

CSI 13: Food insecurity and foodbank use

Summary

- The quantity of food aid distributed has increased greatly, for example from 25,899 Trussell-Trust food parcels in 2008/09 to 913,138 in 2013/14
- Data from a range of social surveys provide some approximate indicators of food insecurity. Prevalence is typically quite low – almost certainly fewer people than are ‘poor’ on standard definitions of absolute or relative poverty
- While there are substantial differences between sources in their estimates of the recent changes in food insecurity, the overall pattern of the evidence suggests that it is likely that there has indeed been an increase since 2010/11
- There is even more uncertainty about the explanations for the trends. It is probable that multiple factors, including drop in incomes, increasing food prices and problems with benefits, have played some part
- One-third of people seeking food aid cited benefit delay as the reason. Sanctions, low incomes, debt and homelessness were also common reasons

Introduction

Food insecurity is defined by the UN as lacking access to *sufficient, safe and nutritious food*.¹ While not a new phenomenon, the rapid rise in food aid provision has become an increasingly visible and public response to food insecurity. *Food aid* predominantly captures parcels of non-perishable goods for consumption off-site together with meals provided by charitable projects who receive their food from redistribution organisations including FareShare and FoodCycle. There is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship between food aid provision and food insecurity, since the supply of food aid could in theory increase even while the level of food insecurity remains constant.

Reports that nearly one million food parcels were distributed by the Trussell Trust in 2013/14 have been interpreted as evidence that the government is not fulfilling its legal duty under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights² to provide food of sufficient quantity and quality to meet people’s dietary needs. Persistent low pay, welfare reform and rising living costs, especially food prices, have been suggested as contributory factors for the increase in food insecurity, and the health consequences of inadequate diets have also been raised by health professionals³.

Measurement issues and technical details

In this briefing note we examine data relating to food insecurity and foodbank use in the UK. It is important to distinguish between the two concepts. Data on food aid provision typically relates to the number of parcels or meals distributed whereas that on food insecurity relates to the number of people at risk.

The published data from food aid suppliers will underestimate the scale of provision because many organisations do not collect such data. The different contributions made by the Trussell Trust and other food aid providers also vary widely between areas. Other provision includes non-Trussell Trust food banks, soup kitchens and informal sharing. There may also be ‘hidden hunger’, where lack of availability, embarrassment, or other issues, prevent people from accessing food aid. Changes in the number of foodbanks and in the supply of food parcels make it difficult to infer changes in need over time.

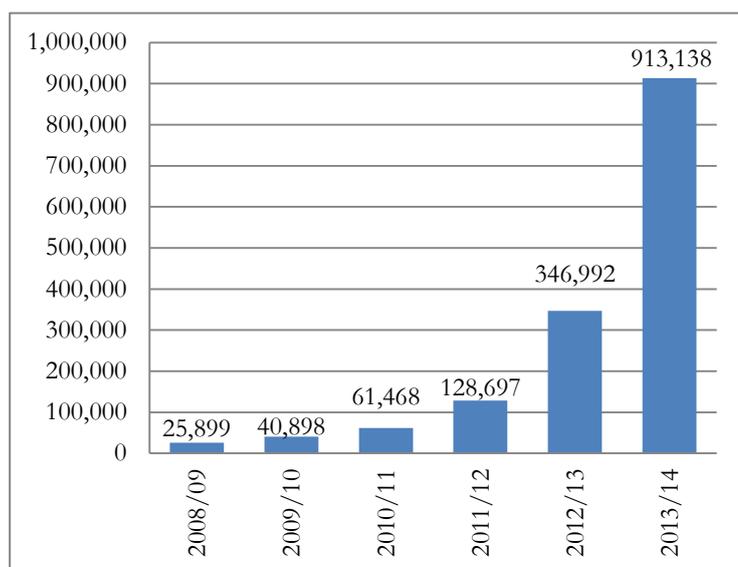
Data from FareShare represent a daily count of meals supplied but without knowing the frequency of supply it is not possible to derive an annual estimate of the number of people helped. Data from Citizens Advice Bureaux cover only 29 branches so may not be nationally representative. Estimates from the surveys of GPs, parents and school staff should be treated with caution because the sampling strategy means they may not be fully representative of these groups. Data on zero-hours contracts must be interpreted carefully due to methodological changes in data collection and the rising profile of zero-hours contracts, which are expected to inflate the documented estimates. Comparisons of socioeconomic and Trussell Trust data were conducted using data on central welfare benefit spending and sanctions from DWP.

