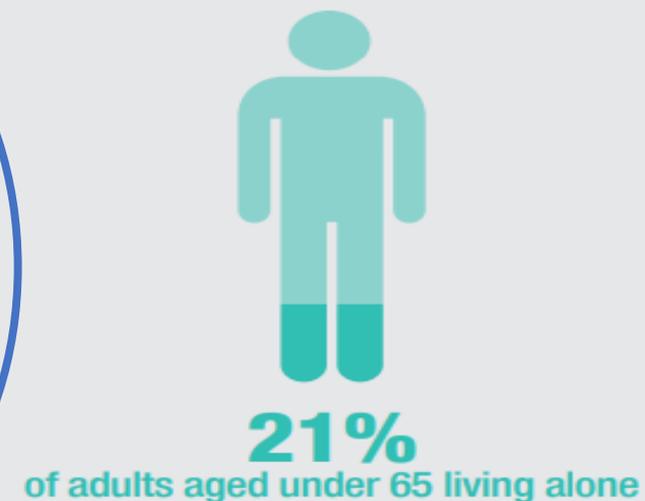


9% of adults experienced food insecurity in 2018 (as defined by being worried during the past 12 months that they would run out of food due to lack of money or resources).

6% of all adults also said they had eaten less than they should for this reason, while 3% of adults said that they had actually run out of food because of a lack of resources.

- In 2017/2018, 16% of adults in the most deprived areas reported being worried about running out of food, compared with 4% in the least deprived areas.
- In 2017/2018, mental wellbeing was substantially lower for those reporting food insecurity: mean WEMWBS score of 42.2 compared with 50.3 for other adults.

In 2017/2018, the household types most likely to have experienced food insecurity were single parents and adults below the age of 65 living alone:



Scotland's Child Poverty Act 2017

- Child Poverty Action Plans 2018-2022
- Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026

Investigation of early implementation of the Financial Inclusion Pathway within the NHS Grampian area in relation to clinical practice, and the experience of care.



[Every Child, Every Chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22](http://www.gov.scot)
(www.gov.scot)

[Supporting documents - Best Start, Bright Futures tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026](http://www.gov.scot) -
[gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

Overall Study aims

1. Low-income parents' perspectives and experiences of engaging with early years health professionals about financial challenges and income maximisation

2. Community-based health care professionals' experiences of addressing income poverty during routine practice - pregnant women and parents/carers of children under 5.

- Two interview studies were conducted with **22 pregnant women and mothers with at least one child under five** during 2020 -2022 in north-east Scotland (10 recruited via a food pantry network, and 12 via health professionals)
- One study also involved interviews with **18 midwives, health visitors and family nurse partners.**
- Data were thematic analysed using Grounded Theory principles.

Study One 2020-2021: Research Objectives

- Lived experiences of parents/carers and mothers of infants and young children in relation to the challenges of parenting on very low incomes (including food coping strategies) in Aberdeen City
- Perspectives and experiences of financial issues conversations during routine health care
- Perspectives of the **benefits** and **possible negative consequences** of the FIP concept

Parent Interview topics

- Exploration of household context
- Perspectives and experiences of financial issues conversations during routine health care
- Perspectives of the **benefits** and **possible negative consequences** of the FIP concept

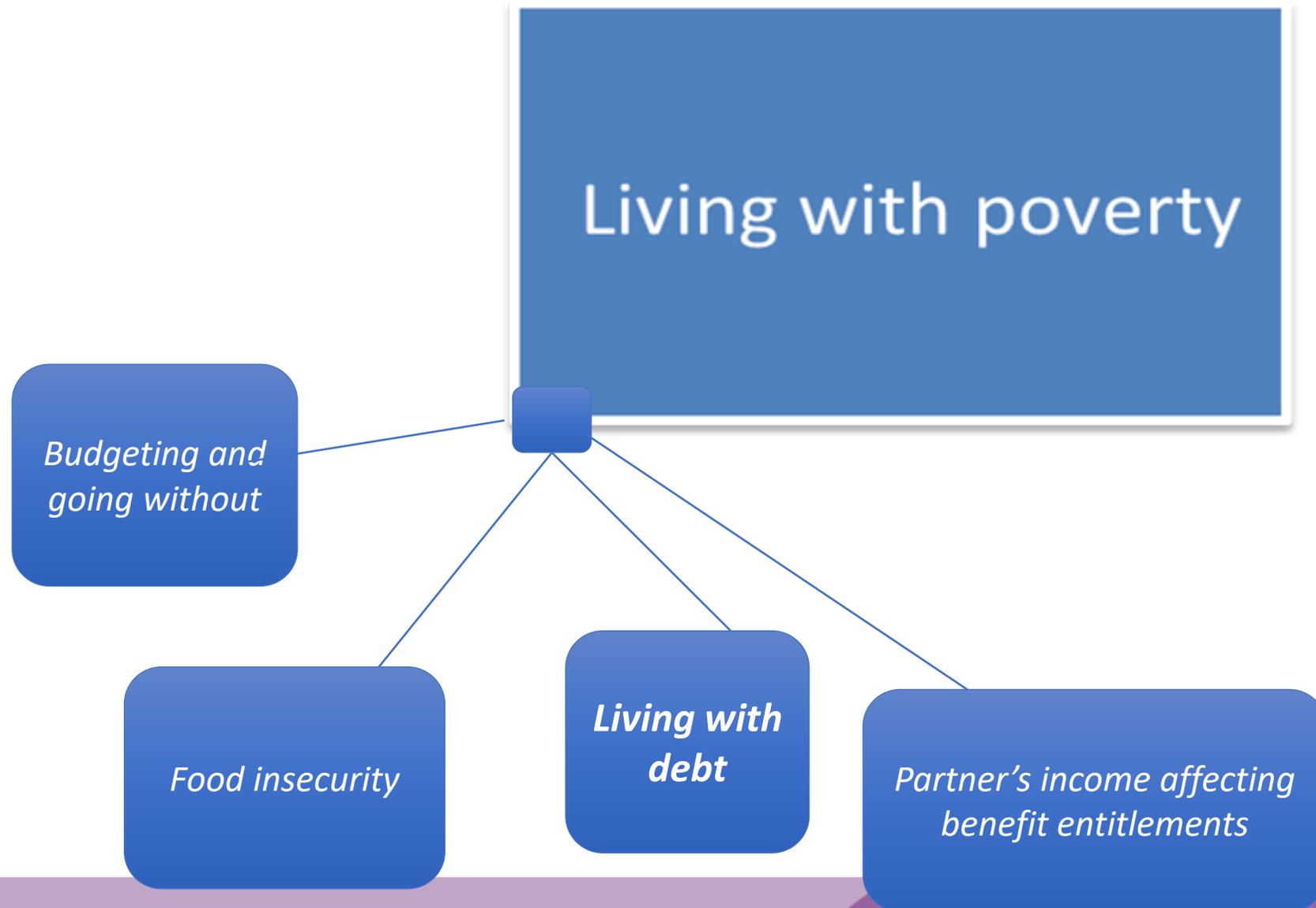
Health care professionals' questions

- Nature of child poverty in practice areas
- Experiences of raising financial issues during routine care
- Perspectives about HCP roles in relation to discussing financial challenges with clients

Overall data analysis yielded five emergent themes and multiple sub themes - three of which relate specifically to the delivery and receipt of routine enquiry about financial challenges during pre and post natal care.

