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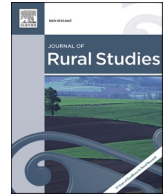
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Older people and food insecurity in rural places: Invisibility, complexity and sociality

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ABSTRACT

Older people and rural places remain neglected subjects within the academic literature on food insecurity. In this paper, we investigate the relations between food insecurity and older people in rural England. We do this in a couple of ways. First, we utilise findings from an analysis of national survey data on food insecurity to examine levels of food insecurity and engagements with food assistance services amongst older people and those living in rural places. Second, we draw on materials from ethnographic research at a community food club in a rural district to explore older people's understandings of, and encounters with, food, food insecurity and community food provision. Three key findings emerge from our study. First, levels of food insecurity and engagements with food aid services are particularly low amongst older age groups and those living in rural places. Second, the relationship between older people and food insecurity in rural places is complex, bound up with cultures of denial, thriftiness, sharing and informal support. Third, community-based food provision can overcome some of the stigmatic aspects of food insecurity and food aid to provide meaningful social food experiences for older people in rural places.

Food insecurity older people community food rural places UK.

1. Introduction

Food has long represented a significant research theme within rural studies. The relationship between food and rurality, though, has largely been researched in the context of particular parts of the food system, most notably farming. Discussion has also tended to focus on the positive contributions that the agri-food sector makes to the economic, social and cultural fabric of rural life. Much less attention has been given to the darker sides of food in rural places, particularly the difficulties of accessing affordable, fresh and healthy foodstuffs within many rural areas and the existence of food insecurity¹ amongst certain sections of the rural population. Indeed, there would appear to be something rather contradictory about the presence of food insecurity in rural places that are both associated with, and surrounded by, spaces of food abundance. In addition, food insecurity remains largely hidden within rural areas, with those experiencing it dispersed across small and scattered settlements, and emergency food aid providers, who award food insecurity a degree of physical and political visibility, generally absent from rural areas or else located in larger rural towns.

With much of the published research on food insecurity focused on groups making use of food aid services, so the rural dimensions of food insecurity have been further overlooked within the academic literature. It is also the case that older people² are one of the groups least likely to make use of food aid services. The Trussell Trust, which operates the largest network of food banks in the UK, for example, states that people aged 65 years or older comprised only three per cent of those making use of its food bank services in 2023–24 (Trussell Trust, 2024). An important consequence of this is that research on, and user statistics provided by food aid providers largely ignore the situations and experiences of older groups living with food insecurity (although see Slocombe, 2023). Bringing these points together, it should not be surprising to read that there exists very little published research on food insecurity amongst older people in rural areas, and this is particularly the case in the UK.

Our intention with this paper is to begin to fill this research void by providing a critical investigation of the relations between older people and food insecurity in rural England. The paper is based around a couple of objectives. The first of these is to examine levels of food insecurity across different age groups and between rural and urban areas in

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¹ We utilise a broadly agreed definition of food insecurity developed by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which states that 'a person is food insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food' (FAO, no date).

² When using the term older people in this paper, we are generally referring to those aged 65 years or older, which often corresponds with those who have retired from regular paid employment.

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England. We do this by analysing time-series data from national government surveys of food insecurity. The paper's second objective is to explore older people's understandings and experiences of food, food insecurity and community food in rural places. To do this, we draw on materials from ethnographic research with older people using, and older volunteers working at a rural community food site in a rural district in England. By combining national statistical and local ethnographic forms of research and analysis, the paper provides important new perspectives on the relations between older people, food insecurity and rurality.

The paper is structured around four main sections. In the next, we provide a critical review of existing literature on food insecurity amongst older people in rural areas, focusing largely on the US - where the bulk of published research has been undertaken - to provide the necessary academic context for our study. We then discuss our methodological approach, setting out details on how we have engaged with the data from the national food surveys and undertaken the local ethnographic research. Next, we provide an analysis of the findings from our empirical work, focusing on the shifting relations between food insecurity, age and place in England, and the understandings and experiences of food, food insecurity and community food amongst older people making use of the rural community food site. In the final section, we reflect on these findings in relation to existing academic accounts of older people's food insecurity in rural places and suggest some avenues for further research.

2. Food insecurity and older people in rural places

2.1. Food insecurity and older people

Older people's food insecurity differs from that associated with younger age groups in that it has a looser connection with low income. Most older people living in poverty are food secure and the majority of older people experiencing food insecurity have incomes that are above the official poverty threshold (Mudrazija and Butrica, 2022). Consequently, research that utilises a poverty level as a sampling tool will tend to underestimate the incidence of food insecurity amongst older people (Quandt and Rao, 1999). It is also the case that the incomes of those who have retired from paid employment fluctuate less markedly than those of working age given that pension income is guaranteed over the long term. Whilst providing a degree of financial stability, this also means there is little older people can do to increase their personal income levels in the face of additional unexpected or unavoidable costs, such as those associated with the ongoing 'cost of living crisis' in the UK and other countries.

