

A RECIPE

FOR

Why our food system is leaving
low-income households behind

INEQUALITY

Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty

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The Fabian Society is Britain's oldest political think tank. Since 1884 the society has played a central role in developing political ideas and public policy on the left. It aims to promote greater equality of power and opportunity; the value of collective public action; a vibrant, tolerant and accountable democracy; citizenship, liberty and human rights; sustainable development; and multilateral international co-operation.

Through a wide range of publications and events the society influences political and public thinking, but also provides a space for broad and open-minded debate, drawing on an unrivalled external network and its own expert research and analysis. Its programme offers a unique breadth, encompassing national conferences and expert seminars; periodicals, books, reports and digital communications; and commissioned and in-house research and comment.

The Society is alone among think tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation, with almost 7,000 members. Over time our membership has included many of the key thinkers on the British left and every Labour prime minister. Today we count over 200 parliamentarians in our number. The voluntary society includes 70 local societies, the Fabian Women's Network and the Young Fabians, which is itself the leading organisation on the left for young people to debate and influence political ideas.

The society was one of the original founders of the Labour party and is constitutionally affiliated to the party. We are however editorially, organisationally and financially independent and work with a wide range of partners from all political persuasions and none.

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First published March 2015

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CONTENTS

Summary	1
Introduction	3
1 The price of food system failure: Access	6
2 The price of food system failure: Health	12
3 A future food system that works for everybody	20
Endnotes	24

About the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty

FABIAN COMMISSION ON **FOOD & POVERTY**

The Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty is a year-long inquiry tasked with examining how poverty relates to the food system. The commission will report in summer 2015 setting out steps towards a fair and sustainable food system.

The commission's work is focused by five overlapping strands: money and affordability; context and access; health; the environment; and the supply chain and society.

The commission is made up of experts in food policy and related fields including health, the environment and education. The commission has held five evidence hearings based in London, Sheffield and Lincolnshire, and further evidence gathering trips will be conducted in Glasgow and Grimsby following the release of the commission's interim report.

The commissioners are supported by three groups: an expert panel of people with direct experience of being in poverty based in Manchester and Salford; a wider advisory network of experts, practitioners, campaigners, policymakers, community organisers and people working with those in poverty; and a cross-party political advisory network chaired by Laura Sandys MP.

Acknowledgements

This commission was made possible by the generous support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

The commissioners and secretariat wish to thank all of those individuals and organisations who have lent their expertise, insight and time to the commission's work, particularly: Jon Alexander, Megan Blake, Tim Benton, Clive Black, David Camp, Helen Crawley, Martin Caraher, Elizabeth Dowler, Angela Donkin, Michael Heasman, Hilary Hamer, Vicki Hird, Donald Hirsch, Joyce Kay, Fiona Gooch, Lindsay Graham, Graham Riches, Alan Robson, David Marshall, Laura Sandys MP, Adam Oliver, Samara Morton, Hannah Lambie-Mumford, Martin O'Connell, Kasia Ostrychacz, Dale Southerton, David Renshaw, Letitia Rose, Ivor Whitfield, Wendy Wills and Sarah Whitehead.

Finally, we would like to thank the whole of the Fabian Society team for their support in the project, in particular Andrew Harrop, Phil Mutero, Marcus Roberts, Anya Pearson, Richard Speight and Ed Wallis.

The Commissioners

Geoff Tansey (Chair) is a trustee of the Food Ethics Council and curates the Food Systems Academy. He is a widely published and well renowned writer and consultant on food and agriculture and a Joseph Rowntree Visionary for a Just and Peaceful World awardee.

Niall Cooper is director of Church Action on Poverty. He also co-founded the Debt on our Doorstep network for fair finance in 1999 and in 2000 he chaired the UK Coalition Against Poverty's Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power.

Tara Garnett initiated and runs the Food Climate Research Network, based at the Environmental Change Institute. It focuses on the contribution that the food system makes to greenhouse gas emissions and solutions for reducing emissions.

Diana Holland is assistant general secretary of Unite for Transport, Equalities & Food, where she oversees the union's work representing food and agriculture workers in food farming, food manufacturing and in food retail. A long-standing anti-poverty campaigner, prior to this Diana was national organiser for women, race and equalities at TGWU.

Andrew Kuyk is a food and sustainability consultant. He was previously director of sustainability and competitiveness at the Food and Drink Federation following a civil service career in the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its predecessor MAFF.

Dr John Middleton is vice president of the UK's Faculty of Public Health. Prior to this he was director for public health in Sandwell for more than 27 years and is an honorary reader in public health at Birmingham University.

Jeanette Orrey MBE is co-founder of Food for Life, working on food culture in UK schools, and was a school dinner lady for over 20 years. In 2003, she won *The Observer* Food Award for 'Person who has done the most for the food & drink industry'.

Secretariat

Cameron Tait is secretary to the commission and lead author of this report. Cameron joined the Fabian Society as senior researcher in August 2014 and previously served as head of research to the Archbishop of York's Living Wage Commission.

Robert Tinker is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society and was previously researcher to the Fabian Commission on Future Spending Choices.

Daisy-Rose Srblin is a research fellow at the Fabian Society and is editor of *Values Added*, a collection of essays on the future of taxation.

Narrative artist

Sarah Woods is the commission's narrative artist, who is gathering stories and experiences of people's relationship with food and poverty and feeding them back in to the commission.

Summary

This interim report from the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty shows that overall advances in access to affordable food and health outcomes have left low-income households behind.

The evidence also suggests that unsustainable pressures within the food supply chain and environmental damage will cause food retail prices to rise further in future years.

Without radical change to the UK food system, millions more people will struggle to access affordable, nutritious food. The scope and shape of such a change will be the main focus of the commission's final report.

Changes in the food system over recent years have pushed low-income households closer to crisis:

- **Food system events:** Food price volatility, food bank use, food supply chain fraud and exploitation, Britain's obesity problem, and the effects of climate change are more likely to affect those on the lowest incomes than any other group.
- **Prices:** Food prices fell consistently from the 1970s, but a rise in prices from 2006 has combined with rising housing and energy costs to push many low-income households closer to crisis.
- **Trading down:** A squeeze on incomes and a rising cost of living mean that those on low-incomes are 'trading down' towards less nutritious diets that are higher in fat, salt and sugar.

The report finds that progress made in access to food, health, and better diets in the UK over recent decades has left those on lower incomes behind:

- While most of the people in the UK are spending less than ever on food as a proportion of their household budget, some low-income families are spending over a third of their budget on food.
- The UK appears to be beginning to get to grips with its child obesity problem on the whole, but incidence of obesity is rising for children in the lowest income households. Incidence of child obesity in low-income households is now higher than it was in 2006, when Jamie Oliver's school food documentary sparked a call for action on children's diets.
- Those on lower incomes are one and a half times more likely to get diabetes than those on higher incomes.
- The proliferation of supermarkets has meant most people have more access to nutritious food, but many low-income areas suffer from a lack of access to nutritious, affordable food.

Current strategies have not worked:

- The top seven food brands spend a combined ten times more on marketing than the entire budget of the government's leading healthy eating campaign, while often targeting unhealthy products

on those with the lowest incomes.

- Evidence suggests the pressure for ever cheaper food is unsustainable. The commission believes that because of pressures on the food supply chain and external costs that aren't yet accounted for in the market price of food, prices are set to rise further in the future.
- Unless action is taken, food banks could be a sign of things to come for many more families finding themselves in crisis.