Data from the social surveys cited in this briefing note are nationally representative and so potentially provide more complete estimates of food insecurity since they are not restricted to counting food aid recipients. The data from ELSA, the British Social Attitudes Survey and Understanding Society were weighted to account for different response rates between subgroups. The ELSA sample comprises older people only, and is not representative of the population as a whole. All the surveys will be subject to sampling error.

In this briefing note we first look at the evidence on food aid provision and then turn to the issue of food insecurity. We attempt to make some rough estimates of changes over time in food insecurity but we must emphasize the limitations of the available data.

How has food aid changed over time?

The Trussell Trust is the UK's largest foodbank network and the only provider to routinely collect data on food parcel distribution. Figure 1 illustrates the sharp rise in the distribution of food parcels. Since 2008/09 the number of food parcels has increased progressively and this has escalated since 2011/12. The most recent data show that nearly one million food parcels were distributed by the Trussell Trust in 2013/14. The number of Trussell Trust foodbanks also rose from 201 to 421 over this period and their coverage widened: the number of UK local authorities containing a Trussell Trust foodbank increased from 16 to 251⁴. This expansion of the Trussell Trust food bank network means their data has limited use



for estimating increases over time in demand for food aid, because supply has risen alongside demand. However, evidence submitted to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK cited increased demand at existing foodbanks⁵, suggesting that rising numbers of people receiving food aid is not just a reflection of increased supply. Furthermore, 59% of charities supported by FareShare reported rising food needs⁶.

Figure 1: Number of food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust, 2008/09 to 2013/14

Source: Trussell Trust

<http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>

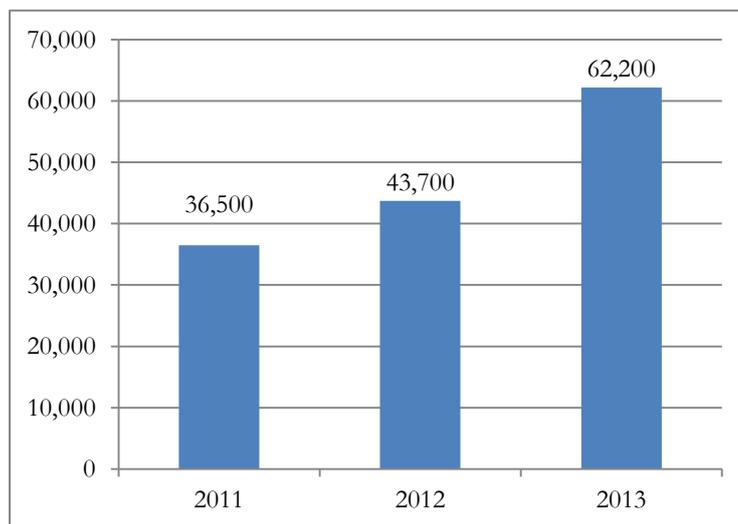


Figure 2: Number of people receiving meals from FareShare daily, 2011 to 2013

Source: FareShare

<http://www.fareshare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/FareShare-provides-food-for-1-million-meals-a-month.pdf>

Figure 2 similarly shows an increase in the number of FareShare-provided meals, with a larger rise between 2012 and 2013.

FareShare sources surplus food from within the food system and redistributes this to charitable projects, including – but not limited to – those working with homeless people, breakfast clubs, women's refuges, lunch clubs for older people and after-school children's projects.

Who receives food aid, and why?

There is little information available on the characteristics of people receiving food aid. Between 2011 and 14, two-thirds of recipients of Trussell Trust food parcels were adults and one-third were children; these figures were consistent over time⁷. Survey data by parenting website Netmums and the Trussell Trust revealed that 2.5% of working families had received food parcels⁸. Small studies reveal substantial variation in the characteristics of recipients⁹. FareShare data identifies men, BME groups and homeless people as more likely to receive meals¹⁰.