Unsurprisingly, it is older people on the lowest incomes who are most likely to be food insecure (Purdham et al., 2019; Hurwitz and Blackwood, 2023), but a couple of other factors need to be considered when making sense of older age food insecurity. The first is mobility and the increased reliance of older people on public or community transport to undertake food shopping and engage in social eating opportunities located beyond their localities. Social isolation represents a second factor, with older people living and eating alone shown to have a lower intake of food than those eating with others (Aday et al., 2023; Heape, 2021). Forsey (2018) suggests that social isolation and loneliness often result from what he terms an 'accumulation of setbacks' (4), which could include the loss of a partner, long-term illness, the closure of a local food shop, the loss of social eating or meeting places, or the withdrawal of social support services (see also Davies and Reid, 2024; Wills and Dickinson, 2023). In approaching food insecurity amongst older people, it is argued that food needs to be viewed as an important 'proxy for social connection' (Davies and Reid, 2024, 7) or as Thompson et al. (2017) comment, meals need to be understood as 'social events' (1348).

2.2. Placing older people's food insecurity in rural areas

It is widely recognised within the social gerontology literature that

place plays a more important part in the everyday lives of older people than is the case with younger age groups (Milbourne, 2021). This is due to what Rowles (1978) refers to as a process of 'spatial constriction' associated with the ageing process, whereby older people tend to spend longer periods of time within the confines of their locality as they age. What follows from this is that the nature of, and changes to place can have a significant impact on the everyday lives of older people (Dickinson et al., 2022; Hurwitz and Blackwood, 2023). Place can be seen to connect with rural forms of food insecurity in two important ways. The first relates to cultural constructions of rurality. It has long been acknowledged that dominant national discourses of rurality as idyll act to construct social problems, such as poverty, as 'out of place' in rural spaces (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992). Piontak and Schilman (2014) suggest that such rural discourses also connect with issues of food and food insecurity, with dominant narratives of rurality associated with 'healthy and wholesome food' and the presence of everyday hunger largely 'left out of the conversation' (75).

The limited presence of state welfare support services in many rural areas has led to social problems being framed more in relation to cultures of self-sufficiency, 'making do' and informal community-based support than to welfare entitlements and rights (Sherman, 2006). In a similar way, food support networks in rural areas are heavily shaped by ideas of sharing, reciprocity and altruism (see Lu and Carter, 2024). Indeed, Buck-McFadyen (2015) claims that this 'reciprocal sharing of resources and instrumental support with others enduring similar hardships' (144) represents a distinctive feature of food insecurity in rural communities (see also Valliant et al., 2022). Sharing and gifting food constitute key components of the coping strategies employed by older people on low-income in rural places (Quandt et al., 2001; Morton et al., 2007). Whilst obtaining food by credit is very much scorned upon, food sharing and gifting are considered to be both socially acceptable and an important part of rural community living (Morton et al., 2007; Quandt et al., 2001). Research also points to the significance of informal local 'foodways' - involving activities such as foraging, gardening, fishing and hunting - as a means of obtaining, exchanging and sharing food in rural places (Lu and Carter, 2024; see also Lloyd, 2019). Before engaging with such foodways, though, it is suggested that older people will typically cut back on everyday essential food consumption, particularly if doing so impacts only on themselves (Quandt and Rao, 1999; see also Age UK, 2014).

Recent studies indicate that older people have a complex, perhaps even contradictory, relationship with food assistance projects. On the one hand, older groups represent the mainstay of third sector responses to food insecurity, given that retired people perform an important role as volunteers with food aid organisations (Lee et al., 2023). On the other, older people are often reluctant to access either state-provided food assistance or third sector emergency food provision, with this situation being particularly pronounced in small towns and rural places (Hurwitz and Blackwood, 2023). Writing about food insecurity in a rural town in Wales, for example, Caplan (2018) describes a discussion with a group of older people on food poverty and food aid projects:

"I spoke to the pensioners' Friendship Circle about food poverty and asked members of the audience whether they would go to a food bank if one was available. Their replies were robust: "Never", "People of my generation know how to manage" and "We wouldn't want to give out personal information".' (2)

Official food assistance schemes are often viewed as 'a last resort or an act of desperation' for older adults (Buck-McFadyen, 2015, 144), with feelings of pride and stigma deterring them from making use of such projects (Oemichen and Smith, 2016). Given such attitudes, Quandt et al. (2001) argue that food assistance schemes in rural places, and those specifically targeted at older people, need to be subtle, creative and sensitive to these kinds of socio-cultural issues (see also Purdham et al., 2019).

A second way that place connects with rural food insecurity is

through the local foodscape (Blake, 2019). Research suggests that the rural foodscape is distinctive from that in urban areas in three key respects. First, many rural places lack a diversity of food retail opportunities, and particularly those linked to supermarkets, meaning that food retail choices are extremely limited and the costs attached to purchasing food much more expensive. Some rural places may lack a food shop altogether, whilst others may contain smaller food shops that lack an adequate range of fresh, healthy or affordable produce. Difficulties in purchasing food are compounded by mobility problems. With many older people no longer able to drive, access to public transport becomes more significant for undertaking food shopping beyond their communities. However, using public transport is more problematic in rural areas, and this is particularly the case in small and/or remote rural places. For example, the average travel time to a food store on foot or by public transport in England in 2019 was 7 minutes for households in urban areas but 17 minutes for those in rural places and 49 minutes for those living in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings in sparse settings (Department of Transport, 2021).