Today's findings focus – a comparison between two key themes:

- **Experiences of parents living with poverty and the risks associated with discussing financial issues with health professionals**
- **Health professionals perspectives of living with poverty, and their concerns about parents financial well being**



Debt

'I've got a few letters saying that I'm supposed to paying £100, I think it was £127 per month....and now I've got a balance that says £586.80 is paid within 14 days...of this letter, which I got today...or, my debt will be passed to the Sheriff's Office for collection... so, they've done this without a phone call, without notifying me through text or phone....because I don't even, you know, I can't, I can't afford that'. Full time carer of 10 month old daughter living on her own SG2)

'Some months are a bit better, cause my Universal Credit isn't constant.....cause I'm paying for my rent arrears, it's like different every month, it's never been the same'. (19 year old woman with a 2 year old son SG2)

"... obviously I've got to feed the kids. They still are my main priority ..." (Julie, 37)

'cause of this benefit cut, sometimes it's like basically I go without even simple things like food and that just so that my kids can get to do stuff.' (005 SG1)

Food insecurity

'mean, there's been days that...we've not had enough for all of us to eat...we'll [self and husband] just have a bit of bread, a bit of toast or whatever cause there's not enough to sort of have a for everyone...you always have to put your kids first.' (009 SG1)

Sub-themes

Budgeting and going without

*'I tend to do like a, a, a tinned shop. I'll buy like all the, the beans and spaghetti and pasta and stuff, you know, the dry stuff, I'll buy all of that sort of monthly and then the rest is kind of weekly, **cause I don't know what money I'm going to have for the month and I don't know what's going to happen and, who's going to need what or, whatever,** so it tends to be just weekly picking up, you know, maybe a pack of mince but, we would, like a pound of mince would do maybe three meals for the two of us so, you know, and we would just, I've got like packets of mince in the freezer, like half a pack or a third of pack, tend not to, you know, spread things out rather than bulking things up with the mince'* (Heather, 54 SG2).

.So, once, obviously, that money comes in, you have to pay your rent, all the bills, then all the shopping, and then you're, you're left with nothing, for leisure, you know....so, it's like one month, okay, I've got a, maybe buy less shopping so I can actually take my daughter out and go play somewhere, you know.' (22 year-old university student with 2-year-old daughter SG2)

'I don't know if I'm too strict, but I have a strict routine. I try and keep to it, you know, where they get their breakfast and then they'll get a snack, then their lunch, then they'll get another snack, erm, between lunch and, and supper...So, sort of tried to maintain the same routine as I do when they're at school. I think snacks and stuff for the kids...sometimes have to be sacrificed so that we can get like main meals...cause I feel that's more important.' (002 SG1)

.'...you know, we literally, every month we live hand to mouth...so the first thing we do, we know now exactly how much goes out on bills and we have all the bills come out on the 1st...so we get (at the end of the month, everything comes out...once everything comes out then we go food shopping and we look at what we've got for the month' (009 SG1)

Partner's income affecting benefit entitlements

'...it was a very hard situation for like a year, for me and my husband, because before my baby was born, we tried to apply for a child grant and like it was like for food coupons, I don't remember properly about that, but for all the, the letter we have, no, you're not available, because your income is so high, you're not available for that type of grant, or that types of benefits as well.' (29-year-old woman with an 8-month-old son whose husband was working SG2)

'I've got a friend, erm, she's, she's got a little boy, and because of her husband's income, erm, she can't get any of this help at all, which, obviously, there's certain, obviously, allowances they do can, but I think it's, that's like another example of, you know, someone that does need that help, but can't get it'. (23 year-old former oil industry employee with a 9 month-old son SG2)



