


The Social Embeddedness of School-Holiday Meals for Children Based on Discourses of Need and Deservingness

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the provision of school-holiday meals for children and shows how it is embedded in society. Proper nutrition is very important for children's physical and cognitive development. However, international research shows that children's social and cultural background has a significant impact on their nutrition. To reduce these disparities and ensure that all children have a healthy diet, effective government intervention is necessary. In Hungary, school canteens and free meals during school holidays for children in need serve this purpose. The latter service is of great importance for the children of families affected by food poverty. Yet, statistics show that some of these children are unable to use this service. This study examines the period before 2016 and highlights the social embeddedness of the service and its consequences on the provision. Whether child food poverty is perceived as a social issue and a common cause generating community intervention largely depends on the local actor's correct perception of the issue, the local appraisal of need, and the consideration of parents' "deservingness." The study also makes some suggestions about areas where further interventions should focus to improve the nutrition of children affected by food poverty.

KEYWORDS

child food poverty, holiday meals provision, perceptions, deservingness, the Roma

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Food poverty and children's malnutrition, once considered a problem of the developing world, are now a concern even in the most developed countries.¹ Especially since the 2008 crisis, European welfare states have had to face the inability of some families to provide their children with adequate nutrition (DAVIS – GEIGER 2017). In many countries, for example, the proportion of households with children having to give up regular meat consumption has increased significantly,² and from time to time there are worrisome news about children's food deprivation in the quantitative sense, too (LOOPSTRA et al. 2015; PFEIFFER et al. 2011).

According to the definition used in this study, "food poverty" and "food deprivation" signify the inability of an individual or family to provide an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways,³ or the insecurity of being able to do so (DOWLER – O'CONNOR 2012:45). This situation is primarily caused by insufficient financial resources, but other factors may also play a role, such as a lack of knowledge and skills necessary for healthy eating or the inadequate infrastructure of one's living environment.

Several studies have already reported on the negative consequences of malnutrition in children: higher child mortality, poorer health and more frequent occurrence of chronic diseases (COOK et al. 2004); poorer academic performance; decreased school attendance (JYOTI et al. 2005); and barriers to the development of social and other non-cognitive skills (HOWARD 2011). The negative consequences of hunger in the qualitative sense and the associated childhood obesity are also well known (REILLY et al. 2003). Effective public policy interventions are therefore necessary to provide adequate nutrition for children whose families are unable to do so. Decisions about intervention, however, are not made in a social vacuum. What decision-makers consider a problem to be addressed and an appropriate solution depends on the nature of the given phenomenon and the social perception of those involved. This study examines the social embeddedness of social services aimed at the poor, using the example of providing school-holiday meals for children.

In Hungary, several government measures have been taken in recent years aimed at reducing food deprivation among children. These include the extension of free or discounted institutional meals to an ever wider range of children, as well as to school holidays. However, these measures did not always reach those most in need. In the study, I examine some of the causes of this phenomenon through the example of school-holiday meals for children based on social need. Since this service is provided by local authorities, I focus on the factors that influence the provision at the local level. Using a constructivist approach, I examine how food deprivation among children becomes — or does not become — a social problem requiring intervention at the local level. The social construction of the issue means, on the one hand, the social determination of which phenomena we perceive, and, on the other hand, how we interpret and evaluate them. In the case of issues relevant for policies, the identification of those in need is part of the process (SCHNEIDER – INGRAM 1993).

¹This study is a revised and expanded version of a paper previously published in English (HUSZ 2018).

²Children of the Recession. The impact of the economic crisis on child wellbeing in rich countries. *Innocenti Report Card 12*. Florence, Unicef Office of Research. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc12-eng-web.pdf>, accessed December 15, 2022.

³A socially unacceptable way is being forced to beg or scavenge for food, but so is having access to adequate food only through donations, food banks, or soup kitchens.



The following are the main research questions: To what extent is the lack of provision for needy children caused by the local institutions' specific perception of the issue? How does the fact that most of the affected children are Roma influence the likelihood of intervention?

The first part of the study provides a literature review of the main factors influencing the nutrition of children from low-income families. In the second part, I outline the situation in Hungary in terms of food poverty among children and briefly summarize the government measures aimed at alleviating it. After describing the research methods, the third part presents the phenomena influencing the local construction of poverty, and then the largely ethnicized discourse on the deservingness of families in need.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE NUTRITION OF CHILDREN FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Several studies have pointed out significant nutritional differences according to socio-economic status, which can be observed both among adults and their children (DARMON – DREWNOWSKI 2008). We do not, however, have enough information about the mechanisms underlying these differences.

