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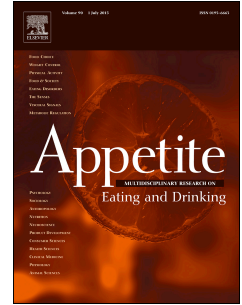
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Georgia Middleton, Kaye Mehta, Darlene McNaughton, Sue Booth



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The experiences and perceptions of food banks amongst users in high-income countries: an international scoping review

Georgia Middleton

Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, School of Health Sciences, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, South Australia, Australia.

Email: georgia_mids@hotmail.com

Kaye Mehta

Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, School of Health Sciences, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, South Australia, Australia.

Darlene McNaughton

Department of Public Health, School of Health Sciences, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, South Australia, Australia.

Sue Booth

Department of Public Health, School of Health Sciences, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, South Australia, Australia.

Email: sue.booth@flinders.edu.au

Corresponding Authors:

Georgia Middleton¹ & Sue Booth

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¹ Permanent address 86 McLaren Street, Adelaide, 5000, South Australia, Australia

Purpose: Food banks have become the main response to food insecurity in many high-income countries, but it has been argued that they lack the capacity to respond consistently and fully to the food needs of the people who use them. This literature review set out to answer the question 'how do food bank recipients experience food relief services and how does this impact their lives and wellbeing?'

Results: A comprehensive search of electronic databases yielded twenty qualitative studies, conducted in developed countries, exploring user perspectives of food banks. From the studies reviewed, there emerged three main categories that represented the different aspects of the food bank process from the food bank user's perspective: the user's perceptions about the idea of being fed from food banks, the user's perceptions about food bank offerings and operations, and the socio-psychological impact of receiving food from food banks. While participants of these studies spoke positively of the volunteers and were thankful for the service, they also consistently report limited food choice, poor quality, shame, stigma and embarrassment associated with food bank use.

Conclusions: The food bank industry continues to expand despite there being little evidence that food banks are an appropriate response for those facing food insecurity. This is worrying as the results of this review indicate that although participants value the service provided by the food bank, the experience can be largely negative. These findings raise questions about the food bank model as a long-term strategy.

1 Introduction

2 Food insecurity occurs “when people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to
3 food”¹. While food insecurity is most commonly associated with the developing world, food
4 shortage and deprivation are also a problem in many high-income countries, that appears to be
5 getting worse².

6
7 Food banks have now become the dominant response to food insecurity in many of these high-
8 income countries (including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and
9 Australia)^{3, 4}. Food banks can generally be described as non-profit organisations that collect, store
10 and distribute donated and surplus food to hungry people, either directly or by going through front
11 line social welfare agencies³. Operationally food banks may differ, for example some operate in
12 large warehouses, others are small local community service centres or church-run agencies³. Some
13 food banks rely solely on donations from individuals in the community and industry oversupply,
14 have little control over the items they receive, and are therefore limited in what they can offer to
15 those in need², while others also buy food when their stocks are running low³. They can provide
16 food to individuals in the community in two main ways; providing pre-packaged hampers that have
17 been made up by the food bank staff, or allowing recipients to choose food items from a pseudo-
18 supermarket set up. Along with providing food, some food banks undertake advocacy work,
19 referring to other agencies and providing education programmes³. Although the operational
20 logistics may differ among the food banks, the basic premise remains the same, namely to provide
21 food charity to those in need.

22
23 The number of food banks has been growing since the 1980’s. In the UK, between the years 2010
24 and 2012, the number of food banks increased from 54 to 201, a 372% increase.⁴ Australia has also
25 seen an expansion from one food bank in New South Wales in 1992 to at least one food bank in
26 every state and territory by 2010⁵. An increase in food bank services has also been seen in Canada⁶
27 and the United States of America⁷. This growth and expansion of food banks as a surplus food
28 response to food insecurity, speaks to both the inadequacy of social policy to meet the basic needs
29 of households, and the failure of governments to adequately address the underlying structural
30 causes of food insecurity^{3, 8}. As Riches (2011) has asked “are charitable food banks symptoms and
31 symbols not only of broken social safety nets but also of failing food and income redistribution
32 policies?”^{9(p5)}. The growth and reliance of food banks to meet the need of those facing food
33 insecurity is concerning, as several studies suggest they offer little more than a ‘band-aid’ response
34 to poverty and perpetuate over-production in the food system^{2, 3}. As food banks are becoming the

35 dominant response to food insecurity, they are the focus of this paper, rather than other charitable
36 food organisations such as soup kitchens and co-ops.

37

38 It has been argued that food banks lack the capacity to respond consistently and fully to the food
39 needs of the many people who use them^{2, 10, 11}. There is speculation that food banks may actually
40 contribute to the problem of food insecurity, rather than solve it, by allowing governments to ‘look
41 the other way’, transferring the responsibility of food insecurity onto these charitable institutions,
42 rather than fixing the social conditions that allow it to prevail^{2, 4, 5, 9}.

43

44 Several studies have found that most food bank users are young (mean age ranging from 25.5-46.3
45 years), have low paid, sporadic employment or are unemployed, and experience some degree of
46 food insecurity^{12, 10, 13, 14}. While these studies help paint a picture of who the ‘typical’ food bank
47 user might be, there are few papers that investigate how the people who use food banks feel about
48 the experience. This scoping review investigates the perceptions and experiences of food bank users
49 documented in research undertaken in the last 15 years, and the effect these services may have on
50 their lives and wellbeing. We attempt to answer the question ‘how do food bank recipients
51 experience food relief services and how does this impact their lives and wellbeing?’