Embarrassment

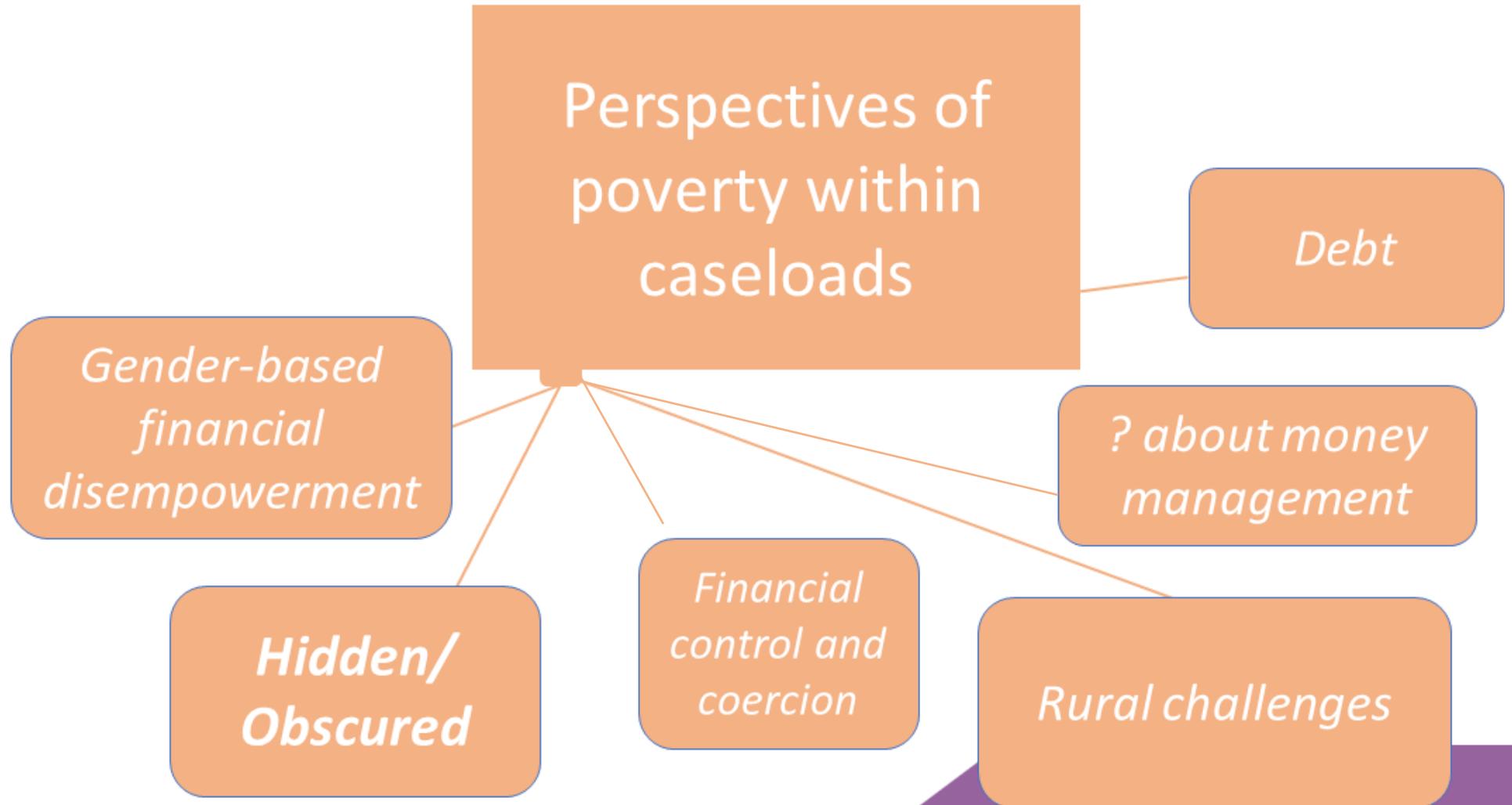
'I feel like you could talk to people and the first question they have is, do you not have family that can help? And not all of us do, know what I mean, like, we might have family but not everyone's family can help you like that, know what I mean? So, I feel that they maybe try push it onto families and you feel a bit embarrassed....know what I mean, it is an embarrassing sort of thing to be like, oh right, even, I don't have money to get formula, milk or food for my family, it's embarrassing.' (19 year-old woman with a 2 year-old son SG2)

Child protection concerns

"because I've been too nervous or too, too frightened because, for myself, and I've just been like, no, it's okay". 1(8-year-old mother of a 2-year-old daughter SG2)

Fear of exacerbating abusive relationships

'I was working actually when I was pregnant, pregnant.....I was working until, I think it was eight and a half months really.....erm, and because of the abuse.....abusive relationship I was in, I wasn't almost allowed to talk to anyone about anything. So, it would've been difficult to bring up finances and things.....so, it was purely about, purely about pregnancy' (single mother with 6-year-old daughter SG2)



Hidden Existence of Poverty

'You know, if .., we're seeing repeated, they're not coming for appointments, it means we have to talk about, well, erm, does it mean that, erm, is it because they can't, they haven't got the bus fare, they can't get the taxi to get to an appointment. So, what we will do is we, we will sort of couch these things in, their neglecting their child, but actually, poverty is often the biggest barrier for them to then parent that can, erm, meet that child's needs. But, as you know, poverty's often hidden.. and they won't, they'll, they'll just say, I forgot, I didn't get the letter, but when we really start unpicking it and drilling down, it might be that they genuinely don't have the wherewithal to get to, to medical appointments.' (FN)

'I think one of the issues that we've had in the past is actually families being targeted by, erm, you know, their data being collated and then those families being targeted by, erm, debt, lone sharks, basically.....you know, and those families that, you know, are very vulnerable in those areas of deprivation, you know, they don't understand finances and when someone's coming to the door saying, oh, what would you like, yes, I'll, I'll give you £200.....but it's 200% APR on it, they don't understand that, and there doesn't seem to an element of protection for those families either, you know'. (HV)

Gender -based financial disempowerment

During COVID HPs had noted that male partners were at home more, and able to hear and see conversations between their partner and a health care professional they otherwise might have done in the past. Possible negative consequences associated with raising the issue of finance in this situation were described in terms of them ***“open[ing] up a whole can of worms”***. (HV)

Financial coercion and control

“men only talk to men about the financial situation” (FN)