Structural factors such as income levels, food prices, and the cost of housing and other basic necessities limit the amount of money that individual households can spend on food (DOWLER – DOBSON 1997). Less healthy nutrition in low-income families is closely linked to a lack of financial resources for adequate food. In households living in poverty, price is a critical factor in buying food, but cheaper foods are often low in nutrients (BURNS et al. 2013). At the same time, there is some evidence that families with limited financial resources still try to ensure adequate nutrition for the children, even at the expense of the adults' nutrition (MCINTYRE et al. 2003). Nonetheless, little is known about the variations of food distribution within the household, and especially about the issue of quantity and quality.

Studies have also highlighted the importance of cultural factors in children's nutrition. The parents' nutritional knowledge, motivation, and cooking skills all influence what foods they offer their children. Empirical research has shown that children initially prefer sweet, salty, and high-energy foods and are averse to bitter and sour tastes in comparison (SCAGLIONI et al. 2011). However, taste perception can be shaped even before birth and during breastfeeding, through the mother's diet (MENNELLA 2014). The younger the child, the greater the opportunity to shape its food-related predisposition, and this process is highly dependent on the home environment. There are few and inconsistent empirical findings, however, on how exactly the family's low socioeconomic status is related to its knowledge, motivation, and skills necessary for a healthy diet (DARMON – DREWNOWSKI 2008).

Parenting principles and feeding practices also play a significant role in the development of children's healthy nutrition. The demanding, but also responsive, so-called authoritative parenting style favors the development of healthier eating habits, while the authoritarian style has a more unfavorable effect (VENTURA – BIRCH 2008), although the direction of the relationship is not entirely clear. Certain parenting practices also promote the development of proper nutrition, such as introducing healthy foods into the diet by repeatedly offering them, rather than resorting to controlling practices (e.g., limiting the consumption of unhealthy foods or forcing children to eat foods considered healthy) (VENTURA – BIRCH 2008). Parental modeling,



nutritional awareness, and family mealtime also positively influence the development of a proper, healthy diet (POCOCK et al. 2010). Nevertheless, it should be added that most studies on nutritional strategies have been conducted among white middle-class families, whereas much less information is available on families with low socioeconomic status (low income and/or low education). Empirical evidence is unclear as to whether appropriate practices and parenting behaviors that promote healthy eating habits are less common in families with low socioeconomic status (MCPHIE et al. 2014).

The opportunities offered by the wider environment can also represent limitations in the development of a child's healthy diet. The physical factors of the local food environment (e.g., availability of stores, restaurants, fast food restaurants, kindergarten and school canteens, buffets) determine the accessibility and affordability of healthy food (CASPI et al. 2012). Charitable organizations and other initiatives at the local or community level also play a role in feeding low-income families. International experience shows that, despite the growing number of such programs, they often only reach a fraction of the potentially affected families. Studies have revealed some of the social factors of this phenomenon, including the lack of access and awareness of the program by potential users, and the transaction costs of participation (KIRKPATRICK – TARASUK 2009; YU et al. 2010; LOOPSTRA – TARASUK 2013). Other research has also shown that the stigma and shame associated with claiming benefits can also limit access to care (RIDGE 2013; PURDAM et al. 2016).

FOOD POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN AND GOVERNMENT MEASURES TO ALLEVIATE IT IN HUNGARY

Child poverty, child food deprivation

Since the regime change, the poverty risk of children in Hungary has been permanently higher than the national average calculated for the entire population, as well as the EU average calculated for children (GÁBOS – TÓTH 2019). Since 2014, statistics show a striking improvement in terms of both income poverty and material deprivation indicators,⁴ but nearly one fifth of children remain exposed to the risk of poverty or social exclusion.⁵

In Hungary, the main risk factors for child poverty include the low level of education and poor labor market status of parents and a high number of children living in the same household. Among the Roma, all the main risk factors of poverty are present in extremely high proportions

⁴At the time of writing, in 2022, the latest available international data reflected the situation of one year earlier than in Hungary. Based on 2021 incomes, the child poverty rate in Hungary was 10.1%, compared to the 19.5% in 2020 in the EU27 countries. At the same time, 13.1% of Hungarian children lived in severe material deprivation (2021), while this ratio was 7.5% (2020) for children in the EU27 member states. Source of international data: *EU-SILC Survey Data file*, Eurostat 2021. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>, accessed November 28, 2022. Source of Hungarian data: *Helyzetkép – 2021: A háztartások életszínvonalá* [Status — 2021. Living Standards of Households]. Hungarian Central Statistical Office [Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, KSH], 2022. <https://ksh.hu/s/helyzetkep-2021/#/kiadvany/a-haztartasok-eletszinvonala>, accessed November 28, 2022 (hereafter: KSH 2022).

⁵*EU-SILC Survey Data file*, Eurostat 2021. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>, accessed November 28, 2022 (hereafter: Eurostat 2021).