A second distinctive feature of the rural foodscape concerns the limited opportunities to engage in social eating. Ramos and Truninger (2021) discuss this issue in relation to poverty, arguing that the absence of (affordable) cafés and (fast-food) restaurants in most rural places means that 'exclusion from social participation around food is a defining feature of being poor in rural areas' (773). Others have approached the lack of social eating opportunities in rural areas more specifically in relation to older people, with research revealing that only 27 per cent of rural communities in Wales contained a communal lunch club for older people (Milbourne and Doheny, 2012) and Quandt and Rao (1999) highlighting logistical difficulties as a key obstacle to delivering social dining opportunities for older groups in low density areas of the US. It would appear that austerity politics have reduced such provision in more recent years, with Valliant et al. (2022) pointing to the recent closures of communal meal sites for vulnerable older persons in rural places and a shift towards home-delivered meals.

Third, there is an absence of formal food assistance infrastructure in many rural areas. Whilst food banks have become an established feature of the urban welfare landscape (Dickinson, 2020), their conventional delivery model depends on the presence of a critical mass of users being able to travel to their services (Food Power, 2019), and so is less suitable in rural places where the food insecure population is much more dispersed. For this reason, the small number of food banks that are present in rural areas are located in the larger towns, which creates access problems for those living elsewhere. Reporting on the situation in one rural county in England, Butler (2013) comments that some people in villages had walked many miles to access their nearest food aid provider and that food aid workers were sometimes required to drive service users to and from their homes for them to access food support. In another English county, a recent survey examining food insecurity and poverty in rural areas revealed that whilst almost all respondents were aware of the presence of a food bank in their local town, many pointed to the difficulties accessing it using public transport and some commented that the cost of the public bus fare to travel to the food bank was higher than the financial value of the food received from it (ACRE Northamptonshire, 2021).

Efforts have been made to develop food assistance programmes that are better suited to addressing food insecurity in rural places. These are generally based around a peripatetic delivery model that takes food assistance (and other support) services to people across a rural area instead of those in need having to travel to a single delivery location (see Feeding Britain). Whilst there has not been any meaningful evaluation of the impacts of these types of intervention, Rodway (2023) warns that the increased visibility they bring to food insecurity may deter food insecure individuals in smaller rural places from making use of their services (see also Morris, 2022). Over recent years, other approaches to food support have been developed in the UK. These are based on pantry, social supermarket, food club and social eating models, within which the

emphasis is placed on providing affordable rather than donated food, and bringing people together through communal food activities (see Milbourne, 2024). Again, there has yet to be any academic assessment of these approaches but piecemeal evidence from organisations working with communal food suggests they may have the potential to be more effective in addressing food insecurity amongst older groups in rural places.

What emerges from this review then is that the relationship between food insecurity, older people and rurality is particularly complex, bound up with distinctive local foodscapes, weak food aid infrastructures, cultures of denial, informal support and self-sufficiency, and antagonistic attitudes towards official food aid schemes. As noted earlier in the paper, the review has been largely reliant on published research from US, with UK insights about older people's food insecurity in rural areas emerging mainly from policy reports and other grey literature. It is also the case that existing research has generally been based on qualitative case-studies conducted in particular places, with a virtual absence of statistical analyses of food insecurity amongst older people in rural places. In this paper, we begin to address these shortcomings by providing a multi-scalar and mixed methods account of food insecurity, older people and rurality in England based on a national statistical analysis of food insecurity by age and geography, and an in-depth exploration of understandings and experiences of food, food insecurity and community food amongst older people making use of a community food club in a rural district.

3. Methods

Our research is based on analysis of two datasets. The first is time series statistical data on food insecurity derived from the Food Standard Agency's³ (FSA) food surveys of a nationally representative sample of adults in England. Our analysis involves data from the FSA's Food and You surveys conducted in 2016 and 2018, and its Food and You 2 surveys undertaken in 2020, 2022 and 2024/25. The overall sample size for these five surveys is just under 18,000 adults, with the individual annual sample sizes ranging from around 3,000 to 5,000 adults.⁴ The surveys use a 'push to web' method, with potential participants sent a letter by post asking them to take part in an online survey with the option of completing a paper version of the questionnaire. In relation to food insecurity, the surveys utilise a suite of questions derived from the United States Agriculture Department's four-fold classification of food in/security - high food security, marginal food security, low food insecurity and very low food insecurity. In addition, the 2024/25 survey included questions on the usage of food aid and social food clubs. Given these data can be analysed by age group and geographical area, they permit new national insights of food insecurity amongst older people and in rural places.⁵

Second, we draw on materials from an ethnographic study of food insecurity amongst older people making use of a community food project in a rural district in the East Midlands region of England. The fieldwork was conducted with partners at Cherry Fields,⁶ an organisation that coordinates various food support services across this district. For this paper, we focus on their food club services, where people can access a variety of foodstuffs for a small fee, and their on-site café, which provides affordable lunches to those in the local community as well as a

³ The FSA is a non-ministerial UK government department responsible for protecting food-based public health in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

⁴ The survey data are weighted to allow for unequal respondent selection probabilities and to ensure the achieved samples reflect the national population for selected demographic indicators.

⁵ The FSA uses the UK government's Office of National Statistics' 2021 rural urban classification (Office of National Statistics, 2025).

⁶ We have changed the name of this organisation to protect the anonymity of research participants.

place to meet in the village within which it is located. Whilst Cherry Fields provides food for users of different ages, many of those making use of its services are older people. It is also the case that volunteers within their partner organisations are largely comprised of older persons.