52

53 **Methods**

54 A comprehensive systematic search was conducted using electronic databases including Web of
55 Science, Medline, Scopus and PsycINFO on 17th August 2015. Due to the paucity of literature
56 found, the grey literature was also searched on Theses Canada, Australian National University, New
57 Zealand Research, DART Europe, Ethos UK, Social Care Online, Find it @ Flinders, New York
58 Academy of Medicine, Informit, Trove and by hand-searching organisations for reports, such as
59 Foodbank Australia, Feeding America Research, Foodbanks Canada, Anglicare Australia and
60 Trussell Trust Research. The specific search terms used in these searches included a combination of
61 key words such as ‘food bank’, ‘foodbank’, ‘food pantry’, ‘food assistance’, ‘satisfaction’,
62 ‘experience’, ‘opinion’ and ‘attitude’. The lack of consistency between search terms used for each
63 database has its justification in the limited scope and reach of some of the smaller databases used,
64 compared with the larger databases which allow for a more specific search. Hand searching of
65 reference lists and citing articles was conducted in order to identify any other relevant studies and
66 ensure the widest scope of literature possible. Due to the lack of literature in this area, all
67 publications were included regardless of the year in which they were published. The search method
68 can be seen below in Figure 1.

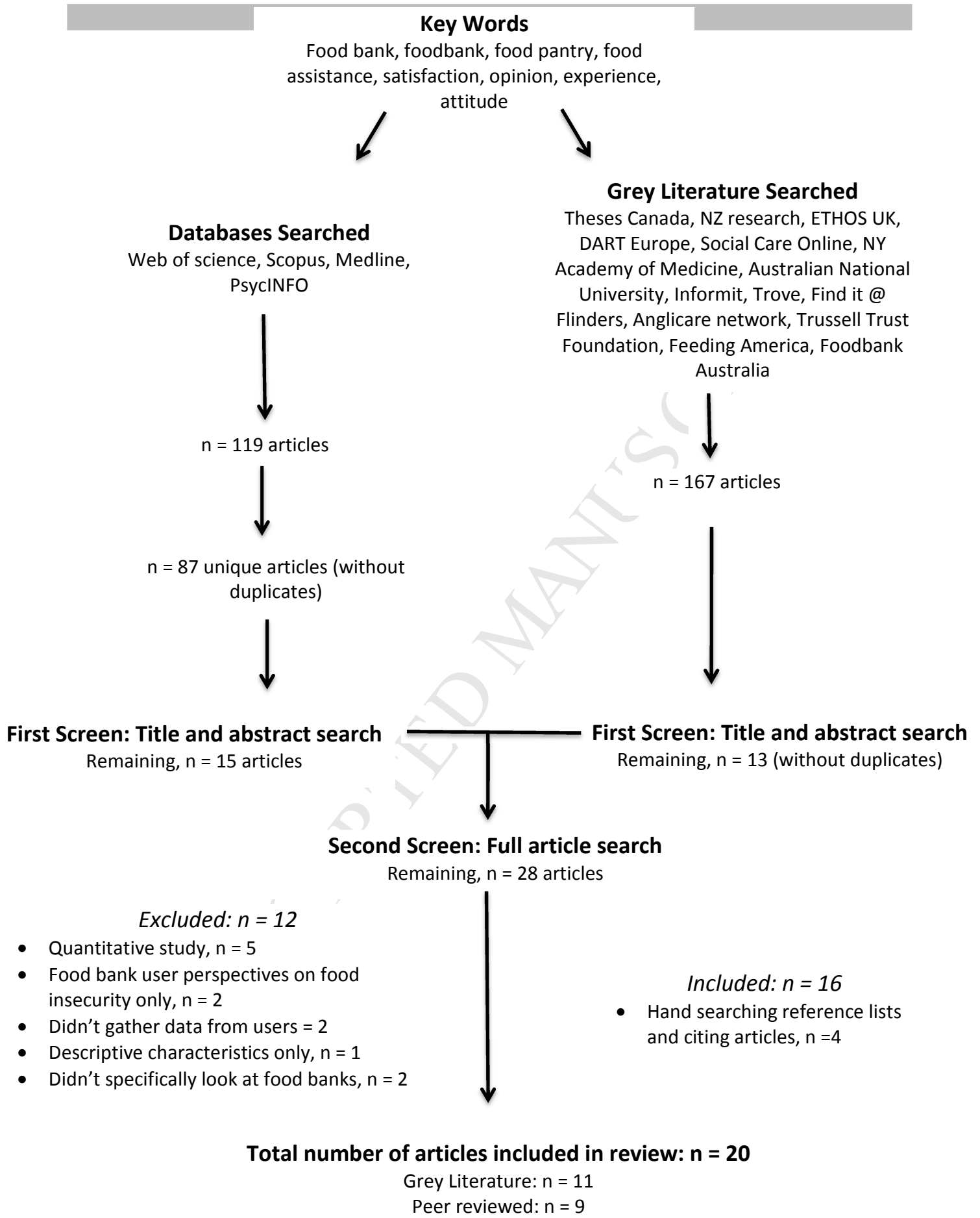


Figure 1: Flow diagram of search methods

69 This review was limited to qualitative studies or those that used both quantitative and qualitative
 70 methods. Qualitative methods are useful for answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions and they are able
 71 to explore the experiences of individuals, something which quantitative methods are not able to
 72 do^{15, 16}.

73

74 Although there were studies conducted in high-income countries other than those included in this
 75 review, many could not be included as they were not accessible in English. As listed in the
 76 inclusion criteria below in Table 1, only studies published in English were included.

