

The precarisation of daily life in Spain: Austerity, social policy and food insecurity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which the 2008 economic crisis has led to a shift in ways of eating among people living in precarious conditions in Spain, and the kinds of strategies they have developed to obtain daily food. Building on a literature review on precarisation in Spain and an analysis of action plans to combat food insecurity, participant-observation ethnography was carried out in Catalonia. Fieldwork was conducted during 2017–2019 in public and private spaces focusing on the food practices of 51 first-time applicants for social assistance. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and direct observation were recorded, transcribed and coded using the ATLAS-ti program to facilitate thematic analysis. Study participants' oral narratives reveal substantial changes in food procurement and eating practices. Strategies include buying different foods, shopping less often and/or in different stores, seeking out cheaper brands, preparing simpler dishes, growing food and recycling leftovers. Their food itineraries reflect increasing reliance on charities, although a common alternative is meals prepared outside the home by family, neighbourhood, activist organisations or themselves. Eating patterns reveal not only experiences of food deprivation and social suffering, but also alternative ways of food procurement. Although food aid is based mainly on an assistance-oriented model, participatory initiatives have the potential to become political spaces that invite us to rethink the distribution of food resources and the limitations of social policies.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the right to food is still not ensured for more than 800 million people in the world ((FAO et al., 2021). The poorest countries on the planet face serious challenges in feeding part of their populations, caused by the growing instability of food prices that are determined by transnational corporations and the rules of international trade, the lack of investment in local farming systems and the destruction of local markets. The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly contributed to the worsening of this situation by reducing income for many people, disrupting the food chain and/or altering the food supply and raising the prices of agricultural commodities. These processes, with very different dimensions and scope, also impact the countries with advanced economies, where food insecurity has not ceased to increase in the last decade, driven by the effects of the global recession and the implementation of neoliberal policies that have put the welfare state in check (Riches & Silvasti, 2014).

In the European context, Spain is one of the countries where the recession has had the greatest impact, driving a dramatic increase in

inequality. During the recession, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) increased by 900,000. In 2020, a total of 12,495,000 people, or 26.4% of the population, were at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion. The figure shows an increase of 1.1% as compared to 2019 and discontinues the downward trend of the previous five years (EAPN, 2021). Temporary workers, the low-skilled and those not born in the EU face one of the highest in-work poverty risks in the EU. Public spending on family benefits, which is half of the EU average, remains poorly targeted at low-income families (European Commission, 2019).

This increasing impoverishment has had consequences in several areas of daily life for the most vulnerable groups (Laparra & Pérez, 2012), particularly in their diet and ways of eating. One of them has been the normalisation of uncertainty in meeting basic needs. Indeed, precarisation refers not only to the deregulation of the labour market and the worsening of employment conditions brought about by neoliberal governments, but also to the consequences of running a country by means of economic, labour and life insecurity (Lorey, 2015; Bauman, 2010). In Spain, this can be clearly seen in the strategies adopted by both

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the people who are facing new sudden difficulties and the institutions dedicated to ensuring the right to food. Studies indicate that the volume of food bought, and the quality of meals consumed have both decreased, and the incidence of specific nutrient deficiencies has risen (Antentas & Vivas, 2014; Medina et al., 2015). Additionally they point out that the administration has addressed the rising social demand for food assistance by increasing, strengthening and institutionalising a broad network of non-profit organisations that usually – though not exclusively– are centred on providing food at no cost. Yet, there is no evidence of their effectiveness in reducing structural food poverty. Unfortunately, there are no studies at the state or regional level that systematically track the extent of food insecurity (Fargas, 2014). The real socioeconomic consequences of precarisation are not well known because, as in other European countries (Borch & Kjaerns 2013), research on people's access to food has for many years been sporadic and fragmented, based on a variety of definitions and methodologies (Díaz-Méndez et al., 2018).

The socio-anthropological literature shows that in all societies, the ways in which food is acquired, shared and consumed are central to economic, social and cultural life (Garth, 2020; Guthman, 2008). Food is not merely a set of nutrients or calories: it is performed by practices and relationships that are central to social reproduction (Sachs & Patel-Campillo, 2014). When purchasing the daily consumed foods becomes more difficult or even impossible, when meals cannot be prepared in the same way as before or when food distribution is done prioritising certain family members at the expense of others, specific forms of food insecurity occur. Exploring shifts in eating habits among people living in precarious conditions as a result of the recession in Spain, this article analyses the strategies they have developed in order to obtain daily food. Particularly, it focuses on the role played by support networks. A notion of food insecurity is used that reflects not only a greater or lesser degree of deprivation but also people's capacity to face and respond to the difficulties arising (Pottier, 1999), as well as the mechanisms that each society establishes (or does not establish) for their care and protection. The results show that food insecurity generates tensions between those who have to feed themselves and/or others and those who determine what kind of assistance will be offered, how and for how long; it brings uncertainty which, in turn, requires recurrent improvisation in the food patterns. People resolve problems of food procurement using various resources that, in some cases, go beyond the institutionalised forms of food assistance provided by charities or social services (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2019). It is discussed whether these resources truly minimise the impact of irregular access to food and whether they transform (or not) their subjective experiences of food deprivation into points of departure for new ways of providing for daily needs. The conclusion points to the need of tackling the process of precarisation and structural inequalities by avoiding those austerity policies that generate and worsen them and ensuring interventions that aim not only to “feed people” but to promote food practices that adequately match their needs and expectations.

2. Materials and methods

The research presented here is part of a broader study entitled ‘The precarisation of everyday life: food (in)security, gender and health’ (CSO2016-74941-P) completed in 2019 and which has found continuity in the current project ‘Eating matters: precarisation and (in)secure food itineraries in later life’ (PID2019-104253RB-C21), both with the support of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. The main objective of this line of studies is to answer the challenges faced by Spanish society and its institutions as they attempt to achieve a fairer, healthier and sustainable food system in a context that, for a decade and a half, has been far from being socioeconomically stable –a context where life's precariousness is having an impact on the increase in social inequality and the worsening of living conditions for the more vulnerable populations. While in previous texts we focused on the debate on the various forms of food insecurity that coexist today, their nature and scope,

Gracia-Arnaiz, Casadó and Campanera, 2021 and on the role of women in coping with material deprivation -particularly in acq household food-Gracia-Arnaiz, Garcia-Oliva & Campanera, 2021, in this article we look at how food aid and other forms of support are being managed. To this end, a variety of complementary sources of information were used. These included bibliographic reviews, documentary sources and ethnographic fieldwork (Fig. 1).

Firstly, we updated an earlier review of the existing literature to compile socio-anthropological studies on this subject, in order to provide a theoretical framework for our research and to discuss its results. Searching the SCOPUS database in order to identify studies published between 2008 and 2017, we examined the relationship between austerity, precarisation and food insecurity with reference to both the international and national context. The studies reviewed focused on the negative consequences of unemployment and cutbacks in salaries and social services as well as analyses social policies that address increasing impoverishment and food insecurity. The studies selected were those published in Spanish and English based on populations in Spain, as well as comparative studies on Europe that include Spain. Search terms included ‘economic crisis’, ‘poverty’, ‘food consumption’, ‘social cutbacks’, ‘food security’ and ‘social policy’. This search yielded 13,680 sources. After applying the inclusion criteria (publication dates, type of publication, language, study location and subjects) a total of 761 publications were identified. From these 761 journal articles and book chapters, 198 were finally selected based on their relevance to the study objectives (Table 1).