The fieldwork was conducted in 2024 and consisted of participant observation at the Cherry Fields sites conducted over a period of twelve months by author three, including intercept conversations with people attending the services. Initial discussions with volunteers revealed they considered most of the older adults attending Cherry Fields to be experiencing some form of food insecurity. They had reached this viewpoint not from any analysis of statistical data on older people's personal income levels but from their conversations around food with those who regularly accessed the service. In selecting the older people involved in the ethnographic research, volunteers were consulted to identify users who had demonstrated recent patterns of food insecurity. We draw from intercept conversations with five different older groups, sized from three to seven people. The conversations lasted between 15 and 45 min, with four being recorded and one captured through written notes. In total, 20 participants aged 65 years or older were included in these conversations, nine of whom were men and 11 women. We also make use of author three's field notes from their site visits. To ensure reliability of the analysis, authors two and three independently coded the notes, focusing on key themes raised in the literature review. Coding notes were then compared and agreed. These were then shared with the first author, with the resulting themes and sub themes used to structure the empirical section of the paper.

4. Exploring food insecurity amongst older people in rural England

4.1. Statistical assessments

For most of the twentieth century, poverty rates amongst pensioner households in the UK were much higher than for those of working age. Reports that the relative poverty rate for pensioners (after housing costs) in 1965 stood at 45 per cent compared with eight per cent for people of working age. In more recent decades, though, older person poverty levels in the UK have fallen dramatically, largely because of national government policy interventions. In particular, the Labour governments in power between 1997 and 2010 declared war on pensioner poverty, increasing the value of the state retirement pension and providing extra income (in the form of pension credits) for those older people on lowest incomes. Relative pensioner poverty fell from 29 per cent in 1997-98 to 14 per cent in 2010-11 (Age UK, 2024). In more recent years, older people have been protected from the full impacts of austerity policy implemented by centre-right governments following the fiscal crisis of 2007-08 through a triple lock income guarantee.⁷ Notwithstanding this support, relative pensioner poverty began to increase from 2012-13, rising to 18 per cent in 2019-20 before falling to 16 per cent in 2022-23 (Age UK, 2024). It is worth noting, though, that these poverty statistics relate only to income. With retired people mainly reliant on fixed incomes, so they are particularly vulnerable to increases in the cost of living (Cribb et al., 2024).

Beyond these headline poverty statistics, there exist little available data on food insecurity amongst older households in the UK. Just over a decade ago, Age UK (2014) published findings from a survey of more than 1000 older people that revealed 15 per cent went 'from shop to shop to find the cheapest food', 15 per cent used the 'reduced section or waited for food to be discounted at the end of the day' and seven per cent could 'not afford to buy a balanced good quality diet' (1). Since 2016, food insecurity questions have been asked in the Food Standard Agency's

(FSA) Food and You surveys. According to the 2024/25 survey, 10 per cent of adults aged 65-74 years and five per cent of those aged 75 years or older in England were classified as having low or very low food security, that is as being food insecure (Table 1). What is clear, though, is that these figures are much lower than the average rate for all adults (20 per cent) and around one third of the food insecurity levels reported for adults aged under 45 years.

These low levels of food insecurity amongst older people would appear to contradict their financial situations. We know from other data that older groups have amongst the lowest income levels of all age groups in the UK. In 2022/23, for example, the average annual pre-tax income for those aged 65-69 years was £34,000, £29,400 for 70-74-year-olds and £27,500 for those aged 75 years or older, compared with £40,000 for all age groups (HM Revenue and Customs, 2025). Such statistics would seem to confirm the looser relationship between low income and food insecurity amongst older people reported by Mudrazija and Butrica (2022) in the US, and suggest the need to explore older people's attitudes towards, and experiences of food and food insecurity in other ways.

Across all age groups, levels of food insecurity increased significantly across the 2016-2024/25 period, most likely as a result of food and other price rises resulting from Brexit and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even though levels of food insecurity amongst older people were consistently lower than for all adults across this period, the rate of increase experienced by older persons was much larger than for other age groups, with those aged 65 years or older witnessing a five-fold increase in their level of food insecurity, which is double the rise for all adults. These findings echo recent statistics published by the Trussell Trust (2024) showing that food aid support provided to pensioner households increased by 345 per cent between 2018/19 and 2023/24, compared with 81 per cent for working age households. What such data suggest is that the lower and fixed incomes of older people have created significant financial problems for them in dealing with the cost-of-living crises of recent years.

What is also evident from Table 1 is that the food insecurity rate for people living in rural areas is consistently lower than that recorded for those in urban places, which would appear to mirror rural – urban differences in levels of poverty reported elsewhere (see Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2025). That said, what is interesting is that across the 2020-24/25 period, the food insecurity level amongst rural residents increased by more than double the rate recorded for those living in urban areas, with this probably linked to the more restricted food retail opportunities in rural areas and the difficulties associated with shopping around for cheaper food.

Looking at the responses to some of the individual questions used to develop the food insecurity indicator, it is evident there exist similar differences between older and younger age groups, and between those living in rural and urban places in relation to reported experiences of

Table 1

Percentage of adults classified as food insecure by age and place of residence in England, 2016-2024/25.