The commission is calling for further evidence on solutions to these problems. We want to understand how to achieve a radical change in the UK's food system that addresses these structural failings. The commission will release its final report in summer 2015.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the story of food in the UK looks like a paean to progress. Food prices, on the whole, eat up a far smaller chunk of the average household budget than in previous decades. Our changing diets – more fruit, more vegetables, less sugar and less saturated fat – have improved the nation’s health, with average life expectancy now significantly higher than in previous decades. The proliferation of big supermarkets has provided most of us with access to a much wider choice and availability of affordable food. If you look at the averages, the food system seems to be leaving us more healthy, more wealthy and ultimately, more satisfied over the long term.

Yet when we look beneath these statistics and the headline trends, we can see that the poorest are being left behind by the UK’s food system. At the same time, costs unaccounted for in the price of food are creating major pressures in the food supply chain and for the environment.

The Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty has spent five months gathering evidence on how the UK’s food system serves those on low incomes, and to what extent it contributes to poverty in the UK. This interim report sets out the commission’s emerging findings.

The evidence shows that when we look below average outcomes from food system progress, those on the lowest incomes lose out.

Food is still widely available and affordable for most people in the UK, but food price rises have disproportionately hit low-income households. The proportion of the average household budget spent on food has fallen from 33 per cent in 1953 down to 12 per cent in 2012.¹ This is because of a long term fall in the price of food and growth in average incomes. However, the price of food in the UK began to rise from 2006. And when we look at the effect this price rise had on different income groups, those on the lowest incomes were disproportionately affected. This is because those on lower incomes spend a greater proportion of their budget – between 16 per cent and 35 per cent - on food. Combined with increases other basic costs, such as housing and energy, those on the lowest incomes are running out of budget elasticity and are finding themselves closer to crisis.

This proximity to crisis of those on low incomes is manifesting itself in the growth in the use of food banks. The Trussell Trust, the largest emergency food provider, has seen the number of people referred for emergency food rise by 38 per cent in the last year.² Recent studies on the use of emergency food provision have shown that it is predominantly used by those that have recently been pushed into crisis by a shock to their income – either a change in work, or social security problems. The ongoing squeeze on household disposable income means that more and more people are moving within proximity of crisis.

At an average level, the UK can be seen to be making progress in diets and health outcomes, but this is not the case for low-income households. On the

whole we are consuming less saturated fat, sugar and salt than we were a decade ago, the statistics suggest we are beginning to make progress on child obesity levels, and average life expectancy is up. But below the average level figures, those on the lowest incomes are eating less fruit and vegetables, more salt, more sugar, more saturated fat and more processed foods. The poor are one and a half times more likely to suffer from diabetes, and while child obesity is falling dramatically in high-income households, it is still unrelenting in low-income households.

The proliferation of supermarkets over recent decades has improved access to affordable, nutritious food for many. The rise of the discount supermarkets – most prominently Aldi and Lidl – has provided more choice, and crucially, more affordable options in the food retail market. Yet this intense competition is causing huge pressure in the food supply chain. Suppliers are having to “make more for less”, and are driving down their costs. This pressure has led to a prevalence of low pay and zero hour contracts in the food workforce, and a search for ever-cheaper ingredients – a cause of the 2013 horsemeat scandal. International supply chains mean this pressure weakens the terms and conditions for producers in developing countries too.

The pressure on costs also incentivises more intensive farming techniques. The commission has found that not only is the food system creating vast amounts of greenhouse gas emissions that are unaccounted for in the market price of food, but that some of the biggest food producing areas in developing countries will be the first and worst hit by climate change.

Each of these stories – the growth of affordability of food, greater access to food, better health outcomes, and more choice – conceal a counter narrative of low-income families being left behind.

The commission is now calling for further evidence on solutions to these problems, and especially what specific actions need to be taken by government, industry, civil society and other key actors. The commission will set out its recommendations towards a fairer food system in summer 2015.

Food and poverty, not food poverty

The term ‘food poverty’ carries with it a number of different definitions – it is not measured by government, and indeed, many of the definitions attributed to ‘food poverty’ are qualitative rather than quantitative.

Unlike fuel poverty, it is hard to give ‘food poverty’ a single, specific definition because food is rarely a fixed cost in household budgets and the term does not account for different choices about the amount of money allocated to food in household budgets. Given that food is a basic need, one might think that it would be a top priority in household budgets. However, the huge range of choice of food and the many options for ‘trading down’ on quality mean that food expenditure is flexible in a way that heating or housing expenditure is not. This means that other household costs are prioritised over food. As Donald Hirsch, director of the Centre for Research in Social Policy, stated in his evidence to the commission, “households without enough to meet all their needs with their overall income have to make choices about what to prioritise.”

While families can trade down on food expenditure, this often leads to low-income households eating cheaper, less nutritional processed food, which is often high in fat, high in salt, and high in sugar. Chapter 1 sets this and its implications for health outcomes out in more detail.

The other complicating factor with regard to ‘food poverty’ definition is

that it is not always simply about having enough money to afford food. Low-income households often lack physical access to affordable and nutritious food, the means to cook it, or sometimes the confidence and necessary skills. This means that even if these households had sufficient income, or prices were sufficiently low, they would still not have access to affordable, nutritious food.

In this sense, a useful definition that takes these issues into account is that given by Elizabeth Dowler, professor of food and social policy at the University of Warwick, in her book *Poverty Bites* (2001). Dowler states that 'food poverty' is:

The inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.

It is not possible to pin down a finite measurement of 'food poverty' as it is with, for example, fuel poverty. Fuel poverty thresholds are either set at a need to spend more than 10 per cent of household income on fuel use, or that households fall under the official poverty line after fuel costs are accounted for.³⁴ Compared with food, fuel is much more of a fixed cost – while it is possible to turn the heating down and to have it on for less time, there is not the same variety of choices, and there is no opportunity to trade down to the fuel equivalent of an own-brand supermarket range.

Finally, the commission wanted to take account of the fact that food choices are informed by more than affordability. As chapter 3 sets out, food choices are socially patterned and informed by the surrounding environment. Food is used as a form of expression of self-identity and aspiration. There are a great many pressures that adults and children alike are faced with on a daily basis, not least the vast amount of food advertising that is targeted at low-income individuals.

Instead of viewing the relationship of food and poverty through a narrow prism of a finite measure of 'food poverty', the commission's approach is to take a wider view, looking at access to food, health outcomes and what the consequences of the ways the food system operates are for low-income households in the UK and consequently elsewhere. Chapters 1 and 2 look in detail at the consequences of failures in the food system for low-income households.

1 THE PRICE OF FOOD SYSTEM FAILURE: ACCESS

While most people in the UK can access a wider range of food than ever before, many people on low incomes are unable to access affordable, nutritious food.

While the proportion of the average household budget allocated to food has declined from 47 per cent in 1953 to 12 per cent today means that food is more affordable for many households, low-income households currently spend up to three times more than average as a proportion of their overall expenditure.⁵

And money is not the only barrier restricting access to healthy, nutritious food. Some deprived areas lack the infrastructure and the facilities for families to source such food, as in the evidence we received from Skelmersdale in Lancashire (see page 11). The affordability of food ultimately comes down to levels of income and the price of food and other household goods. Changes to household incomes, food prices and the price of other essential living costs in recent years have made food less affordable for those on low incomes.