(GÁBOS – TÓTH 2017), and their risk of poverty or social exclusion is more than three times the national average.⁶

Moreover, regional disparities in institutional benefits also contribute to the persistence of differences in life chances. In the most disadvantaged areas, where the average number of children in families is above the national average, child poverty is concentrated in the form of cumulative disadvantages in different dimensions. Moreover, these crisis regions are not showing the same improving trends as the national ones (VASTAGH – HUSZ 2016; BASS 2019).

Income poverty does not necessarily mean food deprivation, but it greatly increases the risk of it. Therefore, other indicators should also be taken into account to assess food poverty. However, in Hungary — as in many other European countries — there are no systematic and direct measurements to clearly identify food-deprived children. Different studies use different indicators and the data are not very recent. A 2010 study among school-aged children, for example, found that 7.6% went to bed hungry sometimes, 1.4% often, and 0.9% on a daily basis because there was not enough food at home (NÉMETH – KÖLTŐ 2011). Roma children are even worse off: at the time of the survey, 36% lived in households that could not always afford the food they needed.⁷ These data point to the occurrence of occasional hunger associated with crisis situations. These figures are high in the light of the fact that in developed countries, social benefits would be one of the ways to avoid such situations. These and similar cases of extreme deprivation point to problems in the functioning of the social system.

We also do not have sufficient data on the quality of the nutrition of children from low-income families. According to the European Union Household Budget and Living Conditions Statistics 2021, 7–15% of households with children,⁸ whereas 23–29% of low-income households with children, cannot afford to eat meat (or protein equivalents) every other day (EU27: 4–11% and 14–17%, respectively).⁹ According to the HBSC study¹⁰ on adolescent health behavior, less affluent Hungarian students eat breakfast less often and consume less fruit and vegetables than their more affluent peers.¹¹ This is in line with the findings of a previous study in a disadvantaged area, which found that low-income families have a diet dominated by flour, bread, pasta, potatoes, and fat, while meat, dairy products, fruit, and vegetables are often absent (BASS 2013). The Roma also tend to eat less healthily: a national survey found that they consume far less of the more expensive foods, such as cheese, salami, and fruit juice, and buy more of the cheaper foods, such as carbonated drinks, pasta, and white bread, than the average family. They also observed low consumption of salad, fruit, vegetables, and brown bread, and a preference for

⁶KSH 2022.

⁷*Poverty and employment: The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States. Roma survey — Data in focus.* FRA 2014, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-employment-1_en.pdf, accessed November 30, 2022.

⁸The value of the indicator varies depending on the household composition (number of adults and children).

⁹Eurostat 2021.

¹⁰The Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) is an international questionnaire survey that is carried out every four years in many countries in Europe and North America, including Hungary.

¹¹*Growing up unequal: gender and socioeconomic differences in young people's health and well-being.* World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe, 2016. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/326320>, accessed December 5, 2022.



animal fats (KOLTAI 2013). These characteristics are certainly not ethnic, but stem from the more disadvantaged social situation of the Roma and can be generalized to other low-income families.

Government measures to help feed children in need

In Hungary, families with children who are food deprived are essentially assisted by the state welfare system, while the role of food banks, soup kitchens, and other community initiatives is negligible. The government is trying to address the problem mainly through in-kind benefits, including the extension of children's public catering. Since 1997, the state has provided an ever-expanding range of institutional meals at reduced prices for those in need. From 2013, children from low-income families receive morning and afternoon snacks and hot lunches in nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools for free and for half price in secondary schools. From 2015, the entitlement to free meals has been extended to essentially all children aged 0–5 attending an institution, thereby reducing the targeting of benefits. In the 2019/2020 school year, nearly 135,000 children received free meals in primary schools, and another 146,000 at reduced prices (KIR-STAT¹²).¹³ At the same time, the amount of the most important cash benefit for families with children, the family allowance, has not increased since 2008.

The worst off are certainly those families living in poverty who are raising a child requiring a special diet. Caring for these children at home often involves significant additional costs for families, which cannot be covered even by the increased family allowance. For years, public catering workers have experienced an increase in the number of children requiring special diets. While in 2013 46% of schools had a demand for a special diet menu, in 2017 this figure was already 72%.¹⁴ According to the relevant legislation, the municipality must also provide meals for these children, but the vast majority of kitchens are not equipped to do so, or are only equipped for certain types of diets. In other cases, such as for children with celiac disease, the costs of meals are so high that municipalities are unable or unwilling to pay for them.¹⁵

Since 2002, free meals for children have been available during the summer holidays as well. Initially, municipalities decided whether to provide the service, and they could apply for state subsidies to cover the costs, yet one third of the poorest settlements did not provide summer meals for children (HUSZ – MAROZSÁN 2014). From 2016, the government has narrowed down

¹²Statistical data from the Public Education Information System (KIR-STAT).