Secondly, in order to analyse the food-aid policies we looked at a selection of national, regional and local action plans and specific programs for social assistance and impoverishment deployed by Spanish government bodies and third-sector organisations, focusing on documents published between 2008 and 2017. These included publications from the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, FEAD (the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived 2014–2020), the Spanish Federation of Food Banks (FESBAL), the Red Cross, and Caritas. These sources also included reports on Social Exclusion and Development in Spain (FOESSA) and European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN). Of the 37 documents initially selected, a total of 25 met the requirements for inclusion (Table 2). At the same time, other sources used in order to better understand changes in the living conditions of Spain's population during this period included the Spanish Living Conditions Survey (ECV) and Labour Force Survey (EPA). Given the breadth and diversity of the statistical sources, only the survey items of interest for the phenomenon under study were analysed. This was the case, for example, for the unemployment rate, the general index of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion, the socio-demographic profile of the population participating in food assistance programs and the amount of food distributed by food banks, among others.

These documentary sources were analysed as cultural texts themselves. As we previously showed when studying the socio-economic dimensions of obesity (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2017: 66), this kind of documents are important in their own right because they are key pieces in the implementation of social policies (Campbell, 2011), are guides that set out how the problem of food insecurity is to be tackled and allow for longitudinal and comparative analysis from international and national actions. We approached them not only to conduct an evaluation of public social policy as such but also to examine predominant discourses (Kleinman, 1995), that is, those authoritative and influential narratives that construct what we take to be “reality”. In short, they diagnose the causes of precarisation and propose solutions.

Third, in order to establish the itineraries followed to obtain food, identify available resources and assess the role of social networks, ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in the region of Catalonia, over a period of eighteen months between 2016 and 2019. Specifically, the study was conducted in the cities of Reus, Tarragona and Barcelona. We understand that changes in the ways of living and eating take place within complex and dynamic processes, and that ethnography, thanks to

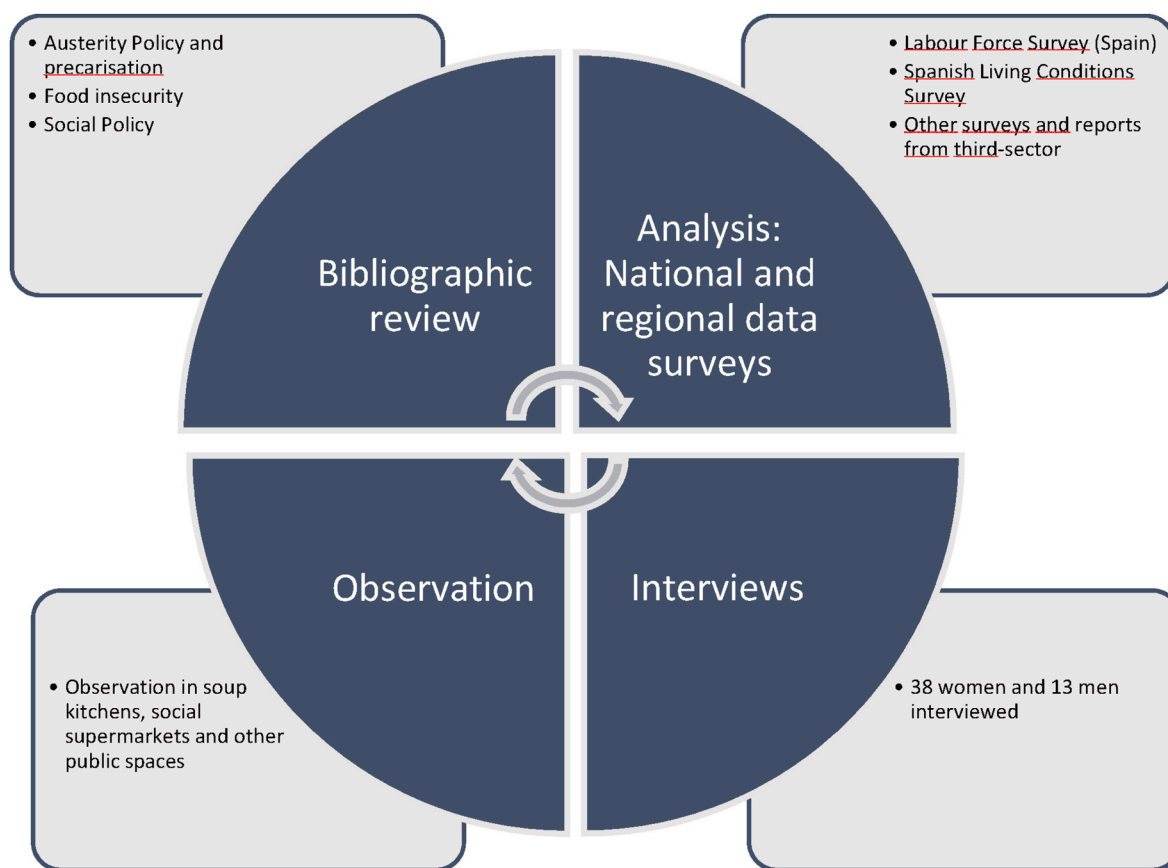


Fig. 1. Methodology and sources of information.

Table 1

Flow of search.

Database search results (n = 13,680)	
Records identified after database search (n = 13,680)	12,919 records excluded, reasons: - Not published between 2008 and 2017. - Not published in either English or Spanish. - No European-based studies, or European not compared to or based in Spain. - Subject area selected: social sciences, art and humanities, economics, medicine, psychology, nursing, management, and multidisciplinary.
Records screened by title and abstract (n = 761)	563 records excluded, reasons: - Socioeconomic or health consequences of crisis not analysed. - Non-comparable studies. - Abstract not available for evaluation.
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility and appropriateness (198)	
Studies included (198)	

Table 2

Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Documents: • Social inclusion plans • Food distribution and aid measures • Consensus papers against poverty • Indicators and data on precarity • Third sector monitoring and evaluation reports • Studies based in Spain and in comparison with European studies	Documents: • Programs or actions aimed only at social and health professionals or other specific stakeholders. • Econometric studies on the crisis and austerity measures • Research projects • Promotional or informational materials

its capacity to observe and participate simultaneously in different contexts, provides an excellent method to reconstruct the conditioning factors that guide the food practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Members of the research team worked in a variety of different contexts – soup kitchens, food banks, social supermarkets and public spaces – using direct observation and in-depth interviews. Both are complementary analysis techniques that not only account for what individuals say or express, but also for what they do. In this sense, they are very useful tools for fact checking. While direct observation made it possible to describe and learn about the ways of obtaining food and participating in daily life, the in-depth interviews provided information on attitudes and perceptions on precariousness, changes and/or continuities in the ways of eating, as well as on support networks and social assistance programmes.

Since it is necessary to address specific challenges in which many social actors are involved, the study incorporated a relational dimension with the objective of including those stakeholders -social workers, volunteers, health professionals and activists-who had direct contact with people living in precarious situation through specific programmes, or those who were responsible for the design and implementation of public policies in the areas of food, health and social assistance. However, this article focuses mainly on people whose life conditions have worsened since the beginning of the financial crisis. The selection of informants included 51 individuals –38 women and 13 men-who were approached through neighbourhood associations, humanitarian organisations and municipal social services. Specifications for selection criteria of informants included people living in precarious conditions who were responsible for feeding themselves and/or family members, and who had applied for food assistance and/or social services. All fifty one participants were adults living alone, with other family members or in shared flats. Most were unemployed. Those who had jobs were employed in poorly paid positions or worked in the informal economy.

Although they did not receive direct aid, five pensioners were also included if they had economic responsibilities for family members, most often adult children and grandchildren (Table 3). Observations and interviews lasted an average of 85 min and were conducted mainly in homes, soup kitchens and on the street. Participants were briefed on the objectives and techniques of analysis required by the project, and informed consent was obtained prior to starting the activities.

