

Review

# Food Insecurity in Advanced Capitalist Nations: A Review

Michael A. Long <sup>1,\*</sup>, Lara Gonçalves <sup>1</sup>, Paul B. Stretesky <sup>2</sup> and Margaret Anne Defeyter <sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA; lgoncal@ostateemail.okstate.edu

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE18ST, UK; Paul.Stretesky@Northumbria.ac.uk

<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE7 7XA, UK; greta.defeyter@northumbria.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: michael.long@okstate.edu

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**Abstract:** Food insecurity is a substantial problem in nearly every advanced capitalist nation, with sizable portions of residents in many affluent countries struggling to eat healthily every day. Over time, a very large literature has developed that documents food insecurity, evaluates programs meant to reduce that insecurity, and proposes solutions to attenuate the problem. The purpose of the current review is to provide a very broad overview of the food insecurity literature, including definitions, measurement, areas of study, and impacts on health. Importantly, this review suggests there are two major causes of food insecurity in the advanced nations: economic inequality and neoliberalism. The food insecurity literature suggests that diminished government responsibility in advanced capitalist nations corresponds to an increase in feeding programs run by non-profit and charitable organizations. This review concludes by suggesting that, while a massive amount of research on food insecurity currently exists, more research is still needed to address gaps in the literature when it comes to significant events, coping strategies and disadvantaged populations.

**Keywords:** first world; food aid; food insecurity; food justice; food poverty; inequality; neoliberalism

## 1. Introduction

Food insecurity, a condition that occurs when individuals and households do not have regular access to a supply of healthy and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs, has become a substantial problem in the advanced capitalist world, with sizable portions of affluent countries struggling to eat healthily every day. For example, in 2018, 11.1% of households in the United States were food insecure [1]. Similarly, estimates of food insecurity in the UK suggest that 10% of citizens were living in food insecurity in 2016 [2], while 12.7% of Canadians were food insecure in 2018 [3]. These levels of food insecurity are also common in other affluent countries [4–6]. Given the scope of food insecurity in the developed world and the level of food aid that is regularly mobilized to help alleviate it, a large literature has developed that documents the existence, impacts, and possible solutions to food insecurity. In this paper, we provide an overview of the field of food insecurity research that focuses on the advanced capitalist world.

The literature on food insecurity in advanced capitalist nations is vast and there is no way we can do a comprehensive review of all of that literature in one article. Therefore, we suggest that this review article be treated as an overview of the field of food insecurity and related concepts, rather than an exhaustive review of all food insecurity studies of affluent countries. We draw on literature from the sociology, public health, social work, geography, economics, and agro-food studies fields to

demonstrate the widespread, multidisciplinary research that has been conducted on one of the most fundamental problems in the world—hunger. While there are numerous reviews of the various aspects of food insecurity in the advanced capitalist world, this is one of the first to take a broad overview of the entire field. It should be noted that many of the studies examined are from the United States, United Kingdom and Canada because the majority of English language research on food insecurity and its causes and impacts have been conducted in these countries. However, we make an effort to include and discuss research from other advanced capitalist nations, when it is available. Before we begin reviewing the literature on food insecurity and hunger in the advanced capitalist world, we first briefly discuss the roles of neoliberalism and income inequality in creating the situation in affluent nations where there are substantial numbers of food insecure citizens. This idea that food insecurity can be caused by structural conditions is not new. Thus, we situate our review in the rich history of extant food insecurity scholarship that stretches back to observations made by Sen [7] nearly 40 years ago by proposing that political economic conditions can influence food access in wealthy nations even when plenty of food exists to meet the needs of everyone living in those nations.

## 2. Neoliberalism and Inequality

While tremendous wealth exists in the advanced capitalist world, substantial poverty exists in these countries as well. With high average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita figures in these countries compared to elsewhere in the world, how is it that poverty rates, and consequently food insecurity rates, are as high as they are in many advanced capitalist countries? While this is a very complex question, two characteristics of contemporary capitalism are primary drivers of poverty and related social problems in affluent countries: the use of neoliberal economic and politically influenced policy and income inequality.

While these two concepts are related, we discuss them first separately and then demonstrate how the combination of neoliberalism and inequality has created a situation in the advanced capitalist world where there is the proverbial “want among plenty”. In other words, substantial levels of food insecurity exist in affluent countries. We begin our discussion with a brief overview and assessment of the impact of neoliberalism on the citizens of advanced capitalist countries.

### 2.1. Neoliberalism

In his now classic history of the subject, David Harvey [8] summarizes neoliberalism as, “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” [8] (p. 2).

The free market will more effectively distribute goods and services than a strategy of state intervention.

In the United States, the post-World War II era was characterized by Keynesian welfare state policies in part to prevent another Great Depression. Similar policy approaches were adopted in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, other parts of Western Europe. While the state intervention approach was effective for the next several decades, the rates of inflation and stagflation (the combination of stagnant economic growth and inflation) increased dramatically in the 1970s. In 1979, neoliberal economic policy was seen as the solution to the mounting inflation crisis. Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the United States ushered in the neoliberal revolution in 1980 and began remaking the economy, the government, and civil society along neoliberal capitalist lines.