Income

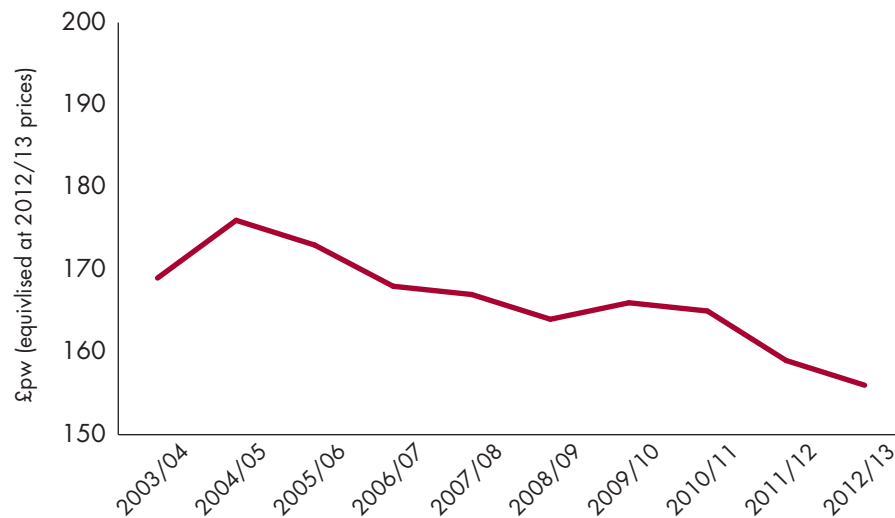
The disposable income of the poorest households has fallen over the last decade, placing a strain on household budgets. As shown in the chart below, from 2004 to 2013 the disposable income of the poorest fifth of households fell by £20 a week to £156 a week. This fall came after a steady rise in disposable income in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This means that low-income households have had to adjust their expenditure on food and other living costs accordingly.

Disposable income has fallen because income has risen slower than the cost of living. Research has shown that those on the lowest incomes pay more for basic goods and services such as travel or energy. This is known as the 'poverty premium' and reflects punitive tariff systems, such as annual season tickets that reward those who can pay upfront, or the difference in price of energy in meters and quarterly bills. The poverty premium also reflects money spent serving debts which can arise from non or part-payment of rent or utility bills, squeezing more disposable income.

The two most important developments that have lowered levels of income available to the poorest households to spend on food are the rise of low-paid jobs and government social security reforms.

Those in work, but on low wages, have seen real income levels stagnate and in many cases decline. The national minimum wage, which provides a wage floor benefiting around 1.4 million people directly and affects millions more on rates of pay linked to it, declined in real terms every year between 2008 and 2013, before the above-inflation rise up to £6.50 an hour

Disposable income of lowest income quintile, 2003/04 - 2012/13



Source: Households Below Average Income 1994/95 – 2012/13 (Department for Work and Pensions, July 2014). Disposable income measured in £pw, equivalised at 2012/13 prices.

in November 2014. Meanwhile, the number of people paid below the living wage (calculated as a basic, but socially acceptable income by the Greater London Authority in London and the Centre for Research in Social Policy for the rest of the UK) has risen from 3.4 million people in 2009 up to 4.9 million people in 2013.⁶

Meanwhile, studies into the rising use of emergency food provision have headlined recent government social security reforms and difficulty in accessing social security benefits as causes for crisis. The DEFRA-commissioned review of food aid explained that, set against the backdrop of stagnating and falling regular incomes, short-term shocks were leading to an increased incidence of emergency food claims.⁷ For example, the Citizens Advice Bureau have identified the delay of payment of social security benefits and social security benefit sanctions as the two most common reasons for people seeking short-term emergency food provision.⁸ A joint report from Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group, the Church of England and the Trussell Trust agreed, also mentioning people losing access to Employment and Support Allowances and dramatic reductions in income caused by changes to working tax credits.⁹ The All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty said that the number of crises in food affordability are growing.¹⁰ Such crisis moments are highlighting the lack of budget elasticity that low-income households now have following a prolonged squeeze on income.

Prices

The other side of the affordability of food is the price of it. Food prices have become more important in relation to food and poverty in recent years, partly because of the rise in the price of food over recent years, but chiefly because of steep price rises in other living costs, such as housing and utility bills in particular. Households have responded by trading down on the food they buy, increasingly buying cheaper, less nutritious food.

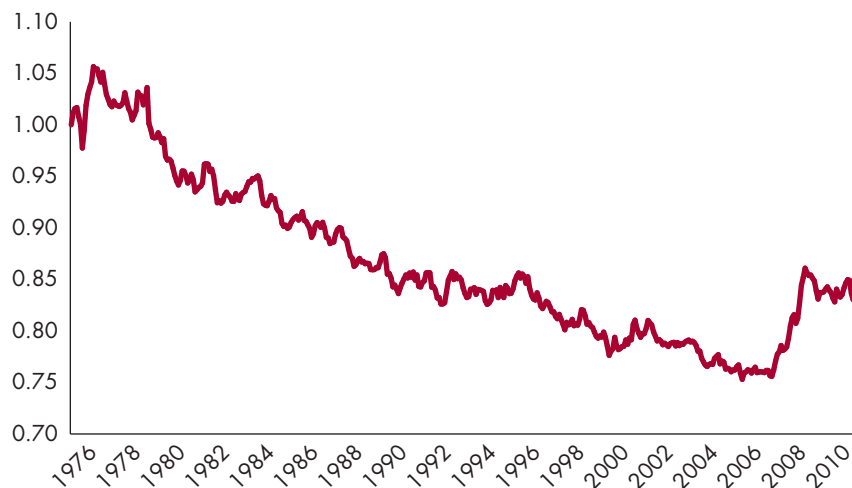
As shown in the chart below, after decades of falling food prices, the price of food relative to other goods has risen over recent years. There are a number of contested factors that contribute to this price rise, and evidence submissions to the commission have noted the main causes as being:

- **A poor northern hemisphere harvest in 2006.** This reduced the international supply of grain, which is a key ingredient of many foods and a core component of industrial meat farming feed, and market trading practices subsequently led to price rises.
- **A material rise in the price of oil.** Oil is a major raw material in the production, movement and packaging of food, and the prices of oil and food are closely linked.¹¹
- **A structural international change in demand.** Changes in demand, including biofuel demand and the huge growth in demand for meat-based protein in Asia and Middle East have put greater pressure on food supply.¹²

The decrease in supply of grain and oil, combined with the international increase in demand for meat-based protein have combined to reverse year-on-year declines in international food prices.

While the recent fall in oil prices may “be very good news for consumers” in the short term, the “structural rebasing” of food prices means it will be unlikely to have significant impact on food prices in the long term, Dr Clive Black, market analyst and Director of Shore Capital, said in his oral evidence to the Commission. In fact, the evidence suggests that significant pressure has built up in the food supply chain, partly caused by intense competition in the UK retail sector, which means food prices are likely to rise further. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

Price of food relative to price of all goods



Source: Data provided to the Commission by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The data is based on RPI and the food component divided by the overall index.

These price rises tend to have a disproportionate impact on low-income households who spend a larger proportion of their budget on food than

higher income households. In 2012, the average household spent 11.6 per cent of their budget on food, while the poorest fifth spent 16.6 per cent on food.¹³ In his oral evidence to the commission the professor of food and health policy at the Centre for Food Policy at City University, Martin Caraher, estimated that the very poorest households spend up to 35 per cent of their income on food. This also illustrates a wider important point – those on the very lowest incomes are often under a lot more pressure than those in the bottom quintile or decile.

As well as spending a higher proportion of the household budget on food, low-income households are more likely to have to prioritise their household costs because of the rising costs of energy, housing and other costs. This has an impact on the type of food low-income households buy.