A narrative approach, focusing on relationships between individual experience, cultural context and the construction of meanings (Garro & Mattingly, 2000), was used in in-depth interviews to analyse experiences of food deprivation in order to shed light on how people with limited resources navigate the continuum between food security and insecurity (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2017; Gracia-Arnaiz, Garcia-Oliva & Campanera, 2021). Literal transcriptions of interviews were digitalised using the ATLAS.ti 7 computer program, a process of data analysis consisting of reading transcripts, identifying possible topics, comparing and contrasting themes. Coding protocol was created through a shared agreement among the researchers. We compared those concepts that were present in all in deep-interviews and those which we not, we discussed which ones pointed to important issues relating to food privation and ways to address it. Fifty three different concepts or labels were recorded and grouped into families or networks of codes on the basis of related meanings among them. This grouping allowed us to establish the final five categories on which that analysis is based: precarisation, food access, practices and consumption strategies, welfare benefits and institutional support, social networking and health status. In this article we particularly focus on precarisation, food strategies and support networks.

3. Results

3.1. Crisis, austerity and precarisation

Documentary and statistical sources show that the successive crises have led to a turning point in Spain. Since the financial meltdown in 2008, living conditions in Spain have changed significantly. The burst of the real estate bubble, the financial downturn and the increase in unemployment made the living conditions of the middle and lower classes more precarious. The average income of Spanish households fell from 27,700 Euros in early 2008 to 22,700 Euros in 2014 (a decline of 18 percent), while wealth fell from 190,400 Euros to 119,400 Euros in 2014 (a decline of 37 percent). Meanwhile, average income fell from 36,100 to 30,400 Euros in this period (−15.8 percent). The government responded to the initial effects of crisis by focusing its efforts on bank bailouts, liberalising labour regulations, reducing health spending and increasing direct and indirect taxes (Navarro, 2015). At the same time, it took regressive action that affected social rights, restricting family allowances, the ‘Renta Básica de Emancipación’ (which helped young people with accommodation costs) and support for dependents, freezing retirement pensions and cutting school lunch subsidies (Mateos & Penadés, 2013).

The recession left more than 5 million unemployed, a figure that only

Table 3
Profile of persons interviewed.

Age	Family structure	Social aid	Number
18–29	Alone or shared flat Nuclear family Nuclear family with children	Yes	10 (6 women, 4 men)
30–49	Alone or shared flat Nuclear family Nuclear family with children Single-parent family	Yes	23 (19 women, 4 men)
50–64	Nuclear family with children Single-parent family	Yes	11 (8 women, 3 men)
+65	With family responsibilities	No	7 (5 women, 2 men)

slightly recovered during the very short-lived post-crisis period. Although from 2015 to 2019 certain macro-economic indicators improved in Spain, leading to a so-called post-crisis stage (Prada-Trigo, 2018), in 2020 there are still over 3 million persons unemployed without yet taking into consideration the political, social, economic and health impacts to come from the COVID-19 pandemic. The recession affected the entire population, but the poor were far worse hit than the rich, with the lower classes being the worst impacted by the negative effects of these policies. Between 2008 and 2015 there was a significant increase in the gap between high-income and low-income citizens. Thus, in 2015 the income of 20% of the Spanish population with highest earnings was almost 7 times higher than that of the 20% with the lowest income, a gap that has only been widening since then (Martínez-Martín et al., 2018).

Additionally, the quality of jobs available has deteriorated, with more temporary contracts and lower wages which do not allow many workers to lift themselves out of poverty (Fernández, 2017). According to Martínez-Martín et al. (2018), most of our lives are built around work, and social insertion is hardly conceivable without labour insertion. The main economic function of work -obtaining a wage to acquire necessary goods and services- is not fulfilled in the case of the working poor, whose income falls below the poverty line. The number of working people at risk of poverty in Spain has risen from 10.9% in 2010 to 12.7% in 2019, an increase of 16% −4 percentage points above the EU average. In fact, Spain is currently the EU country with the highest rate of temporary employees, almost twice as high as the European average of 14.2%. Specifically, 24.2% of employees are not employed indefinitely, according to Eurostat data for 2020. Spain is not only the country with the greatest load of temporary work in the European context, but also the majority of temporary contracts signed are of high turnover and short duration (BBVA, 2019). According to the latest figures, one in four contracts signed in May 2021 had a duration of less than one week.

Prekarisation translates into worsening living and working conditions and increasing inequality. As we have already stated in previous studies Gracia-Arnaiz (2017) and Gracia-Arnaiz, Garcia-Oliva, & Campanera (2021), precarisation is a more open conceptual field than the scope afforded to the terms “precarious” or “precarity” by 1980s social science literature, with regard to the difficulties caused mainly by the flexibilisation of the labour market and the worsening of employment conditions. This is a ubiquitous and multidimensional process that affects all sectors. Lorey (2015) proposes the term “governmental precarisation” pointing out that in neoliberal governments, where precarisation is undergoing a process of normalisation, it is precisely through insecurity that they rule, whether that is economic, occupational, social or general life insecurity. Ultimately it points to the idea of social fragilisation, and is on a continuum between integration and exclusion. As a consequence of austerity policies and precariousness, (Lorey, 2015), both poverty and income inequality are among the highest in the European Union (European Commission, 2017). According to the AROPE index,¹ the proportion of Spain’s population at risk of social exclusion increased from 23.3% in 2007 to 29.2% in 2014, reaching nearly 13 million people (Llanos Ortiz, 2017), many of whom depend on social assistance for basic needs (Caritas Europa, 2015). Fuel poverty has increased dramatically during the crisis period, affecting more than 4.5 million people (BOE 2017).² All actions taken until 2020 have been insufficient to reverse these trends. Even the social shield measures approved by the government in the face of the current health emergency, which meant implementing an income maintenance policy, have not been enough to keep the effects of the health crisis from being as severe as those recorded during the great recession.

One of the most notable impacts of the increasing insecurity is apparent in the difficulties that people have in meeting their basic needs,

¹ AROPE is an indicator developed by the European Union, and refers to the percentage of the population that is at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion.

² <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2017/10/07/pdfs/BOE-A-2017-11505.pdf>.

as is demonstrated by the indicators in the Survey of Living Conditions (ECV). The most noteworthy data from the 2020 ECV is the enormous increase in Severe Material Deprivation, which rose from 4.7% to 7% within a single year, which means that there are 3.3 million people in Spain who cannot afford four or more of a total of nine items considered basic in the European territory. The two items of material deprivation in which the greatest increase is observed are the inability to maintain their homes at an adequate temperature, which rose 2 points (from 8.5% in 2019 to 10.6 in 2020) and delays in the payment of charges related to the main home (mortgage or rent, gas bills, community fees), which rose from 10.6% to 15.9%. There was also an increase in the percentage of people who find it very difficult to make ends meet, from 7.8% to 10% of the population, i.e. 4.7 million people. The AROPE index rose from 25.3% to 26.4% (EANP, 2021: 4). The European authorities warned Spain that it must improve on fairness, and are calling for urgent economic, fiscal, and social policies to reduce the high inequality in income and opportunities, while, contradictorily, reminding it of the need to make tax adjustments in the face of a considerable increase in public debt brought about by the response to the coronavirus. This means that in the coming years adjustments will once again have to be made by applying austerity policies either on the revenue side (by raising taxes) or on the expenditure side (by increasing cuts).

