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## **Food Poverty and Catholic Schools in the Post Covid-19 era.** **Stephen McKinney, Stuart Hall and Kevin Lowden**

Many educational systems throughout the world are now adjusting to the post Covid-19 era. These systems are reflecting on the effects of the restrictions and lockdowns on children and school education. This is certainly the case in the Catholic schools in the UK and this is an opportune moment to examine the continuing pressing social challenge of child poverty and the impact of child poverty on the school education of children and young people. We must emphasise from the outset that child poverty levels in the UK were alarmingly high before the pandemic, were exacerbated by the pandemic, and continue to be unacceptably high. The Child Poverty Action Group report that the overall figure for child poverty in the UK for 2021-2022 was 4.2 million children or 29% of all children. This amounts to nine children in a classroom of thirty (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). These levels of poverty and child poverty in the UK have been affected by the economic effects of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and the cost of living crisis which has grave consequences for the most vulnerable families.

All schools have a duty of care towards the children and young people on their roll and take this responsibility seriously. Catholic schools share this duty of care and it is also underpinned by the demands of the gospels for social justice and the preferential option for the poor. This is a key feature of Catholic Social Teaching, as articulated by John XXIII on the eve of the Second Vatican Council and in the more recent social teaching of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. This preferential option for the poor has been especially emphasised by Pope Francis, notably in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) which dedicates a substantial section to the Christian response to the poor. In this section, Pope Francis draws attention to the Christian call to the preferential option for the poor:

Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid (Pope Francis, 2013, paragraph 187).

There are different forms of poverty that affect children and their engagement with school education. These include food poverty, digital poverty, uniform poverty and the poverty experienced by many children and young people who are young carers. While school staff are neither trained nor employed as Social Workers, many of them face the consequences of child poverty on a daily basis: children arriving in school hungry; children who do not possess adequate clothing for inclement weather or sports; families that cannot afford extra resources to support school learning activities or extra-curricular activities and a lack of access to devices or the internet. Many schools provide some form of intervention whether through breakfast clubs, uniform banks, access to devices in schools and the schools work hard to

ensure that they 'poverty proof' the school day. There is evidence that these resources are being stretched in some places. The headteacher of St Philip Howard Catholic primary school in Hatfield has recently commented to the media that the levels of child poverty have increased significantly, and this has put pressure on the school foodbank and second-hand uniform sales (Fullbrook & PA Media, 2023). This article will now focus on food poverty with a specific emphasis on food banks and free school meals. The authors acknowledge the ongoing challenges of digital poverty, uniform poverty and the poverty experienced by young carers and, in terms of food poverty, the introduction of breakfast clubs in many Catholic schools (and all other schools) throughout the UK and the increasing numbers of teachers providing snacks for children.

According to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights article 25, 'everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food...' (United Nations, 1948). This means that food security is enshrined in Human Rights and this has been consolidated in the United Nations Sustainable Goals. Sustainable Goal number two aims to 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture'. In terms of Catholic Social Teaching, the right to food is rooted in the fundamental God-given dignity of every person and their right to live a true human existence. To live this God-given life to the full, a person needs to have access to a sufficient amount of nutritious food (US Bishops, 2023). Returning to *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis comments in paragraph 191:

In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor. This has been eloquently stated by the bishops of Brazil: "We wish to take up daily the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of the Brazilian people, especially of those living in the barrios and the countryside – landless, homeless, lacking food and health care – to the detriment of their rights. Seeing their poverty, hearing their cries and knowing their sufferings, we are scandalized because we know that there is enough food for everyone and that hunger is the result of a poor distribution of goods and income".

Food poverty or food insecurity is a world-wide issue and effectively means that people do not have access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food. Food poverty is having an increasing impact in the UK on the lives of many children and young people and their families. There has been a steep increase in the price of food since the second half of 2021 (Francis-Devine et. al., 2023). In the two-year period between October 2021 and October 2023, food prices increased by 28% (Harari et. al., 2023). It is unsurprising, then, that the main foodbanks have reported unprecedented rises in demand for their services. At this point, it has to be recognised that the UK wide food bank networks and independent food banks are formal charitable organisations or small bodies motivated by charitable concerns – they are not Government funded. The Scottish Government has recently outlined a strategy, *Cash-First*:

*Towards ending the need for food banks in Scotland*, which aims to ensure that everyone has a sufficient and secure income to meet their needs. This Scottish Government aims to eradicate the need for food banks in the long-term (Scottish Government 2023a).