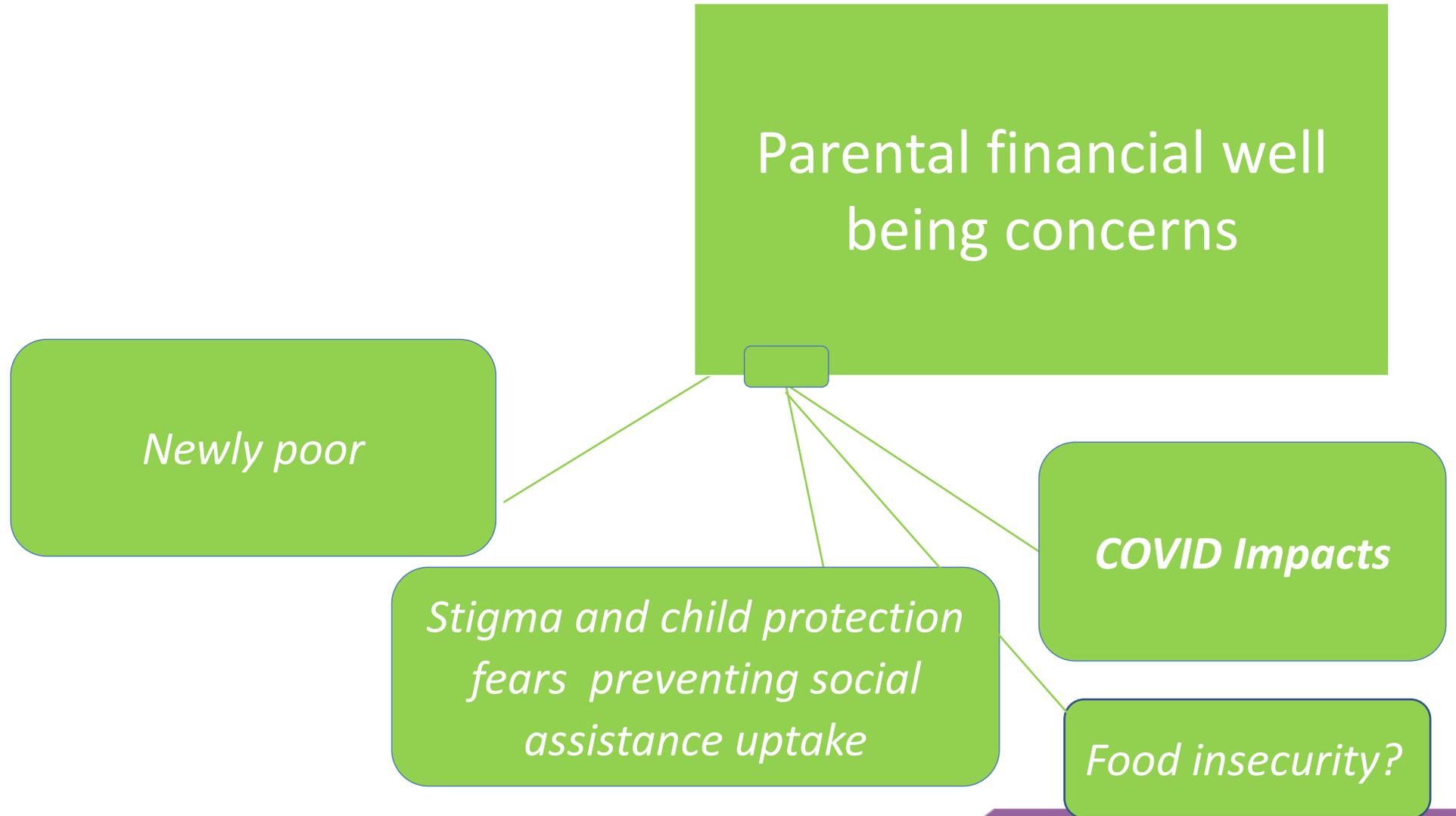
Sub-themes

Money management?

'some of the women find it difficult to manage their money. So, they might get themselves into a tricky situation, but I don't, I'm not wanting to stereotype that areas, but it's just..., it's, you know, it's the cycle of the generation, you know, input, that, you know, money comes into one hand then it goes out in the other quite freely, without thinking about making it eek out longer. So, I couldn't say a, you know, a particular percentage of women, but I think definitely, it's more noticeable in that areas of deprivation compared to, you know, West End, you know, families'. (HV)

Rural isolation

'There's that rural idyll,... I love living in the middle of nowhere. I'm lucky that I can drive, I have a car, I, you know, I see that, but that reality is not the same for many a woman who is there with small children, doesn't drive and doesn't have the money for a taxi. There is no bus service, you know, it can, so, manifesting in many different ways, but that living on, on the edge of being able to manage financially, you know, and prioritising the essentials may mean the children are fed and they get the school bus to school, but that, actually, the rest of life is very impoverished and, I have seen, I've been quite taken aback by how many families, single parent families, are in rural locations, possibly because they've been housed to escape from abuse or to move, you know, to move out, from difficulties in areas, and are then trapped, literally, you know, in a way, with, maybe a local shop, if they're very lucky, but that local shop's probably more expensive and, and very limited in, in what it can offer'. (HV)



Child protection concerns and stigma preventing social assistance uptake

'I think some families might be worried that if we are aware of their financial situation, that we'll think negatively about the family, we'll judge them or, we may, you know, refer them to social work, and they'll have other people sort of nosing about their, their private business. So, you know, cause some families are very private, you know, about, you know, what's, what their situation is and that's, you know, you have to respect that at the end of the day as well'. (HV)

'I know how some of the forms, that the claims forms are, you know, incredible. They would challenge people with intellect and legal degrees so, it's not surprising that people aren't always claiming everything they're entitled to, and for many people, I think the whole process is beyond their capability, either because, you know, stress-wise, or just because they look at it and are frightened to even go near it. And then there are others, for whom, of course, they know the system back to front, and that's the way they've brought up generation after generation and they know exactly, and I do feel there's a lot, the stigma comes often from people thinking they'll be seen as spongers, rather than recognising, actually, you know, it's, it's not like that at all' (HV)

Sub-themes

Newly poor

Financial issues are generally more **'out there'** butHPs should to look beyond appearances and ask everyone about financial challenges regardless of apparent circumstances, because **"we can't make assumptions about families and whether they are financially stable or not"**. (HV)

Covid impacts

'one of the challenges, for the Financial Inclusion Pathway has been, during Covid, is that they couldn't get the birth certificate.... there was a delay because they couldn't access, they couldn't go in person to XXXXX to get the birth certificate, and then they couldn't get their child benefit, they couldn't get the Best Start, be, because they didn't have the birth certificate with them'. (MW)

Sub-themes

Food insecurity?

'I have huge admiration for, you know, the whole concept of (...) supporting people who are living in food poverty, but I have seen first-hand what they get and it, it, it makes me want to cry because I wouldn't buy that food. ...' (HV)

'Family nurses are having to do, erm, emergency drops, you know, food parcels or, you know, through Social Work, or signposting to foodbanks, and that's, that's new, that's definitely an emerging thing. And the thing about that, and we know this, is that impacts on dental health, it impacts on, erm, obesity because, I'll be honest with you, I've seen the, the, the stuff from food banks and, whilst of course, it's an absolute saviour, I don't believe the quality is, is what we want for our children. You know, I look, I look in the bags cause I'm, I'm sitting in a social work department at the moment, and they, they often dropped bag they distribute it, and I look inside them and I, why are we giving pot noodles and, erm, I don't know, sugary, sugary cereals and like Angel Delight packets and, I just think, oh God, you know'. (FN)

2023 Context update

The current context

Energy bills are up: the typical annual household bill is currently £2,500, it was £1000 in 2021

Wage stagnation

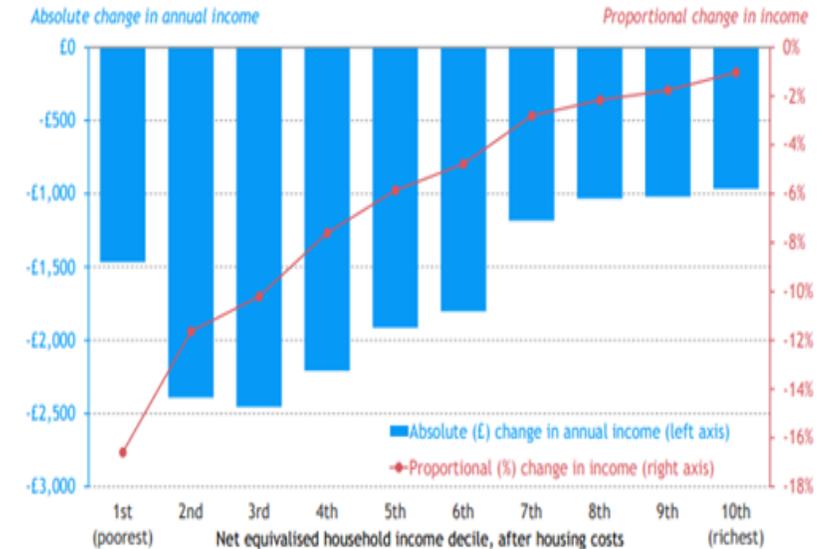
The value of social security benefits has fallen