3.2. Social assistance and food insecurity

Precarisation has had multiple consequences on the ways of life of the worst impacted groups and, consequently, on their ways of eating. Not infrequently, the existing food safety nets have been challenged. According to documentary sources, a coalition of civil society organisations and research groups³ submitted a report to the United Nations in 2014, questioning whether Spain was meeting its obligation to devote the maximum available resources to fulfilling social rights and ensuring the protection of groups at risk and exclusion, thus mitigating the impacts of the financial crisis. This coalition recommended, among other things, that the state refrain from promoting legislative or public policy measures that imperil human rights, in particular the right of the entire population to adequate food. Unfortunately, we do not have accurate diagnoses of the scope and dimension of food deprivation because there is no widespread agreement on its existence or nature. With the exception of some local studies, there are no surveys focusing specifically on food insecurity in Spain, and much of the available data comes from statistical sources on living conditions, food purchased and nutrient intake. The diversity of research designs and data collection methods makes it difficult to evaluate and compare them (Del Pozo et al., 2015). Nevertheless, certain items from these surveys and other secondary sources point to the rising problem of food access. One of the most significant impacts of this growing precariousness is the difficulties people face when trying to meet basic needs. According to the Survey of Living Conditions (INE, 2020), 5.4% of Spanish households cannot afford to eat meat, chicken or fish at least every other day. This is twice as many as those who were experiencing this scarcity 5 years ago, in 2015 (2.6%) (Fig. 2). Similarly, the latest Promotion of Social Studies and Applied Sociology report (Valls & Belzunegui, 2014) indicates that 16% of Spaniards consume a nutritionally poor diet due to loss of income.

Some authors point to decline in purchasing power as the primary explanation for the changes in consumption of certain foods, especially increasing recourse to those that are cheaper and less healthy (Medina et al., 2015). Usually, these trends are based on annual figures provided by Food Consumption Panel of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Food and Environment, which reveal changes in the purchasing patterns of some food groups. According to Antentas & Vivas (2014), a

comparison between 2008 and 2012 confirms a downward trend in household food consumption, with the sharpest fall registered for meat and fish. By contrast, purchase of fruit and vegetables has barely changed. A report by the Office of the Catalan Ombudsman (Síndic de Greuges, 2013) interprets difficulty in consuming meat or fish at least every other day as a sign of food deprivation resulting in an increase in child malnutrition.

In Spain, most of the available data relating to food insecurity at the municipal level are provided by third-sector organisations. A study carried out by the Creu Roja de Catalunya (2015) among beneficiaries of aid programmes, showed that in this population 60.6% of families with children consume a nutritionally poor diet and experience levels of food insecurity ranging from mild (29.5%) to moderate (40.7%) to severe (21.7%). Non-governmental organisation reports have highlighted an upward trend in the number of first-time applicants for food assistance (Caritas Europa, 2015), and it is estimated that more than two million people in Spain are dependent on public and/or private social assistance programmes in order to eat. Among people living in precarious conditions, 22.4% have had recourse to family members or friends for access to food or other basic goods, and 14.7% have approached private or religious organisations for assistance (Llanos Ortiz, 2017). Among these, between 2007 and 2015, Cáritas Barcelona spent more than 2 million euros a year on food aid, a fivefold increase from before the crisis. According to Caritas, at the beginning of 2021, 45% of the families seeking aid were unable to eat adequately due to financial problems, which had an impact on their health and well-being (Cáritas, 2016).

In the face of increasing social demand, various government bodies have expanded or instituted a variety of emergency programmes including transfer payments of various kinds, food services, and distribution of food products. These forms of assistance are managed by a complex network of non-profit organisations. In Barcelona alone there are 234 such organisations (Fargas, 2014). These policy responses are frequent in contexts where food overproduction and surpluses are common (Gascón & Montagut, 2015). The European Union's Food Aid Plan (FEAD), co-financed by EU and Spanish government funds, is the programme that currently provides the most extensive assistance "to palliate food deprivation" in Spain ((Fondo Español de Garantía Agraria, 2017). Between 2008 and 2012 the number of beneficiaries of this programme rose by 217%. In 2015, 115 million kilograms/litres of food were purchased through this plan, including rice, children's cereals, powdered milk, chickpeas, beans, UHT whole milk, olive oil, canned tuna, spaghetti and dehydrated cream of vegetables. While the government bought 63 million kilograms/litres of food in 2010, this figure had almost doubled by 2015 (Pérez de Armiño, 2018). These measures are accompanied by a programme for the collection of fruits and vegetables withdrawn from the market for distribution free of charge.

Government has addressed the problem of food assistance by strengthening and institutionalising the role of third-sector organisations. Supranational institutions such as food banks, the Red Cross and Caritas store and distribute surplus basic commodities from the agribusiness sector and from private donations (producers, companies, large-scale wholesalers) in collaboration with local authorities. Distribution of food purchased through FEAD is controlled by the Spanish Federation of Food Banks (FESBAL) and the Red Cross. FESBAL, with 56 partners, has been the main non-profit volunteer organisation distributing foodstuffs since 1996. According to data provided by FESBAL (2016), in 2015 this federation distributed 152.9 million kilograms of food to 8488 charities, which reached more than one and a half million beneficiaries – nearly twice as many people as in 2007-, being the same aid recipients after the Covid-19 pandemic (FESBAL⁴). The Red Cross, together with Caritas, and in cooperation with local administrations, has also developed other programmes such as coupons/vouchers for the

³ Information available at: <http://observatoridesc.org/es/informe-vulneracion-del-derecho-alimentacion-espana-ante-naciones-unidas>.

⁴ <https://www.fesbal.org.es/post/noatum-y-sus-empleados-colaboran-con-los-bancos-de-alimentos>.

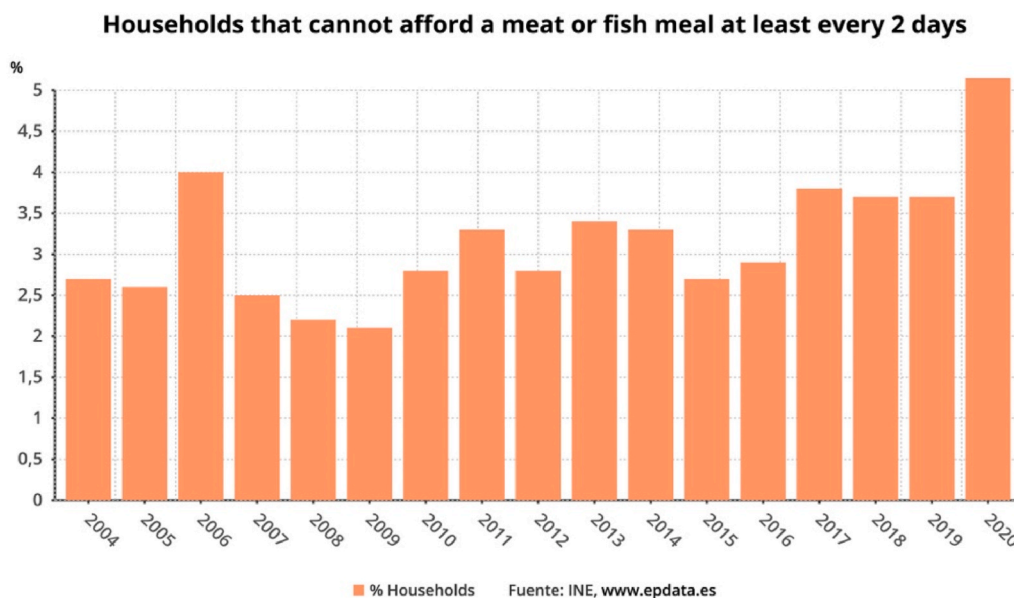


Fig. 2. Households that cannot afford a meat or fish meal at least every 2 days.

purchase of food, as well as social canteens and supermarkets. An example of these devices are the wallet cards that allow the purchase of food in supermarkets and shops without giving away the purchaser's status and thus avoiding their stigmatisation: *"to dignify food aid, to ensure that people who have become impoverished can continue to shop in the stores where they normally do and that they themselves decide what food they need so that their diet is balanced, sufficient and adapted to their needs"*.⁵ This is a resource which, while not available in all municipalities, is highly valued by the beneficiaries because it allows them to diversify their purchases and to better reproduce their pre-crisis food pattern.

