

CSI 28: Food insecurity and foodbank use

Summary

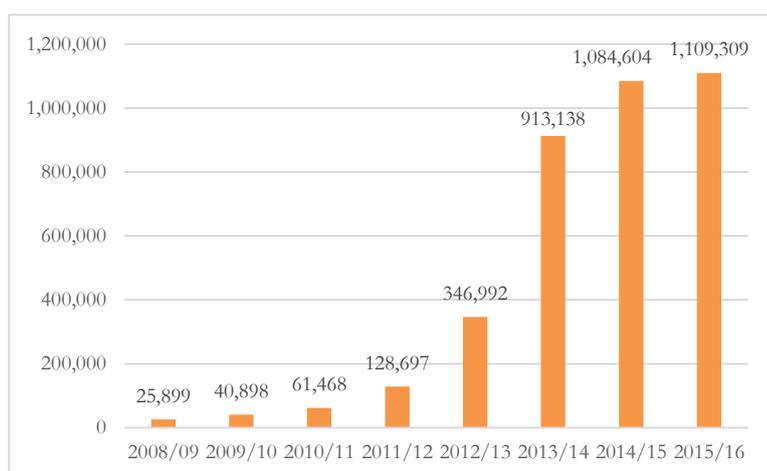
- The quantity of emergency food distributed has increased greatly, from 25,899 Trussell-Trust food parcels in 2008/09 to 1,109,309 in 2015/16
- Data from social surveys provide some approximate indicators of food insecurity. Prevalence is typically lower than people who are 'poor' on standard poverty definitions
- While there are substantial differences between sources in their estimates of the recent changes in food insecurity, the overall pattern suggests that food insecurity has increased since 2010/11
- There is even more uncertainty about the explanations for the trends. Multiple factors, including falling incomes, increasing food prices and problems with benefits, appear to have contributed
- One-third of people seeking emergency food 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 emergency food provision— commonly supplied by foodbanks – has drawn attention to food insecurity in the UK. In 2014, an estimated 8.4 million people in the UK were considered food insecure². *Emergency food* predominantly captures parcels of non-perishable goods for consumption off-site, together with meals provided by food redistribution charities including FareShare and FoodCycle. The relationship between emergency food provision and food insecurity is complex and affected by need alongside factors including the availability of volunteers and food donations. This means that uptake of emergency food is not a direct indicator of the level of food insecurity. Moreover, only a minority of households experiencing food insecurity use foodbanks³. Some have interpreted the rising uptake of emergency food as evidence that the government is not fulfilling its legal duty under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to provide food of sufficient quantity and quality to meet people's dietary needs. Food insecurity is associated with impaired mental and physical health, and the number of hospital admissions for malnutrition have increased over the past five years⁴. Qualitative evidence has consistently reported feelings of shame and embarrassment among people receiving emergency food⁵.

How has emergency food use changed over time?

Figure 1: The number of Trussell Trust food parcels rose considerably between 2008/09 and 2015/16, Source: Trussell Trust⁶



The Trussell Trust is the UK's largest foodbank network and the only provider to routinely collect data on the distribution of food parcels. Figure 1 shows that since 2008/09 the number of food parcels has increased progressively, and has escalated since 2011/12. More than one million food parcels were distributed by the Trussell Trust in 2014/15 and 2015/16. The number of Trussell Trust foodbanks also rose over this period and their coverage widened. This expansion of the Trussell Trust food bank network means their data has limited use for

estimating increases over time in demand for emergency food, because supply has risen alongside uptake⁷. However, evidence submitted to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK cited increased demand at existing foodbanks, suggesting that rising numbers of people receiving emergency food is not just a reflection of increased supply⁸.



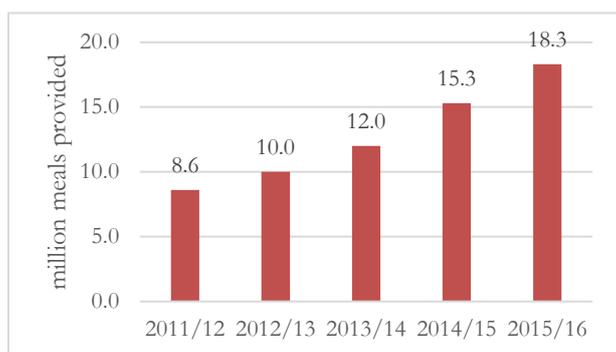


Figure 2: Meals provided by FareShare each year increased steadily between 2011/12 and 2015/6, Source: FareShare

Figure 2 similarly shows a progressive increase in the number of FareShare-provided meals. FareShare sources surplus food from within the food system and redistributes this to charitable projects, including those working with homeless people, breakfast clubs, women's refuges, lunch clubs for older people and after-school children's projects.