77

78 Other charitable food services are available such as food co-ops, soup kitchens and food stamp
 79 programs, however this review focused only on food banks. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are
 80 summarised in Table 1.

81

82 **Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature searches.**

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User perspectives on food banks • Qualitative methods as source of data collection (or mixture of qualitative and quantitative) • Published in English • Set in high-income, industrial countries • Any year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User perspectives exclusively on food insecurity, no mention of perspectives on food banks • Exclusively volunteer, manager or other non-user perspectives with no mention of user perspectives • Only provided descriptive statistics • Only looked at the operation of food bank • Other emergency food relief services too dissimilar to food banks eg. Soup kitchens, food stamps • Only looked at nutritional intake of users • Only quantitative methods used

83 The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist was used to assess the
 84 quality of the 20 studies included in the review. It was chosen because it has been validated and
 85 widely used in published assessments of qualitative studies¹⁷. CASP Qualitative Checklist contains
 86 10 questions, with prompts to consider that help researchers to critically appraise qualitative
 87 studies¹⁸. Each question requires a “yes”, “no” or “can’t tell” answer, which the prompts help to
 88 guide. As there was a paucity of literature in this area, studies were included even if they did not
 89 meet “yes” for all questions. The possible consequences of including studies that did not meet all
 90 criteria in this review are explored below in the discussion.

91

92 One author (GM) was responsible for conducting the search and reviewing the literature, with
 93 assistance and input from other members of the team (KM, SB, DM). The process involved first
 94 screening of the titles and the abstracts of the papers. If the articles seemed to meet the inclusion
 95 criteria they were then read in full. From here only the articles that met the inclusion criteria after
 96 being read in full were included in this review. Once the final articles had been selected, they were
 97 read closely in order to identify the key findings, processes, underlying assumptions and knowledge
 98 gaps. A meta-ethnographic synthesis of the papers was undertaken, where the key findings, themes
 99 and concepts across the different studies were analysed and grouped together to form the themes for
 100 this paper¹⁹. These themes found across the studies represent the different aspects of the food bank
 101 process from the user's perspective. The themes identified from the literature were: user perceptions
 102 about the idea of being fed from food banks, user perceptions about food bank offerings and
 103 operations, and socio-psychological impact of receiving food from food bank.

104

105 **Article Selection Process**

106 A total of 20 studies met all search criteria, sourced from scientific databases, grey literature
 107 databases and hand searching.

108 **Findings**

109 *Summary of studies*

110 The 20 papers included in this review are all empirical studies that collected some form of
 111 qualitative data from individuals who had received food assistance from food banks. Seven studies
 112 used one qualitative method^{4, 10, 20, 24, 27, 35, 36}, six studies used more than one qualitative method^{21, 23,}
 113 ^{26, 30, 31, 33}, five used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods^{25, 28, 29, 32, 37}, and two studies used
 114 multiple qualitative methods along with quantitative methods^{22, 34}. The range of qualitative methods
 115 used can be seen below in Table 2.

116

117 **Table 2. Qualitative methods used in the studies to gather information regarding user**
 118 **perception of food banks.**

119

120

Method	No. of Studies
Interview	18 ^{4, 10, 20-35}
Participant observation	7 ^{22, 23, 26, 30, 31, 33, 34}
Group interview	2 ^{21, 36}
Survey	1 ³⁷

121

122

123

124

125

126 The details of each study can be seen below in Table 3. The studies included ranged from published
127 literature^{4, 10, 21, 27, 29-31, 33, 34, 36, 37}, to theses^{20, 22-26, 28} and organisation reports^{32, 35} and were published
128 between 1999 and 2015. Most were conducted in Canada^{10, 20-24, 29}, followed by the United
129 Kingdom (UK)^{4, 32-35}, the United States of America (USA)^{27, 30, 36, 37}, New Zealand^{25, 28} and the
130 Netherlands^{26, 31}. There were no Australian studies found that met the criteria for this review. Two
131 of the studies looked at food banks in rural settings, one in Canada and the other in the USA^{21, 27},
132 the remaining focused on food banks located in urban settings.

133

134 Four studies examined and recruited participants from one particular food bank, Lethbridge
135 Canada²⁰, the Netherlands³¹, North East England³³ and North East Scotland³⁴, while the remaining
136 16 focused on multiple facilities^{4, 10, 21-30, 32, 35-37}. The description of the specific food service used
137 was not provided by all studies, but based on the studies that did provide the information, it was
138 clear that the vast majority of services were providing pre-packaged parcels^{4, 20-26, 28, 30-34, 36, 37}, with
139 some providing choice of extra items^{10, 23, 36, 37}, and one where individuals could select their own
140 food items³⁴.

141

142 The user perspectives fell into three main categories in the literature: user perceptions about the idea
143 of being fed from food banks, user perceptions about food bank offerings and operations and socio-
144 psychological impact of receiving food from food bank.

145

146 *1. User perceptions about the idea of being fed from food banks*

147 A recurring theme expressed by a number of participants in these studies was that food bank use
148 was a last resort, and only when absolutely necessary^{22-25, 27-29, 32, 34}. Hicks-Stratton (2004) found
149 that participants felt ‘forced’ to use the food bank because of the situation they were in, and use was
150 as a result of desperation²⁴. Commonly participants were reluctant to use food banks as they viewed
151 it as ‘unnatural’³², stating that it challenged their pride and made them feel inadequate as providers
152 for their families, causing feelings of embarrassment and shame^{20, 23, 28, 32}. However, regardless of
153 these feelings, participants continued to use food banks because they needed the assistance^{23, 24}.