Apart from these institutions' ability to bring food from agricultural surpluses and private donations within the reach of the poorest people, other initiatives aimed at decreasing food deprivation have emerged since the economic crisis began in 2008, particularly since the Spanish government's 'More food, less waste' programme began incentivising donations to charities. These include, among others, Alimentos Solidarios [Solidarity Foods], Muévete contra el Hambre y la Pobreza [Take Action Against Hunger and Poverty], Ningún Niño sin Bigote [No Child without a Moustache], Restaurantes contra el Hambre [Restaurants Against Hunger] and BCN Comparte la Comida [Barcelona Shares Food]. Some of these projects were backed by local authorities and non-profit entities after the consequences of drastic cuts in social benefits became apparent, but others, such as community gardens, the distribution of food in public spaces or solidarity soup kitchens, are the result of the growing mobilisation of civil society, which is supporting people whose needs are not met by charitable institutions. The impact of such interventions is unknown. A recent analysis of current food resources carried out by the Barcelona city government (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017) reveals, nevertheless, a fragmented map of aid recipients and services provided.

3.3. Food strategies: changing patterns, interlocutors and contexts

A new profile for applicants for aid has recently appeared, consisting of lower-middle-class families whose daily life has been undermined by loss of income that jeopardises access to subsistence resources. These people are quite heterogeneous in terms of situations and needs, and their food itineraries, understood as trajectories and social practices to

resolve everyday food needs, reflect this diversity. People who have experienced rapid declines in income have seen their purchasing power severely reduced, and they try to cut expenses in all areas, including food costs. The unavoidable – although flexible – need to eat in order to survive means that all possible solutions are considered.

Oral narratives and observation reveal substantial changes in eating practices. These include changes in locations for purchase; changes in the types and frequency of the products purchased and the brands chosen, with the cheapest sought out in order to reduce spending; fewer meals consumed in restaurants and bars; and changes in the ways meals are prepared, avoiding dishes that require elaborate preparation and taking care to minimise waste, recycling any leftovers into future meals. There is also a change in the way of thinking about food, which is understood as a scarce good that must be protected: "You have to adapt, see how it's going. First your wages go down, then you have unemployment benefit, but that's only for a limited time ... With less money, you shop less. You make food last longer because you don't know how long you're going to have to live like that - you start to attach much more value to it" (man, 29 years old). As one study participant explained: "The first thing you do is eliminate any spur-of-the-moment purchases. You buy the cheapest food possible, and you don't throw anything away, not even foods past their sell-by date" (woman, 42 years old). Even commensality, the human trend to eat in group (Fischler, 2011), is frequently altered by the increase of individual meals: "You give up celebrations -no birthdays, no restaurants, with any luck a €6 cake from the cheapest supermarket for my son's birthday ... (woman 36, years old)".

In many cases this occurs at the same time as the emergence or expansion of the social support networks which are essential for understanding why food deprivation has not resulted in widespread hunger. Food aid is incorporated into the diverse set of strategies that people follow in order to be able to feed themselves. Transformations in food supply and places of food consumption are the best evidence of the tensions caused by the difficulties that people face. The process of acquiring food is time-consuming and it is also a source of stress and anxiety caused by the loss of independency and ability to shop for oneself. The lack of sufficient income makes them aware of their precarious situation and afraid of having to depend on others: "It is one thing not being able to go on holiday or to the pub, but you learn to live with it somehow. Quite another is not having anything to eat, that's tough ... You think about who can help you out, and just hope that it won't be for long" (man, 29 years old). Frequently, these people talk

⁵ <http://www.caritasbcn.org/node/3598>.

about what they will eat that week, whether they will be able to make ends meet and have enough money to feed the family. This usually alerts the people with whom they regularly interact. When there is a stable network of social relations, they facilitate access to resources, leading to a broad range of benefits including improved food security for both the individual and the family.

Indeed, relatives, friends and even neighbours with whom they have a relationship of trust are usually the first to become aware of the extent of the difficulties experienced, and to offer support. This type of support often comes in the form of food: “My sister told me that she couldn’t give me any money, but that I would always have a place at her table, and that’s how it was until I found a job again. I didn’t want to become too much of a burden, so I alternated between my two sisters. They went out of their way to help me and, to spare me from having to go from one place to the other, they went to the supermarket with me and paid for my weekly food supplies ... They were always trying to reassure me and sooth my worries by saying that there’s always room for one more at the table” (man, 49 years old).

Another possible recourse is to seek support from parents. Many senior citizens provide meals for their adult children and their grandchildren; they cook food their children obtain from donations, but above all, they use what they can buy with their pensions: “I used to complain because my pension was less than 800 euros, but now it pays for all of us to eat – the two of us, and my children and grandchildren” (woman, 72 years old). Going to their parents’ home “avoids the embarrassment of having to ask for food in other places, I prefer it a thousand times to a soup kitchen” (woman, 41 years old). But this choice is not only about shame. They reported that it is more convenient and personally more comforting. In addition to not being subject to inflexible schedules, they are able to eat familiar dishes that are also usually in line with their tastes and limited budgets: “My mother always asks me ... but her kitchen isn’t a restaurant, so we adapt to her budget. The thing is, we all eat hot food together with the people we love” (woman, 41 years old). For those who take their adult children in for meals at home, doing that is a way of caring for them: “I know it’s hard for them to make ends meet, of course I do. My son has been out of work for many months and my daughter-in-law earns very little doing odd jobs as a cleaner. They eat with us every weekend so they can spend less. Then I prepare containers for them with lentil soup or meat stew. If I have found discount meat or fish in the shops, I also put it in their takeaway bag so they have enough food for the week” (woman, 65 years old).

However, these networks are not easily built, as they are the result of long-standing interaction, exchange and solidarity. When the network is unstable, support is more sporadic or erratic: “I am virtually on my own. I used to take care of an older woman, but her daughter has lost her job and says she can’t go on paying me. I have no right to unemployment benefit, no income ... My neighbour, who knows how hard up I am, sends me food from time to time. If she makes a soup, she gives me a bowl, if it’s a potato omelette, a good slice. But she doesn’t have much to spare either ...” (woman, 45 years old). The sporadic nature and the fragility of support, being embarrassed to tell anybody about their hardships, or realising that they do not eat a single proper meal a day are often the main reasons that lead people to seek help from social assistance: “You realise that you can’t go on like this, you don’t get to eat a single decent meal. One day you eat what your neighbour gives you, and another day you eat because a friend has you over for a meal ... but your fridge is still empty” (woman, 51 years old). Precariousness changes the meaning of what is sufficient, appropriate or adequate. The times of greatest tension occur during the waiting time between the consultation with social services and the response to the application for assistance. This is what happened to a single mother who had a young child, a mortgaged house and a foreclosure warning from the bank due to non-payments: “You become desperate when you don’t hear from social services because it is a matter of utmost urgency to you. I went to the Red Cross and I was lucky, they helped me out not only with food parcels, but also with my car’s MOT. I attended a job-hunting workshop and

eventually found a job, but I was in bad shape for almost two years” (woman, 45 years old).

3.4. *Eating in, eating out: managing food assistance*

People resolve problems of food procurement using various resources that, in some cases, involves resorting to institutionalised forms of food assistance provided by charities or social services. While feelings of helplessness and shame in the face of day-to-day pressures are repeatedly mentioned by the study participants, they also say that they consider themselves lucky to have found support from different organisations (city council, parish, soup kitchen) and people (social workers, volunteers): “At first you don’t know which door to knock on, but once you’ve left your embarrassment behind, you find out about what’s available and you start to ask around” (woman, 45 years old). None of them had ever imagined themselves in this situation; none of the mothers thought they would ever have to skip one or two meals a day or eat less to ensure that their children had enough to eat: “My children eat first, then my husband and I’m last. If I’m hungry I eat more bread ... and I drink more water. It swells up in your stomach and takes your mind off it” (woman, 39 years old). Loss of predictable income and the need to keep up with utility bills and rent or mortgage payments lead them to improvise in many areas, including food: “I went to look where I thought they could help me. I remember asking my son’s teacher. Next day, she gave me a bag full of food. The meals that I prepare depend on the foods I get. A social worker evaluated my situation, and I can have regular assistance” (woman, 37 years old).