Who receives emergency food, and why?

Approximately one-third of people receiving Trussell Trust food parcels are children; these figures are consistent over time. The number of older people receiving emergency food is very small⁹. Survey data by parenting website Netmums and the Trussell Trust revealed that 2.5 per cent of working families had received food parcels¹⁰. FareShare data identifies men, ethnic minority groups and homeless people as more likely to receive meals¹¹.

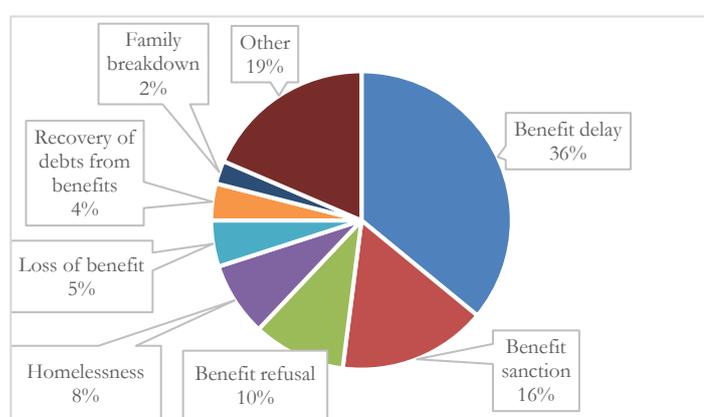
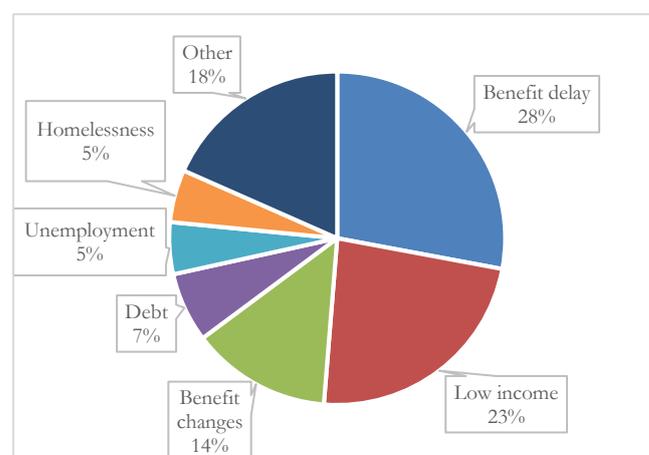


Figure 4: Reasons for referral to Trussell Trust foodbanks, 2015/16, Source: Trussell Trust

Figure 4 (right) shows that people's reasons for referral across the Trussell Trust foodbank network were consistently with the composition of referrals from the Citizens Advice Bureaux. Benefit delays were the single largest reason, although nearly one quarter of people cited low incomes as the cause. Further research suggests that people mainly turn to food banks because of an immediate income crisis¹³.

Figure 3: Reasons for referral from 29 branches of the Citizens Advice Bureaux over one month, spring 2013, Source: Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB)¹²

Figure 3 (left) 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.



Measurement issues and technical details

It is important to distinguish between the two concepts of food insecurity and foodbank use. Data on food insecurity relates to the number of people at risk, whereas that on emergency food provision typically relates to the number of parcels or meals distributed.

Published data on the number of food parcels distributed is limited to the Trussell Trust network because many organisations do not collect such data, so will underestimate the scale of emergency food provision to an unknown extent. Other initiatives include non-Trussell Trust food banks, soup kitchens, and informal sharing. Food insecure households may also experience 'hidden hunger', where lack of availability, embarrassment, or other issues prevent people from accessing emergency food. Changes in the number of foodbanks make it difficult to infer changes in need over time. Figures of the number of food parcels distributed currently do not distinguish between unique and repeat visits, which affects interpretations of the scale of the issue. Likewise, the number of meals supplied by charities working with FareShare may not provide a direct indication of need.