Age group	2016 ^a	2018 ^a	2020	2022	2024/25
16-24 years	15	11	25	44	30
25-34 years	11	14	22	37	27
35-44 years	9	15	22	31	30
45-54 years	9	8	16	22	18
55-64 years	7	10	11	16	14
65-74 years	2	3	5	9	10
75 + years	1	2	3	7	5
All adults	8	10	14	24	20
Living in an urban area	No data	No data	17	27	21
Living in a rural area	No data	No data	10	15	16

^a Figures relate to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Source: Food Standards Agency Food and You and Food and You 2 surveys, 2016-2024/25

⁷ This guarantees the value of the state pension will rise by 2.5 per cent, the rate of inflation or the level of earnings growth, whichever is the highest.

food insecurity. As can be seen from Table 2, people aged 65 years or older were less than half as likely as those aged under 45 years to report ‘they were worried that food would run out before they had the money to buy more’, ‘the food they had bought had not lasted until they had the money to purchase more’ and they had been ‘unable to afford to eat balanced meals during the 12 months prior to the survey’. Similarly, a sizeable gap remains between rural and urban responses to these questions. This again suggests that older people, and particularly those living in rural areas, engage with food and experience food insecurity differently to other age groups.

Turning to the use of food aid, the FSA survey data confirm evidence provided by the Trussell Trust that older people are amongst the age groups least likely to make use of food banks or other emergency food providers. Table 3 reveals that only two per cent of those aged 65–74 years and nobody from the 75 years or older age group had received a free food parcel from a food aid provider during the 12 months prior to the latest survey, compared with five per cent of those aged 16–24 years and six per cent of 25–34-year-olds. It may also be that the proportion of 16–34-year-olds using emergency food aid is actually higher than that stated given that they were the group most likely to answer ‘prefer not to say’ to this question. Examining the geographies of food aid use, the proportion of people receiving a free food parcel in rural places was half that in urban areas, with this difference probably reflecting the reduced presence of food banks in rural areas, the difficulties associated with accessing them and antagonistic attitudes towards emergency food aid reported in previous studies.

If attention is switched to social supermarkets, food clubs and community pantries (hereafter referred to as food clubs), then a different pattern of usage emerges. Food clubs were utilised by a larger proportion of people (five per cent) than those who used emergency food aid providers (three per cent) (Table 4). This situation is apparent with older groups, with four per cent of those aged 65 years or older using food clubs, double the rate who were accessing emergency food providers. It is also the case that older people were more likely to have heard of a food club than other age groups. In relation to geography, whilst more people were using food clubs than food banks in both urban and rural areas, it is still the case that the proportion using food clubs in urban places was double that in rural areas, which probably reflects the spatial distribution of food clubs across England.

4.2. The lived experiences of food, food insecurity and community food

Our focus now turns to findings from our ethnographic research conducted at the Cherry Fields rural community food club in the East Midlands. Cherry Fields comprises a central food club site containing a

Table 3

Percentage of adults receiving a free food parcel from a food bank or other emergency food provider during the last 12 months in England, 2024/25.

Age group	Received a free food parcel from a food bank or other emergency food provider	Not received a free food parcel from a food bank or other emergency food provider	Prefer not to say
16-24 years	5	88	7
25-34 years	6	86	7
35-44 years	3	95	2
45-54 years	2	95	3
55-64 years	3	96	1
65-74 years	2	98	1
75+ years	0	99	1
All adults	3	94	3
Living in an urban area	4	93	3
Living in a rural area	2	96	2

Source: Food Standards Agency Food and You and Food and You 2 survey, 2024/25

social eating space that provides low-cost meals to people in the local area and an affordable food shop (see Fig. 1). It also has a food pantry located a few streets away that serves the local community. Beyond this, Cherry Fields works in partnership with other community food projects to provide food clubs across the East Midlands region, with these located in schools, community centres, churches and other community buildings. An example of one of its community meals for older people in a community building is provided in Fig. 2. Food is secured from various sources, including local supermarkets, charities, smaller food shops and farms, with a small amount grown on the Cherry Fields site.

4.2.1. Food insecurity, poverty and local foodscapes

Our encounters with older people during the fieldwork involved asking questions about whether they had struggled recently with accessing food. What became apparent from these interactions was that participants experienced regular periods of skipping meals for financial reasons and had to shop for low-cost food produce. It was also clear that participants identified difficulties accessing food that extended beyond

Table 2

Percentage of adults reporting food access problems by age and place of residence in England, 2024/25.

During the last 12 months									
Age group	I was/we were worried about food running out before getting money to buy more			The food that had been bought didn't last and I/we didn't have the money to get more			I/we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals		
	Often/sometimes	Never	Don't know/prefer not to say	Often/sometimes	Never	Don't know/prefer not to say	Often/sometimes	Never	Don't know/prefer not to say
16-24 years	36	54	11	24	66	10	32	57	10
25-34 years	31	63	5	27	66	7	28	65	8
35-44 years	34	61	5	28	67	5	33	62	5
45-54 years	22	72	5	20	76	5	22	74	4
55-64 years	20	78	3	16	82	3	17	80	3
65-74 years	15	79	6	11	85	5	12	83	4
75+ years	7	85	8	6	87	8	7	87	6
All adults	24	69	6	21	74	6	22	71	6
Living in an urban area	26	68	6	23	73	7	24	70	6
Living in a rural area	20	76	5	16	79	5	17	79	6

Source: Food Standards Agency Food and You and Food and You 2 survey, 2024/25

Table 4

Percentage of adults visiting a social supermarket, food pantry or food hub during the last 12 months in England, 2024/25.