People diversify their strategies, not only seeking food to take home, but also eating whenever and wherever possible. The limited food in the larders of those receiving food aid is striking compared to the number of times that some people leave their homes to eat. In these cases, people use strategies that differ markedly; from eating outside the home while at work or during leisure time, to making use of resources that free them from the need to use their kitchens, which in some cases cannot be used due to a lack of power.

As we pointed out in a previous study (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2019), the groups that have established the most complex itineraries are families with children in their care. More than half of the study participants reported that they eat less at home since their living conditions became insecure, and they do not cook a great deal. Those responsible for providing meals, usually women, said that the non-perishable food that charities give them does not meet their needs: “I am very grateful for the help received, but it’s not enough. If we want to eat well, we would need more meat and fruit. When I have money, I buy them” (woman, 42 years old). They usually receive pasta and rice, milk and canned tuna, but fresh foods requiring refrigeration such as fruit, vegetables, eggs and meat are very scarce, although they are gradually being added to the stocks of food banks and charities. The same is reported regarding the availability of food which, in some neighbourhoods, can be purchased in solidarity supermarkets. When this type of benefit exists, the purchase is determined by the coupons/vouchers that each individual or family receives, which are allocated by the social services on a temporary basis according to the income and make-up of the household: “We have 200 coupons a month and, for example, 1 L of oil costs 15 coupons and a bag of chickpeas costs 3 coupons. There is no way the 4 of us can eat for a whole month on that. Plus, it’s just an allowance that you have right now but you don’t know how long it will last, whether 3 or 6 months, or even less” (woman, 36 years old). In addition, their choice is limited to the products available in the shop. At the beginning of the crisis, beneficiaries could spend these vouchers by purchasing the items they wanted in the desired quantity, but now they are required to diversify their purchases. Some of these agencies have also expanded their offerings by receiving donations from the food chain’s waste-channelling system, and the recovery of foodstuffs before they are thrown away has meant that the surplus from restaurants and catering services is put into circulation. The solidarity supermarkets, and therefore their users, receive

surplus items from 4- and 5-star hotels. Some supermarkets, the larger ones, carry more than two hundred different products, and alongside the shelves with rice, pasta and pulses, there are freezers with appetising fish or meat stews, all of which have been carefully packaged and labelled to ensure traceability. This food policy is seen as a means of “dignifying” poverty: “Here we are told that we also have the right to eat tasty, well-cooked food” (woman, 58 years old). However, the aim of these fortnightly or monthly benefits is not to cover all food needs, but to be a supplement to other benefits or own resources that the beneficiaries may have.

Study participants who eat outside the home do so for different reasons and in different ways. One possibility involves eating in other ‘homes’. Some people without access to energy in their home (the ‘energy poor’) have access to flats managed by charities or provided by municipal councils so that they can cook and even eat there. These have a pantry stocked with non-perishable foods such as pasta and rice, and users bring perishable foods which they have purchased either with cash or with supermarket vouchers, or obtained from charities. They are allocated 3 h per week, and usually prepare simple dishes, thereby optimising the limited time available. They cook as quickly as possible, and several dishes at once: for example, pasta with meat and white rice with tomato sauce and a fried egg.

When there are children in the household, instead of returning home for the midday meal, they eat in the school canteen if their school lunch is fully or partially subsidised - another meal consumed outside the home. Some children also have breakfast and their mid-morning snack at school. This aid programme for families with limited resources is provided by the parents’ associations of schools in working-class neighbourhoods. The parents appreciate this because, as one 31-year-old woman put it, “At least my children have a good meal once a day.”

Going to a soup kitchen is another common way of eating, although it was not available to all informants. Although they have multiplied in many Spanish cities since 2009 (Pérez de Armiño, 2018), access to a soup kitchen is usually a result of a referral from social services. Some informants considered them to be one option among many possibilities: “Here I get only some meals; the place is closed at night and on weekends” (man, 52 years old). They usually provide one daily meal, either breakfast or lunch. Some parish churches, municipal services, and civil society organisations also deliver cooked food to be consumed at home, providing the main meal of the day for users who live in a hostel room or shared apartment, in most cases elderly couples or single people. If there is any spare food, the cooks in the soup kitchens pack the leftovers into containers that their users can take home. A young mother, living with her husband and two daughters in a hostel room provided by social services, reports: “The cooks in the canteen also pack dinners for the four of us to eat in the hostel room, warming them up in a microwave oven that sits in the hallway. It’s not very convenient, but that’s all we’ve got” (woman, 31 years old).

Hired staff and volunteers prepare lunch almost entirely with products from food bank donations and private donations. This dependence on donations determines the kind of food that can be cooked each day: “If they happen to receive 100 or 200 kilos of courgettes, that week we eat them in every possible way. As a cream soup, in an omelette, fried in batter ...”. (man, 63 years old). In addition to maintaining the three-course structure of the meal (starter, main course and dessert), they attempt to prepare dishes that replicate culturally accepted recipes, for example, noodle casserole, paella or Spanish omelette. This does not necessarily mean that the expectations and wishes of the diners are met. Emotions of gratitude are mixed with feelings of loss of autonomy over food choices and satisfaction of tastes: “You eat whatever they put on your plate regardless of preferences and appetite, but at least I eat a warm meal every day” (man, 29 years old). In fact, beneficiaries have little (or no) choice in deciding “what”, “how much”, “where”, “when” or “with whom” to eat. Another factor that makes it hard for them to benefit from these services is the lack of flexible hours, particularly for those who have jobs: “It is only open at lunchtime and I would have to

take an extra break to go there. I eat there more often when I don’t have a job or when I can go outside of my working hours. (man, 52 years old).

Eating in or getting food from all these facilities provided by social services is compatible with consuming food collected in grocery stores, or obtained from neighbourhood food collection points operated by civic groups. Some of the people who regularly use these informal spaces and food sources did not have a permanent address before the crisis, but now they are increasingly frequented by people waiting for a decision on their aid application. In general, asking for food from shops or collecting food distributed in public spaces is seen as one of many opportunities to increase their scarce resources: “When the soup kitchens are closed, I ask for food in bakeries or restaurants” (man, 52 years old). People knew the days, places and times for the distribution food, often at night and first thing in the morning. Some said they take advantage of collective meals held in public spaces, but because of their sporadic nature no one considers them a regular source of food. In Barcelona, a guide has been published to inform about the location of these facilities, with maps, opening hours and types of services provided⁶. In these facilities, omelette, cheese or ham sandwiches, some fruit, warm soups or white coffee and pastries are normally handed out.

Soup kitchens and food banks self-managed by residents of the city’s most deprived neighbourhoods constitute an additional resource, although these small-scale initiatives can be difficult to sustain because they depend on volunteer labour and an irregular supply of resources, and are sometimes closed down by the authorities because they lack the requisite permissions. Their structure is group-based, and they meet weekly to arrange collections from shops, transport, distribution and cooking. In the soup kitchen of one cooperative, “many food items come from neighbours or local shops and the cooks are pensioners, unemployed people or neighbours” (man, 49 years old). In working-class urban districts, neighbourhood associations and other local organisations have encouraged the use of community gardens, which in some cases have also been promoted by the city government as tools for community development, education and social transformation. In these collaborative projects, people living in precarious conditions participate actively, generating resources in their own communities, learning to grow food organically or rescuing and reusing food that is not considered edible: “the vegetables collected are for our own consumption, but also for the neighbourhood social soup kitchen and charities. I attended a recycling workshop and I learnt to reduce waste and prepare meals with leftovers. No throwing away wilted lettuce leaves; they have vitamins, and you can use them to prepare delicious croquettes” (woman, 37 years old).

