
Iain Bell | Deputy National Statistician and Director
General for Population & Public Policy

The Lord Krebs
Chair, Food, Poverty, Health and Environment Committee
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

11 October 2019

Dear Lord Krebs,

I write in response to the Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment Committee's call for evidence.

As the Committee may be aware, the Government Statistical Service (GSS) provides independent, trustworthy statistics in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's National Statistical Institute, and largest producer of official statistics within the GSS.

We aim to provide a firm evidence base for sound decisions, and develop the role of official statistics in democratic debate.

The ONS is responsible for sourcing and reporting UK data for the UN's Sustainable Development Goal indicators on behalf of the UK Government. The measurement of food insecurity is a requirement for the measurement of *Goal 2: Zero Hunger*.

The following short note provides details of the available data on food insecurity in the UK and cross-government plans to improve these data in the near future.

I hope this evidence is helpful to the Committee. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Iain Bell

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) – Written Evidence to the Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment : Food insecurity and sustainability inquiry (October 2019)

The ONS role

As the UK's national statistical institute, the ONS is responsible for the reporting of data which enables regular monitoring of UK progress towards the 244 global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators. We work with partners across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to ensure that we can monitor and report on the indicators.

The comprehensive framework for SDGs fits with our Better Statistics, Better Decisions strategy¹, which sets out the official statistics system collective mission of providing high quality statistics, analysis and advice to better inform policymaking. Sourcing and analysing data for the SDGs, which covers the economy, environment and society, and is also broken down to show a more complete picture for the UK, will enable better-evidenced policy decisions.

We are:

- Sourcing the appropriate UK data for the global indicators.
- Providing data to the international organisations responsible for each indicator, known as Custodian Agencies, who are responsible for reporting the data to the United Nations.
- Analysing the data so that it can be understood in context.
- Making the data available to everybody through the development of an online tool and supporting reports.

Background

1. The ONS recognises the measurement of food insecurity is a key priority and requirement for indicator 2.1.2 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population, based on the UN Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)).
2. Emma Lewell-Buck MP wrote to Sir David Norgrove, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, on 30 May 2018 outlining her concerns in relation to the lack of statistical data on food insecurity in the UK. Her Food Insecurity Private Members Bill asked the Government to introduce a reliable and robust measure of UK hunger. At the time, the Bill had secured the support of 150 MPs and 16 Peers.
3. Following this, a meeting of the ONS with Ms Lewell-Buck MP took place. Given the requirement of the SDGs, we started a programme of work to improve UK statistics on food insecurity. This began with a comprehensive review of relevant existing data from both official and non-official sources. We convened a roundtable on food insecurity with key third sector and government stakeholders in early 2019 to fully understand all the data requirements before determining next steps. We also partnered with the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (FAO) to better understand the different international measurement approaches.

¹ [Better Statistics, Better Decisions strategy](#)

Food insecurity data sources

UN (FAO) published food insecurity data

4. In June 2019, the UN (FAO) published the latest version of its annual report entitled '*The state of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World*'.² The Gallup World Poll was used to collect data for this report, which included a detailed methodology for the UK data. The data collected was used to produce baseline country estimates for the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) for more than 140 countries, including the UK. A detailed methodology for the UK data included was also published alongside the report³.
5. The Gallup World Poll surveys at least 1,000 individuals using a telephone interviewing method in the UK.