Age group	Visited a social supermarket, food pantry or food hub	Did not visit a social supermarket, food pantry or food hub	Prefer not to say	Not heard of a social supermarket, food pantry or food hub
16-24 years	8	70	4	18
25-34 years	7	69	6	18
35-44 years	7	77	1	14
45-54 years	3	83	2	12
55-64 years	2	89	1	7
65-74 years	4	90	1	5
75+ years	4	94	0	2
All adults	5	81	2	11
Living in an urban area	6	80	3	12
Living in a rural area	3	86	1	10

Source: Food Standards Agency Food and You and Food and You 2 survey, 2024/25

financial matters, relating to restricted mobility, health problems and difficulties accessing local public transport services. However, these problems were never discussed in relation to food insecurity or any

‘hollowing out’ of local foodscapes. Indeed, these problems were rarely viewed as ‘problems’; rather as just being part and parcel of their everyday lives, which indicates some of the complexity associated with older people’s understandings and experiences of food insecurity.

The older people within our research recognised that most of those who accessed the Cherry Field sites (including themselves) often struggled from time to time to make ends meet, although they generally did not feel this constituted reason enough for them to be classed as living in poverty. Indeed, some participants considered there were relatively few people living in ‘true’ poverty within their localities. As Mark commented, *‘there’s no such thing as poverty; it’s just people that don’t know how to organise their finances, I’m afraid’*. Across the different sites, older people frequently commented that those who owned ‘luxuries’, such as smartphones or ‘nice cars’, could not be described as experiencing ‘genuine’ poverty. Participants also had clear views on what poverty should look like, with these strongly influenced by their past recollections of their own or parents’ experiences of ‘making do’ on low incomes. For example, John commented that rabbit snaring in the local countryside was a common coping strategy for his family in his childhood years.

As discussed earlier in the paper, the limited presence of local food shops in rural places and inadequate public transport services to enable people to shop for food in towns represent key barriers to accessing food in rural places. Older people involved in our study also discussed these difficulties. Jane, one of the elderly volunteers, commented:

“[referring to users accessing a local supermarket] That’s the other side of town. But here, can you actually think of anything? There isn’t anything. You know, you’ve got Morrisons which you’ve got to walk over the hill road [to get to] which is really windy and blowy ... But then to walk across there ... [it’s] a big thing to carry a few bags.”

Others mentioned problems with online supermarket shopping on a low budget, with Brenda noting that the delivery charge for her £8 weekly shop would add up to roughly half of the bill, making it



Fig. 1. Cherry Fields showing left-to-right the social eating space, storage space and local food shop.



Fig. 2. A community meal organised by Cherry Fields with food items for purchase after the meal.
Note: the image has been blurred to protect the anonymity of participants.

uneconomical to use. Being a mobile service that delivers low-cost food to several sites in the rural district on a pop-up basis means Cherry Fields was able to overcome some of these difficulties, allowing older people to access a local food support site as well as giving them choice to purchase food on a low budget. Older people considered the food hubs to be a valuable addition to their local foodscapes. The localness and accessibility of the sites were particularly appreciated by participants. Indeed, several older people commented that if the food hub were to move away from their localities, then they would be unlikely to continue to make use of it. This contrasts with some of the younger users we encountered, who stated that they would often travel to different sites throughout the week to purchase the low-cost food provided.

4.2.2. Valuing community food: sociality, sharing and thriftiness

Issues of access and availability are part of a wider picture of how participants utilised the Cherry Fields food services to get by in rural life. A key finding emerging from the fieldwork is how older people constructed their lives around these services. The food clubs operate around strict timing slots. For example, one of the sites is only open for 2 hours on Tuesday afternoons. This is part of the way many food clubs work, as they exist within the time constraints of their host sites, such as schools and village halls, as well as the availability of their volunteers. Consequently, those making use of the Cherry Fields sites were required to adapt their own lives to the rhythms of the food sites. It was claimed that these rhythms also introduced structure into older peoples' lives, which many of our participants valued.

Older participants - both volunteers and users - often reflected on how the sites allowed them to address some of the boredom within their lives. Although this was rarely referred to as social isolation or loneliness, several people did remark on how they consistently looked forward to coming to the food sites in the days before they ran. In most cases, older people would arrive well in advance of the service start time. For example, Simon remarked 'well, it doesn't start until 2, and we're here now

[at 12 o'clock], you know what I mean!' This waiting time was viewed positively, as offering opportunities to socialise with other people on the site, including chatting over food or a drink in the café. In these senses, the sites are acting as places that effectively anchor older people's lives. They are also providing new social eating and drinking spaces in areas where 'the pubs are shut so all that's gone hasn't it. Like none of them now, us, can go out on the weekend ... there's nowhere to go' (Mark).