154

155 Some participants in these studies had come to rely on the food bank, stating that they would not
156 know what they would do without the food provided from these facilities^{21, 37}. In this way, food
157 banks were sometimes viewed as a “lifeline”^{33, 34}, something that prevented users from resorting to
158 other more drastic, sometimes illegal strategies to obtain food^{33, 34}. Participants in both De Marco
159 (2009) and McNeill (2011) described food bank as a “godsend”, meaning they felt “blessed” that
160 this service was available to them^{27, 28}. In some cases, food bank use helped ease stress, especially

161 financially, as it allowed them to save the money they were not spending on food to go towards
162 other necessities^{32, 37}.

163

164 Participants in both Douglas et al. (2015) and Perry et al. (2014) viewed food bank use as a turning
165 point; it gave them hope, helped alleviate an immediate food crisis and in some cases was a way
166 back into work if they were able to volunteer at the facility^{32, 34}. Nikou (2002) found that food bank
167 users that were able to volunteer felt they were giving back to the community, not just relying on a
168 handout, which increased their comfort in using these services²².

169

170 Not all participants viewed their food bank use in a positive way. A number of respondents were
171 openly concerned about their reliance on the food bank and the service it provided. Across the
172 studies, participants suggested that they never thought they would have to resort to using food
173 banks, they disliked asking for help, and their continued reliance on food banks bothered them^{23, 24,}
174 ²⁶. For some, having to depend on the food bank was “oppressive and unpleasant”²⁶, however, they
175 continued using the food bank oftentimes because they needed it to feed their children^{21, 24, 26}.
176 Knowing that using the food bank meant that their children were fed made the process easier,
177 however some participants still described an inner struggle every time they went to the food bank²⁴.

178

179 *2. User perceptions about food bank offerings and operations*

180 *2.1 User perceptions about the food bank operations and services*

181 Participants expressed both positive and negative comments about the food banks they used,
182 regarding both the service and food provided. The majority of positive comments attributed to food
183 banks were about the volunteers. Participants stated that the volunteers were often friendly, non-
184 judgemental and supportive, and treated users with dignity, anonymity and respect^{23-25, 32}.

185

186 A number of food bank users appreciated the opportunity to connect with other people in similar
187 situations at the food bank, valued the social contact and found it a supportive environment where
188 they could develop friendships and support networks^{22, 25, 32}. Garthwaite et al. (2015) found that the
189 food bank encouraged a sense of community that helped ease the feelings of stigma and shame that
190 were often experienced³³.

191

192 *2.2 User perceptions about the food quality*

193 Many comments about the food received from food bank were negative. Participants described
194 dissatisfaction with both the quality and quantity of the food provided^{20, 21, 25, 28, 37}. Due to limited
195 food choice, participants had to take food that they would not regularly eat, did not know how to

196 prepare or was inappropriate in terms of cultural or health needs^{21, 28-30, 33, 34}. Participants questioned
197 the quality of the foods provided at the food bank, stating that it was often “unhealthy”²⁹,
198 “expired”^{20, 23, 29}, “mouldy”²³, rotten²⁹, “disgusting”²⁹, “doesn’t look edible”²⁹ and “not fit to feed an
199 animal”²⁹. Sub-optimal food quality caused stress and anxiety and could impact on participants
200 feelings of self-worth^{23, 31}. However there were also a number of participants who stated, “beggars
201 can’t be choosers”, indicating their resignation and loss of control over their situation^{20, 25, 28}.

203 *3. Socio-psychological impact of receiving food from food bank*

204 *3.1 Emotional impact*

205 Shame, embarrassment, degradation, humiliation, awkwardness, failure, desolation, intimidation,
206 guilt, discomfort, powerlessness, inequity, nervousness and frustration, were all expressed by
207 participants in relation to having to use the food bank^{10, 20-26, 29, 32-35}. These feelings were
208 particularly apparent leading up to the first use of the food bank, and at times would prevent
209 participants from using the services, even though they needed the assistance²¹. A number of
210 respondents felt that food bank use had a negative impact on their identity, self-esteem, reputation
211 and dignity²⁴.

212
213 Nevertheless, the majority of participants stated that over time they came to accept their use of food
214 bank, and were able to put aside their ‘emotional entanglements’^{10, 20-22}, however some felt that the
215 experience never got any easier²⁴. There were some participants who recognised their need for the
216 help and therefore did not experience these negative emotions at all²⁰.

217
218 Another emotion that was discussed by participants was gratitude^{20, 22, 24-26, 28, 31, 34}. Van der Horst et
219 al. (2014) found that many participants felt that they were expected to feel gratitude towards the
220 services, and that they only expressed gratitude because they knew it was expected of them³¹.
221 Hicks-Stratton (2004) found that some participants were not willing to display gratitude for
222 something that they were dissatisfied with; they took a stand and returned food to the food bank due
223 to poor quality which helped restore some pride and self-respect²⁴.

224 225 *3.2 Social impact*

226 Shame and embarrassment were common experiences noted by study participants. They discussed
227 fear of being seen at the food bank, fear of being judged and fear of social stigma^{10, 20, 23, 24, 26-28, 31}.
228 They felt that ‘begging’ for food or receiving ‘charity’ would create a negative social image and
229 were embarrassed by how others might view them, which in turn often led to secrecy about food
230 bank use and in some instances prevented people from using them^{4, 10, 24, 26-28, 30, 31}.