The full employment goal of Keynesian inspired economic policy was replaced with “supply side” measures to reduce inflation. As a result, unemployment increased and the small government approach favored by proponents of neoliberalism substantially reduced social welfare benefits in both the UK and the US, causing poverty and inequality to increase. Along with the economic philosophies of neoliberal capitalism came a related discourse on the importance of individual responsibility for

personal failures rather than structural reasons associated with capitalism. The competition which is seen as vital to efficient capitalist market performance and economic growth, seeps into other aspects of life and instills a competitive neoliberal philosophy into the citizens of capitalist countries [9,10]. The combination of an individualistic competitive mentality and reduced social programs often results in people being blamed for their own poverty and expecting them to fix their problems themselves. This narrative fits well with a limited government intervention approach. Neoliberalism's biggest supporters, such as Reagan, combined the mandate for small government intervention and individual responsibility, with a call for increased voluntarism in civil society to help those in need. Ordinary citizens, not the various levels of government, should help others who are less fortunate.

In sum, the neoliberal revolution that began in 1979 in the UK with the election of Thatcher and 1980 with the election of Reagan exacerbated the inequality and poverty associated with capitalism in the advanced capitalist world, while also making it clear that the state was not primarily responsible for assisting those in need, rather, that was the responsibility of civil society and charitable organizations that are increasingly reporting to the state [11].

## 2.2. Inequality

Harvey [8] discusses how neoliberal policies increase income inequality. Moreover, inequality and the redistribution of wealth are structural aspects of neoliberal capitalism that aid in the "restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites" [8] (p. 16, 19). While neoliberal policies often increase inequality, inequality and capitalism are inexorably linked. Inequality has long been associated with capitalism (see Marx [12]). More recently, Thomas Piketty [13] in *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, empirically details how inequality has always been and will continue to be a core feature of capitalism that can only be reversed by serious state intervention into the economy, or exactly what neoliberal capitalism's defenders argue against. Piketty proposes that, without global wealth and progressive income taxes, the future will be largely characterized by extreme income inequality.

High income inequality generally means that there are substantial numbers of people living in poverty, as disproportionate amounts of wealth and resources are accumulated by the affluent. According to the *2018 World Inequality Report*, in 2016, the top 10% national income share in Europe was 37% and in US and Canada was 47%, indicating that the top income decile owns 37% of wealth in Europe and 47% of the wealth in US and Canada [14]. Income inequality across the world has increased since 1980, the beginning of the neoliberal economic revolution in the UK and the US. Alvaredo et al. [14] note that, "[s]ince 1980, income inequality has increased rapidly in North America, China, India, and Russia. Inequality has grown moderately in Europe. From a broad historical perspective, this increase in inequality marks the end of a postwar egalitarian regime" [14] (p. 3). In other words, as Keynesian policies fell out of favor in the advanced capitalist world, and neoliberal policies started to take hold, income inequality increased across the globe, including in developed countries. For the most part, these increases continue in the present day [14].

The Great Recession of 2008–2009 highlighted the failures of neoliberal economic policies, and the problems of inequality and poverty in the advanced capitalist world. The neoliberal capitalist financial institutions failed throughout the developed world and it was the middle and lower classes who bared the brunt of the consequences. Research has begun to show how the Recession increased food insecurity, which disproportionately affected low income households [15], undoubtedly increasing the levels of food insecurity and poverty more generally.

In sum, capitalism has long been associated with hunger and inequality. However, as the previous sections have suggested, in the advanced capitalist world, the last 40 years have been dominated by neoliberal economic policies, which have increased income inequality, poverty and food insecurity, while simultaneously concentrating wealth in the hands of a small number of individuals and corporations. In the remainder of this review we focus on food insecurity and related concepts in advanced capitalist nations. We first review studies that examine food insecurity and food poverty, Next, we discuss studies that focus on the role of food aid, charity, and emergency food in addressing food insecurity. Finally, we

review the food justice literature and the burgeoning food sovereignty perspective before concluding with some thoughts on future research.

### 3. Food Insecurity

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) suggests that *food security* is achieved “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” [16] (p. 53). As a result, *food insecurity* occurs when people have restricted access to “safe and nutritious foods” and are unable to “access enough food to meet dietary energy requirements” [17] (p. 5) for an active healthy life [18]. This term does not always capture the extent of the economic and structural causes of food insecurity. As a result, the term *food poverty* is also frequently used when discussing food insecurity. For instance, O’Connor, Farag, and Baines [19] (p. 2) note that food poverty is the “insufficient economic access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory and socially acceptable diet”. Despite this conceptual definition of food poverty, it is often used synonymously with food insecurity in the literature. Given our focus on structural conditions that are bound up in capitalism, neoliberalism, and inequality we treat food insecurity and food poverty as inseparable concepts in this review (hereafter, we use *food insecurity*). That is, we are largely interested in food insecurity as an outcome of poverty brought on by advanced capitalism. Food insecurity is often accessed at the household level as households are generally where money and food decisions are made. For example, research has found that parents often cope with food shortages by skipping meals themselves [20], not paying utility bills [20], and purchasing cheap, unhealthy food [21], among other coping strategies [22].