The food clubs and hubs are place-based and thus reflective of particular socio-material-geographical assemblages. The social settings associated with the sites are shaped by those who use and organise them, as well the contexts of the sites and their surrounding rural areas. For instance, a site based within an assisted living project is likely to have a very different sense of place for users than one based in a church or school. Different people may be looking to gain different things from being in these community food spaces - to secure affordable food, meet old friends, forge new friendships, engage in acts of kindness and reciprocity or create a longer-term sense of community. By fitting the food sites into existing and familiar community buildings, the volunteers were looking to create a more socially acceptable service capable of removing some of the stigmatic aspects of accessing food support services. As Sandra, one of the elderly volunteers, commented about a site in her local church:

"I'm passionate about this church. And this is a church building. And when people walk through that door, I would like to feel that they feel as if they're part of a church. Whether they get through the door of the church is another matter, they don't always, but they know we're here. And also, I've taken to praying with people recently, which I think is one thing that we can do."

Our research suggests that the food clubs represent important informal social spaces, allowing people to build community whilst also accessing food. This social element made visiting the sites more acceptable for participants, with the food aspects of the visit adding to

the socialisation process rather than the other way around, as well as reducing the sense of stigma often associated with accessing food support. The social aspects of the community food sites were also evident through acts of reciprocity and gifting amongst older people. These took a variety of forms, including the sharing of conversation, laughter, personal troubles, cooking tips and recipes, and were considered by participants to be as valuable as accessing food at the sites. In addition, the giving and receiving of items such as 'nice boxes of tea', chocolates or other foodstuffs of symbolic value - often whilst waiting to be called to collect their food - allowed participants to build connections with one another and further reduce any feelings of stigma associated with making use of the community food sites.

Ideas of thriftiness were present across the community food sites and were particularly prevalent amongst the elderly. Older participants were proud of how they often enacted thriftiness in their day-to-day living as the following exchange demonstrates:

Chris: *But I have learned not to look at any full-price clothes. I always go to the sale rail every single time.*

Brenda: *Charity shops.*

Chris: *Yeah, I do as well.*

Mark: *I mean, everybody wants a bargain, don't they!*

Chris: *I read books, and I always go to the charity shop. You read them, your brother reads them. You can take them back or you can have a car boot sale and sell them at your car boot! (All participants nod in agreement).*

The volunteers at Cherry Fields expressed pride that 'you couldn't go to the supermarkets and get what they [people using the sites] take away' (Sandra). Volunteers also displayed a sense of pleasure in teaching thriftiness to others on the site whilst also facilitating users' own desires to be thrifty. Thriftiness was something that allowed older participants to use the sites to access food in more dignified ways, as is illustrated in the following extract from fieldnotes in one of the food hubs:

"Having it come to them feels more dignified ... If the Hub didn't exist, everyone present agreed that they would go to the supermarket instead. This would mean that they would have less time, and they would be spending a lot more money on the things that they needed."

As noted earlier, older people represent a mainstay of the third-sector response to food insecurity. What our research also shows, though, is that many of the volunteers spoken to at Cherry Fields were also users of the service, which allowed them to benefit not only from the food offerings but from the sociality and conviviality provided by the sites. Working on the sites also allowed volunteers to develop valuable friendships with other volunteers as well as to build their own social networks and, in some cases, improve their individual sense of well-being, as the following exchange between a couple of volunteers illustrates.

"I come here to be involved in the organisation of it ... as you're here, and you see, the folk that access the place, and then you find those people's wellbeing and all the rest of it, it's, it has a massive effect on people And that goes for some folk who are involved in the organisation, and I don't want to speak for X but it helps his mental wellbeing in terms of his involvement here ..." (Linda)

"Absolutely." (Julie)

5. Conclusions

Our intention in writing this paper has been to provide the seminal academic account of food insecurity amongst older people in rural England. By drawing on data from national surveys and materials from

place-based ethnographic research, we have been able to interrogate the relations between food insecurity, older people and rurality in ways that have allowed both breadth and depth of coverage. Analysis of national survey data has provided new insights into changing levels of food insecurity and usage of food support services across different age groups and between those living in rural and urban areas. The ethnographic research has allowed for an exploration of how food, food insecurity and community food are understood and experienced by those older people making use of a community food site in a rural district in England. In this final section of the paper, we first discuss how key findings from our study both connect with and extend published work on food insecurity amongst older people in rural places, and then suggest some potential areas for future research.

It is clear from our analysis of the FSA survey data that older people record the lowest levels of food insecurity of all age groups in England even though they have amongst the lowest incomes. This reinforces Mudrazija and Butrica's (2022) point about the complexity of the relationship between income and food insecurity amongst older people and indicates the need to explore older people's understandings and experiences of food and food insecurity in ways that move beyond statistical analysis. It is the case, though, that older people have witnessed the largest increase in food insecurity levels across all age groups during the last few years, demonstrating how their largely fixed low incomes have been unable to deal with recent food (and other) price increases linked to Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis. Our analysis also reveals that levels of food insecurity amongst people living in rural areas are much lower than for the urban population, which echoes the spatial distribution of poverty in England. That said, food insecurity rates have increased more significantly in rural areas since the start of the cost-of-living crisis, which probably relates to the more limited opportunities to shop around for cheaper foods in many rural places.