231

232 Although participants were afraid of being stigmatised and stereotyped as a 'food bank user', they
233 themselves had preconceived ideas of what a typical 'food bank user' was. There were perceptions
234 that food banks were for the homeless, welfare recipients and the unemployed²⁹. Due to these
235 perceptions, some participants were uncertain of whether they qualified to receive assistance from
236 the food bank, as they perceived others as more 'needy' than themselves^{20, 27, 29}. This perception
237 that food banks were for the 'needy' could make it hard for participants to accept help, as they were
238 not used to asking for assistance, and disliked having to do so^{4, 29, 32, 33}. The fear of stigmatisation
239 was interesting, as it led some users to develop a hierarchy that distinguished themselves from the
240 stereotypical, 'non-deserving' users^{23, 25}. They discussed stereotypes, labelling some food bank
241 users as lazy and unable to manage their finances, and tended to separate themselves from these
242 types of food bank users^{23, 25}.

Table 3: Summary table of studies included in the review

Features	Objective/aim	Methods	Results	Conclusion
<p>Derrickson et al. 1999. Temporary emergency food assistance program: Perceptions of benefits and effect of welfare reform. <i>Journal of Nutrition Education</i>, 31, 31-38.</p> <p>Country: USA</p>	<p>To evaluate the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program in Larimer County, Colorado, looking at recipients' perceived impacts of the program, how welfare reform may affect their future use & food security status.</p>	<p>Quantitative and qualitative survey with 64 Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) recipients. Constant comparative data analysis using HyperRESEARCH was used.</p>	<p>Transportation problems, pride, and lack of knowledge about unfamiliar foods were barriers to participation. Participants couldn't do and would be 'suffering' without it. Using food bank freed up money they didn't have to spend on food. Some participants weren't satisfied with amount or type of food provided.</p>	<p>The primarily perceived benefit of TEFAP is stretching food resources.</p>
<p>Tarasuk et al. 1999. Household food insecurity and hunger among families using food banks. <i>Canadian Journal of Public Health</i>, 90, 109-113.</p> <p>Country: Canada</p>	<p>To assess the food insecurity and nutritional vulnerability of one subgroup of food bank users.</p>	<p>Three qualitative interviews with 153 women who used a food bank at least one other time in the previous 12 months. Thematic analysis using Ethnograph v4.</p>	<p>For most, using a food bank was a new experience. Feelings of shame, embarrassment, degradation & humiliation were felt – especially at first. Over time, participants came to accept food bank use. Sensitivity to social stigma was apparent with regards to their children.</p>	<p>There is a limited capacity for ad hoc, charitable food assistance programs to respond to and adequately deal with problems of household food insecurity, which arise in the context of severe and</p>

				chronic poverty.
<p>Nugent. 2000. Journeys to the food bank: Exploring the experience of food insecurity among postsecondary students. Master's of Science (Nursing), University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.</p> <p>Country: Canada</p>	<p>To understand the experiences of food insecurity among postsecondary students and the factors which contributed to, and alleviated, this social public health issue.</p>	<p>Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 15 university students who accessed the University of Lethbridge Students' Union Food Bank. Transcripts were analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Embarrassment, awkwardness, humiliation, desolation, failure, stigma and shame – especially with first time use.</p> <p>Easier to put aside feelings as time goes on.</p> <p>Not used to receiving or asking for help – questioning if they're 'deserving' or not.</p> <p>Sometimes pleased with quality of parcel, but not always – “beggars can't be choosers”.</p>	<p>Participants valued their health, but lacked the necessary supports to maintain adequate nutritional intake.</p> <p>Participants employed multiple strategies to mitigate their food insecurity issues (one of which using the food bank).</p>
<p>Hamelin et al. 2002. Characterization of household food insecurity in Quebec: food and feelings. Social Science & Medicine, 54, 119-132.</p> <p>Country: Canada</p>	<p>To understand how household food insecurity manifests itself, from the perspective of people in low-income households who had experienced it in a broad range of situations.</p>	<p>23 qualitative group interviews and 12 individual interviews with 98 low-income households from urban and rural areas. Transcripts were thematically analysed using ATLAS/ti.</p>	<p>Feelings of embarrassment and shame were felt when using for the first time.</p> <p>Fear of being seen at food bank.</p> <p>Use of food banks became part of one's way of living after some time.</p> <p>Participants wonder how they would manage without it.</p> <p>Some dissatisfaction with food parcel variety.</p>	<p>Participants have a need for sufficient food in the present and in the future.</p> <p>It is also important that they have some sense of control over their food situation, in order to achieve self-respect and</p>

				social integration.
Nikou. 2002. An ethnography of food banks in Winnipeg: Organizations as adaptations to poverty and hunger. Master of Arts, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Country: Canada	To describe food banks, analyse and demonstrate how food banks have become adaptations to poverty and hunger.	Participant observation, descriptive surveys with 52 food bank clients and open-ended, semi-structured interviews with four food bank clients/volunteers, seven volunteers and two head directors. Analysis not discussed.	Dissatisfaction with parcel, but grateful for assistance. Only use food bank if they really have to. Feelings of embarrassment, intimidation, shame and humiliation. First time is the hardest – easier over time. All clients were also volunteers - made them feel better about receiving food. Develop friendships and support networks at food bank.	The use of a food bank was a necessity. Most found their first experience intimidating and shameful. Clients that volunteered found their experience positive. Food banks fulfil a need, but have become a long-term Band-Aid solution.
Kratzmann. 2003. More than food: An exploration of the food bank experience in the Halifax regional municipality. Master of Arts, Dalhousie	To describe the experiences of people who have found themselves in need of emergency food assistance from a food bank, and to explore the relationship between the social	Participant observation and qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two food bank coordinators and ten food bank recipients from two food bank locations. Transcripts were analysed	Embarrassment, guilt, shame, nervousness and failure – especially first time. Didn't think it was something they would ever have to do - only used when absolutely necessary. Hierarchy created among food bank users. Staff could ease the experience by being 'understanding' and 'non-judgemental'.	The food bank experience is generally negative due to the feelings of stigma experienced by the receivers. The experience can

