

Insight

Food security: What is it and how is it measured?

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Insight Environment Farming and fishing

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Food security is a global issue, but for many people it is also a very immediate concern. How do we define and measure food security?



Food security is a global issue, but for many people it is also a very immediate concern. Households in the UK want to have access to affordable, nutritious food, while governments want to ensure access to sufficient and safe food. Meanwhile

global issues such as climate change, trade and conflict are challenges to the world's ability to feed a growing population. The new *Agriculture Bill 2019-20*, reintroduced to Parliament in January 2020, introduces a duty for the Government to report to Parliament on food security in the UK.

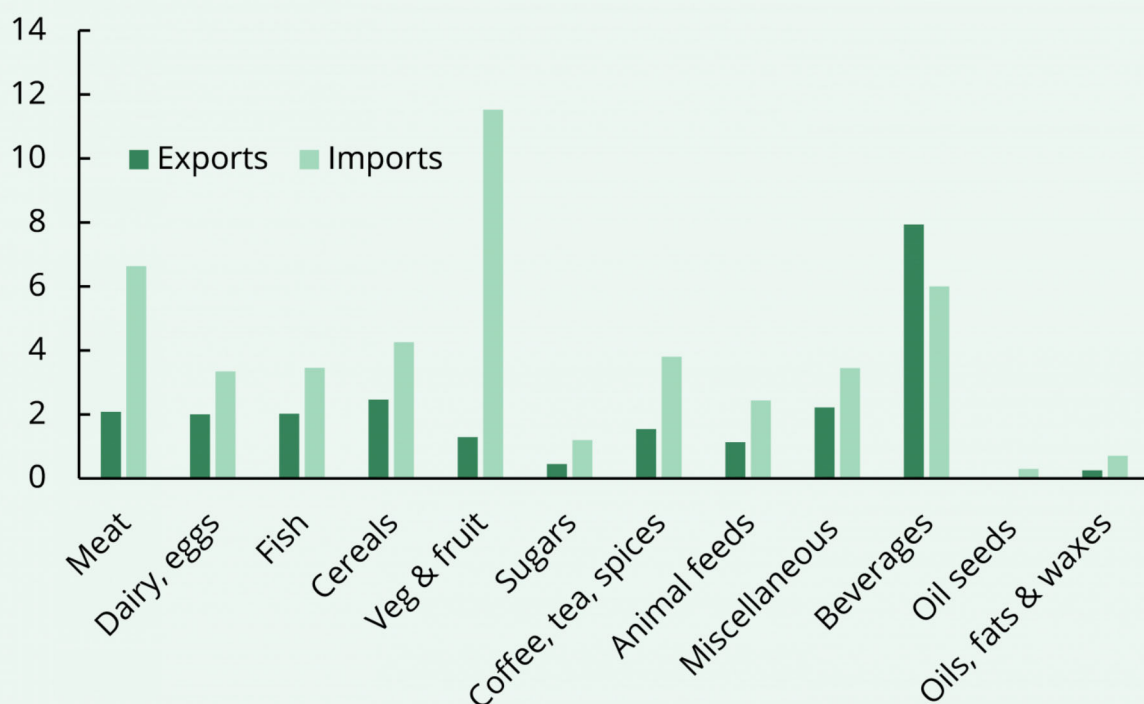
So why are people concerned about food security, and what exactly is it?

What does 'food security' mean?

Food security has many dimensions, as the *Agriculture Bill 2019-20* recognises. It includes practically everything about how people access food; from global availability, to the resilience of the supply chain and household spending.

The term is also often used to mean a country's ability to feed itself. But it is not the same as "self-sufficiency". Self-sufficiency exists when a country can source the goods it needs without having to rely on imports. Government statistics in 2018 showed that the UK is approximately 61% self-sufficient in all foods and 75% in "indigenous type food"; figures show that UK self-sufficiency has been declining for the past 30 years. The UK imports more than it exports for all food categories except beverages, but the balance varies between different food types (see chart below).

UK trade in food, feed and drink, 2019 (£ billions)



Source: HMRC, UK Trade Info

But producing everything domestically does not always increase food security. It is a balancing act: a completely self-sufficient country would be vulnerable to events at home like adverse weather. Equally too much reliance on a few specific imports can leave a country exposed to international disruption.

What threatens UK food security?

In 2017, the government-advising [Committee on Climate Change](#) identified “risks to domestic and international food production and trade” as one of the UK’s top six climate change risks. The [Government’s own risk assessment](#) agreed that “climate change will present significant risks” to the UK food supply, but responded that it “takes a more optimistic view” of the supply resilience achieved through markets and diverse sources of supply. It also argued, for domestic production, that climate change brings opportunities as well as risks.