#### 3.1. Measuring Food Insecurity

Measuring food insecurity can be difficult given the sensitive nature of the subject, that it is a multifaceted problem, and that households can drift between food security and insecurity over time. Currently, one of the most common methods of assessing food insecurity is the module of questions that was developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The full module contains 18 questions, however shorter versions of subsets of the questions (10- and 6-question versions) exist for when the full module is not practical. In the full version, ten questions are aimed at the household level and eight questions specifically ask about children’s food situations. All versions of the USDA food insecurity module are available on the USDA Economic Research Service website [23]. Researchers have also used modified versions of the USDA food insecurity questions to examine specific aspects of food insecurity [24]. A similar, but shorter instrument has been developed by the United Nations. The UN FAO Food Insecurity Experience Scale is made up of eight questions that tap many of the same dimensions of food insecurity as the USDA food security module, however it does not have separate questions that ask about children’s food experiences [25]. Other indicators include an FAO measure of undernourishment based on several measures of caloric intake, measures of the height and weight for children, and household consumption surveys. de Haen, Klasen, and Qaim [26] analyze the usefulness of these additional measures. One thing is clear from the theoretical and empirical literature on the measurement of food insecurity, there is no generally accepted official measurement of food insecurity (see Lambie-Mumford and Dowler [27] on policy implications of the lack of an internationally accepted method of measurement of food insecurity). Nevertheless, scholars have begun to examine various measures of the concept, including the strengths and weaknesses of different measures of the concept (for a comprehensive review, see Jones et al. [28]). Future work operationalizing food security will undoubtedly be conducted by scholars, given the importance of the problem.

#### 3.2. Food Insecurity and Human Rights

A growing literature focuses on whether the “right to food” is a basic human right, and, if so, how it can be guaranteed to individuals and households [29–33]. In 1948, language about the right to food

was included in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25 [34]), that is, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services . . . ” [34]. However, this declaration has no legal standing and therefore does not have real utility in assuring the right to food to everyone in a country that has signed onto the Declaration. From 2008 to 2014, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Oliver de Schutter, examined the degree to which a number of advanced capitalist nations were honoring their commitment to the right to food. In his final report, de Schutter [35] found that, although some countries had explicitly incorporated the right to food into their Constitutions, actually guaranteeing all citizens their right to food in these countries has been less successful.

While food insecurity has been a problem for a long time and has been researched by many people, Riches [31] was one of the first scholars to situate this problem within a human rights framework [31]. Subsequently, Riches and Silvasti’s [33] edited work, *First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or the Right to Food?*, organizes a set of First World country case studies, where, in almost all instances, regardless of whether the countries have ratified the UN *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) which includes a right to food provision (Article 12.2 [36]), this right was currently going unmet. Riches and Silvasti [37] note that, “governments continue to turn a blind eye despite the fact that 160 states have ratified the right to food. This crude non-compliance of the majority of wealthy states to ‘respect, protect and fulfill’ the right to food for vulnerable populations is unacceptable, and raises the question of the role of public policy in addressing domestic hunger and food poverty” [37] (p. 10).

In their review of thirty years of food aid in Canada, Riches and Tarasuk [38] argue that, in Canada, and by extension the advanced capitalist world, hunger is a socially constructed phenomenon. In a neoliberal capitalist world, hunger is a problem that should and will be solved by charity and kind-hearted citizens. This approach conflicts directly with a view that access to sufficient, nutritious food is a basic human right. From this perspective, governments are no longer responsible for feeding their food insecure citizens and, therefore, food is not a guaranteed human right. This inevitably leads to substantial levels of food insecurity in the advanced capitalist world, which brings with it a host of problems that have been well documented by researchers from a number of disciplines.

### 3.3. Social, Physical and Mental Impacts of Food Insecurity

Research has shown that food insecurity has a number of social, physical and mental impacts on children and adults. There are a number of reviews of different areas of food insecurity research in the advanced capitalist world (for example, see Hanson and Connor [39] on food insecurity and dietary quality, Eisenmann et al. [40] on food insecurity and obesity in children, Gundersen and Ziliak [41] on food insecurity and health outcomes, and Laraia [42] on food insecurity and chronic disease, among others). While we cannot review all of the studies in these areas, below we highlight research that demonstrates the myriad social, physical and mental impacts of food insecurity. We first review studies on the results of childhood food insecurity and then discuss research that focuses on adults.