Many evidence submissions to the commission suggested that low-income households are ‘trading down’ in the type of food that they eat. In particular, Martin O’Connell of the IFS showed that over the course of the recession households had tended to spend less on food, while consuming the same number of calories. In part this is down to households reducing wastage and seeking out the best deals. But Professor Elizabeth Dowler of the University of Warwick noted in her evidence that unhealthy foods are often a cheaper form of calories than more nutritious diets.

There are several studies comparing the average prices of ‘healthy’ food items and ‘unhealthy foods’, which suggest that healthy diets are becoming more expensive. For example, a 2014 study by Nicholas Jones, Annalijn Conklin, Marc Suhrcke and Pablo Monsivais found that more healthy foods (as according to ‘Eatwell’ food groups) were approximately three times more expensive than ‘less healthy foods’ per calorie.¹⁴ A 2015 study on price promotions by Nakamura et al found that less healthy foods tend to have bigger reductions placed on them in retail promotions than healthy foods.¹⁵

The relative expense of fruit and vegetables compared to other food was raised by the commission’s expert panel of people with direct experience of being in poverty. One member said: “I can’t even afford fruit, so I ended up with anaemia, with low folic levels and iron” and went on to say: “When you only have £19 for food each week, you end up with the crap stuff.” Another member said “I’d always look at the value of something, how much you get for your pound. How much it is going to fill you up.” The group’s experiences were in line with the trend of low-income households to trade down to lower cost foods, often at the expense of fruit and vegetables.

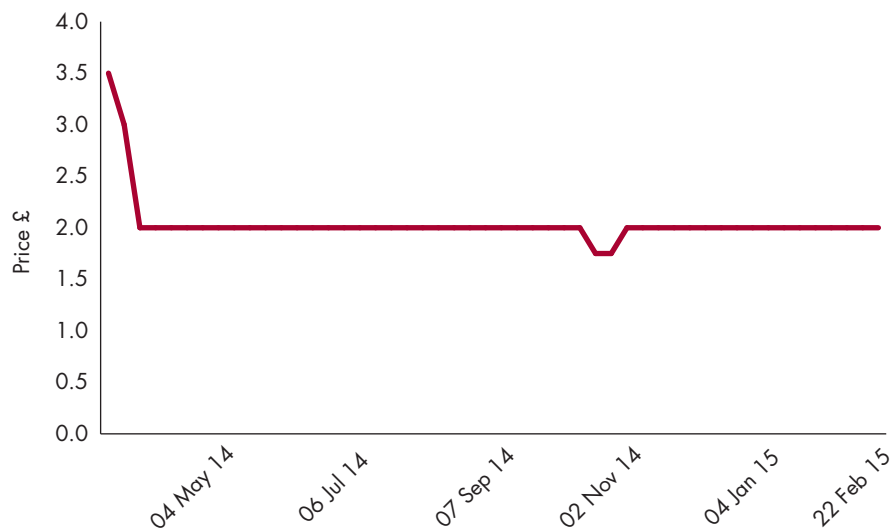
It is important to note that fruit and vegetables generally have a much lower calorie content than other foods, which is the reason for the striking ‘three times more expensive’ figure. But we know from the analysis of spending over the recession that when household incomes are squeezed, it is the level of calories that families generally look to maintain, rather than nutritious diets.

In her evidence to the commission, Dr Wendy Wills, reader in food and public health at the University of Hertfordshire, explained how households from different socio-economic backgrounds tended to have different food cultures. People with lower incomes are more likely to prioritise “getting fed” in meal preparation and food purchasing, whereas those with higher incomes prioritise family health, “presentation and self-preservation”. This correlates with the way in which households adjust their food budget during tough times – food becomes more about sustenance and survival, rather than as a means of promoting good health, self-expression, aspiration, and participation in society.

The relative expense of nutritious foods is made worse by the decline in availability of cheaper seasonal produce. This is because supermarkets tend

to prioritise the year-round availability of food, which means there is less fluctuation on price. One food producer told the commission that the biggest supermarkets would expect them to provide fruit and vegetables for as much of the year as possible. To meet the demand for year-round availability, food is increasingly imported and grown under special conditions. This leads to less seasonal variation in pricing – for example, strawberries are available at a similar price all year round, rather than being especially affordable in the summer and rare and expensive during the rest of the year. The chart below shows that the price of Tesco strawberries barely changed from April 2014 to March 2015 after an initial promotional rate. As a result low-income households do not have access to cheap seasonal fruit and vegetables: as the consistent pricing structure means that prices are averaged across the year and rarely drop down to their seasonal rate.

The price of Tesco strawberries (227g) over 12 months



Source: MySupermarket.com

Physical access to food

Income and overall food prices are not the only barriers to affordable, nutritious food. Many low-income areas suffer from a lack of access to good food.

In her oral evidence to the commission, Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford, faculty research fellow at the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, noted that while the term ‘food desert’ is rarely used today because there is little evidence of populated areas having no access to food at all: rather it is access to affordable and nutritious food that is the issue.

Various studies have looked at access in individual local areas, finding that some areas suffer from a lack of access to good food at the right price, and that food prices can often be cheaper in larger, harder to access food stores. For example, Martin White et al undertook a multi-level geographical analysis of Newcastle,¹⁶ Hannah Lambie-Mumford surveyed residents in areas in both Salford and Leicester,¹⁷ Professor Martin Caraher et al looked at two areas in Preston,¹⁸ and Sarah Bowyer et al looked at the London Borough of Hackney.¹⁹ The studies highlighted that:

- In some low-income areas, some foods are not available. These included fresh meat, brown rice and high fibre pasta.
- There is insufficient or inadequate public transport in some areas, meaning that a taxi or inconvenient bus would be needed to access an affordable shop with an adequate choice of food.
- Prices would be different for the same food in different shops (even different stores under the same retailer), which could punish those living further away from the cheaper shop.

Low-income households are less likely to own a car and find bus fares harder to afford. Research from the Campaign for Better Transport shows that since 2010, local authority funding for bus services has declined by 15 per cent with more than 2000 routes being reduced or withdrawn entirely.²⁰ Meanwhile, some households may be able to devote more time to shopping journeys, but there is no evidence to suggest that low-income households are on average less time pressured than other households. As Dr Lambie-Mumford highlighted in her evidence to the commission, this lack of access unfairly discriminates against elderly and disabled people, who are more likely to have mobility issues and will often struggle to travel long distances without adequate transport infrastructure.

The commission heard from Nikki Hennessy, a Lancashire county councillor, who identified several access issues for low-income residents in Skelmersdale, Lancashire. Councillor Hennessy told the commission that the only sources of food directly available to residents of the Tanhouse Estate, Skelmersdale were in the estate chip shop and in the freezer cabinet of the newsagent. The nearest supermarket is an Asda one and half miles away. The cost of a taxi is prohibitive, it is a three mile round trip on foot and people working during the day cannot take the bus, which only runs until 6pm.

THE RIGHT TO FOOD

The international trade of food and the global nature of the food system mean that food has been a long running component of the international debate on human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 included a right to food and it was enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976. It emphasises what Hannah Lambie-Mumford calls in her evidence to the Commission 'sustainable access to socially acceptable food experiences.' Oliver De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, has summarised the role of the state in relation to the right to food as:

- To respect the right to food by not interfering with or blocking access to food
- To protect the right to food by preventing 'private actors' from taking action which limits access to food
- To fulfil the right to food by putting policies in place to ensure everyone has access to an 'adequate diet'

How states deliver on the third role of the right to food - fulfilling it - has been a matter of debate. Graham Riches, emeritus professor at the University of British Columbia, stated in his evidence to the commission that the UK has a duty beyond the role of emergency food provision in fulfilling the right to food. Instead, it is their duty to address the structural problems that prevent people from accessing food.²¹

2 THE PRICE OF FOOD SYSTEM FAILURE: HEALTH

There is a clear correlation between income, diet and health outcomes. Health and diet advances made by the population as a whole are failing to take low-income households with them. Obesity is getting worse in low-income households and diet-related health inequality is growing.