GSS food insecurity data

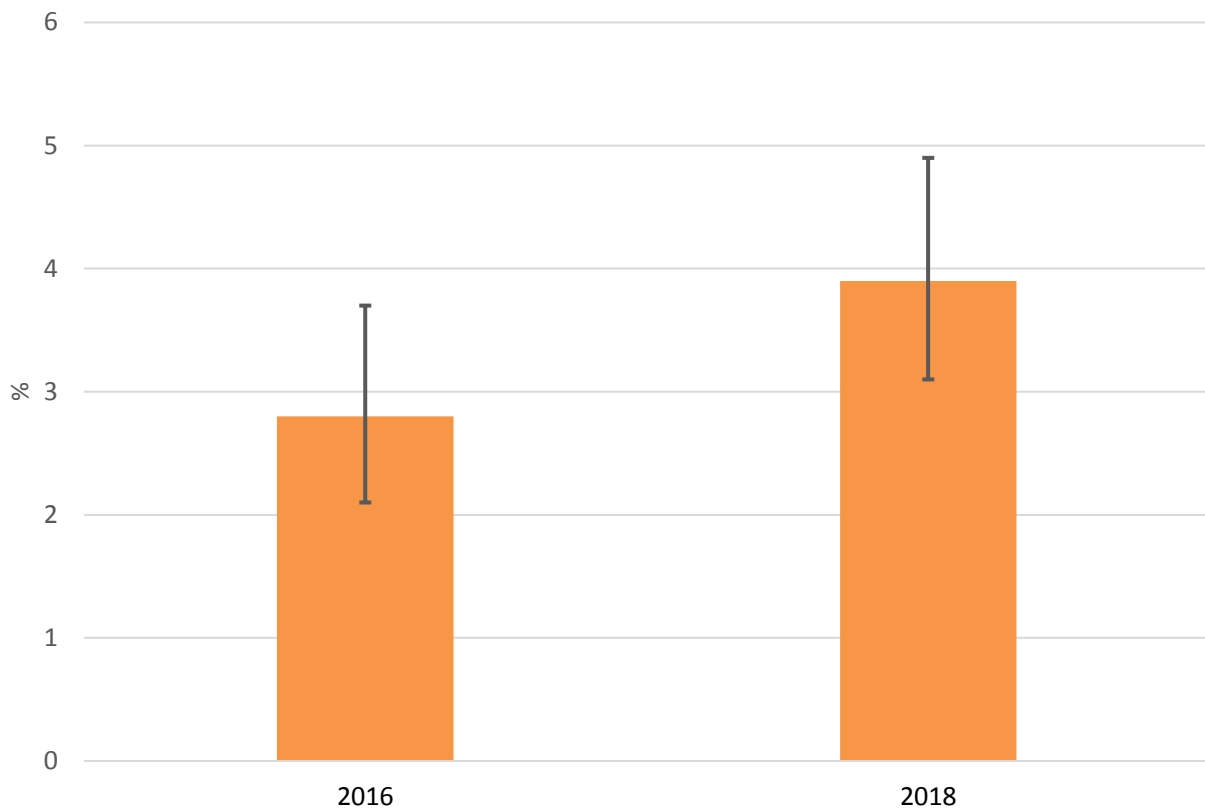
6. The biennial Food and You Survey, commissioned by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), collects information about the public's reported behaviours, attitudes and knowledge relating to food safety and food issues. Wave 5 of the survey was conducted in 2018 and consisted of 2,241 interviews from a representative sample of adults aged 16 and over across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (not Scotland). In line with 2016, the 2018 survey incorporated a suite of 10 food insecurity questions used by the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service in their annual, nationally representative survey monitoring the extent of food insecurity in the U.S.
7. Results from the 2018 Food and You Survey found 80% of respondents lived in households with high food security, 10% in households classified as marginally food secure, and 10% reported living in households with low or very low food security.⁴
8. The following graph shows that 4% of respondents lived in households with very low food security in 2018. There has not been a statistically significant increase compared with 2016.

² [The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World](#)

³ [Food Insecurity Experience Scale, United Kingdom, 2018](#)

⁴ [Food and You Survey Wave 5](#)

Estimated prevalence of very low food security, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2016 to 2018



Source: Food and You Survey, Food Standards Agency

9. The Scottish Government committed to monitoring household food insecurity in 2016 following recommendations from an Independent Working Group on Food Poverty. Three priority questions on household food insecurity, selected from the wider set of UN FIES questions, were included in the 2017 and 2018 Scottish Health Surveys⁵. The 2018 Scottish Health Survey showed that 9% of adults in Scotland reported that they worried they would run out of food due to a lack of money or resources at some point in the previous 12 months. Furthermore, 6% of adults said they ate less than they should and 3% said they had run out of food due to lack of money or resources in the previous 12 months. There was no statistically significant change in the prevalence of food insecurity between the 2017 and 2018 Scottish Health Surveys. In 2017, 8% of adults reported that they worried about running out of food, 7% reported they ate less than they should and 4% reported that they had run out of food.
10. Combined analyses of the 2017 and 2018 Scottish Health Surveys showed that worrying about running out of food was more prevalent among single parents (25%), single adults aged under 65 living alone (21%) and adults living in the most deprived areas (16%). These analyses also showed that adults experiencing food insecurity had substantially lower mental wellbeing and were more likely to have consumed no fruit and vegetables on a given day than the rest of the adult population.

