

Hungry and out of work: What life is like for young British people under COVID-19

November 25 2020, by Charlotte McPherson



Credit: Helena Lopes from Pexels

Leo (all names of project participants have been changed to protect their identity) is a 22-year-old living in Edinburgh. He was working part-time in hospitality and waiting to begin university when we spoke during the

UK's nationwide lockdown earlier this year. Like [many young people](#), the pandemic had significantly affected Leo financially.

Furloughed and unable to access overtime as he normally would, several months off from his first student loan payment, he was anxiously awaiting a decision on his application for universal credit—without which he would literally have no money for food. He told me: "My income has dropped by at least about half [...] Hopefully universal credit will kick in [...] After this Friday, I'll be only earning about £40 less than [the cost of] my rent and bus fare, before any other costs are considered."

Research has revealed the [disproportionate impact](#) of the pandemic on [young people](#), who are the most likely to have been furloughed, lost their jobs and to have experienced [food insecurity](#). [Surging use](#) of food banks under COVID-19 has placed a spotlight on [food insecurity](#) in the UK, with [Marcus Rashford's lobbying](#) of the government to secure food provision for schoolchildren just one example.

But very little is known about how food [insecurity](#) affects [young adults](#). During the nationwide lockdown, I interviewed [a diverse range](#) of young people in Edinburgh and London, aged 18-26, to learn about their experiences both before and during the pandemic.

Underemployed and poorly paid

Food insecurity was not new to the young people I spoke to, who had invariably been underemployed in poorly paid, insecure jobs for several years. But the pandemic had severely aggravated this precarity in ways that expose the [insecure nature](#) of young people's employment and its penalties.

Before the pandemic, Holly, 18, was working long hours, six days a

week, in a commission-based sales job in London. She was employed on a four-hour contract per week but, apart from a small daily wage, her earnings came almost exclusively from door-to-door sales that she made outside her contracted hours. Unable to work in this way during lockdown, she had been furloughed to the value of her contract, causing a steep drop in income: "I was literally working six days a week, ten hours a day [...] The money I'm getting (per month), it's not even what I was getting in a week [...] it's horrible."

Others had been laid off from casual [jobs](#) where they had few employee protections, or were uncertain they had a job to return to at all post-lockdown. Rachel, 22, had been furloughed from her job in a betting shop in London when we spoke in May. She worked full-time hours but was on a part-time, fixed-term contract. Her manager had recently told her that not only could they not promise that she would be able to return to her job, but that her furlough payments might soon cease too: "They are paying us until the end of June. They could say anything. They could tell us that they don't want to pay us anymore, I just don't know."

Gaps in pandemic provision

The students I spoke to were unable to secure paid work or overtime. But they were also unable to access universal credit, for which full-time students are ineligible. Alex, 22, was moving into her final year of university when we spoke. Furloughed from a [part-time](#) hospitality job and unable to claim universal credit, she was unable to pay rent or afford food: "I applied for benefits, but [...] because I'm still in full-time education, I don't qualify for universal credit. My furlough pay is 80% of ten hours [...] which is absolutely nothing."

The young people were accessing food through both informal and formal support channels. Some could rely on food parcels and money from their parents, but many couldn't because of strained familial relationships or

because their parents were struggling financially themselves. As a result, some young people had used food banks—support that they not only found uncomfortable and embarrassing, but also often somehow undeserving of. As Leo, 22, told me:

"Every time that I need it, I just feel like I (haven't) done enough ... When you've got folks that are in their 40s, their 50s ... it's like no, surely to god, surely to god there's something else that I can do so this can be left for other folks that need it more."

My findings suggest that the key policies for protecting against poverty under COVID-19—furlough and universal credit—are not applying to, or being experienced by, young people in the same way as older age groups. This has triggered food insecurity, causing young people to ration portions, skip meals and subsist on nutritionally inadequate diets. This carries significant penalties for their health and wellbeing. Faye, 25, told me: "I'm not getting any goodness into my body, so I feel tired and run down."

Precarity and food insecurity was a regular threat and reality for the young people I spoke to, whether they were in or out of work. This aligns with [mounting evidence](#) about the declining protections employment holds against poverty, particularly among young people. Lucy, 26, told me: "My whole salary just goes to bills that I have to pay, so there is nothing really left for shopping, or not enough to eat well [...] So that money comes from my dad and that's what I use for food shopping. I need that to buy food."

While COVID-19 has undoubtedly played a significant role in young people's food insecurity, it has aggravated [economic instability](#) that was already persistent in their lives.

It has exposed the penalties of enduring disadvantages linked with being

young in the UK—lower incomes, higher job insecurity and reduced social security protections—and how these mean that young people are especially vulnerable to experiencing harm in the event of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the disproportionately [bleak economic forecast](#) for young people, it is essential that their exposure to [food](#) insecurity, and its entanglement with their chronic economic precarity, be acknowledged and met with strong national policy in the UK.

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