This chapter uses evidence submitted to the commission and new analysis of diet and health trends to look in detail at diets and consequent health outcomes for low-income households.

The close link between diets and health outcomes means that as a consequence of low-income households having less economic and physical access to nutritious food, individuals in them are more likely to suffer from health ailments throughout their lifetime, and have a lower life expectancy. Meanwhile, research has shown that nutrition levels in early life have a significant influence on health in later life.

Food choices are complex, and low-income households face huge pressure on their food budgets, as set out in the introduction and chapter 1 of this report. While prominent public figures have said that “the poor can’t cook,” a box at the end of this chapter sets out the evidence that shows why this conclusion is not accurate.

The links between diet, income and health outcomes

This link between diets and health outcomes has been the driver behind several high profile government-funded public health campaigns in the UK, such as ‘5 a day’ and Change 4 Life. The scale of the challenge of improving diets nationally is immense:

- The UK Faculty of Public Health estimate that a poor diet is linked to 30 per cent of life years lost in early death or disability.²²
- The Cabinet Office predict that 70,000 deaths could be avoided each year if UK diets matched nutritional guidelines on fresh fruit and vegetables.
- A third of five-year olds had tooth decay in 2012, caused by high sugar diets.²³

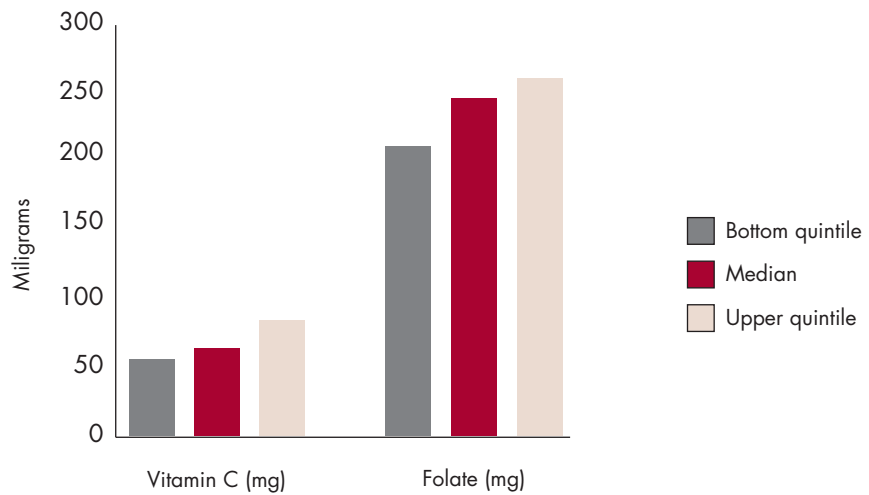
An analysis of National Diet and Nutrition Survey statistics shows this strong correlation between better diets and income. Low-income households tend to consume fewer micronutrients and less fresh fruit and vegetables than average-income households. The higher the income of the household, the more nutrients, fruit and vegetables that are eaten. This supports Professor Martin Caraher’s oral evidence to the commission, in which he explained that low-income households are more likely to prioritise goods that will last, and get eaten. The lifespan of fruit, for example, is relatively short compared to most other food, and low-

income households are less likely to buy food that will end up being wasted.

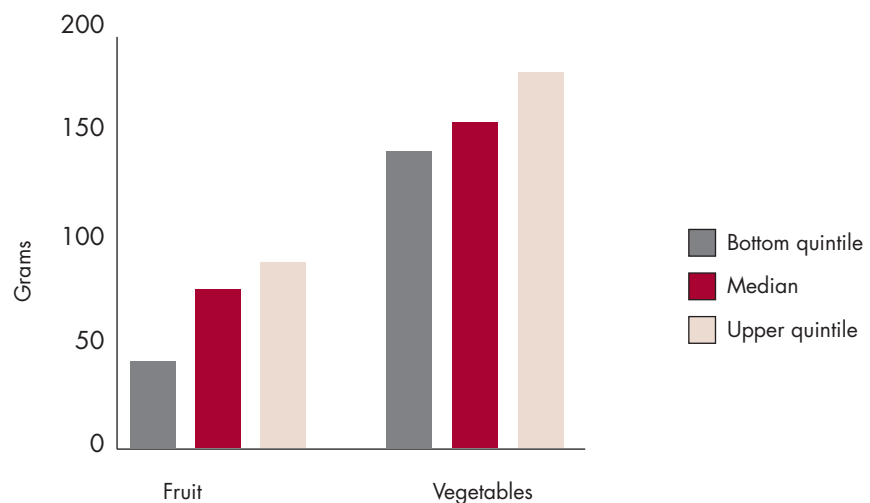
Meanwhile analysis from the Faculty of Public Health shows that as well as getting fewer micronutrients, low-income households are more likely to eat those foods with negative health effects, such as highly processed foods, high sugar foods and foods with high saturated fat levels.²⁴

This social gradient in health was set out by the final report of the Marmot Review (2010), which showed that those on lower incomes had a lower life expectancy than the median, and those in routine and semi-routine professions had a far higher mortality rate than those in managerial professions.²⁵ As well as a social gradient in life expectancy, those in the bottom income quintile are one a half times more likely to develop diabetes than the average.²⁶ A very clear manifestation of this social gradient in health outcomes can be seen when we look closely at how child obesity levels have changed in recent years.

Micronutrients by income



Fruit and vegetables by income



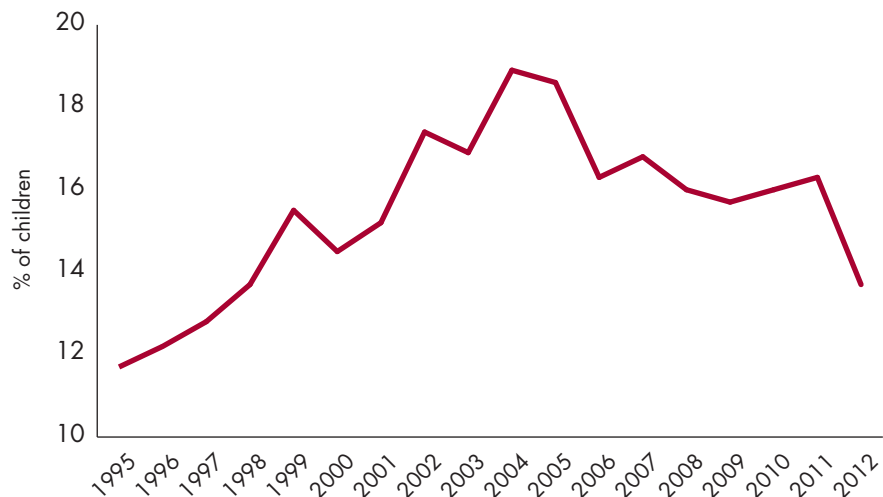
National Diet and Nutrition Survey (2008/09 - 2011/12)

Child obesity and health inequalities

While as a nation the UK appears to be getting to grips with an obesity problem – shown by the graph below - its incidence continues to rise in low-income households.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s child obesity rose year on year. However, warnings from leading public health figures and a renewed public interest in children's diets coincided with a campaign by Jamie Oliver and leading public health figures in the mid-2000s, most famously depicted in Jamie's School Dinners. The campaign drew from the recommendations of the Soil Association's 2003 report *Food for Life: Healthy, local, organic school meals*, which referenced pilot schemes such as St Peter's Primary School in Nottinghamshire which used fresh ingredients and taught children where their food came from.²⁷ The ensuing campaign, as well as the government's establishment of the School Meals Review Panel, led to a number of initiatives, particularly focused on school meals, which led to incidence of obesity in children beginning to fall in the late 2000s.