⁵ [Scottish Health Survey, 2018 Main Report](#)

11. The prevalence of food insecurity in Scotland will continue to be monitored in the 2019 Scottish Health Survey. Data from the 2019 Scottish Health Survey will be published in September 2020. Thereafter food insecurity in Scotland will be monitored in the UK-wide Family Resources Survey.

Why are we working to improve the data?

12. While existing official data are available, the aforementioned evidence points to limitations in its ability to appropriately report progress towards the SDGs. We promised to consider ways the ONS can improve official statistics on food insecurity for the UK.
13. The UN (FAO) data collection has now been discontinued, due to the FAO expecting countries to collect and report their own national survey data.
14. Both the Gallup World poll for the UN (FAO) and the Food and You survey have limited sample sizes of 1000 individuals and 3000 adults respectively. This means the findings lack statistical robustness and reliability. It also limits our ability to identify characteristics that are associated with food insecurity, which goes against our commitment to 'leave no one behind'.
15. The Food and You survey is only collected once every two years and lacks UK wide coverage as it does not report data for Scotland.

Delivering better statistics on food insecurity

16. During our roundtable with key third sector and government stakeholders, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) confirmed they would include food insecurity questions on the Family Resources Survey (FRS) from April 2019. This development was strongly welcomed by all stakeholders.
17. The FRS questions follow the same general format as those already used in the United States and Canada to measure food insecurity (the questions are available at Annex A).
18. The FRS has a sample of 20,000 households, that is designed to be representative of the UK.
19. Data from these questions is now being collected. The current survey year ends in March 2020 and we would expect DWP to publish the first set of results by end March 2021, subject to quality assurance. These will be on a UK basis; the level of detail of results will depend on the level of actual response. The ONS will work with DWP to ensure that, as far as the data allows, the reporting requirements of the SDGs are met by the results from the FRS.
20. We have committed to a further roundtable to keep stakeholders abreast of developments. This is scheduled for November 2019.

What are the benefits of this new method for food insecurity data collection?

21. The summary table below identifies the benefits the FRS will offer in respect of food insecurity measurement compared with the Food and You Survey and the UN FAO statistics currently collected using the Gallup World Poll. By having UK-wide coverage and a much larger sample size the data will be much more reliable and statistically robust. Furthermore, it will enable the reporting of more characteristics associated with food security, helping to fulfil our commitment to leave no one behind.

22. The new food insecurity questions on the FRS are undergoing thorough checks to ensure they meet the required high quality standards. Assuming these standards are met, the new FRS data will be available from 2021. Until these data are available, we will continue to report progress towards SDG indicator 2.1.2 using data for the Food and You Survey. All data are published and available to all via our National Reporting Platform (NRP)⁶.

Summary table: Current and Future data sources

| | Currently reported data | | Future data source |
|---|--|---|-------------------------|
| | Gallup World Poll (UN FAO) | Food and You Survey | Family Resources Survey |
| Frequency of food insecurity data collection | Annual | Once every two years | Annual |
| Sample size | 1,000 individuals | 3,000 adults | 20,000 households |
| Coverage | UK wide | England, Wales and Northern Ireland | UK wide |
| Limitations | Small sample size lacks statistical robustness and limits the ability to disaggregate by characteristics. UN (FAO) data collection has now been discontinued. Household survey only. | Lack of UK-wide coverage as Scotland is not included. Small sample size lacks statistical robustness and limits the ability to disaggregate by characteristics. Data is only collected once every two years. Household survey only. | Household survey only. |

⁶ [National Reporting Platform](#)

Annex A: Food insecurity questions to be asked on the Family Resources Survey

| Q1-Q3 | |
|---|--|
| Q1-Q3 | “We worried whether (my/our) food would run out before (I/we) got money to buy more.” Was that often true, sometimes true, or never true for you in the last 30 days? |
| | “The food that we bought just didn’t last, and we didn’t have money to get more.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days? |
| | “We couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days? |
| If any of Q1-Q3 are ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ follow with Q4-Q7 | |
| Q4-Q7 | In the last 30 days, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>If so</u>, how many days (or 3 or more, if not sure)? |
| | In the last 30 days, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money for food (Yes/No)? |
| | In the last 30 days, were you ever hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food (Yes/No)? |
| | In the last 30 days, did you lose weight because there wasn’t enough money for food (Yes/No)? |
| If Q4-Q7 are ‘Yes’, follow with Q8 | |
| Q8 | In the last 30 days, did you ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food (Yes/No)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>If so</u>, how many days (or 3 or more, if not sure)? |