People accessing food did so for a range of reasons, illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3: Reasons for referral from 29 branches of the Citizens Advice Bureaux over one month, spring 2013

Source: Citizens Advice Bureaux

http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/policy/policy_publications/er_benefitsandtaxcredits/cr_benefitsandtaxcredits/citizens_advice_bureaux_foodbank_survey.htm

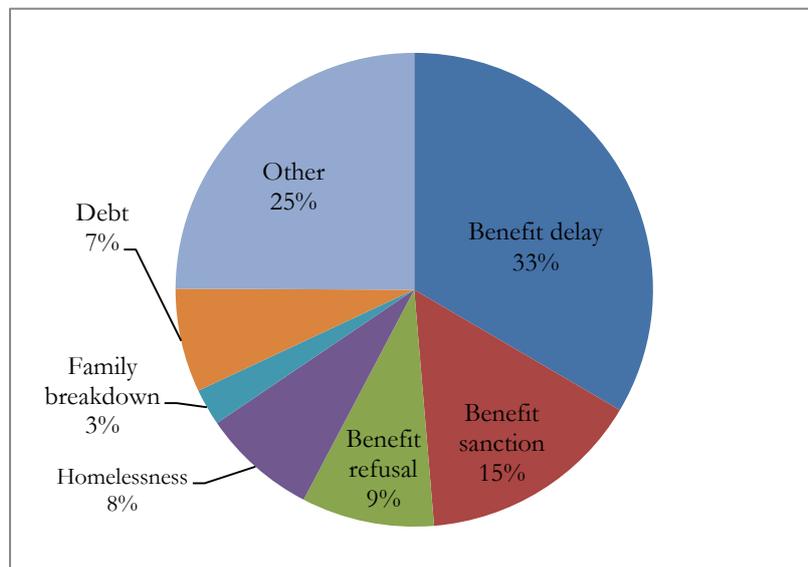


Figure 3 shows that problems with benefits accounted for the majority of foodbank referrals. Delays, sanctions and refusal of benefits together accounted for over half of referrals. Homelessness and family breakdown accounted for a small proportion of referrals. Other reasons included job loss, low pay and domestic violence.

Figure 4: Reasons for referral from Trussell Trust foodbanks, first half of 2014/15

Source: Trussell Trust

<http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/foodbank/mid-year-2014-2015.pdf>

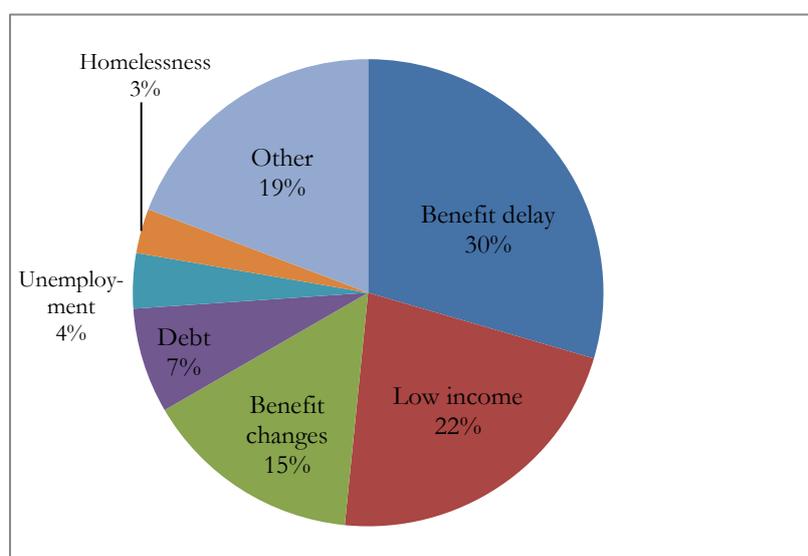


Figure 4 shows that people were referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks for similar reasons as the Citizens Advice Bureaux data. Benefit delays were the single largest reason, although more than one in five people cited low incomes as the cause. Further research suggests that people mainly turn to food banks because of an immediate income crisis.

Wider measures of food insecurity

Although data on food insecurity is not routinely collected in official surveys, a range of data from other sources can help provide some indications about levels and trends in food insecurity in the UK. The Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey, conducted in 2003-2005 with a sample of materially-deprived individuals, included a module on food insecurity using questions drawn from US surveys (where food insecurity is examined more consistently). Overall, 29% of respondents were identified as experiencing food insecurity, which was especially prevalent in single-person working households (40%) and lone-parent households (43%)¹¹. This survey has not been repeated so unfortunately it is not possible to examine change over time.