Incidence of obesity (%) in all children aged 2-15, 1995-2012

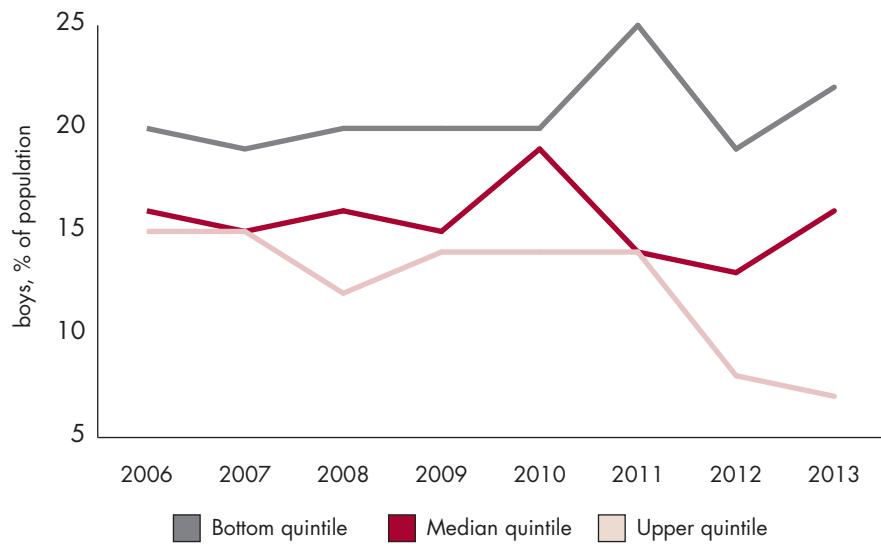


Source: Health Survey for England – 2013

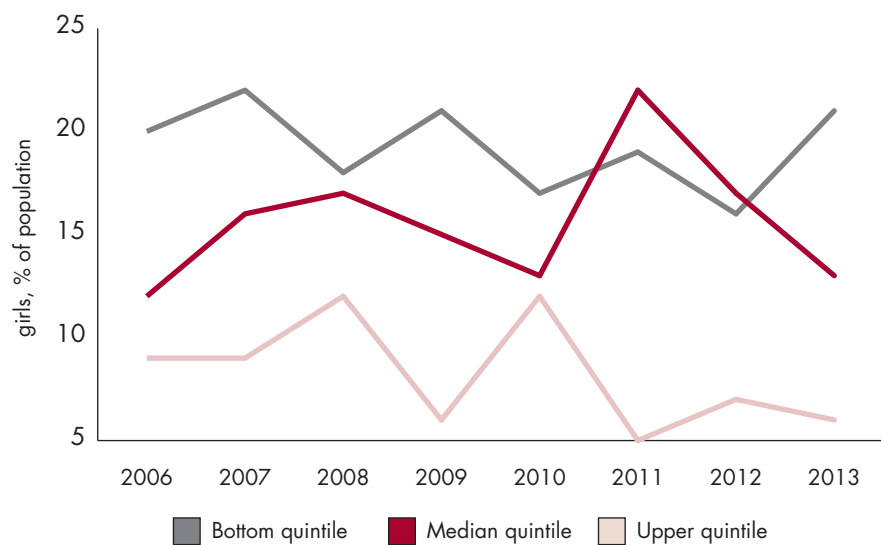
In contrast to these average trends, incidence of child obesity is on the rise in low-income households. In fact, a review of Health Survey for England data shows that 22 per cent of boys and 21 per cent of girls from low-income households were classified as obese in 2013. This means that incidence of childhood obesity is higher now than it was in 2006, the year of Jamie Oliver's documentary that exposed the high saturated fat, high salt, high sugar makeup of school dinners across the UK. This highlights a worrying gap between dietary and health outcomes in children from low-income households and the rest of the population. Over this same time period, incidence of obesity fell by more than half amongst boys from the highest income households, and by a third amongst girls in the highest quintile. It implies that while health and dietary breakthroughs in schools during the late 2000s have improved the health of children as a whole, they have disproportionately benefited higher-income households and have failed to make an impact on

households on the lowest incomes. In this sense it is a prime example of advances in the UK's health and food system increasing health inequalities and leaving the poorest behind.

Child obesity (boys, % of population) in lowest, median and highest income quintiles



Child obesity (girls, % of population) in lowest, median and highest income quintiles



Sources: Health Survey for England data from 2006 – 2013.

Diet and nutrition in early life are especially important indicators of health inequalities because they influence outcomes in later life. The government white paper, *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* (2010) acknowledges that children's diet and development "is crucial for their future health and wellbeing and better early years support could make a big difference". Good diets at

a young age have been shown to lead to better health outcomes and educational attainment, and protect against high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes in adulthood.²⁸ In this sense, the health inequalities in the incidence of child obesity have a multiplying effect for health outcomes in later life.

Diets and behaviour

Diets and eating behaviour are influenced by a wide range of factors. The clear correlation between low incomes and bad diets shows that affordability of food is absolutely key (see chapter 1). This is confirmed by the squeezing of food budgets when money is tight and the tendency to prioritise calories over health benefits when food becomes less affordable.

However, there are other drivers that affect food choices and therefore diets, and in turn health outcomes. There is a cultural influence from family, peers, habits and routines that shape diets and food choices.

Choices regarding food can only be partially explained by economic logic because food plays a wider role in society than simply a bundle of nutrients or a means to sustenance. Eating is often a social endeavour and food is used as a means of expression.

The different functions that food serves in different socioeconomic households are an important reminder of food as a social and cultural phenomenon. In his evidence to the commission, Dale Southerton, director of the Sustainable Consumption Unit at the University of Manchester, dismissed the idea of the “sovereign,” completely logical and market-driven consumer, instead saying that consumption patterns are “socially patterned” as a result of habits, routines and company.

Food marketing

While much of the social patterning of food comes from family, friends, colleagues and through relationships with people, there is an external element of behaviour change created by food industry marketing campaigns.

In his evidence to the commission, Dr Adam Oliver, associate professor in the Department of Social Policy at the LSE, explained that food industry retailers are “experts on using behavioural economics to manipulate the demand side” and have been attempting to change the choices made by their customers for “generations.” A 2009 systematic review of evidence into food marketing to children set out how contemporary food marketing ‘predominantly promotes’ low nutrition foods. The study found that between 50 and 80 per cent of food and drink marketing is for low nutrition foods.²⁹

The targeting is especially relevant for low-income households since we have seen they tend to consume less fruit, vegetables, and micronutrients, and more high saturated fat, high sugar products.

Food marketing is successful at shaping food consumption norms because it has the power not only to change somebody’s preference at brand level, but also at ‘category level’. This ability to affect category level changes, which is particularly marked in relation to children, means that people are more likely to develop a preference for the types of food that are marketed to them.³⁰ So for example, food marketing goes beyond the choice of whether to eat at McDonalds or KFC, but whether to visit a fast food restaurant over buying some fresh produce and preparing it at home.