Childhood food insecurity related social problems include declines in social skills, including increased levels of off-task, irritable, aggressive, and oppositional behaviors [43–45]. Children from food insecure families are also less likely to socialize outside of school with other children because they do not want other children and families to view them as poor [46]. In terms of education, research has shown that children who are hungry fall behind academically in math and spelling more frequently than non-hungry children [47]. Hunger affects children’s physical and mental health. Hungry children are more susceptible to weight gain because they eat primarily unhealthy cheap food, rather than more expensive fruits, vegetables, and lean protein [47–52]. (There are also studies that find no or negative associations between food insecurity and childhood obesity [53–61].) Research has demonstrated that food insecure children have a higher prevalence of poor health [62], dental decay, and caries [63]; have frequent headaches and stomach aches [64]; anemia [65]; asthma [66]; have higher prevalence of chronic

illnesses [67]; and often have poorer health outcomes during adulthood [68]. Food insecurity can also affect children's mental health. Food insecure children suffer from increases in anxiety, depression, and other forms of psychiatric distress [67,69–71]. Furthermore, Hill et al. [72] note that most children who grow up in food insecure households may carry the unhealthy eating habits that were forced on them as children into adulthood, resulting in a reproduction of social class and health inequalities that they have experienced as a child to their own children.

There is a substantial literature on the physical and mental health impacts of food insecure adults, much of which is similar to the findings of the research on children. For example, Muirhead et al. [73] found that oral health problems were more prevalent in food insecure households compared with food secure households. Research has linked iron deficiency [74], diabetes [75–78], hypertension [79], and hypoglycemia [79,80] to food insecurity in adults. Several studies have found increased odds of maternal depression in food insecure pregnant women [81], mothers [48,60,82], and food assistance participants [83]. Franklin et al. [84] found that food insecurity is related to obesity in women. Research that focuses specifically on adult food insecurity has found that food insecurity can limit seniors' ability to engage in their daily routine activities [85]. Unsurprisingly, total health care costs have been found to be positively associated with severity of food insecurity in a sample of Canadian adults [86]. Finally, there is also a small, but growing literature on food insecurity on college and university campuses. In their review of this literature, Bruening et al. [87] examined 17 peer-reviewed studies and 41 sources of gray literature and found very high percentages of student food insecurity across both sources. Specifically, in meta-analyses of these two groups of literature, the rates of student food insecurity were 35% in the peer-reviewed studies and 42% in the gray literature.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that food insecurity has many negative consequences. A related area of research focuses on the role of access to a regular supply of healthy, nutritious food, not just whether it is affordable. Research on food deserts, for example, examines how marginalized individuals and groups often have limited options for purchasing food, which often contributes to food insecurity.

### 3.4. Food Deserts

Access to affordable, healthy nutritious food is not a given for all people. The food insecurity literature is replete with studies that show that the poor and minorities have to travel, on average, farther to locations that serve healthy nutritious food. In this vein, the concept *food desert*, created in the early 1990s in the UK [88,89], was originally defined as an area, "where people do not have easy access to healthy, fresh foods, particularly if they are poor and have limited mobility" [90]. "Easy access" is usually conceptualized in terms of distance and transportation. For instance, researchers interested in food deserts often examine how far people must travel to get to a supermarket to purchase food [91]. Moreover, the mode of transportation used to travel to supermarkets is also important. That is, the difference between walking, driving, and taking public transportation can greatly impact access to healthy nutritious food. In countries such as the United States, transportation is historically tied to economic and racial segregation in a way that intensifies social injustice [92]. Thus, it is not surprising that racial segregation and poverty are often determinants of living in a food desert. In particular, research has demonstrated that areas where large amounts of low-income individuals and ethnic/racial minorities reside often have less healthy food purchasing options and that the residents living in these areas must to travel further to supermarkets [89,93,94].

In their review of 31 studies of food deserts, Walker et al. [94] identified eleven categories of food desert research. These included studies that examine the impact of access to stores, income/socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, food store density, cost, location, store type, availability, perception, quality of available foods, and overall impact. The authors review numerous studies in each category that demonstrate the existence and effects of food deserts and how marginalized individuals face multiple barriers to food security.

While some may interpret the existence of food deserts as a failure of neoliberal capitalism, Willis and Fitzpatrick [95] remind the reader that in the US (and throughout the international capitalist economy) food is a commodity first, and something to eat, relieve hunger, and provide nourishment second.

“One might reasonably suspect that food deserts represent a breakdown in the US industrial food system, or a failure of the free market. This view of the problem misses the point; that is these spaces are void of healthy food precisely *because* of the existing US food system, which treats food as primarily a commodity . . . . From this view, spaces such as food deserts are seen as *achievements* of market mechanisms, rather than a failure or accidental outcome” [95] (p. 82).

In other words, neoliberal capitalism is efficiently allocating resources (e.g., supermarkets) in locations where maximum profit will be produced and leaves those who live in food deserts at increased risk of food insecurity because those locations are not viewed as profitable enough to justify siting a store there.