The study participants, especially younger and single people, also explained that they visited neighbourhood bars, pastry shops, supermarkets, grocery stores, bakeries, and cafeterias to collect any leftover food items, unsold bread, tapas, and cooked dishes from the set-price daily menu, as well as food in damaged packaging. “In my neighbourhood supermarket they told me that nothing gets thrown away there, and they let me take food from a box with items that probably had damaged packaging” (woman, 38 years old). Encouraged by local policies against food waste, these businesses put leftover food in bags, plastic containers or cardboard boxes. At other times, when the practice is systematic, the informants bring their own receptacles. In general, people choose to eat this food in the street, “depending on how hungry I am or what the weather is like” (man, 52 years old). Sometimes they take it home to cook and/or share it with others, or simply consume it at another time of day. Some study participants, usually the youngest ones, also help to organise ‘soup discos’ in public spaces: culinary events that recycle unused vegetables from food producers, markets and restaurants in a huge soup distributed free of charge in order to dramatize the reduction of food waste. In one such event, organised in Barcelona by the non-profit Aprofitem els Aliments (Make the Most of Food), more than 150 volunteers were involved in cooking for 4000 people. While it is true that because of its sporadic nature the people interviewed for this study do not see it as a regular source of food, their participation is felt to

be socially relevant, because they share experiences and knowledge that make it evident that other forms of eating, cheaper, less dependent and more sustainably are possible in their view.

4. Discussion

In Spain, the successive crises have led to a turning point, showing not only the contradictions of often improvised and short-term policies, but also the limits of an increasingly weakened welfare state. The economic crisis represents simultaneously a continuous restructuring and an institutionalised uncertainty embedded in the life of social groups (Alonso & Fernández, 2013). Both phenomena embody the notion of precarisation, understood by Paugam (2013) as a dynamic process related to increasing socio-economic difficulties. As we have seen through the ethnographic data, it is not necessary to be in extreme poverty to experience precarisation, which is not merely a financial indicator, but also points to changes in consumption on many levels as a result of unemployment or underemployment; difficulties in paying housing costs, electricity and gas bills, or purchasing food. The austerity policies implemented to reduce public spending have accelerated the processes of dispossession, which, according to Méndez (2017), are reflected in the high growth of unemployment, job insecurity, wage reduction and, in general, in a greater lack of protection for people. Precarisation is no longer an exceptional situation in capitalist societies but a current that runs through people's everyday lives (Lorey, 2015). The everyday eating behaviour of many Spaniards reflects this process and highlights the paradox identified by Warde (1997): while food production is more abundant, flexible and diversified than ever, social class, which now has more fluid boundaries, continues to be the main explanatory variable for unequal access to food. According to the socio-anthropological literature, we can or should no longer speak of societies of food overabundance in the same sense as we did a few decades ago when referring to industrialised societies (Fischler, 1995). We should also not assert without question that social differences in consumption have diminished (Pakulski & Waters, 1996), particularly in those countries where production systems increasingly drive an increase in the gap between rich and poor. The impact of the cuts carried out in Spain has brought to light the contradictions and limitations of an agro-industrial food system that is as profuse in its food production as it is questionable in its ways of redistribution and consumption. It is true that the forms of food insecurity referred to in this study have not been accompanied by experiences of recurrent or chronic hunger or diagnoses of malnutrition, nor have they been due to a lack of supply or availability in the markets, as food is all around. The food insecurity has been mainly caused by the difficulties of accessing food through one's own resources, given the lack of sufficient income and the need to prioritise unavoidable expenses. Food is undoubtedly essential for subsistence but, as the results of this study show, its consumption can be rendered extremely flexible in terms of quantity, variety, quality and frequency.

We have found that statistical sources and third sector reports provide insufficient data to determine how this phenomenon is occurring at the individual or household level. On the one hand, the increase in inequality and social exclusion has been widely confirmed by national surveys and third sector reports (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2017) while, on the other hand, statistics sources related to living conditions or indicators such as AROPE show that growing precariousness has come hand in hand with material deprivation. However, there is a lack of official data at local, regional and state level on how the scarcity of resources affects daily nutrition and how structural inequalities are translated into forms of food insecurity and its consequences, as the international literature points out (Lombie-Mumford, 2018; Loopstra, 2020).

The agencies in charge of studying Spanish eating habits and compiling official statistics only collect data on this subject in a partial way. Although Spanish statistics sources related to food consumption, living conditions and types of food purchased reveal constraints on consumption in recent years (Medina et al., 2015; Antentas & Vivas,

2014), they rely on excessively general food categories (meats, vegetables, oils and fats) that make it difficult to determine whether these dietary changes have affected previous food pattern and health status in some way. One supranational agency that has recently provided figures on food insecurity in Spain is the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). These data were collected by FAO through the Gallup World Poll and, according to the latest reports (FAO et al., 2019, FAO et al., 2020), the number of Spaniards in a situation of food insecurity has gone from 600,000 to 700,000 in just one year between 2018 and 19. As we have reported in a previous study (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2017: 72), experts insist that the crisis has had a negative effect on health, particularly mental and nutritional health (Cortès-Franch & González, 2014). Some researchers have linked have established a relationship between the increase in poverty and the increase in obesity, suggesting that unemployment and cuts to spending on assistance programs have led to increased consumption of unhealthy foods (highly processed and high in calories), which in turn can lead to obesity (Radwan & Gil, 2014). Unfortunately, all these sources do not show how the whole food pattern changes when faced with the emergency of not having enough resources to feed oneself.

Because there are no studies of the nature and degree of food deprivation in Spain, there is no accurate diagnosis of its extent as a social problem. What is more, the government does not acknowledge that food insecurity exists as a permanent phenomenon and, consequently, it is not understood as a political issue (Escajedo, 2018). The concept of food security used by the authorities refers mainly to ensuring safety throughout the food chain and protecting health from possible chemical, physical or biological hazards through the enforcement of specific standards and controls. This is therefore a partial notion that in no way alludes to the meaning used by organisations such as the FAO when referring to the fundamental right of people to food, i.e. to having individual and/or collective, regular and permanent access to adequate and sufficient food, and to the means necessary to produce/acquire it, in a way that is culturally acceptable and promotes a life of dignity. It is therefore surprising that the authorities, despite having subscribed for decades to the declarations enshrining the right to food at the global level, have not paid the same attention to this second meaning and have not created monitoring mechanisms to anticipate and avoid the risks associated with material deprivation.

During the period under review, the number of people applying for food aid for the first time to social services has increased significantly and this has been the main reason why the authorities have been compelled to reinforce and/or implement new assistance mechanisms. Food insecurity is treated as a problem of individuals and families who only occasionally are unable to manage their food requirements using their own resources and need emergency assistance, which is provided by strengthening mitigation programmes. To this end, these measures have involved transferring cash to beneficiary families/individuals, facilitating access to food through purchase aid and, most often, providing food through catering services or donations from food banks. This assistance is designed to be a temporary benefit, counting on people's financial emancipation through employment or other potential income in the short term. Like the majority of wealthy states (Lambie-Mumford 2017; Pfeiffer et al., 2015), Spain has responded to the growing demand for food assistance particularly by buying more food on the international and national markets and also by incentivising donations from food-related enterprises to charities in order to reduce waste. As has been shown, food aid has become increasingly corporatised. Indeed, government has tended to delegate the implementation of food security nets to non-state actors - from food industry donations to charities and non-governmental organisations- and to municipal social services. They are responsible for diagnosing needs and redistributing food and food services to those most in need at no cost. This has required the creation of more locations for distributing food and authorisation of more organisations to do this. In practice, it is a highly dependent emergency system, as it assumes the existence of surplus and waste food.