¹³Subsidies for meals for children living in poverty but not attending institutions (0–3-year-olds, home-schooled children, 16-year-old school dropouts) remains a problem to be resolved. The Operational Program for Deprived Persons (RSZTOP) focuses on these (especially the youngest ones), as well as on disadvantaged expectant mothers. Within the framework of the ongoing program, food packages are distributed to some 100,000 families nationwide. Magyar Nemzeti Társadalmi Felzárkózási Stratégia. II. Nyomonkövetési jelentés 2017 [Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy II. Monitoring Report 2017]. <https://szocialisportal.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MNTFS-2017-jeletnes.pdf>, accessed July 16, 2020.

¹⁴Országos iskolai MENZA körkép, 2017. Általános iskolai táplálkozás-egészségügyi környezetfelmérés [National Survey of School Canteens, 2017. Primary School Nutrition and Health Survey]. National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition [Országos Gyógyszerészeti és Élelmezés-egészségügyi Intézet (OGYÉI)], 2018. <https://ogyei.gov.hu/dynamic/Orszagos-iskolai-MENZA-korkep-2017-181212-2-web.pdf>, accessed December 5, 2022 (hereafter: OGYÉI 2018).

¹⁵See the ombudsman's inquiry on this: *Report of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights in case no. AJB-3378/2017*. September 2017. https://www.ajbh.hu/documents/10180/2602747/Jelent%C3%A9s+az+%C3%B3vodai+%C3%A9tkeztet%C3%A9sr%C5%91+3378_2017/795e2707-c126-e084-a953-97bdc59ab9d2?version=1.0, accessed December 5, 2022.



(halved) the scope of eligibility, while making it mandatory for municipalities to provide such services not only during summer but also during autumn, spring, and winter holidays. The cost of this is reimbursed to municipalities by the state. The first experiences were positive: upon the imposition of the obligation to provide the service, the number of settlements where free school-holiday meal provision was introduced based on demand increased by more than one and a half times compared to the previous year (Husz 2018). According to the most recent data, 127,000 children were able to use this service in 2021 (TEIR data¹⁶). However, it remains a problem that the narrowing of eligibility means that the children of some families in need are excluded from the benefits.

While the Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for alleviating food deprivation among children living in poverty, the Ministry of Health is responsible for improving the quality of public catering. The effectiveness of the interventions therefore depends on the degree of coordination between the two ministries. The measures of the Ministry of Health are aimed at promoting healthy eating in children's institutions. In 2017, 74% of school-age children used public catering, i.e., the measure covers a wide range of children.¹⁷

Surveys of school and kindergarten canteens in the 2000s unanimously found that the quantity and quality of the food served did not meet the guidelines of healthy nutrition. In particular, the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as dairy products, was below optimal, whereas pasta, bread, pastries, and sweet foods were common, and the carbohydrate and fat content of the food was very high. The reports also highlighted that the diet was found to be extremely low in iron and calcium and extremely high in salt.¹⁸ The government has therefore decided to uniformly regulate children's public catering. The mandatory regulations from 2015, which have become known in the press as the "salt ordinance," aim to significantly reduce salt and sugar, introduce whole grain breads and pastas, greatly increase the use of dairy products and fresh vegetables and fruit, and generally achieve a more varied diet. The assessment of the canteen reform, which required radical changes in the flavors, ingredients, and processes of traditional Hungarian cuisine, has so far been mixed. Although the canteens have tried to introduce new foods and raw materials that meet the criteria of healthy nutrition, and to reduce the use of fat and salt, some children — and their parents — do not appreciate these, as indicated by the increased number of parental complaints.¹⁹

¹⁶Statistical data from the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System (TEIR).

¹⁷OGYÉI 2018.

¹⁸OGYÉI 2018; *Országos helyzetkép az óvodai közétkeztetésről. Óvodai táplálkozás-egészségügyi felmérés* [The Status of Public Catering in Kindergartens. Kindergarten Nutrition and Health Survey]. National Institute for Food and Nutrition Science [Országos Élelmezés- és Táplálkozástudományi Intézet, OÉTI], 2009. https://ogyei.gov.hu/dynamic/oeti_forms/ovoda2009.pdf, accessed December 5, 2022; *Országos iskolai MENZA körkép* [National Survey of School Canteens]. National Institute for Food and Nutrition Science [Országos Élelmezés- és Táplálkozástudományi Intézet, OÉTI], 2013. https://ogyei.gov.hu/dynamic/oeti_forms/menza2013.pdf, accessed December 5, 2022; *Országos helyzetkép az óvodai közétkeztetésről. Óvodai táplálkozás-egészségügyi felmérés* [The Status of Public Catering in Kindergartens. Kindergarten Nutrition and Health Survey]. National Institute for Food and Nutrition Science [Országos Élelmezés- és Táplálkozástudományi Intézet, OÉTI], 2013. https://ogyei.gov.hu/dynamic/oeti_forms/ovoda2013.pdf, accessed December 5, 2022.