While supermarkets are one way for people to gain access to a regular supply of healthy and nutritious food, for many people, they are not the only option. Recently, scholars have shown that communities that would be technically characterized as food deserts have successfully used small community grocery stores [96] and other community-based non-supermarket solutions to reduce food insecurity [97].

Now that we have provided an overview of the research on the various aspects of food insecurity, we turn to a discussion of how countries in the developed world have attempted to reduce food insecurity. As neoliberal economic policies have systematically dismantled much of the government funded social welfare programs throughout the advanced capitalist world (increasing food insecurity in the process), others have been left with the task of feeding the hungry.

#### 4. Food Aid, Charity and Emergency Food

In the neoliberal advanced capitalist world, the predominate response to food insecurity has been a combination of food aid and charity. Janet Poppendieck [98] highlights the fundamental problem with this type of response, “the proliferation of charity contributes to our society’s failure to grapple in meaningful ways with poverty” [98] (p. 5). In other words, it allows people that are hungry to be fed without addressing the root causes of poverty. In her detailed examination of the history of emergency food in the US, Poppendieck found that even emergency food providers recognized the inherent tension and problematic nature with a food aid response to food insecurity. She remarks,

[w]hen I began my research, I worried that emergency food providers would be alienated by the implicit criticism in my perspective. Instead, I found that they are often their own most perceptive critics, that they recognize and are troubled by the inherent limitation of emergency food, and that many of them feel trapped, unwilling to deprive the poor of the help that these programs provide, but increasingly unconvinced that their work can contribute to solving the basic problems [98] (p. 16).

A response to food insecurity that is based on food aid and charity has numerous problems. First, hunger is de-politicized, that is, governments act as if they no longer have responsibility for feeding the hungry citizens of their country because others are doing it [98]. In essence, governments in the vast majority of advanced capitalist nations operate as if guarantying the human right to food is not their responsibility. Second, the nutritional quality of the food is often low because the majority of the food is unwanted donated food and food aid providers often have little control over what is donated [98]. Third, availability of food aid can vary from area to area, leaving some areas of high deprivation with few available options [99,100]. Fourth, supply of food aid is often limited and food aid organizations often restrict the frequency that people can come and use the resources. Finally, food choice is often taken away from the recipients of food aid because in some locations they are given food parcels, rather than being able to shop for items that they need so they can prepare balanced

meals. However, research that examines approaches to make these five issues less of a concern does exist [101–104] and community food programs are paying more attention to nutrition than they did in the past [105].

What was once referred to as “emergency food” was originally designed as a measure for short-term relief in times of acute need. In other words, the assistance was designed to be temporary. However, emergency food providers and the system have become institutionalized and a mechanism for chronically hungry people to help feed themselves and their families. As Booth [106] (p. 23) notes in the case of Australia,

[n]eoliberal approaches designed to keep welfare benefits low in an effort to push people off welfare and into employment are driving vulnerable people deeper into poverty. Welfare recipients turn to food charity, not so much for emergency provisions but rather to meet regular shortfalls in their ability to feed their families.

From here on, we refer to this phenomenon as “food aid”, a phrase that more accurately describes what it is being used for.

#### 4.1. Types of Food Aid

There are three main types of food aid that we discuss in this section: food pantries/banks, non-governmentally operated feeding programs, and government assistance. We need to clarify a bit of terminology first. The terms “food pantry” and “food bank” mean different things in different countries. What is referred to as a food pantry in the United States is referred to as a food bank in other areas of the advanced capitalist world. What are termed food banks in the US are usually large warehouse distribution centers which receive large food donations and supply the smaller pantries in the region. (The UK has some of these larger warehouse type of food banks as well, such as Fareshare and the Trussell Trust. They both have large warehouses that then distribute to local food banks.) In this section we use the term food bank in the manner in which it is commonly used in Canada, the UK, Europe and Australia, which we describe below.

Food banks (i.e., pantries) are locations where food insecure individuals can go (they often have to verify need) and obtain a few days’ supply of food. Although all food banks operate differently, clients can usually only go once or twice every few weeks and get a limited supply of food. Food banks are arguably the most studied type of food aid in advanced capitalist countries. Some of the topics scholars have addressed in relation to food banks are their rise in various countries [106–115], how food bank usage is a poor indicator of food insecurity [116], the growth of food banks on university campuses [117], and the role of stigma in getting food from these types of organizations [118]. In general, while food banks are on the front line of hunger and feed millions of people throughout the advanced capitalist world every year, the general consensus is that they are at best a Band-Aid for much larger structural problems [98,119].