Several other surveys provide estimates of food insecurity at single points of time: 16% of 522 GPs surveyed by the practitioner's magazine Pulse in 2013 reported referring patients to foodbanks in the past 12 months¹². Research by parenting website Netmums and the Trussell Trust in 2014 revealed that 56%

of working families had bought cheaper, lower quality food, and 20% of parents had chosen between paying bills and buying food in the last 12 months¹³. Similarly, half of school staff surveyed in London in 2012 said children did not eat breakfast because their families could not afford it and 61% reported giving food to pupils at their own expense¹⁴.

In addition, there are some data sources which do enable us to look at change over time for particular subgroups of the population. Data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) suggest that food insecurity is a growing problem in people aged 50 and older. The proportion of older people who reported that having too little money stopped them buying their first choice of food items rose significantly from 5.3% in 2004 to 9.1% in 2012. The proportion of older people who reported that they (or someone else in their household) had skipped meals or reduced the size of their meals in the last year because there wasn't enough money for food also rose significantly from 1.6% in 2004 to 2.8% in 2012.

Questions on hosting family and friends provide a further measure of the vulnerability of households' food supplies. Understanding Society survey data indicated that the proportion of families who could not afford for their children to host a friend for tea or a snack every month decreased significantly from 5.3% in 2009 to 4.4% in 2012¹⁵, suggesting that food insecurity among families with children may have fallen over time. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents to the British Social Attitudes Survey who reported struggling financially rose significantly from 17.4% to 19.6% between 2010 and 2013.

Figure 5: Trends in food insecurity, 2004-2013

Source: Trussell Trust, FareShare, ELSA, Understanding Society, British Social Attitudes Survey