<p>University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Country: Canada</p>	<p>organisation of food banks and the participants' subjective experiences.</p>	<p>thematically.</p>	<p>Food was of limited quality. Participants wanted to volunteer at food bank.</p>	<p>be made more positive if food bank receivers are treated well, in a friendly, understanding and non-judgemental manner.</p>
<p>Verpy et al. 2003. Attitudes and behaviors of food donors and perceived needs and wants of food shelf clients. Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, 35, 6-15. Country: USA</p>	<p>Explore attitudes and behaviours of those who donate food, and the perceived needs and wants of the clientele using the food shelves in terms of cultural, health and nutritional concerns.</p>	<p>Qualitative focus groups with 31 food bank clients and 64 donors. Transcripts were analysed thematically.</p>	<p>The donations of food from the donors didn't match the client needs – The need for more food choice and more non-food items, concern about safety and quality of food provided and thoughts on how to improve services were identified.</p>	<p>Nutrition educators need to work with food bank directors to improve the education of staff and general population on appropriate foods and items to donate.</p>
<p>Hicks-Stratton. 2004. The experience of food bank usage among women: A phenomenological study. Master of Nursing, Memorial</p>	<p>To provide a richer and deeper understanding of women's experiences with use of food banks.</p>	<p>Unstructured interviews with three women who had used the food bank in the previous twelve months. Transcripts were analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Felt forced to use the food bank – was a last resort. Embarrassment, discomfort and stigma had a negative impact on identity, image, reputation and dignity. Food bank use never got easier. Bothered by dependence on food bank. Grateful but frustrated at lack of choice.</p>	<p>The difficulties that the women experienced in relation to alienation and psychological suffering were evident.</p>

<p>University of Newfoundland. Country: Canada</p>			<p>Taking control (returning unwanted food) helped establish self-respect.</p>	<p>The loss of self and the profound experience of using the food bank made the women question where they fit in society.</p>
<p>McPherson. 2006. Food insecurity and the food bank industry: A geographical analysis of food bank use in Christchurch. Master of Arts in Geography, University of Canterbury. Country: New Zealand</p>	<p>To investigate the growth of the food bank industry, determine trends in use, look at client characteristics, neighbourhoods and reasons for use, discuss implications of food bank use and how dependency on may be reduced.</p>	<p>Non-identifiable socio-demographic data, questionnaires and in-depth interviews with five social service agencies and managers and 22 food bank clients. Analysis not discussed.</p>	<p>Feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt. Food bank was a last resort. Using a food bank was not as bad as expected. The environment, staff and social contact were valued. Not overly satisfied with food parcels – but still grateful “beggars can’t be choosers”. Hierarchy created by users – distinguishing between deserving and non-deserving poor.</p>	<p>Feelings of shame, embarrassment and pride can inhibit people from going to the food bank.</p>
<p>Oomkens. 2008. A qualitative study on food bank clients in Rotterdam: food bank versus 'alternative' state-run social welfare</p>	<p>To find out why people make use of the food bank.</p>	<p>Participant observation and qualitative in-depth interviews with 37 food bank clients and eight informants. Data analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Feelings of shame, nervousness, stigma and issues with pride associated with food bank, but grateful to receive food. Some participants discussed issues around having to ask for help. Some participants didn’t like the food or it was out-</p>	<p>People mainly make use of the food bank because they are aware of it’s existence, they feel the subjective need</p>

provisions. Masters of Social Policy and Social Interventions, University Utrecht. Country: Netherlands			dated. Attitude towards volunteers mostly positive.	to make use of it and they consider the application procedure as relatively easy.
De Marco. 2009. "In a country as affluent as America, people should be eating": Experiences with and perceptions of food insecurity among rural and urban Oregonians. <i>Qualitative Health Research</i> , 19, 1010-1024. Country: USA	To explore the role that social support from family, friends and the community plays in the relationship between income and food insecurity, and to assess other contributing factors from the perspective of those at risk of food insecurity.	Qualitative in-depth interviews with 25 low income and/or food insecure participants from either rural or urban settings. Transcripts were thematically analysed using MAXqda2.	Food bank was a "Godsend" and people felt "blessed" that they could use it. Food bank use was a last resort. People initially unsure of whether they qualified for help. Fear of stigma – especially in small towns due to lack of anonymity.	This study highlights the differences in experiences between the rural and urban participants. The nature of rural living can be both a facilitator and a barrier to food security.
McNeill. 2011. Talking with their mouths half full: Food insecurity in the Hamilton community. Doctor of Philosophy, The University of Waikato.	To assess food insecurity by examining the historical, cultural, structural and critical factors that underpin its presence within the New Zealand context.	Quantitative surveys sent to 10 food support organisations, and qualitative semi-structured interviews with ten food insecure individuals. Surveys analysed with SPSS,	Secretive about food bank use due to fear of stigma. Food parcels are a 'blessing'. Not always satisfied with food in parcels – but were grateful "beggars can't be choosers". Food bank use is a last resort and respondents identify personal pride as a limitation to seeking assistance.	These accounts demonstrate that use of food banks are accompanied by stigmatisation, exclusion and a general sense of