There are a number of different types of what we call “feeding programs” throughout the advanced capitalist world. These programs, and the organizations that operate them, are used to directly feed hungry people. These include the soup kitchens in the US and elsewhere where the hungry and destitute can receive a free meal. Recently charities and other non-profit organizations have begun setting up places where hungry children and sometimes other members of their households can come and have breakfast and/or lunch and often socialize with other families [120]. Both food banks and feeding programs are primarily run by volunteers and through charitable organizations. These are classic neoliberal responses to hunger which takes advantage of the goodness of others. Food secure individuals have plenty of opportunities to get involved in feeding the hungry and therefore are able to feel good about themselves in the process often resulting in them becoming repeat volunteers [98]. Recent research however suggests that persistent volunteers often struggle with volunteer fatigue [121], which may further threaten the long-term viability of this type of approach.

As we have discussed, a great deal of food aid is administered and funded through donations and other forms of charity. Some governments do provide mechanisms of regular food aid, above and beyond the normal welfare benefits that are available, such as free meals for school children [122]. Additionally, there are instances of governments throughout the developed world sometimes funding feeding programs, however they are usually not permanent and subject to the whims of those who control budgets from year to year. In short, no governments in the advanced capitalist world have been able to successfully guarantee the human right to food. Rather neoliberal capitalism has prevailed in reducing government involvement in feeding the hungry. O'Brien [123] sums this up in regards to New Zealand's approach to food insecurity,

[a]s is to be expected, given the neo-liberal frames which have dominated policy over the last three decades, individual responsibility, limited direct government involvement (with a strong focus on management and surveillance) and an emphasis on charitable and corporate provision, articulated frequently around a theme of partnership, have been the central features of New Zealand's responses to the evidence and experience of growing hunger [123] (p. 107).

#### 4.2. Examples of Responses to Food Insecurity in Advanced Capitalist Nations

We now turn to brief discussion of two responses to food insecurity, one in the UK and one in the US. While these two models of food aid focus on children, they are important cases because they demonstrate how food aid is intertwined with neoliberalism, capitalism, inequality and poverty both domestically and internationally. To be sure, there are also numerous food aid programs that target households and adults in countries in the advanced capitalist world.

##### 4.2.1. United Kingdom

Here, we draw on some of our own work in the UK on holiday hunger, a primarily bottom-up aid-based response to summertime food insecurity. *Holiday hunger* is a condition that occurs when a child's household is, or will, become food insecure during the school holidays [24]. Therefore, holiday hunger primarily affects households that have at least one child in school that receives free school meals (FSMs) to help supplement their diet. During the summer holidays from school, these children do not have access to FSMs and school breakfast clubs and consequently their households have to adjust their limited resources to accommodate the extra expenses of feeding their children five-plus extra meals a week. Currently, the mean price of a school lunch meal is £2.35 in primary schools and £2.40 in secondary schools [124], meaning that households who rely on free school meals need to find at least an additional £11.75 per child, per week to feed their child during the school holidays. The extra weekly costs for families are likely even higher than £11.75 per child, as schools benefit from reduced costs due to purchasing food in bulk. If the household is unable to afford the extra meals for the children, then either the children, other household members, or both, will start experiencing holiday hunger.

The scope of holiday hunger is large. There are currently over one million UK students in receipt of FSM. In addition, estimates suggest that there nearly two million UK students who, despite growing up in poverty, are not eligible for FSM. This suggests that the households of three million children may be affected by holiday hunger [125].

The predominate response to UK holiday hunger has come in the form of "holiday clubs". These are clubs that are funded by charitable organizations and UK local authorities with the purpose of providing meals (usually breakfast and/or lunch) and snacks to children. They take place in schools or community groups and often entail other activities such as physical activities, cooking, and field trips. These clubs generally run for the majority of the summer school holiday and are usually open to anyone from the local area to attend, regardless of income to help reduce the stigma of using food aid. Mann et al. [99] examined the spatial relationship between measures of deprivation and holiday clubs

in England and Wales and determined that, for the most part, holiday clubs were located in areas of deprivation. In other words, holiday clubs tended to exist in areas of need.

Long et al. [126] conducted the first and only study, to our knowledge, that examines whether holiday clubs reduce household food insecurity. Using data collected from five holiday clubs in Wales, one in the south of England, and one in Scotland in 2015, the authors found that, compared to parents from food secure households, parents from food insecure households were significantly more likely to agree with the following statements: (1) “without holiday club it’s harder to make ends meet during the summer than during the school year”; and (2) “without the holiday club we sometimes find ourselves without enough money for food during the summer”. This small study suggests that food insecurity in the summer can be reduced due to the presence of holiday clubs. Subsequent research has also highlighted the non-food benefits of holiday clubs such as social network building, safe child care, and educational opportunities [127].

#### 4.2.2. United States

As Poppendieck [128] notes, unlike the majority of other advanced capitalist countries that primarily use income transfers to help families in need, the US has traditionally relied on food aid. One mechanism for government funded food aid is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In the United States, the USDA reports that 30 million children qualify for free and reduced lunches at school [129]. The school lunch program in the US is an interesting case study in how international capitalism has shaped approaches to food aid.