Whilst the FSA surveys indicate that only a very small proportion of people make use of food aid services in England, older people are the group least likely to have utilised them and their level of usage in rural areas is much lower than that in urban places. Perhaps these findings are unsurprising given that other studies have shown that emergency food services are less numerous and more difficult to access for those living in many rural places, and that older people experience physical and cultural difficulties in engaging with emergency food aid (Buck-McFadyen, 2015; Lu and Carter, 2024). The analysis also highlights that a higher proportion of older people and those living in rural areas are engaging with food clubs than with food aid providers, which may suggest that the broader and more community-based approach to food insecurity adopted by the latter is better able to meet the needs of older people in rural places.

Our study confirms some of the awkward narratives of food insecurity amongst older people that have emerged from previous academic research (Davies and Reid, 2024; Piontak and Schilman, 2014; Valliant et al., 2022). Older adults using Cherry Fields tended not to discuss their (food) situations in relation to the conventional metrics of food insecurity. Whilst some acknowledged problems getting to food shops, these were usually discussed in relation to personal (mobility) struggles rather than any 'hollowing out' of their local foodscapes (Blake, 2019). More generally, older people were reluctant to acknowledge poverty in their areas or amongst those using the community food site, drawing on historical narratives of financial struggle and rural cultures of 'making do' to dismiss the presence of 'real' poverty (Milbourne and Doheny, 2012) and to construct contemporary situations of low-income as resulting more from personal financial mismanagement than structural failings.

Cherry Fields is just one of an increasing number of community food clubs operating in the UK. It is addressing problems of food insecurity by delivering affordable food and social eating opportunities to people in their places. The project was viewed by older participants as a valuable addition to their local foodscape, helping to redress the closure of food shops and limited opportunities for social activity in their communities,

and to provide new opportunities to socialise and engage with food within their localities. The community food sites have come to represent important anchor points within the lives of the older people making use of their services, providing a sense of welcome anticipation and structure to their weekly routines. It also appears that providing food within the spaces of familiar community buildings, such as schools, village halls and churches, has enabled the everyday, social and shared nature of the food (support) experience to be brought to the fore.

It is clear from our study that making use of the community food sites is as much, if not more, about socialising as it is accessing food (Davies and Reid, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017). With the absence of social meeting and eating spaces within their localities, the community food sites have come to be viewed by older people as cherished social settings that allow them to engage with others, to relieve some of their weekly boredoms and to address aspects of social isolation. Allowing people to purchase food at lower prices rather than provide food donations represents another important aspect of the Cherry Fields approach, with the food being offered viewed by our older participants less in terms of shame and stigma, and more in relation to thriftiness, which was largely constructed as a significant and positive aspect of their everyday lives.

Confirming findings from other studies (Morton et al., 2007; Quandt et al., 2001), acts of reciprocity were very much evident amongst older people using the food sites, with the food provided by the project supplemented with other forms of exchange, including the sharing of knowledge about recipes and cooking, and the gifting of food and other goods to others. The sites also represent important spaces of, and for, conviviality and sociality, involving the sharing of humour and problems, the deepening of existing friendships and the creation of new ones. Indeed, our observations reveal that, for both users and the volunteers, an important aim and outcome of being involved with Cherry Fields was the forging of long-term and meaningful social relationships with others.

We want to end the paper by looking towards future areas of research on older people and food insecurity in rural places. We suggest there are four main areas where new research could extend key findings from our research. The first of these is the statistical assessment of food insecurity. Whilst the FSA surveys have provided valuable statistical data on the different dimensions of food insecurity and food support in England, their sampling sizes are too small to allow for more detailed analysis of food insecurity amongst older people in rural places, or to examine food insecurity in different types of rural place. In addition, the FSA surveys do not address some key aspects of food insecurity in rural areas, for example, access to food shops and social eating places, and the (higher) costs of purchasing food in local shops. Given this, it would be useful to develop new place-based household surveys to generate more detailed information on older people's relationships with food and food insecurity in rural areas.

Second, we recognise our ethnographic research is focused on a single community food project based in a specific rural district and that further research is required to explore other community food models and projects in the UK and other countries. In doing this, there will be a need to consider the effectiveness of different approaches in meeting the needs of older people experiencing food insecurity and the extent to which community food interventions can address some of the structural aspects of food insecurity. Such work could also engage with recent critiques of community-based food interventions as reinforcing existing inequalities (Ramos and Truninger, 2021), distracting attention away from public policy responses to food insecurity (Buck-McFadyen, 2015) or having the potential to empower those living with food insecurity and challenge dominant narratives of food insecurity (Wheeler, 2018).

Third, we acknowledge that our study has engaged with older people who have both chosen, and been able to make use of a rural community food site. It would be useful to undertake additional research on the lived experiences of food and food insecurity amongst older people in a broader range of social food settings – such as at coffee mornings and luncheon clubs, and in care and nursing homes – as well as with those older adults who are so ‘spatially constricted’ (Rowles, 1978) that they

spend almost all their lives within the confines of their home. Last, whilst we have pointed to the importance of site specificity in shaping experiences of food and food insecurity, we have made only passing references to our older participants' local foodscapes. Providing more meaningful accounts of the (changing) nature of local foodscapes and their impacts on the everyday lives of older people in rural areas would seem to represent another area for future food insecurity research. We hope our study will lead to further research on these and other themes to enable the development of a much fuller understanding of the relations between older people, food insecurity and rurality.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Paul Milbourne: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Megan Blake:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Ollie Chesworth:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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We declare that there are no competing interests associated with this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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