Country: New Zealand		transcripts analysed thematically with NVivo.		alienation.
<p>Loopstra et al. 2012. The Relationship between food banks and household food insecurity among low-income Toronto families. Canadian Public Policy-Analyse De Politiques, 38, 497-514.</p> <p>Country: Canada</p>	To report on the factors related to food bank use and non-use.	<p>Mixed method quantitative and qualitative interviews with 371 low-income Toronto families.</p> <p>Quantitative data analysed using a multivariate logistic regression model, qualitative data analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Didn't like the food – poor quality limited variety, rotten, unhealthy.</p> <p>Uncertain of their suitability to be using food banks – other people in greater need.</p> <p>Feelings of degradation and shame.</p> <p>Food bank use as last resort.</p>	The reasons for participants not using food banks showed both resistance and inability to use food banks.
<p>Lambie-Mumford. 2013. 'Every town should have one': Emergency food banking in the UK. Journal of Social Policy, 42, 73-89.</p> <p>Country: UK</p>	To investigate the rise in the number of Trussell Trust Foodbanks in the UK and to explore some of the social dynamics which lay behind this rise.	<p>Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 5 Trussell Trust personnel, 11 food bank managers, administrators and affiliates, 8 volunteers, 5 clients and 6 voucher holders.</p> <p>Analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Voucher holders discussed reluctance to go to food bank because it feels like 'charity' or 'begging'.</p> <p>Participants talked about difficulty seeking and receiving support or help when they have never had to seek any kind of 'help' before.</p>	The rise in food bank signals the growth of an initiative which can only provide relief from the symptoms of hunger and poverty, but doesn't address the underlying issues.

<p>Mares. 2013. "Here we have the food bank": Latino/a immigration and the contradictions of emergency food. <i>Food and foodways</i>, 21, 1-21.</p> <p>Country: USA</p>	<p>To examine the role of emergency food in the lives of Latino/a immigrants in Seattle, Washington.</p>	<p>Ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with agency representatives, and 46 first-generation immigrants from various regions of Latin America. Data was analysed systemically.</p>	<p>Emergency food services were far greater than participants could access in their home countries. Some hesitancy to use food banks, even if use was viewed as potentially beneficial. Mostly positive feelings about food bank, some comments about food not meeting cultural or culinary preferences or needs.</p>	<p>Emergency food programs in this area have a significant impact on the rates of food insecurity and hunger of Latino/a immigrants and others. The emergency food system is ill equipped to maximize community self-reliance and social justice.</p>
<p>van der Horst et al. 2014. The "dark side" of food banks? Exploring emotional responses of food bank receivers in the Netherlands. <i>British Food Journal</i>, 116,</p>	<p>To address how food, social status and the interactions at the food bank induce emotions in receivers, such as shame, gratitude and anger.</p>	<p>Participant observation and qualitative in-depth interviews with 4 food bank referrers, 5 food bank volunteers and 17 food bank receivers. Transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti using open</p>	<p>Receivers didn't feel taken seriously, some indicating feelings of loss of self-worth, embarrassment and shame in receiving the parcel, interacting with volunteers and interpreting their place in society. Receivers felt they were expected to feel gratitude and satisfaction with parcels.</p>	<p>Shame and gratitude were prominent emotions linked to the food parcel and interactions with the volunteers. Most clients did not see food bank as a</p>

<p>1506-1520. Country: Netherlands</p>		<p>coding.</p>		<p>social setting and distanced themselves from it as much as possible.</p>
<p>Perry et al. 2014. Emergency use only: Understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK. Oxfam GB: London: Child Poverty Action Group, Church of England, Oxfam GB and the Trussell Trust. Country: UK</p>	<p>To expand the evidence base regarding what leads individuals and families to use emergency food services, inform the debate on emergency food aid, and offer practical solutions to reduce the need for such assistance.</p>	<p>Administrative data, caseload analysis and semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 40 food bank clients (contacted again for a short follow-up telephone interview). Analysis not discussed.</p>	<p>Food banks were a last resort – difficult choice due to shame, embarrassment and fear of being judged. Deciding to accept help was difficult. Some don't know what they would have done without it and view it as a turning point. Some felt treated with respect and dignity and were positive about support they received. Enabled users to save some money.</p>	<p>The individuals experiencing food insecurity and using the food banks have challenging, complex lives. There is a need to address the wide ranging issues that underlie food insecurity.</p>
<p>Garthwaite et al. 2015. Food for thought: An ethnographic study of negotiating ill health and food insecurity in a UK foodbank. Social Science & Medicine, 132, 38-44.</p>	<p>To examine the relationship between ill health and food insecurity among food bank users in the UK.</p>	<p>Participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 42 food bank users (six interviewed twice) and 8 volunteers. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo.</p>	<p>Participants found it hard to ask for handouts. Embarrassment and frustration were evident. Some found coming to the food bank helped alleviate feelings of stigma and shame and encouraged a sense of community. Described as a 'lifeline'. Some people experienced negative health consequences (digestive problems) after consuming</p>	<p>Findings bring into question the appropriateness of food banks as a response to food insecurity, particularly for people with health</p>