¹⁹OGYÉI 2018.



It would be worth systematically examining the impact of the salt ordinance on the diet of children from poor families. The first research findings show that the government's (otherwise welcome) intention to reform the quality of public catering has had the unintended consequence of food-deprived children (also) eating less of the food served to them in public institutions than before (Husz 2018). This could lead to an increase in quantitative food deprivation among them, despite government intentions.

RESEARCH LOCATION AND METHODS

The present research was carried out in the most disadvantaged districts of Hungary, where socioeconomic disadvantages and poorer access to quality services are both an issue. Most of these areas are located far from Budapest, in the eastern, northeastern, and southern rural parts of the country. Extensive programs, such as the district-wide projects of the Child Opportunities program, are being implemented for the development of the most deprived rural regions, which aim to improve the quality and accessibility of services for children and their families according to local needs. The projects are supported by a technical-methodological accompanying program, which, among other things, monitors local implementation and carries out research to support policy decisions.

The study is based on three research projects related to the accompanying program activities, carried out between 2013 and 2016. One was a questionnaire survey carried out between 2013 and 2014 in the 23 most disadvantaged micro-regions participating in the program at the time, on a representative sample of families with children.²⁰ The data collection covered more than 6,100 households. The primary aim of the research was not to examine food poverty, but the questionnaire included questions on the issue. The findings of the survey are not presented in detail but are only used to illustrate the nature of food deprivation in the areas studied. Hereafter I will refer to the research as "Survey 2013/14."

The other two studies were qualitative in nature, looking at how local institutions address the issue of food poverty among children.²¹ The empirical basis of the research was a survey conducted in 2013, which included 87 semi-structured interviews with decision-makers of local authorities about the conditions of children's summer meals provision. For this study, I conducted a secondary analysis of the interviews (hereafter: mayors, 2013).

In 2016, we broadened the scope of the topic and looked at the reception of the new regulations related to school-holiday catering. As part of this, we conducted another 32 interviews with teachers, kitchen managers, and social workers in kindergartens and schools. Local actors who are in contact with the concerned children and their families, but who can also influence the discourse on nutrition through their institutional position. In the study, I refer to them as providers, sometimes "locals." We also conducted 9 interviews with mothers with children to better understand the local context of what the providers were saying (hereafter: locals, 2016).

This paper draws on information gathered through qualitative research. I first carried out a manifest thematic analysis of the interview transcripts in order to examine which themes emerge

²⁰For more details on the survey, see: VASTAGH – HUSZ 2016.

²¹For more details, see: HUSZ – MAROZSÁN 2014.



in the interview dataset. I then selected four broad themes (need, hunger, responsibility to the poor, deservingness) for latent thematic analysis. Looking for recurring patterns of reporting helped to explore the respondents' experiences and the meanings attached to them. Participation in both the questionnaire survey and the interview surveys was voluntary, and the information collected was used anonymously.

PERCEPTIONS AND EVALUATIONS OF FOOD POVERTY: THE QUESTION OF NEED

In our study area, 52% of families with children lived in income poverty in 2013 (Survey 2013/14). In these areas, the income of the large part of the local population came from social benefits and public works, providing them with a rather modest living. For example, in 2013, for a family of two adults and three children, these resources (family allowance, public works wages, welfare benefits) provided approximately HUF 120,000 net per month. Casual and seasonal work was another income-generating option, but it was not always available to everyone. In the same year, a family of this composition would (have) had to spend approximately HUF 104,000 per month on food in order to eat healthily, according to the recommendations of the National Institute of Food and Nutrition.²² In the areas studied, income was therefore a major constraint on adequate nutrition. In addition, the food environment in small villages is also poor: in some places there were and still are no grocery stores, and where there are, the selection of foods is usually very limited and the prices are high. Raising livestock and growing fruit and vegetables can reduce dependence on stores to some extent, but these activities were only undertaken by a portion of low-income families.

In our questionnaire survey, 36% of poor families did not always have enough money for food, and for Roma families, this proportion was as high as 51%. Food deprivation was most often linked to recurrent, chronic lack of money: 66% of families reported that they had financial problems from month to month (Survey 2013/14). Interviews with parents also showed that food shortages were not continuous but cyclical in nature: they were most common in the last week or two of the month, when the money from paychecks and social transfer payments received at the beginning of the month has already run out. The number of days affected depended on the time of year and other factors, such as the need to buy firewood or cover unexpected expenses. In the last weeks of the month, the family would become increasingly destitute, unless they managed to find a casual job, or receive a donation from somewhere or a temporary allowance from the municipality. The fact that usury was flourishing in many settlements at the time of the research is the best indication that such help was often not available (information based on interviews with locals, 2016).