Data from the social surveys cited are nationally representative and are weighted to account for response rates, so potentially provide more complete estimates of food insecurity since they are not restricted to counting emergency food recipients. Data from ELSA represent only the experiences of older people.

Wider measures of food insecurity

The only direct data on UK food security is the 2003-2005 Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey. Overall, 29 per cent of materially-deprived households were considered food insecure, which was more prevalent in single-person working households (40 per cent) and lone-parent households (43 per cent)¹⁴. Questions included in social surveys provide some evidence about levels and trends in food insecurity in the UK. The proportion of people aged 50 and older in the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) who reported that having too little money stopped them buying their first choice of food items rose significantly from 5.3 per cent in 2004 to 9.3 per cent in 2012, before falling slightly to 9.1 per cent in 2014. The proportion of households where someone had skipped meals or reduced the size of their meals in the last year because there wasn't enough money for food likewise rose significantly from 1.6 per cent in 2004 to 2.8 per cent in 2012, then reduced slightly to 2.4 per cent in 2014, collectively suggesting that food insecurity in older people has risen, but may have peaked.

Broader questions can identify the vulnerability of households' food supplies. 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 per cent in 2009 to 4.4 per cent in 2012, so food insecurity among families with children may have fallen. Conversely, the proportion of households who were unable to afford meat, chicken or fish at least every other day rose from 3.6 per cent in 2007 to 8.8 per cent in 2011¹⁵.

Other research revealed that in 2014, 56 per cent of working families had bought cheaper, lower quality food, and 20 per cent of parents had chosen between paying bills and buying food in the last 12 months¹⁰. 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 per cent reported giving food to pupils at their own expense¹⁶.

Has food insecurity increased in recent years?

Figure 5: Trends in food insecurity, 2002-2015, Sources: Trussell Trust, FareShare, ELSA

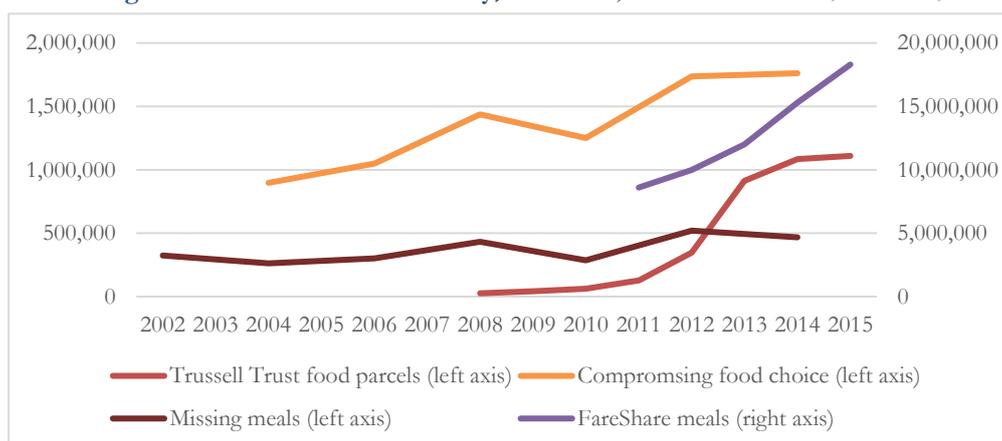


Figure 5 combines data sources to provide an overview of trends in food insecurity and emergency food provision. Measures of the number of food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust food and meals provided by FareShare increased more steeply than measures of missing meals and

compromising food choices from ELSA. Some of the documented rise in emergency food provision might therefore reflect greater availability of this type of assistance over time. The survey data nonetheless reveals clear increases in the food insecurity among over-50s. Taken together, these figures do indicate that food insecurity is a growing problem in the UK.

What can explain the rise in food insecurity?

Low pay and insecure employment

Low incomes can affect people who are working as well as those claiming benefits. Work does not necessarily provide sufficient protection against poverty: in 2011/12, over half of UK households living in relative poverty contained someone in work¹⁷. The rise in zero hours contracts – from 225,000 people or 0.8 per cent of the workforce in 2000 to 801,000 people or 2.5 per cent of employees at the end of 2015¹⁸ – may also have played a part.

Rising food costs

Rising food costs place pressure on household budgets even if inflation-adjusted incomes are stable. Food prices rose by 12 per cent in real terms between 2007 and 2012, consequently UK households spent 17 per cent more on food in 2012 than 2007, but purchased less food and fewer calories. These changes were more extreme among the lowest income quintile¹⁹. Food price increases were also greater for healthier foods, making healthy diets less affordable over time²⁰.