The role of food marketing, according to Robert Heath, a former leading marketing professional, is “communicating simple rationally persuasive messages that change our beliefs and make us buy the product.”³¹ And marketing often has demonstrable effects. In a meeting with the commission, PepsiCo noted that they decided only to advertise their no-sugar branded soft drinks, and as a result 70 per cent of Pepsi retail sales in the UK contain no sugar. Heath gives another example: the Cadbury’s drumming gorilla advertisement, which he believes caused a 9 per cent increase in sales of Dairy Milk.³² In his evidence to the commission, Jon Alexander, also a former marketing professional who worked on the Cadbury’s gorilla campaign, said that brands aimed to “associate themselves at a fundamental human level with human needs and desires” and specifically target these adverts at “certain groups that are most likely to buy” their products.

The resources available to brands to influence behaviour is demonstrated by the vast amount of money spent on marketing each year. For example, McDonalds alone spends nearly three times as much on marketing as the Department of Health spends on its Change 4 Life initiative. Change 4 Life is the government’s public health initiative encouraging healthy eating and physical exercise. The seven biggest food brands together spend over £300 million a year on marketing – more than ten times the amount spent on Change 4 Life. These statistics demonstrate the scale of the food industry’s work that goes into changing consumer behaviour – often geared towards low nutrient, high sugar, high salt products.

The top food advertisers marketing spend compared to total budget for Change 4 Life, government’s leading public health initiative

Advertiser	Expenditure (2013)
McDonalds	£72,148,548
Nestle	£63,150,743
Mars	£44,600,484
Kellogg’s	£43,481,511
KFC	£31,647,353
Change 4 Life	£25,000,000
Muller Dairy	£24,570,685
Kraft Foods	£21,436,415

Sources: Brand marketing spend from Nielson statistics (2013).³³ Change 4 Life spend based on £75 million over 3 years.³⁴

Public policy recognises the potential influence marketing campaigns can wield and a number of regulations have been put in place to limit this influence, particularly on children. For example, television advertising of

'unhealthy foods and beverages' to children during child-specific television programmes was banned in the UK in 2009. However, studies have questioned the impact of these regulations, because advertisers are using other means to target children, such as advertising during family programmes and using 'advergames' – web-based games featuring prominent product placement - to target children directly.³⁵

The success with which adverts for low-nutrition food are reaching children is borne out by comments from the commission's expert panel. One member said her son "believes everything they say on the telly." Her son would point things out in the supermarket saying "that's the best one", and when [the expert panel member] asked why, he said "because the advert said it". Another member recalled her child playing a brand "logo game" on the internet, and he could "name all of them". The evidence suggests that big food brands are still having a major influence on food purchasing and consumption behaviour.

Based on the evidence the commission has heard, it is clear that simple exhortations to people on low incomes to change their diets simply will not work. There is no evidence that policies based narrowly around empowering low income consumers to buy 'better food' will have any impact either on their behaviour or on the wider food system.

COOKING SKILLS AND LOW INCOMES

In recent months, there have been a number of claims regarding links between 'the poor' and a lack of cooking skills, which might lead to poor diets, or even be a cause for increased food bank usage.

For example, prominent public figures are reported to have recently said that "poor people don't know how to cook"³⁶ and that the poor "never learn to cook, they never learn to manage and the moment they have got a bit of spare cash they are off getting another tattoo."³⁷ Such comments are not reflected by the evidence.

While good cooking skills are an important enabler that effectively allow households to do more with less,³⁸ the commission has seen no evidence that cooking skills in low-income households are any different to the rest of the population. In fact, the evidence suggests that those on low incomes are more likely to be resourceful than any other income group. Market analyst Dr Clive Black noted that low-income households are acting like "true economists" in the way in which they are managing their budgets. Analysis of food spending over the recession has shown that low-income households hunted out best value products and increasingly made use of promotions. This trend is borne out by comments from members of the commission's expert panel. One member said: "I only buy the food that's reduced at the end of the day" and another recalled buying six boxes of cereal on one occasion when they were on offer. "When it gets reduced," she said, "I buy loads."

However, it remains that the energy needed to power kitchen appliances like freezers, microwaves and ovens is a significant cost burden on already squeezed households. For example, one of the members of the commission's expert panel of people with experience of poverty told the commission that he rarely has enough money on the electricity meter at the end of each month, meaning he has to carefully monitor his appliance use. In addition, the one of cost of buying new appliances, fixing and replacing them adds a further burden onto budgets.

Rather than restricted to low-income households, it appears that there is an issue with cooking skills and time allocated to cooking that stretches right across the population. The average amount of time spent making the average meal has nearly halved over the last twenty years – from 60 minutes to 32 minutes. According to a Change 4 Life poll, 71 per cent of respondents said that time pressures had meant they were more likely to consume convenience foods, rather than preparing from scratch.³⁹ The squeeze on time is partially caused by changes to the labour market – the average person is working more hours than in previous generations, particularly in the case of women. Professor Dale Southerton also highlighted lifestyle changes and trends that have decreased the regularity of the ‘family meal’, but these are trends which occur right across the income distribution.

While there are a number of drivers for a population-wide decrease in time allocated to preparing meals, and questions over a decrease in cooking skills, there is no evidence to suggest that this is a specific problem for low-income households.

3 A FUTURE FOOD SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR EVERYBODY

“Looking ahead, business as usual in food provisioning in the UK and globally is simply not an option” - Professor Tim Benton, UK champion for global food security and professor of population ecology at the University of Leeds

This interim report sets out some of the commission’s emerging findings on the links between food and poverty. The final report, which we will publish in summer 2015, will set out the commission’s recommendations for a fairer food system. In this final chapter we set out the pressing food system challenges we have identified that any policy framework and action plan has to address.

Simply placing more pressure on prices is not sustainable

Unsurprisingly, price is a key determinant of the affordability of food, but lower food prices are not necessarily the answer. The evidence the commission has heard suggests that cheaper food could have damaging consequences for the food supply chain and the environment. Over the long term, the damage would be likely to outweigh any benefit in short-term price cuts, given the unsustainability of the current food system for people and the planet.

In the food production system, there are a number of external costs of production that are currently unaccounted for in food retail prices. Many of these are environmental. The chief environmental impact is that food production accounts for up to 30 per cent of the UK’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.⁴⁰ As a result of the UK and international GHG emissions, Professor Tim Benton told the commission that we could see an average global rise in temperature of 4°C by 2100, and that this would disproportionately affect big food producing areas in developing countries such as Brazil, where temperatures could rise by up to 8°C. This analysis is shared by Australian researchers Steven Sherwood, Sandrine Bony and Jean-Louis Dufresne, whose published modelling shows there is likely to be a change of “more than three degrees” by 2100.⁴¹ This would have a devastating impact on many big food producing areas of the world, and the consequent reduction in supply would lead to less choice and higher prices of food and levels of price volatility in the UK.

Another key environmental impact that is unaccounted for in food retail pricing is in the loss of biodiversity. In oral evidence to the commission, Hilary Hamer, director of local food group Food 4 Hull, described the astonishing lack of flower, fauna and wildlife of farmland around Hull, reinforcing a warning about the decline of biodiversity in the UK made by Professor Tim Benton. This biodiversity loss is increasingly occurring not just in the UK but across the world, with intensive farming techniques leading WWF to claim that the Earth has lost half its wildlife in the last 40 years.⁴² This problem sits alongside better known issues such as unsustainable water extraction, water

pollution, and deforestation. Without action, there will be long term damage to the food producing ecosystem, which will reduce food supply and ultimately put upward pressure on food prices.