The US has frequently subsidized its farmers, even after complaining to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about other countries doing the same thing. One result of the heavy subsidization of large US agribusinesses was massive overproduction of US crops such as soybeans, wheat, corn, and dairy products. After World War II, the US began dumping large quantities of these products on developing countries in the form of food aid. At the same time, the US NSLP was created by the federal government. Poppendieck [130] documents how over time the NSLP began to serve a similar role as the developing countries, as a dumping ground for surplus US agricultural products. The so-called “commodity” program of the USDA uses government funds to purchase agricultural surpluses and then provides them to schools that participate in the NSLP. As surpluses are by definition goods produced in excess of what can be sold, they are unreliable sources of food and the types and quality of the food can vary. These issues have had negative consequences for the healthiness and desirability of the meals served in the US school lunch program. Additionally, in true neoliberal capitalist fashion, the last several decades have seen the rise of “competitive foods” in US school cafeterias which children can buy as alternatives to the NSLP meal [130]. These food items include unhealthy items such as snack foods, pizza, fast food, and sugary drinks. In sum, one of the main methods of food aid in the US, the NSLP, was created and partially maintained through agricultural surpluses. More recently, there is evidence that children who participate in the NSLP had improved health outcomes [131] as the US government has passed legislation (i.e., the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act [132]) to improve the health and nutrition of the NSLP and other government funded food assistance programs. Any improvements in health due to NSLP participation however, will be hedged against those who choose unhealthy competitive foods in the lunch room.

The last two sections discuss research in the broad areas of food insecurity and food aid in advanced capitalist nations. We now shift our attention to two newer perspectives that examine various injustices in the food system, including food insecurity: food justice and food sovereignty.

### 5. Food Justice and Food Sovereignty

As with food insecurity, there are numerous definitions of *food justice*. For example, the two most cited books on the topic define food justice in similar, but slightly different ways. Gottlieb and Joshi [133] (p. 6) in *Food Justice* suggest that food justice focuses on “the benefits and risks of where,

what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly". Alkon and Agyeman [134] (p. 5) provide a more expanded definition of food justice in the introduction to their edited work, *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*:

"Essential to the food justice movement is an analysis that recognizes the food system itself as a racial project and problematizes the influence of race and class on production, distribution, and consumption of food. Communities of color and poor communities have time and time again been denied access to the means of food production, and, due to both price and store location, often cannot access the diet advocated by the food movement. Through food justice activism, low-income communities and communities of color seek to create local food systems that meet their own food needs".

Both Gottlieb and Joshi's definition and Alkon and Agyeman's definition of food justice make it clear that the food security literature must be situated in a holistic examination of agro-food systems. In response to wider food justice concerns, Glennie and Alkon [135] conducted a review of 200 peer-reviewed articles and books on food justice in the US with topics including: social movements, urban agriculture, food access/inequality, policy, research methods, labor/work, race/ethnicity, land use, health impacts/inequality, gender, class, and youth. Food justice scholarship tends to focus on wider issues of justice in domestic and global food systems, while food insecurity research often focuses more on the amount of hunger that exists and how to reduce it. However, the human rights perspective on food in the food insecurity literature shares some similarities with concerns in the food justice movement.

There are critiques, however, regarding the *doing* of food justice. For example, the development of community gardens in marginalized neighborhoods can be seen as an example of *doing* food justice [136,137]. However, the organizers of these programs tend to be affluent and white, while the community participants are usually low-income people of color. Scholars point out that it is therefore necessary to explain *how* this is justice [138] when inequality, such as highly racialized power-dynamics, are often at the forefront of these endeavors.

While community and consumer support are necessary to help mobilize food justice [139], researchers contend that it is not sufficient enough to create lasting changes at macro level [138,140]. It is therefore necessary to further address the structural causes of inequality within the food system. In response, there is a growing body of literature investigating how race, class, and gender inequalities are maintained, reproduced, and challenged within the food system [135].

The *food sovereignty* movement is another more recent development in the food systems literature that highlights and attempts to rectify food related injustices. Batada and Lewis [141] provide a useful way of distinguishing food sovereignty from the other concepts we have examined in this paper. "While food security is a social condition and food justice a progressive movement, the term food sovereignty refers to an approach to reclaiming people's land, food, livelihoods, and identities in the face of industrial food system monopolies" [141] (p. 220).

Food sovereignty as a concept was created and developed in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the heavy neoliberal capitalist turn in agriculture in the developing world, particularly Latin America [142]. Philip McMichael [143] (p. 347) defines food sovereignty as "the social right of a community or country to determine its own policies regarding food security and the cultural, social, and ecological conditions under which it is sustained". While primarily a movement that is centered in the developing world, there are an increasing number of US and other advanced capitalist country-based food sovereignty groups. Of primary importance to food sovereignty advocates is the ability to have local control over one's food supply and food decisions. This is seen not only as a mechanism for returning control to communities and regions that have historically had little control over their food supply due to the industrial agriculture export model favored by neoliberal capitalism, but also as a more effective way to reduce food insecurity.