The interviews highlighted that neediness often remains hidden from the social care system. The number of people who use school-holiday catering is not necessarily an indication of the number of food-deprived families. Surely there are some who manage, albeit with difficulty, to provide for their children from their own resources. And for many, a sense of shame may

²²Létminimum, 2013 [Subsistence Level, 2013]. *Statisztikai Tükör* 2014/53. <https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xfp/idoszaki/letmin/letmin13.pdf>, accessed December 5, 2022.



prevent them from using the service.²³ The stigma attached to social benefits was well known among mayors and social workers, many of whom cited it as a reason for some families perceived to be in need not applying for free summer catering for children. One mayor explained it this way: “Most parents keep their difficulties a secret. In such a closed village society, this can still carry a stigma. Parents are reluctant to put themselves through this, regardless of how needy they are or how eligible they might be” (Interview 60, mayors, 2013).

In addition, the current child protection law makes the poorest, most destitute families cautious. Even though the law provides that a child cannot be removed from the family for purely financial reasons, endangerment due to starvation can easily lead to the child being taken into state custody. Although there was no direct observation of who went hungry and who did not, most of the mayors were aware of the families’ food deprivation. They said that the number of claims for emergency aid increased towards the end of the month, with food shortages being cited as a reason for the claims. However, the need for aid often exceeded the capacities of the municipality; as one mayor put it: “there is no amount of money that would be enough” (Interview 28, mayors, 2013).

In kindergartens and schools, the primary indication for teachers was the way children treated food. They perceived financial hardship mainly in the form of “weekend starvation,” which became more and more common towards the end of the month. On Mondays, the children were more restless, had difficulty concentrating, and gulped down their food. One teacher put it this way: “You should see Mondays, the kitchen can’t make enough snacks to keep up with demand, because [the children] keep coming back for more. So, it is obvious that they didn’t have their regular three meals on Saturday and Sunday. (...) A lot of the children only have the two meals that they get here at school, and they go home and don’t eat. Very often it is terribly difficult to teach them during the first period because they are hungry. They are much easier to work with during the second period” (Interview 2, locals, 2016).

However, locals found the phenomena they experienced in relation to poor families’ eating habits contradictory. A common complaint in public catering was that children in school and kindergarten are picky eaters, not eating their meals and throwing away snacks on their way home.²⁴ These were considered a general feature of children’s behavior and were explained by things like preferring to eat sweets brought from home or imitating their peers. As one teacher noted: “There is a saying that there’s no such thing as bad food, only sated people. So if (sooner or later) a child gets hungry, (s)he will eat what is put in front of her/him, that’s for sure. But if (s)he can stuff her/himself with chips, (s)he won’t [eat lunch]” (Interview 2, locals, 2016).

However, for children from low-income families, this phenomenon has been interpreted to mean that those who are picky with their food must not be starving. But conversations with the parents have nuanced this picture. The mothers themselves often described their children as “picky,” which they tried to take into consideration when cooking. They would mostly cook things that the children liked; in practice, this meant preparing a few ingredients in traditional but varied ways. Meals were designed to keep children full, with little mention of a healthy diet

²³The stigmatizing nature of the “free lunch” was already observed in the soup kitchens of the late 19th century. On this, see: [BÁTI – UMBRAI 2020](#).

²⁴Anikó Bági in her very detailed ethnographic description approached the same issue from the perspective of the participating children and their parents, and based on this, she formulated a number of recommendations to increase the success of public catering and reduce waste ([BÁTI 2018](#)).



or encouraging them to try unusual flavors. The taste, color, and texture of the food at home therefore significantly differed from what the children experienced in public catering. This was particularly true during the period of our research, after the introduction of the salt ordinance. Getting children used to new tastes and a healthy diet in general, which is the responsibility of the family for middle-class children, was mostly left to the kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers were aware of this and considered it an important part of their educational program to reduce the disadvantages related to diet and food culture. However, parents did not make it easy for children to appreciate canteen flavors, as they themselves were often dismissive of foods that were unusual to them. Given the reactions of the parents, it is no wonder that the children were not enthusiastic about canteen food either (information based on interviews with locals, 2016).

Local providers also saw the shopping habits of poor families as controversial. At the beginning of the month, families went shopping for food and other necessities after receiving their salaries and social transfer payments. In some settlements, these occasions were given a name, indicating their special significance: they were called “shopping bag days.” In such cases, not only the nutritional function of food came to the fore but also its social one. As Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood put it: “The goods are neutral, but their use is social, they can be used as fence or bridge” (DOUGLAS – ISHERWOOD 1996:XV). For poor families, cola, chips, and similar rarely consumed “luxury items” served as a bridge, a signal of similarity²⁵ towards those who could buy them at any time. But for local providers, the sight of the full shopping carts had a different meaning: it gave them the impression that the family was not in need. One mayor summed up this controversial observation as follows: “It does not reach the municipality that someone is starving. We do hear that there is not much to eat in the days before the benefit is paid, but on benefit day, we see that families do a lot of shopping. And we often see discarded snacks on the road. Poor children also throw away food, and then we see that [the parents] buy them cola and chips” (Interview 48, mayors, 2013).