In Oct 22
6 in 10 low-income households were not able to afford an unexpected expense
Over half are in arrears
1/4 use credit to pay essential bills
Over 7 in 10 families are going without essentials.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2023

FIGURE 9: Welfare policy changes have reduced incomes for those at the bottom of the income distribution most

Change in income resulting from changes to the benefit system since 2010, by household income decile: UK, 2023-24

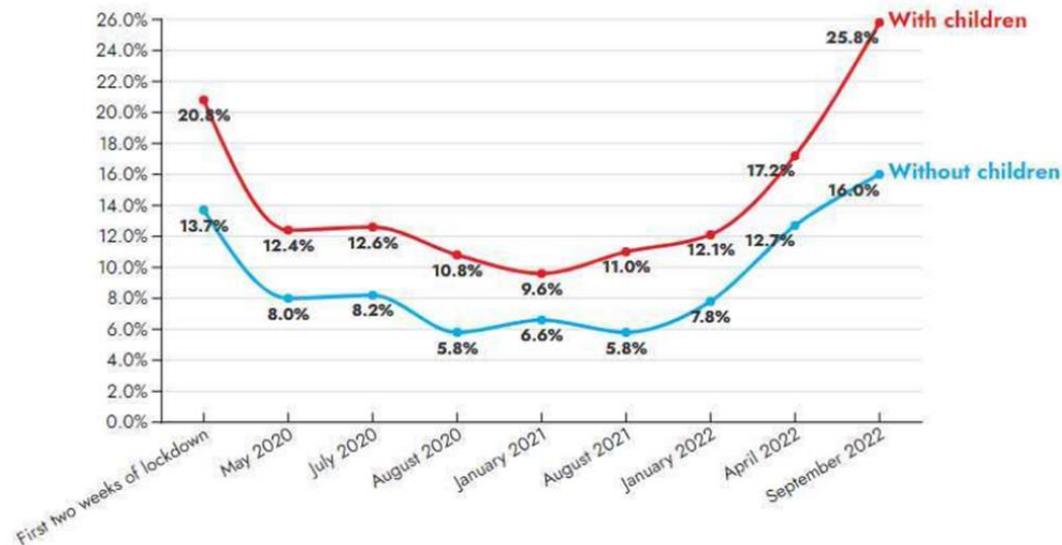


1/5 of poor households, and **1/4** of households in receipt of Universal Credit experienced food insecurity in 2020/ 2021.

50% of the poorest families have reduced spending on food for adults

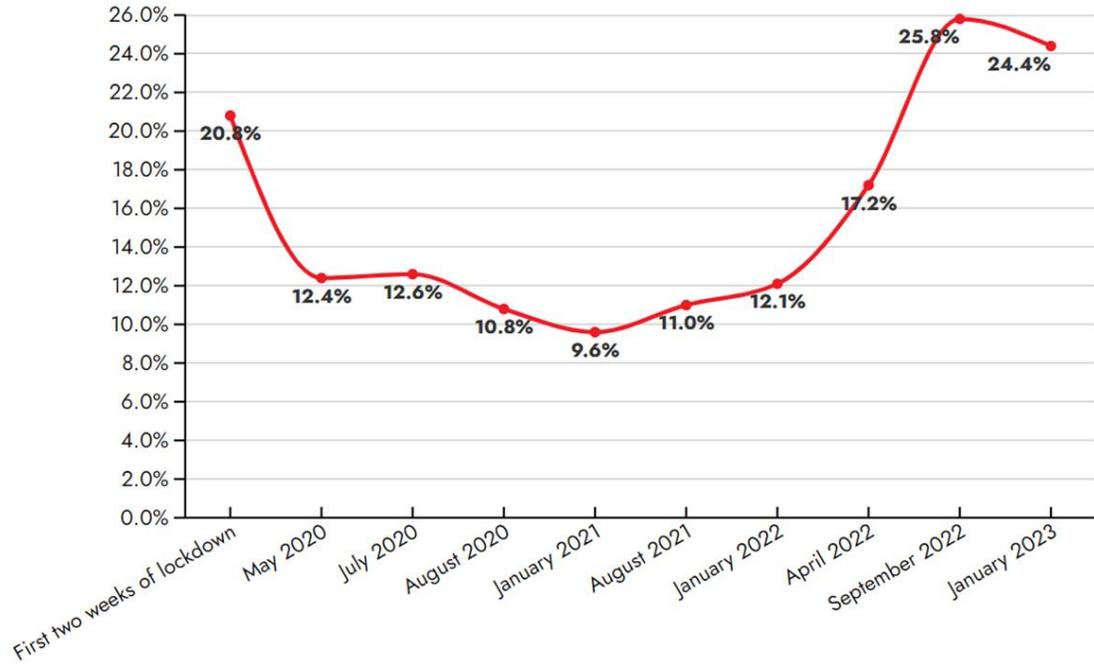
4 in 10 families with children are spending less on food for their children

Figure 1: Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity (1-month recall)



(The Food Foundation, 2022)

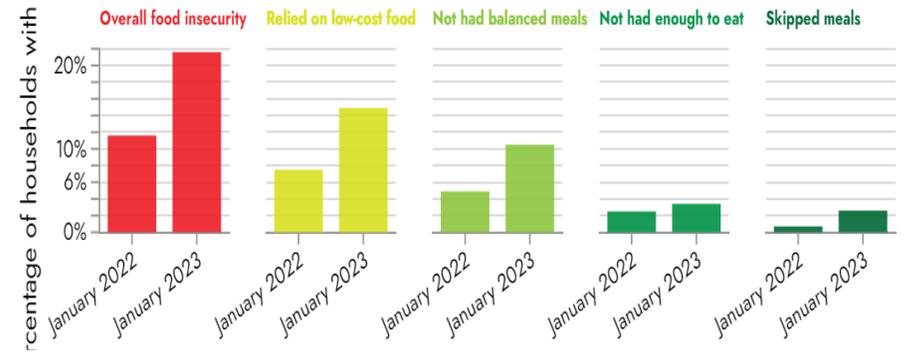
Percentage of households with children that are experiencing food insecurity*:



* 1-month recall period

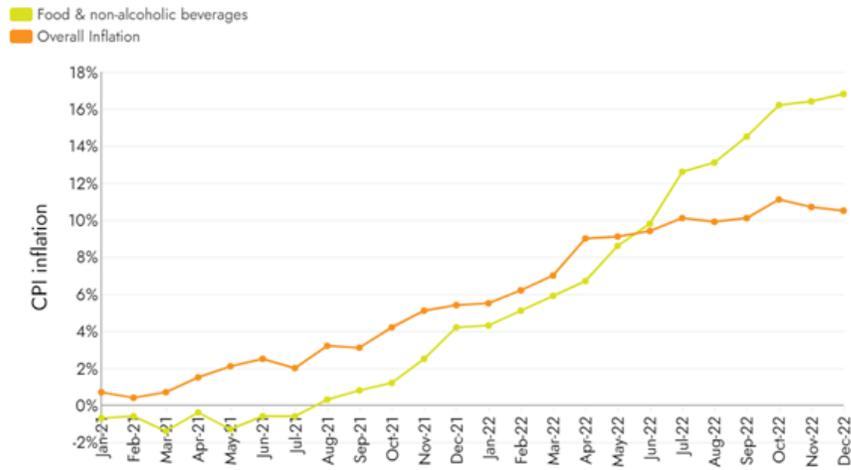


Percentage of households with children where children are experiencing food insecurity:



The macro level food story

Annual Consumer Price Index (CPI) Inflation

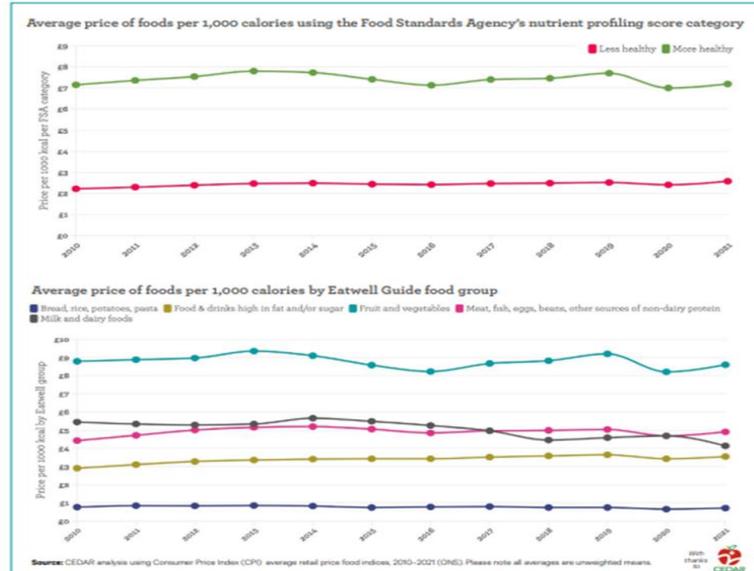


Source: ONS, Consumer price inflation tables

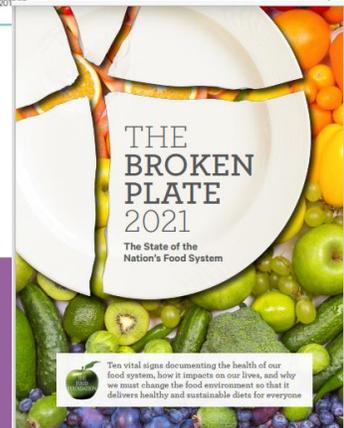
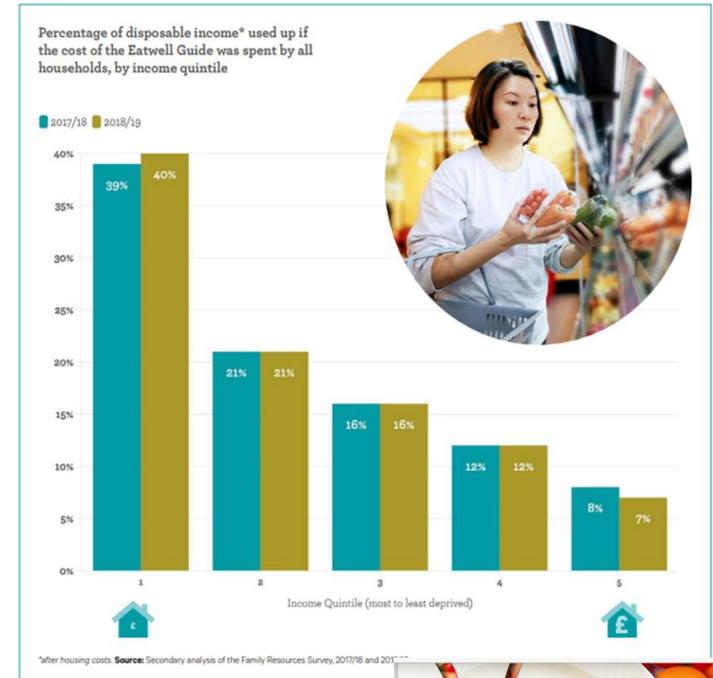


FOOD PRICES

More healthy foods are nearly three times as expensive as less healthy foods calorie for calorie