The institutionalisation of organisations such as FESBAL and the Red Cross is presented by the state as a kind of moral achievement that, according to Poppendieck (1998), implements the solidarity and altruism of thousands of donors and distributors of food, along with the unpaid volunteers who take part in food distribution. Food is thus reconverted into a good of social interest, so that waste reduction is also presented as a means to reduce poverty. However, while these initiatives may contribute to diversifying the currently limited options for donations, there is no evidence yet that they are reducing poverty. Moreover, food is a matter of rights, not of welfare practices. (Gascón & Montagut, 2015). These organisations embody the triumph of top-down charity and non-judgemental solidarity because something donated or given away is not intended to change the causes of impoverishment, only to alleviate it (Riches, 2018). Food assistance helps the most disadvantaged groups to meet their basic food needs, but at the same time deflects social pressure on the state, and makes the recipients of these benefits increasingly dependent on charities. This is illustrated by the fact that many study participants have normalised the use of these services as a usual resource.

People manage their needs by adopting a variety of strategies, both old and new, negotiating with various interlocutors, groups, and institutions. Ethnographic data show that food insecurity is a product of hardship caused mainly by unemployment, underemployment and cuts in social benefits. It occurs when people do not have enough food to eat, when they have to reduce the quantity and types of food or skip meals. Also when uncertainty determines food patterns, which are now characterised by seasonality and the variable content of food aid. The different constraints are reflected particularly in supply and places of consumption. According to Garth (2020: 4) food acquisition is not only an important process along the claim of production-distribution-consumption, it also is essential to consider where food comes from and how the social, economic or political aspects of obtaining food impact life. The main difficulties highlighted by the participants in this study relate precisely to how, where and through whom food is to be obtained. Thus, as other experiences of material deprivation have shown (Caplan, 2016; Heflin et al., 2011), food strategies are not limited to public and private assistance, but also include informal resources based on family, neighbourhood and friendship networks. When these networks are consistent, feeding is solved by combining support from various sources. However, they do not always withstand prolonged precariousness. Most people who seek help from social services do so when informal support networks are non-existent or have become fragile. In a context of uncertainty, people attempt to diversify sources of food for their households. With the foods they buy, are given, or otherwise find, they try to create or reproduce orderly meals that are acceptable by cultural standards. But this replication is not always possible because changes have affected the whole food pattern (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2019). When food is in limited or uncertain supply, people may also engage in more improvised food practices, substituting cheaper or lower-quality foods, eating less, altering the distribution of food among family members, or even eating food previously not considered edible. It also changes the value of commensality and mealtimes, challenging it when eating in company is imposed, or longing for it when it cannot be had. Some of these solutions entail experiences of suffering which materialise in dependence on other people and institutions and in the investment of a considerable amount of time and effort to obtain food. Applying to social services for food assistance or searching for food among items discarded by restaurants, bars, supermarkets, or bakeries is often accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt. Impoverishment is experienced as the inability to be autonomous and to cover basic needs.

In this sense, the measures adopted in Spain by the state and by regional and municipal governments are failing to address what is specific about the experience of food deprivation. Although 'being hungry' in Spain may not be comparable to the problems described by international aid organisations working in other continents (Farmer, 2003), the

decline in the ability to obtain food independently and on a regular basis is reflected in the frequency with which expressions such as 'shortage', 'eat what you can' and 'skipping meals' appear in everyday speech. As embodiments of penury, these expressions constitute evidence that these social interventions can alleviate the problem that places individuals on the continuum between food security and insecurity, but they are not the solution.

If increasing precarisation has led to serious difficulties for many people, it has also impelled some to discover other means of meeting their need for food. One of the consequences of insecurity in everyday life is the change that has taken place in ways of thinking about food. Among people who have suffered most from the effects of the crisis, food is considered something to which access is limited and uncertain, and must be rationalised. Although to date they are minority options, some initiatives based on collaborative work constitute an alternative response to official policies. Participatory projects have the potential to become political spaces in which people not only meet their basic needs, but also transform their subjective experience of food deprivation into a point of departure for more active ways of providing daily sustenance. These initiatives illustrate two important issues: other, more participatory ways of producing and redistributing food are possible; and people can draw unexpected conclusions from experiences of uncertainty. These activities are frequently unplanned and emerge from family, neighbourhood and friendship networks with the goal of achieving not only a greater coverage of basic needs but greater personal autonomy. Community gardens or collective soup kitchens require co-responsibility and resources, and their continuity over time can be difficult to maintain without political backing. As embodiments of impoverishment and penury, these solutions frequently constitute experiences of social suffering; but they are also opportunities to question the role of government and the institutional means currently being deployed to ensure the right to food.

5. Conclusion

There are many key gaps and lost synergies around the effectiveness of all the devices that have been implemented over the last decade to ensure the right to adequate food. On the one hand, austerity policies have come into contradiction with the social safety nets, insofar as the cash or in-kind transfer programmes that seek to reduce poverty by redistributing wealth and/or protecting households against income shocks have been significantly reduced during the crisis. On the other hand, food security networks, as a subset of the social safety nets that aim to assure a minimum amount of food consumption and/or to protect households against shocks to food consumption, have been built up in an improvised way, leaving a scattered map of benefits that have not managed to reduce precarisation. Through this aid, people manage to feed themselves to a greater or lesser extent, but they are forced to restructure their previous food pattern by adapting the content, structure and quantity of meals based on the food and/or services available to them. In this sense, public policies in Spain are still far from being able to eradicate food insecurity, an issue that is linked to the first goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to end poverty.

Considering the impact of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, we wonder how much more fragile the living conditions of the Spanish population – and thus its food security – are going to become once the pandemic has been overcome. All the economic indicators predicted a deep new global recession, particularly in those countries where the health emergency was having its worst effects. In the European context, Spain has been one of them. Following the failure to reduce the poverty risk rate to pre-2008 levels, another new crisis is currently giving way to an unprecedented social emergency. Given these circumstances, the current government has approved a package of measures to help its citizens. A case in point is the temporary lay-offs or minimum living income, whose impact on inequality reduction has so far been weak. In fact, since the state of emergency was declared,

requests for social assistance have tripled, most of them to cover basic needs, while in the big cities there have been twice as many requests for food aid than in the previous year. After more than a decade of material constraints imposed by a context of economic and political instability, Spain would have learned little if the only policy response to the health and financial crisis had been to go back to charitable and humanitarian organisations. However, we still do not have official estimates for the percentage of people living in food poverty –with untold consequences for their health and well-being. This lack of knowledge cries out for immediate action by administrations to create a food security network within a broader strategy based on the right to food, while defining objectives and establishing mechanisms to ensure food security in all its dimensions.

6. Limitations

This research has some limitations. Insofar as we were interested in looking into the policy measures undertaken to respond to the increased social demand for food aid, we selected informants who met this condition. We believe, however, that much of the support people receive comes from informal networks, and it is only when these are non-existent or exhausted that they turn to social services. This population group that does not receive social assistance has not been taken into account here and it is very likely that they also have experienced food insecurity. Similarly, the ethnographic analysis was conducted mainly in settings such as soup kitchens, solidarity supermarkets and other welfare facilities. Only occasionally were we able to access households and observe how meals are organised, prepared and distributed among their members. The timeline of our research also did not allow for a close follow-up over time of the initiatives that have emerged outside of public mechanisms and the aspirations shown by some administrations to incorporate them into their policies. All of these constraints are being taken into account in the current research.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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