The question of need was also raised in connection with school-holiday catering. In settlements where such services had been organized before, the mayors often reported negative experiences. Use of the service was rather uneven: the children did not always come to lunch, or the parents did not always pick up the food. While there were certainly cases where the mayors’ indignation was justified, an earlier study reported circumstances that made the unpredictability of the use more understandable. For example, in cases where the children came to lunch every day from a part of the settlement that was far away from the canteen. Moreover, the long distance had to be covered under poor public transport conditions, so on days when the family had lunch on the table anyway, the children were not sent to the municipal canteen for lunch. Especially if the child had to be accompanied, which was difficult for the mother to do while looking after the younger children. In other cases, the older children did not pick up the food because they were looking after the little ones while the parents were seasonally employed, or they themselves went to work with the parents. Moreover, as the meal was free, there was no incentive to cancel the lunch if the children could not or did not want to pick it up (HUSZ – MAROZSÁN 2014).

²⁵The scope of this paper precludes further elaboration of this idea. I am thinking of cases where parents have bought certain things for their children that are beyond their financial means just so they would not stand out from their peers, for example. This is referred to in an interview excerpt in which a mother of multiple children said: “If [the children] know that there is money, they ask for chips or candy, which they can distribute among their classmates” (information based on interviews with locals, 2013).



The salt ordinance further increased the sense of waste around public catering. Canteen staff complained about the increase in the amount of food being thrown away, and parents complained that children were not getting used to the new flavors. A mother of four put it this way: “My children eat for free [at school], I have a large family and I am disadvantaged, but the children do not eat there every day because the food is bland. On the other hand, during school holidays, you have to pick up the food in a lunch box. And the way I see it, it’s not just us, because not even the animals will eat it, it tastes inedible. (...) Before the reform, my children ate what they were given, and even asked for seconds. They even ate foods that they hated at home” (Interview 30, locals, 2016).

Overall, there were few settlements where children affected by food deprivation were not in the sights of local institutions. In some settlements, however, this did not lead to child food poverty being perceived as a social problem that spurs action. This was not only due to conflicting experiences related to need but also to considerations of deservingness of assistance.

THE QUESTION OF DESERVINGNESS IN THE DISCOURSE ON CHILD FOOD POVERTY

In 2013, a third of the poorest villages and towns in Hungary did not provide summer meals for children (HUSZ – MAROZSÁN 2014). In the studied areas, only 32% of the children in the families where there was not always enough money for food participated in the summer meal programs. Another 21% were unable to do so because the municipality did not provide the service, 19% were not eligible for benefits based on the family’s income, and 28% had other reasons (Survey 2013/14). One fifth of the children at risk of food poverty have therefore been left unprovided for as a result of the municipality’s decision. That this was not only due to the infrastructural difficulties mentioned earlier can be inferred from the fact that a similar service for the elderly had been in place in the vast majority of settlements for years. As the interviews with the mayors revealed, in some cases the municipal leaders questioned whether the families with children concerned were deserving of assistance. Those who had not previously provided summer meal programs most often cited either this or a lack of need, but the issue of deservingness also came up frequently in other interviews (information based on interviews with mayors, 2013).

Narratives about the users of summer meal programs often individualized the reasons for food deprivation. One of the complaints was that those in need of food distribution have themselves to blame for not cultivating their gardens.²⁶ Local institutional actors saw this as laziness and evidence of an inappropriate attitude to work. Other arguments held that poor financial management or too many children are at the root of food poverty, both of which show the irresponsibility of the family. Two of the mayors put it this way: “It’s only the families who don’t bother to take care of the seeds and plants that they get from the... [foundation], so nothing grows in their gardens. These are usually the same families who do not manage the family income properly either. I don’t believe there are starving children in the settlement, but at

²⁶Our questionnaire survey confirmed that income-poor families grew less fruit and vegetables than average. However, this was often due to a lack of the basic conditions needed: seeds, fertilizer, sprays, tools, and, in many cases, the right farming skills (Survey 2013/14; information based on interviews with locals, 2016).



the same time, there are families where parental negligence and neglect are behind the inadequate care of the children” (Interview 31, mayors, 2013).

“I definitely see it as the responsibility of the family how the children live, so parents should have as many children as they are able to support. They should be able to assess this. Unfortunately, I see that there are quite serious problems with this, especially among the Roma” (Interview 27, mayors, 2013).