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 through measures including the overall benefit cap, the spare room subsidy, and reductions in housing benefit. Between 2009 and 2014, benefits reduced by 8 per cent for working-age adults, 7 per cent for pensioners and 5 per cent for children²¹. The exact impact of these changes are difficult to isolate, yet austerity measures are linked with increased foodbanks use²². Benefit delays were cited by one-third of foodbank users (see Figures 3 and 4). There exists no statutory time limit for benefits claim decisions to be made, leaving claimants with no income during this time. The replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments in April 2013 resulted in average waits of 28 days for terminally ill people and 104 for non-terminally ill people, considerably higher than the expected waits of 10 and 74 days²³. In this case, welfare reform can plausibly be linked with delays and risks of financial hardship. Benefit sanctions – in which payments are stopped when claimants fail to meet benefit conditions – were cited by 15 per cent of people referred to foodbanks by the CAB (Figure 3). In September 2013, an estimated 76,000 (6 per cent) JSA claimants were sanctioned. Only 35 per cent of sanction referrals were up held after reconsideration and appeal, meaning that nearly two-thirds of sanctioned recipients may have had their benefits stopped in error²⁴. Although benefits are reimbursed retrospectively, this will not protect against interim financial hardship. Local authorities with higher rates of benefit sanctions also distributed more emergency food²², demonstrating that recourse to food banks may be a response to temporary crises such as these. The number of people receiving emergency food due to benefit sanctions has, encouragingly, declined over the past two years⁹.

Collectively, these data demonstrate clear links between reduced welfare spending, increased sanctions and rising food insecurity. 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>

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³ Kirkpatrick, S.I. & Tarasuk V. (2009) 'Food insecurity and participation in community food programs among low-income Toronto families', *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 100(2):135-139.

⁴ Taylor-Robinson, D., Rougeaux, E., Harrison, D., Whitehead, M., Barr, B. & Pearce, A. (2013) 'The rise of food poverty in the UK', *BMJ*, 347, p. f7157

⁵ Purdam, K., Garratt, E. A. & Esmail, A. (2015) 'Hungry? Food insecurity, social stigma and embarrassment in the UK', *Sociology*.

⁶ Trussell Trust (2016) *Foodbank Stats*. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/>

⁷ Loopstra, R., Fledderjohann, J., Reeves, A., & Stuckler, D. (2016) 'The impact of benefit sanctioning on food insecurity: A dynamic cross-area study of food bank usage in the UK'. Oxford: Department of Sociology working paper 2016-03.

⁸ All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom (2014) *An Evidence Review for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom in 2014*. London.

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¹⁰ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/06/FOODBANK-FIGURES-TOP-900000.pdf>

¹¹ FareShare (2011) 2011 National Impact Survey. London: FareShare;

¹²

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

¹³ Perry, J., Williams, M., Sefton, T. & Haddad, M. (2014) *Emergency Use Only: Understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK*. London: Child Poverty Action Group, The Church of England, Oxfam GB, The Trussell Trust.

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¹⁶ Greater London Authority (2012) *A Zero Hunger City – Tackling food poverty in London*. London.

¹⁷ MacInnes, T., Aldridge, H., Bushe, S., Kenway, P. & Tinson, A. (2013) *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2013*. York: JRF.

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/contractsthatdonotguaranteeaminimumnumberofhours/march2016>

¹⁹ DEFRA (2013) *Family Food 2012*. London: DEFRA.

²⁰ Jones, N. R. V., Conklin, A. I., Suhrcke, M. & Monsivais, P. (2014) 'The Growing Price Gap between More and Less Healthy Foods: Analysis of a Novel Longitudinal UK Dataset', *PLoS ONE*, 9(10), p. 109343.

²¹ Oxfam (2014) *Multiple cuts for the poorest families*. Oxford: Oxfam.

²² Loopstra, R., Reeves, A., Taylor-Robinson, D., Barr, B., McKee, M. & Stuckler, D. (2015) 'Austerity, sanctions, and the rise of food banks in the UK', *BMJ*, 350.

²³ National Audit Office (2014) *Personal Independence Payment: early progress*.

²⁴ Miscampbell, G. (2014) *Smarter Sanctions: Sorting out the system*. London.