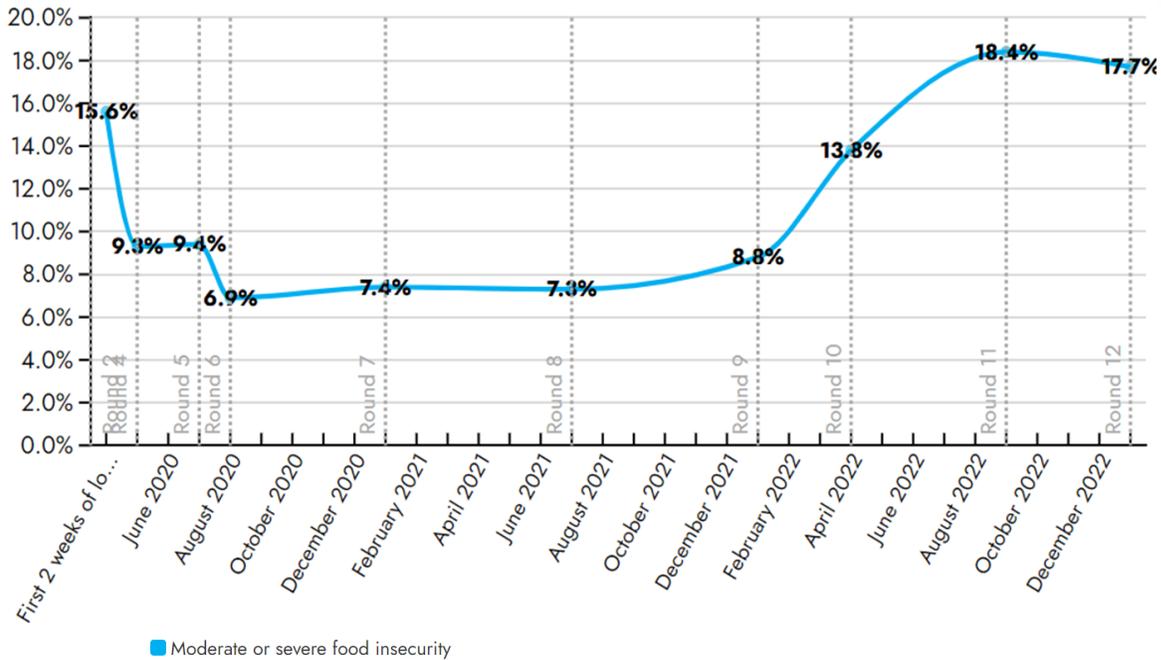


The poorest fifth of UK households would need to spend 40% of their disposable income on food to meet Eatwell Guide costs. This compares to just 7% for the richest fifth.



9.3 million adults (17.7% of households) reported experiencing food insecurity in January 2023

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity*:



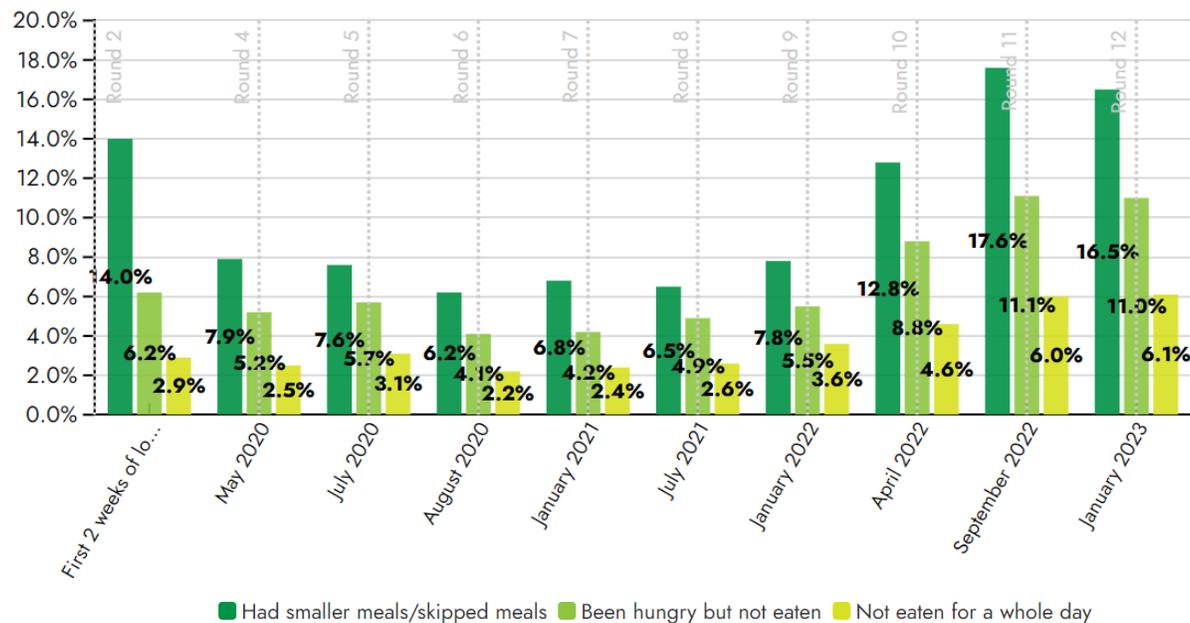
* 1-month recall period



From an online survey of 10,814 adults in the United Kingdom commissioned by The Food Foundation and conducted between 31st January to 3rd February 2023 by YouGov Plc

3.2 million adults (6.1% of households) reported not eating for a whole day because they couldn't afford or access food

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity*:

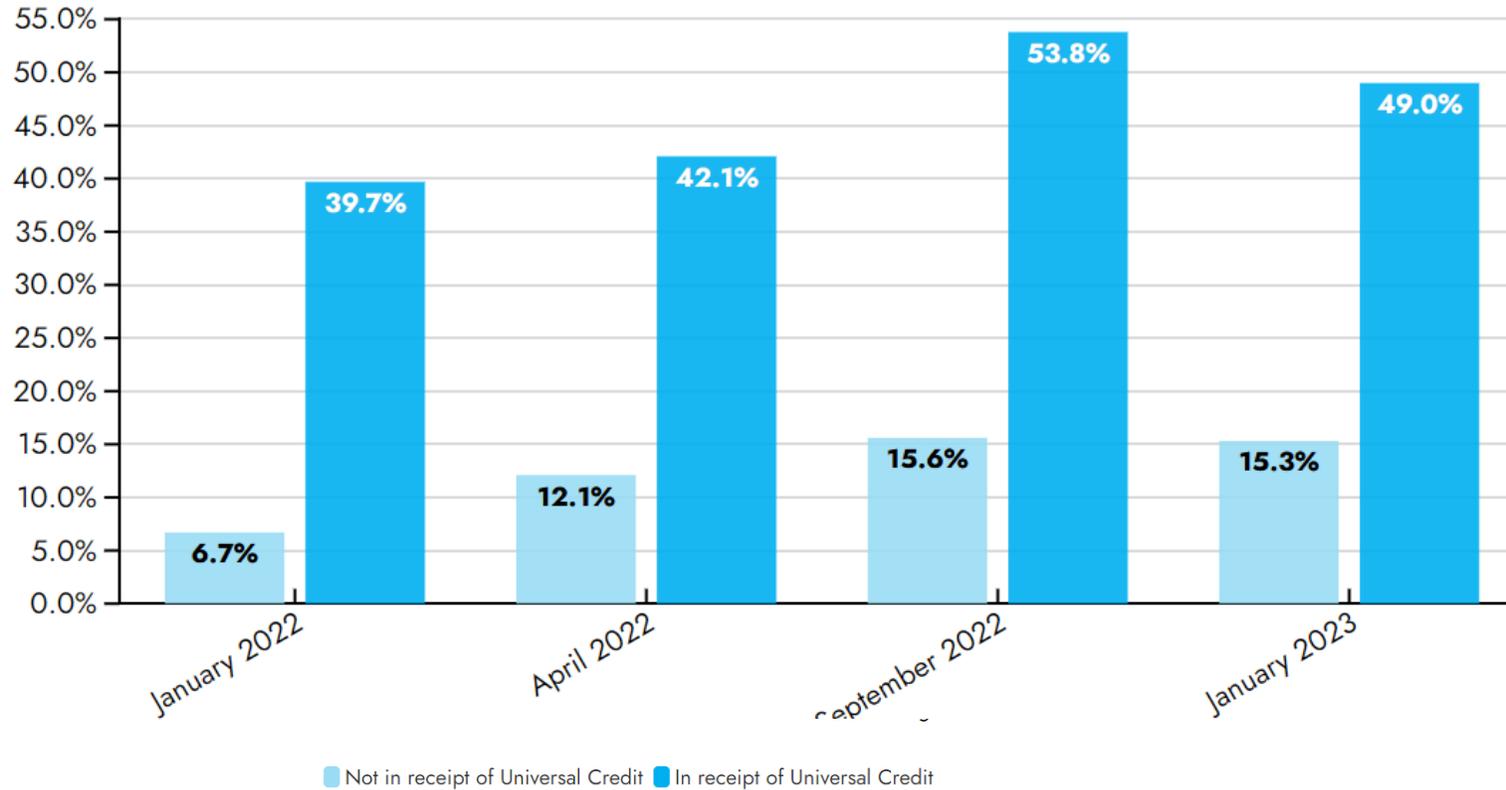


* 1-month recall period



Half of households on Universal Credit (49%) reported experiencing food insecurity in January 2023

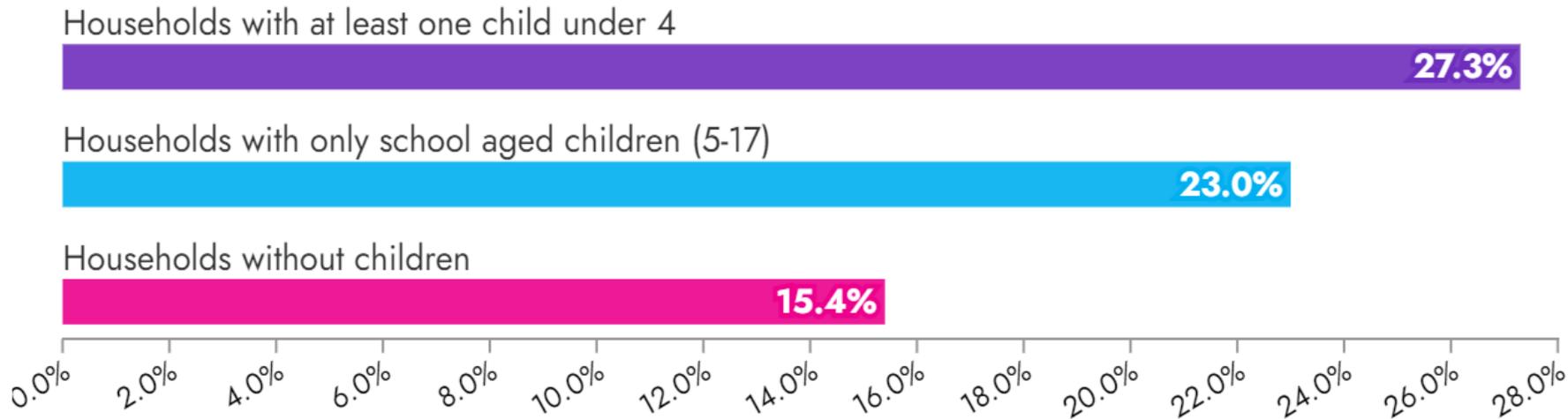
Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity*:



* 1-month recall period

Households with pre-school children are more likely to be food insecure than households with only school-aged children

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity*:



*1-month recall period



[Healthy Start needs urgent improvement to tackle food insecurity in the early years | Food Foundation](#)

- *Rising food insecurity will be making it both harder for some women to breastfeed, and for some families to afford to formula feed. It may also be affecting the sufficiency of the diets of pregnant women and young children, especially as healthy foods are generally more expensive than unhealthy foods.*
- *Between March 2021 and November 2022 the most widely available and purchased infant formulas increased in cost by 15-23% and the cheapest and only 'own-brand' infant formula (Aldi's Mamia) increased by 33%.*
- ***There are no infant formulas that are affordable with the Healthy Start allowance.***

**What the Cost of Living
Crisis means for the diets
of babies and young
children and
recommended actions**

Updated: December 2022

Conclusions and Implications

- Our parent participants were negatively impacted by inadequate social security income, debt-caused-by-deductions, restricted access to paid employment, anxieties around food and other resource provision for their children, and were going without food themselves.
- Fear of raising child protection concerns, shame and embarrassment, and exacerbating partner abuse prevented parents disclosing financial hardship and food insecurity experience to HPs.
- HPs were aware of poverty within some households but not universally confident they could recognise the problem, were inhibited from raising the issue because of poverty stigma, and reported lacking time and knowledge to do so effectively.

Conclusions/Implications

- Our findings point to economic, nutritional, and social vulnerability of lone parents **that existed before the current cost of living crisis.**
- As mothers continue to remain responsible for infant feeding (either as food producers themselves or through infant formula procurement from commercial sources) there is an urgent need to develop a better understanding of the nature and extent of maternal and infant food security in the UK to develop more effective public policy and health care practice.

Health implications and questions arising for pregnant women and food insecure families with young children and infants

- **Food insecure parents commonly sacrifice their own food needs in favour of their children to prevent them from going hungry**
- Parents **going without food** to feed their children seems to have **become normalised and/or accepted.**
- **Leads to the following questions**
- What is the extent of maternal food insecurity both locally and nationally in the UK?
- How is it impacting on the health of pregnant and post partum women?
- How is poverty and household food insecurity experience impacting **infant food security?**

Acknowledgements

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Thank you for listening

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