The complaint about the lack of small gardens was not limited to the Roma, although it was often mentioned in connection with them. Other elements of the narratives, however, were put within a clearly ethnicized interpretive framework, which found the explanation of food poverty in the “specific culture” of the Roma and thought it was graspable through characteristics such as a high number of children or a short-term, “living in the moment,” unable-to-allocate kind of attitude. As one teacher put it: “A fairly significant proportion of the population here is Roma (...). They have an ancient way of life, that if they come by some money, they live it up, even if it’s just for three days. And what happens after that, doesn’t matter” (Interview 12, locals, 2016).

The parts of the narratives about entitlement also shed light on the interest base of the discourse on deservingness. Indeed, in these deprived areas, a large part of the population, including local providers, was only slightly better off financially than those entitled to social benefits, yet could not claim school-holiday meals for children. In the interview excerpt below, a kitchen manager and mother of two explained this as follows: “I don’t think it’s fair that if I calculate how much aid is given to families, those who can’t claim any aid won’t have as much left in their monthly budget as families that do. With three children [you’re entitled to] free meals and free textbooks. By the time I have paid for all of that, I won’t have left as much for food as someone who has three or more children” (Interview 30, locals, 2016).

The complaints about the Roma were not only made in the context of catering — in this case the question of deservingness had in fact been settled earlier.²⁷ In the specific case of school-holiday children’s catering, it had to be decided whether, in addition to the parents “not deserving” it, they should nonetheless receive help by rights of their children. Most mayors provided the service for the sake of the children. However, a small number of them decided not to provide it, as they wanted to force parents to take care of their children themselves (mayors, 2013). The extent to which their efforts were successful is not covered by our research.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In my study, I examined the provision of school-holiday meals for children as a social service, showing its social embeddedness. In my review of international literature, I summarized the main factors that may explain the significant differences in children’s nutrition based on their social background. These have an impact partly via the family’s income and partly via the infrastructure development of their place of residence. I also presented some cultural factors that also affect children’s nutrition. Further research is needed on the extent to which cultural differences are related to social background, i.e., whether, for example, we can talk about a culture of poverty in relation to the eating behaviors of poor families.

²⁷See: KOVÁCS et al. 2013; FEISCHMIDT et al. 2013.



The study's empirical background was provided by a multi-stage, mixed-methods research that aimed to contribute to the debate about who and how should intervene to alleviate food poverty among children. Until 2015, the Hungarian system of school-holiday meals could be described as a state-subsidized local program, with municipalities providing meals to those in need. In my case study, I pointed out some of the problems with this system.

Firstly, whether child food deprivation as a problem becomes a social issue, a common cause generating community intervention, depends largely on the local actors' perception and assessment of the problem, and the local perception of need. This draws attention to the importance of further research to better understand phenomena such as the pickiness of food-deprived children, or the functions of food beyond biology.²⁸ On the other hand, it also indicates the need to inform decision-makers — both local and governmental — to avoid misperceptions, misinterpretations, and prejudices.

Secondly, the success of local programs also depends on the development of local discourses on deservingness. This can be disadvantageous for Roma children in Hungary, and for the children of ethnic minorities with a negative social image in other countries, resulting in unequal access to care. Although children are generally considered to be outside the scope of the discourse on deservingness, in practice they may still suffer disadvantage if their parents are deemed "undeserving."

The cases included in the study also point out a number of additional dilemmas of public policy relevance. The findings indicate that food deprivation is not continuous but limited to certain periods. However, the Hungarian system of school-holiday children's catering provides continuous, daily care. This contradiction carries with it the risk of waste, which had been common to some extent in most settlements, and which has reduced social support for the service. This draws attention to the fact that an inappropriately designed aid program can also have unintended harmful consequences, in that it can reinforce negative attitudes towards the poor. It would therefore be worth considering (in addition to strengthening families' income-earning capacity) increasing cash subsidies instead of in-kind benefits, for it is better able to deal with periodic deprivation. Another significant advantage is that it is less stigmatizing for people receiving benefits, thus reducing latency in children's food poverty.

A further dilemma is whether the quantitative and qualitative aspects of food poverty can be addressed through the same intervention. As I have shown, the intention to reform the quality of public catering has had the unintended consequence of even food-deprived children eating less of the food served to them in public institutions than before. This does not mean that the goal of improving the quality of food for poor children should be abandoned, but that this potential impact should also be taken into consideration when choosing appropriate measures. There is also the question of whether it is possible to provide children with adequate food in terms of quantity and quality without also focusing on their families. If parents fail to make progress towards a healthier diet, we cannot expect significant improvements in children, despite improvements in the quality of public catering.

²⁸For more details on this, see: [BURNS et al. 2013](#).



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