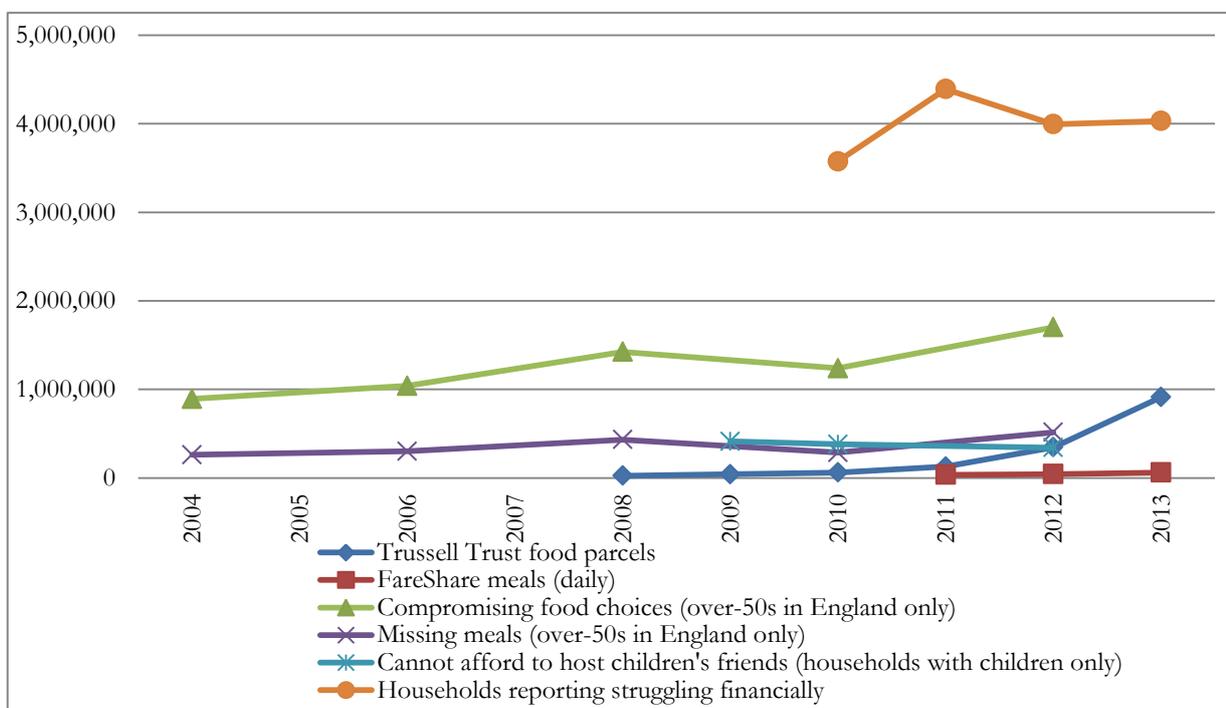


Figure 5 combines the different data sources discussed in this briefing note to provide an overview of estimates of change over time in food insecurity and food aid provision. At one extreme the sharp increase in Trussell Trust-provided meals (blue line) contrasts, at the other extreme, with the small decline in families who could not afford to host their children's friends (light blue line). In between are a number of other sources all pointing to increases in food insecurity. Thus FareShare-provided meals (red line), the number of households who were struggling financially (orange line) and the number of over-50s in England compromising their food choices (green line) or missing meals (purple line) for financial reasons all show increases since 2010.

On balance, then, it is reasonable to conclude that food insecurity in Britain has grown. To be sure, the increase in Trussell Trust food parcels clearly exceeds the growth of food insecurity captured in other sources, which is not surprising given the expansion of the foodbank network. Crucially, however, while Trussell Trust data alone almost certainly overstate the scale of the increase in food insecurity, combining data from these sources does suggest that food insecurity is a growing problem in the UK. While there is

considerable uncertainty, in the absence of an up-to-date representative survey, about the actual level of food insecurity in Britain, a substantial increase since 2010 appears to be the most robust conclusion.

What explains the rise in food insecurity?

The probable increase in food insecurity needs to be understood in the context of changes in poverty more generally. While the percentage of the population in absolute poverty has been in long term decline, there was a slight increase (from 8.6% of the population in 2009/10 to 9.1% in 2012/3) as the effects of the recession on living standards became apparent¹⁶. This suggests that the increase in the number of people at risk of food insecurity may in part be due to falling incomes. Other potential factors include rising food costs and welfare reform.

Low pay and insecure employment

Low incomes can affect people who are working as well as those claiming benefits. Some foodbank users are employed so welfare reform is unlikely to be the sole cause of the increased use. However, work does not necessarily provide sufficient protection against poverty: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that in 2011/12, 6.7 million of the 13 million people living in relative poverty in the UK were in a family where somebody worked, the first time where in-work poverty exceeded out-of-work poverty¹⁷. The rise in zero hours contracts may also have increased vulnerability to in-work poverty because such contracts have no minimum number of hours and employees are only paid for the hours they work. In 2007, 165,000 people or 0.6% of the workforce was employed on zero-hours contracts¹⁸; this had risen to 586,000 (1.9%) in 2013 and 697,000 (2.3%) in 2014¹⁹.

Rising food costs

Rising food costs are also important because this places greater pressure on household budgets even if incomes (adjusting for the overall rate of inflation) are stable. This is clearly true for food prices, which rose by 12% in real terms between 2007 and 2012. UK households spent 17% more on food in 2012 than 2007 but purchased 4.7% less food, and total energy intake reduced by 4.1%. The lowest income quintile spent 22% more and bought 5.7% less, indicating a disproportionate impact on food purchasing in this group²⁰. Food price increases were also greater for healthier foods, making healthy diets less affordable over time²¹.

Welfare reform

The rise in foodbank use has occurred alongside significant social changes, notably the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which tightened eligibility rules and reduced the incomes of some benefit recipients. Many commentators have linked these phenomena but clear comparisons over time are difficult. The value of benefits has also declined: between 2009 and 2014: benefits reduced by 8% for working-age adults, 7% for pensioners and 5% for children²². The New Policy Institute further estimated that 1.75 million families eligible for Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance or Income Support saw the value of their benefits fall due to reductions in housing benefit, the under-occupation penalty, changes to Council Tax Support and the benefit cap.

Research combining Trussell Trust data with socioeconomic data has demonstrated links between welfare reform and foodbank use. More food parcels were distributed in local authorities that experienced larger cuts to central government welfare spending (each 1% reduction in central welfare benefits, excluding pension spending, was associated with a 0.16 percentage point rise in food parcel distribution), indicating rising food insecurity in response to welfare reform. These figures controlled for number of foodbanks and their length of operation so cannot be attributed to increased supply²³.