The most well-known food sovereignty group is Vía Campesina, which is currently comprised of 182 local and national organizations from 81 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America [144]. It is a movement that brings together peasants, small farmers, and other

marginalized agricultural workers to oppose neoliberal corporate agriculture and fight for food sovereignty. In addition to periodically holding international conferences around issues of food sovereignty, *Vía Campesina* organizes local food activism events such as protests when food workers are laid off unjustly [145], protests of larger food system issues such as corporate agricultural price fixing [146], as well as recognizing the contributions of marginalized farmers [147]. The anti-capitalist critique of the current food system that is central to the approach of *Vía Campesina* to food sovereignty is important because the solutions to widespread food insecurity, especially for marginalized individuals and communities, are most likely to come from outside of the neoliberal capitalist system.

In short, with the focus on justice and community rights both the food justice and food sovereignty perspectives have added a great deal to the study of food insecurity.

## 6. Conclusions

Food insecurity exists in rich countries even when there is enough food to meet the needs of all citizens. This situation has led researchers to produce a daunting amount of food insecurity research. This attention devoted to food insecurity is not surprising given the fundamental nature of the problem of hunger. What might be unexpected for those unfamiliar with the literature in this area, however, is the degree of food insecurity in the advanced capitalist world and the amount of scholarship that is dedicated to describing, explaining, predicting, and reducing that food insecurity. As stated in the Introduction, it is not possible to provide a detailed, exhaustive overview of all types of food insecurity research in the developed world, but rather we provide an overview and discussion of the major areas of research in the field and highlight relevant contributions where possible. While several detailed reviews of various aspects of food insecurity, food aid, food justice, and related areas have been done by scholars, this paper is one of the first to broadly review the field of food insecurity scholarship and responses in advanced capitalist nations in a more holistic fashion. First, we argue in this paper that the shift to neoliberal capitalism in the developed world has contributed to increasing income inequality and poverty. One of the outcomes of the increases in inequality and poverty is higher levels of food insecurity. Unfortunately, the response to higher levels of food insecurity is also based in neoliberal policy environments that have focused solutions on food aid. Even in cases where the government intervenes to help alleviate food insecurity, it usually takes the form of food aid, rather than addressing the structural causes of food insecurity and poverty. Second, what is clear from our overview of food insecurity research is that it is a very multidisciplinary field with a tremendous amount of scholarship that documents the existence of food insecurity and its consequences, and is replete with useful discussion of how to address this important issue. While this body of research is impressive, the data for many advanced capitalist countries suggest that food insecurity is still a problem for substantial numbers of households in these countries. More research, activism, and food justice work is still needed.

What should the future of food insecurity research look like? Gundersen and Ziliak [148] have provided a number of areas where more research in food security would be welcome, including long-term research on food insecurity, the effects of the Great Recession on food insecurity, and a more thorough understanding of the coping mechanisms that low-income people and households use to deal with acute and chronic food insecurity, among others. To this, we would like to add that additional research is needed on the effects of various types of disasters and disaster-like events on food insecurity [149]. For instance, while we were writing this review the novel coronavirus COVID-19 was classified as a global pandemic and is having an impact on food security throughout the developed and developing world [150]. The spread of the virus has not only impacted food purchasing which shapes the availability of food, but many countries have also implemented policies that have unintentionally had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable members of society [151]. While the long-term repercussions from COVID-19 are unknown, it is clear that it is influencing levels of food insecurity for many people as the world attempts to cope with the repercussions of panic buying, restricted travel and disruptions in the food supply chain, causing even more demand on food aid providers. These

issues were once central to the study of food insecurity when the focus of scholarship was largely on the reduction of food access on political stability [28]. We would also like to echo the research discussed earlier that convincingly argues that improving the measurement of food insecurity should be a priority. While existing measures of food insecurity such as the USDA food security module do an adequate job of assessing the level of food insecurity in some cases, it is not without its critics and shortcomings. Finally, as the food justice perspective would suggest, food insecurity among indigenous peoples in the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and other affluent countries is disproportionately high compared to other residents of those countries. More research is needed to understand how to best alleviate food insecurity in indigenous communities in culturally appropriate ways.

Given how low hunger is on Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs (i.e., high priority), it is not surprising how pressing a social problem food insecurity has become and that a great deal of research has been undertaken to help reduce it. We agree with those who have suggested that large structural changes need to be undertaken to substantially reduce food insecurity, by reducing the root causes of that insecurity such as inequality and poverty. The prospects for these types of changes currently appear unlikely given that most economic and political elites tend to favor neoliberal capitalist solutions to problems of food insecurity. In other words, food insecurity will likely remain a substantial problem in the advanced capitalist world unless there is a fundamental shift away from neoliberal capitalist political economic relations. Until the right to food guarantee is met all over the developed and developing world, research that documents and provides evidence-based solutions to problems of food insecurity will continue to be vital in helping recognize the problem and its potential solutions.

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