The latest annual statistics from the Trussell Trust for April 2022 to March 2023 indicate that nearly three million food parcels were distributed, one million of these were for children (The Trussell Trust, 2023). The latest mid-year figures for April 2023 to September 2023 indicate that 1.5 million food parcels were distributed. Sixty-five percent of all parcels in this mid-year reporting period were for families with children and 320,000 people had to approach foodbanks for help for the first time. There is a rise in the number of schools that support foodbanks or have established their own food banks to support the children and their families. A good example is St Anne's Catholic Primary School, Chelmsley Wood, Birmingham which directs families to local food banks when necessary (St Anne's Catholic Primary School, 2023). St David's RC High School in Dalkeith, Scotland has an ongoing foodbank appeal and Corpus Christi primary school in Oldham hosts a food bank once a month to support the local parish foodbank pantry (St David's RC High School, 2023; Corpus Christi, 2023).

In England, there is provision for universal free school meals for infants from the reception class to the end of year 1 (Gov.UK, 2023). Beyond this, free school meals are means tested and the number of children and young people eligible for free School meals in England has risen sharply since 2018 and now stands at 2.0 million children. This is the equivalent of 23.8% of all state funded pupils (Francis-Devine et.al., 2023). In Scotland, all children from primary one to primary five are entitled to a free school meal as a universal benefit. Beyond primary five, free school meals are means tested (mygov.scot, 2023). The planned rollout of universal free school meals for children in primaries six and seven was targeted for 2022, delayed till 2024, and now further delayed until 2026 (Hepburn, 2023). There are also opportunities to apply for free school meals in the school holidays. By 2022, the total figure among Scottish children registered for free school meals constituted 51.9% of the total school roll, though this included all the children from primary one to primary five who are entitled to the universal provision (Scottish Government, 2022). Recent findings from Scottish Government statistics demonstrate that children and young people from the most deprived areas of Scotland do not always have breakfast, are more likely to have a poor diet, and are less likely to eat fruit and vegetables regularly (Scottish Government 2023b).

There are serious questions about the number of children and young people in the UK who may be fed through a combination of foodbanks and free school meals. There are further questions about the quality of the food and the nutritional value of these meals for physical and intellectual development. Food banks can only provide short-term relief and cannot offer a long-term solution to food poverty which, as has been seen above, is a major issue for society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century UK. Caritas Westminster has a three-fold approach to tackling food poverty: direct relief; enabling food security and influencing and advocacy. Direct relief

involves support for food banks and the provision of emergency supermarket vouchers to meet immediate food needs. Caritas Westminster has joined the Children's Food Campaign 'Say Yes to School Food for All' (Caritas Westminster, 2023a). This is a call for the provision of free school meals for all children and young people from nursery to sixth form through a progressive roll out by 2030. It is to be noted that this campaign is for healthy and nutritious food (Sustain, 2023). Enabling food security means that advice is also provided in debt counselling, education and training in nutrition and cooking skills, Finally, influencing and advocacy seeks engagement with those in power and seeks changes in the systems that force families into poverty (Caritas Westminster, 2023b). This threefold approach seeks to address the immediate and pressing need to alleviate hunger, support people to become more autonomous, and apply pressure to people and structures to introduce preventative measures and bring about greater social justice.

Food poverty has become a scourge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century UK. It is an unmistakable and very public sign of the extent of contemporary poverty and inequality. While food security is a Human Right, it is also at the heart of Catholic Social teaching on the God-given dignity of the individual person. There is ample evidence of primary and secondary Catholic schools supporting children and young people and helping to alleviate food poverty. However, there is also evidence that Catholic schools, like other state funded schools, are experiencing an increase in the number of children and families who need support and resources are being stretched.

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