There is also intense pressure within the food supply chain that means retailers are unlikely to be able to sustainably maintain food prices at today's current low levels. One food producer with major supermarket contracts spoke to the commission anonymously. He explained that producing for the major supermarkets is like being on a "hamster wheel," as every year he had to "make more for less" to keep the supermarket contracts upon which his business relied. He estimated that his competitors had dropped from around 20 to just five over 20 years. The producer predicted that there would soon "become a point where the number of suppliers will be so small that supermarkets won't be able to drive" prices down any further. This would bring an end to the unsustainable notion of ever cheaper food, and would lead to a rise in retail food prices.

One of the reasons for this pressure on suppliers is the intense competition in the UK food retail market. According to Dr Clive Black, the rise of Aldi and Lidl is having a disruptive effect on the big four supermarkets, who are renewing pressure on their suppliers in order to compete with the "hard discounters". However, this pressure is running right through the supply chain and is making business unsustainable for many primary producers who are unable to cover their costs of production. Michael Davenport, a dairy farmer in Lincolnshire, told the commission that he "couldn't survive just milking dairy cows" and had to diversify to stay afloat by starting a cheese making venture. According to the NFU, the number of dairy farms in Britain has halved since 2002.⁴³ The implication is that as the number of producers dwindle, competition will decrease, and the power of the retailers to put downward pressure on prices will decrease. This would then lead to further upwards pressure on food prices.

The European Union Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the consequences of future trade deals may also put further pressure on producers. Various evidence submissions have highlighted the role of the CAP in shaping what happens in farming throughout Europe and its wider impact on the world. The contested trade negotiations around the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) could have a major impact on European farmers, food standards and consumption patterns. The EU Agriculture and Rural Development commissioner Phil Hogan, speaking at a conference in the USA, told American farmers "with the lowering of EU tariffs which would form a central part of any TTIP deal – you guys [American farmers] stand to benefit enormously."⁴⁴ It will be important to monitor how the CAP and trade deals, including TTIP, affect those on low incomes and the various pressures on the UK food supply chain.

Meanwhile, much of the pressure in food production is already being passed on to the food industry workforce, which is characterised by low pay and zero hour contracts. This undermines the development of a skilled and valued workforce and generates another external cost not accounted for in the market price of food as income from low wages and low working hours are topped up by the social security system in tax credits and in-work social security benefits.

The commission held a community meeting in Boston, Lincolnshire which revealed that food producers had been sending agents out to Romania and Bulgaria to recruit experienced migrant workers who are prepared to work

long hours for low wages. Right across the food production industry there are reports of exploitation of such migrant workers. Det Supt David Wood from Lincolnshire Police recently told the BBC, “there is a level of exploitation” of migrant workers, “through slavery and servitude, through sexual exploitation, labour exploitation” that is “on the increase”.⁴⁵ The Gangmasters Licensing Authority have also exposed serious abuse and trafficking of migrant workers in the area.⁴⁶

The Groceries Code Adjudicator was launched in 2013 to halt any exploitative practices from major UK food retailers that were unfairly squeezing suppliers. However, criticisms have been made about its ability to adequately protect suppliers from exploitative practice.⁴⁷ In February 2015 the adjudicator launched its first major inquiry, looking at “practices associated with the profit over-statement announced by Tesco plc in September 2014.”⁴⁸ It will be important to monitor these developments with regard to the adjudicator’s scope and ability to protect suppliers from unfair practice.

These pressures on the environment and food supply chain have built up to such an extent that further food price rises will be likely in years to come. This is because both threaten to reduce the supply of food, while there is currently little sign of a future reduction in international demand. The environmental damage caused by the food production system will in time begin to damage fertility in big food growing areas in the developing world. Farmers and producers in the UK are increasingly going out of business, reducing competition and ultimately supply. Meanwhile, international food security and supply have been closely linked with a changing geo-political environment, which could lead to international food and fuel markets becoming inaccessible.⁴⁹ These factors will begin to inflate the price of food in the UK over coming years.

What food price rises mean for affordability

If food prices do rise over the coming years, the problems of food affordability will become more acute, unless action is taken.

Food unaffordability will also become an issue for more people in the UK. Indeed, a food bank manager in Boston, Lincolnshire – an area with a high incidence of deprivation – told the commission that they have had to extend the maximum number of packages given to each attendee because many people were in a longer period of crisis and the three packages they used to give out were insufficient. A recent report of food bank use in West Cheshire tells a similar story. While most usage of the food bank were down to short-term crisis issues outlined earlier in this report, 12 per cent of users were unable to afford sufficient food for 13 to 26 weeks, suggesting that the problems were longer term.⁵⁰ Short-term crisis is fast becoming long-term struggle.

Fundamental change is needed

Delivering affordable, accessible, nutritious, sustainable food will require fundamental change inside the food system and the wider economy. But this could mean higher food prices. So outside the food system, action is needed to give everyone access to a nutritious, affordable diet.

Increasing pressures on low income families, combined with potential

food price rises means that demand for food banks is likely to rise unless something changes. Simply creating more and more food banks to satisfy this growing need cannot be the answer to these structural problems in society. Rather than more sticking plasters, there is now an urgent need to address the failings of the food system that threaten to impoverish millions more people, and create worse health outcomes and less opportunity for social participation over the coming years.

A renewed call for evidence and feedback

Given the scale of the challenge, the commission is seeking fresh evidence of potential solutions and positive examples, including action points for business, governments and civil society to tackle the structural issues that are causing imbalances and unfairness in the food system.

Whilst we are looking for some potential 'quick wins' for UK governments, businesses and the people most affected by the complex relations between food and poverty, we are also keen to explore the potential for larger scale system change.

We would therefore welcome evidence of potential solutions at a variety of different levels, from large scale changes to how we think about or organise the food system through interventions by government, public agencies or the food industry itself, to more practical local and community based solutions.

The commission will be taking further evidence from experts and practitioners in the UK food system over the coming months. If you would like to submit evidence, please contact Cameron Tait, the commission secretary, at cameron.tait@fabians.org.uk.

ENDNOTES

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- 11 In his oral evidence to the Commission, Dr Clive Black noted that the recent sudden fall in the price of oil would “be very good news for consumers in due course,” but not necessarily over the long-term due to the structural rebasing of food prices.
- 12 The background to these price rises was given by Dr Clive Black, market analyst and Director of Shore Capital, in his oral evidence to the commission.
- 13 *Food Statistics Pocketbook 2013* (Defra, 2013) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315418/foodpocketbook-2013update-29may14.pdf
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ally induced land use change mean that this figure should be higher.

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A RECIPE FOR INEQUALITY |

WHY OUR FOOD SYSTEM IS LEAVING LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS BEHIND

Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty

The Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty has gathered evidence on how the UK's food system serves those on low incomes, and to what extent it contributes to poverty in the UK. This interim report shows clearly that those on the lowest incomes are the ones losing out from our food system.

Food price rises have disproportionately hit low-income households since 2013 and now those on lower incomes spend a greater proportion of their budget – between 16 per cent and 35 per cent – on food. Combined with increases in housing and energy costs, those on the lowest incomes are moving closer to crisis.

And while the proliferation of supermarkets and the rise of the discount retailers like Aldi and Lidl has held food prices down for consumers, it has come at the cost of huge pressure on the food supply chain. Low pay and zero hour contracts are rife in the food workforce and the search for ever-cheaper ingredients led to the 2013 horsemeat scandal.

The commission will present its final report later this year and make recommendations on what politicians can do to fix Britain's unequal and unsustainable food system.