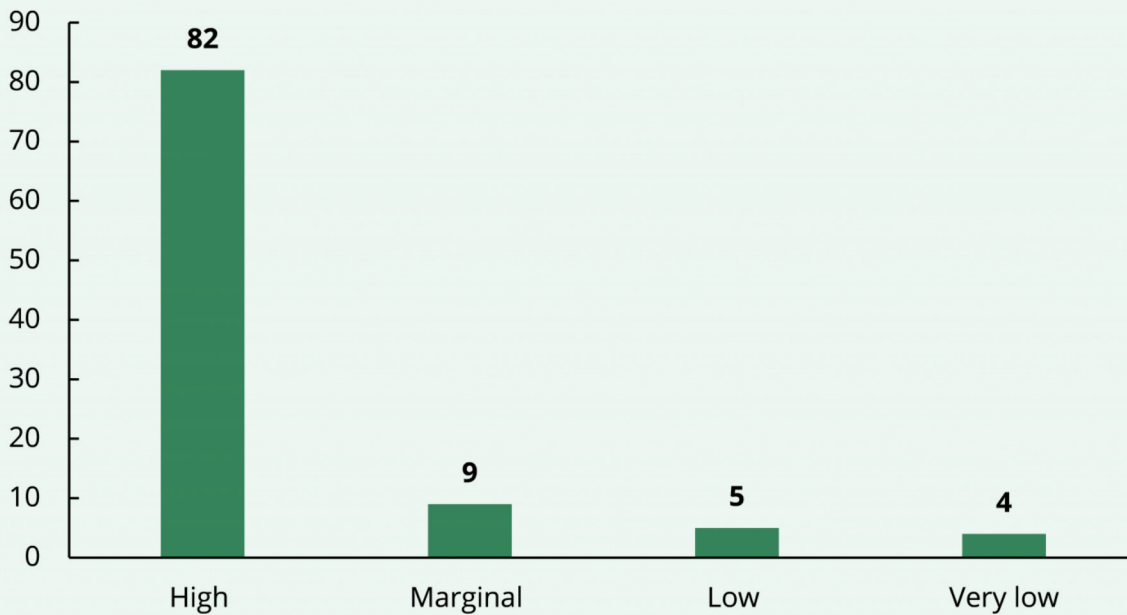
As well as climate change, other risks to food security at the national level include conflicts, economic shocks and agricultural disease.

Some have criticised what they see as a lack of focus on food security in government policy. The House of Lords EU Committee’s 2018 report on [Brexit: food prices and availability](#) called on the Government to produce “a comprehensive food strategy” to ensure food security post-Brexit. The former Environment Secretary Michael Gove [commissioned an independent review](#) to consider the food chain “from farm to fork” and inform a [national food strategy for England](#). The review will be published later in 2020 and the Government will respond with a white paper six months later.

It’s not just about trade

But as the *Agriculture Bill 2019-20* recognises, food security doesn’t just mean supply chains and national challenges. It is also about individual households being able to access and afford the food they need. In 2018 the Food Standards Agency’s [Food & You survey](#) found that 18% of households experience levels of food security that are “marginal” or lower (see chart below; excludes Scotland).

Levels of food security, England, Wales and NI, 2018 (% population)



Source: Food Standards Agency

The FSA also identified different levels of food security between people of different ages, household incomes, working status, and households with and without children. But the Government has stressed that data on food insecurity is limited, and in 2019 it added a new set of food security questions to one of its largest household surveys. And with the new duty to report on food security, there is an opportunity to have a much clearer picture of household food security in the context of the wider challenges.

So what happens next?

The previous *Agriculture Bill*, which was introduced during the 2017-19 Parliament but never became law, was criticised by farmers and Opposition politicians for not focussing enough on food security. As the UK establishes new measures to support farmers outside the EU, decisions will need to be made about the role of food security in this policy.

But it is not just a concern for farmers. Achieving and maintaining food security means considering global pressures like climate change, as well as domestic issues including future trading relationships. What impact will this have on choice and affordability for consumers?

The Government last undertook a full assessment of UK food security a decade ago, and said in 2018 that it aimed to update this by the end of last year. This has not yet appeared, but the *Agriculture Bill 2019-20* would mean an update at least every five

years. Depending on any amendments to the Bill, Parliament will soon be receiving updates on food security. MPs will then be able to judge if we are meeting the challenge.

Further reading

Library briefing paper on the *Agriculture Bill 2019-20* (January 2020)

POSTnote on *Security of UK food supply* (July 2017)

Library briefing paper on *Food Banks in the UK* (February 2020)

This article was updated on 12.02.20 to reflect updated trade data published by HMRC on 11.02.20 to reflect 2019 statistics (see first chart above). It previously showed data for 2018.

About the author: Jonathan Finlay is a Commons Library researcher specialising in agriculture and food.

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