Benefit delays were cited by approximately one-third of foodbank users, shown in Figures 3 and 4 above. There exists no statutory time limit within which benefits claim decisions must be made, leaving claimants with no income during this time. Changes to target times mean it is not possible to compare delays for all benefits before and after welfare reform but data on waiting times for some benefits suggest increased delays. The National Audit Office reported in the six months following the replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments in April 2013 that DWP had made only 16% of the decisions it had expected to. Average waits were 28 days for terminally ill people (against an expected 10 days) and 104 for non-terminally ill people (against an expected 74 days)²⁴. In this case, welfare reform can plausibly be linked with longer delays and increased risk of financial hardship.

Benefit sanctions were cited by 15% of foodbank users in Figure 3. Sanctions are imposed on Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance claimants for failing to meet benefit

conditions. The Policy Exchange estimated that in September 2013, 76,000 JSA claimants (6% of claimants) were sanctioned. While many sanctions were correctly applied to claimants who failed to meet their benefit conditions, only 35% of sanction referrals were upheld after reconsideration and appeal, meaning that nearly two-thirds of sanctioned recipients may have had their benefits stopped in error²⁵. Although benefits are reimbursed retrospectively, this will not protect against interim financial hardship. Indeed, more food parcels were distributed in local authorities with higher rates of benefit sanctions (each 1% increase in the rate of benefit sanctions was associated with a 0.09 percentage point rise in food parcel distribution)²⁶. These figures demonstrate that recourse to food banks may be a response to temporary crises such as these.

Welfare reform is also associated with benefit refusal (9% of recipients in Figure 3) and benefit changes (15% of recipients of Figure 4). For example, the replacement of Incapacity Benefit (IB), Income Support for disability and Severe Disablement Allowance with Employment Support Allowance (ESA) in 2008 was accompanied by changes to work capacity assessments. Between January and March 2014, 24% of new claimants and 7% of previous IB claimants were assessed as fit for work and thus ineligible for ESA²⁷, contributing to financial hardship in this group. Collectively, these data demonstrate clear links between reduced welfare spending, increased sanctions and rising food insecurity. It is also likely that increased benefit delays have contributed to this rise. A more extensive analysis would ideally be undertaken, modelling any potential compensating effects of the reforms, for example through moving people off benefits and into work.

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¹ <http://www.fao.org/3/a-y4671e.pdf>

² <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4538838c11.html>

³ <http://www.bmj.com/content/347/bmj.f7157>

⁴ http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/04/08/bmj.h1775.DC1/loor025220.wv2_default.pdf

⁵ <https://foodpovertyinquiry.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/food-poverty-appg-evidence-review-final.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.fareshare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/FareShare-Media-Information-2014-15.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>

⁸ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/foodbank-figures-top-900000>

⁹ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Press/Foodbank-Report.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.fareshare.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Report-online.pdf>

¹¹ <http://tna.europarchive.org/20110116113217/http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/lidnsvol03.pdf>

¹² <http://www.pulsetoday.co.uk/news/finance-and-practice-life-news/one-in-six-gps-asked-to-refer-a-patient-to-a-food-bank-in-the-past-year/20005889.article#.VRBK9PnDJNo>

¹³ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/foodbank-figures-top-900000>

¹⁴ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/london-assembly/publications/a-zero-hunger-city-tackling-food-poverty-in-london>

¹⁵ <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

¹⁶ http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CSI_2_Income.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/MPSE2013.pdf>

¹⁸ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/labour-market/articles-and-reports/zero-hours-contracts.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lmac/contracts-with-no-guaranteed-hours/zero-hour-contracts--2014/index.html>

²⁰ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/265243/familyfood-2012report-12dec13.pdf

²¹ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0109343>

²² http://npi.org.uk/files/4613/9816/3093/Full_report_-_Multiple_cuts_for_the_poorest_families.pdf

²³ <http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/350/bmj.h1775.full.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Personal-Independence-Payment-early-progress-summary.pdf>

²⁵ <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/smarter%20sanctions.pdf>

²⁶ <http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/350/bmj.h1775.full.pdf>

²⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/385578/esa_wca_summary_Dec14_final.pdf