Country: UK			food they received.	problems.
<p>Douglas et al. 2015. Resourcefulness, desperation, shame, gratitude and powerlessness: Common themes emerging from a study of food bank use in Northeast Scotland. Public Health, 2, 297-317.</p> <p>Country: UK</p>	<p>To study the use and operation of a food bank situated in a rich northeast city: to establish who was seeking help, their reasons for doing so, what they thought of and how they dealt with the food they received.</p>	<p>Audit of client database, participant observation and face-to-face interviews with seven either current or former food bank clients. Data were manually analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Participants experienced compromised food choices, receiving food they would not usually eat or did not like. Feelings of shame and desperation were evident, and co-existed with themes of gratitude and powerlessness. Participants described food bank as a ‘lifeline’.</p>	<p>People only use food banks after experiencing severe financial shock. People are likely to be experiencing great shame and potentially health damaging emotional challenges in the process of accessing the food bank.</p>
<p>Zipfel et al. 2015. Our lives: Challenging attitudes to poverty in 2015.</p> <p>Country: UK</p>	<p>To understand and explain the lived experience of families in poverty by letting them tell their stories.</p>	<p>20 individuals (known to the researchers) living in poverty were invited to tell their stories. No analysis.</p>	<p>Many people were apologetic, embarrassed, ashamed or too proud to use the food bank.</p>	<p>The stories reflect a picture of how people on very low incomes have to struggle to survive.</p>

247 **Discussion**

248 This review set out to answer the question ‘how do food bank recipients experience food relief
249 services and how does this impact their lives and wellbeing?’ Through a scoping review of
250 qualitative studies, using a range of investigative methods to explore the user perspectives on food
251 banks, we were able to bring together and present a broad overview of the perceptions and
252 experiences of these individuals, and have captured the various ways food bank use affects them.
253 While participants were largely thankful for the services and mostly spoke positively of the
254 volunteers and staff, they experienced feelings of perceived stigma, encountered expected gratitude,
255 were confronted with lack of choice and found that the experience of using the services could have
256 a negative impact on their identity, self-esteem and dignity.

257

258 Food bank services go some way to alleviating immediate hunger for those who use the services.
259 Participants spoke positively of some aspects of the service, but along with these positives, there
260 were also elements of the service that had the potential to negatively impact the participants.

261

262 From the studies analysed in this review, it is clear that a proportion of participants reported a
263 perception of stigma as part of their food bank experience^{10, 20, 23, 24, 26-28}. McNeill (2011)
264 differentiated between participants’ experiences of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ stigma²⁸. In their study
265 on the sufferers’ perceptions of epilepsy and its impact on their lives, Scambler and Hopkins (1986)
266 make an important distinction between what is termed ‘enacted’ and ‘felt’ stigma³⁸. Enacted stigma
267 refers to actual occurrences of discrimination or judgement against people, whereas felt stigma is a
268 much more complicated issue and encompasses not only the fear of encountering enacted stigma,
269 but also includes the internal feelings of shame experienced³⁸. Participants in these studies were
270 certainly experiencing felt stigma, as most of the comments centred around participant’s fear of
271 being stigmatised, and their own perception of the stigma that surrounded their situation. Scambler
272 and Hopkins (1986) found that felt stigma can be more powerful than enacted stigma, and can cause
273 unhappiness, anxiety and self-doubt amongst those experiencing it³⁸. Anxiety resulting from felt
274 stigma appears to be a very real barrier to people accessing food banks, and can also be expected to
275 exert a negative impact on psycho-social health over and above the impact on physical health
276 caused by poor nutrition.

277

278 There was discussion about participants feeling obliged to show gratitude towards the volunteers
279 and the service. Both van der Horst et al. (2014) and Hicks-Stratton (2004) explored this theme of
280 ‘expected gratitude’, stating that participants often only expressed gratitude because they knew it

281 was expected of them, even if they were dissatisfied with the service^{24, 31}. The work of Marcel
282 Mauss (1990 [1950]) on the concept of the ‘gift’³⁹ provides an interesting lens for analysis of this
283 review, because essentially the provision of food from food bank is a ‘gift’ to the users. Mauss’
284 states that a gift is received “with a burden attached”^(p41) and that there is an obligation to
285 reciprocate once accepting the gift³⁹. He further states that “to accept without giving in return... is
286 to become client and servant, to become small”^{39(p74)}. Mauss’ theory of the ‘gift’ has been applied to
287 food banks by Vlaholias’ et al. (2015) where she concludes that food banks may be perpetuating
288 and in some cases exacerbating inequality through this concept of the unreciprocated gift⁴⁰. For
289 people using the food banks, they are often in vulnerable situations where they have no other option
290 but to seek and accept food charity from food banks, therefore accepting a gift that they have no
291 means or intention of returning, which can be damaging to one’s self-esteem and dignity. Mauss
292 also states that to give “is to show one’s superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank”^{39(p74)}, which
293 could explain the presence of expected gratitude felt by the users. This theory may also provide an
294 explanation for the strong desire of some participants to volunteer at the food banks once accessing
295 the services; this was a way they felt they could reciprocate the gift of food that they had been
296 given.

297
298 All but one of the food banks studied offered pre-packaged hampers to individuals with minimal, if
299 any, choice of the food items they received. Lack of food choice resulted in individuals receiving
300 food items they did not usually eat, did not know how to prepare or food that was of sub-optimal
301 quality^{21, 28-30, 33, 34}. Consequently, going to the food bank and receiving this unsuitable food was
302 found to lead to disappointment, which when compounded by other factors of their vulnerable
303 situations could have a negative impact on identity, self-esteem, reputation and dignity^{23, 24, 31}.
304 Mann (1998) and Jacobson (2009) assert that violations of dignity have the ability to negatively
305 impact the physical, mental and social-wellbeing of individuals^{41, 42}. Consistent violation of dignity,
306 by providing unsuitable food to individuals, has the potential to compound and affect the health and
307 wellbeing of the individuals using this service.

308
309 The studies in this review are of mixed origin, and include published journal articles, theses and
310 organisation reports. Assessment against the CASP guidelines indicated some studies were lacking
311 in quality, but were included regardless as this area of study is under-researched and limited studies
312 were available. Some studies did not reveal how participants were recruited^{32, 35} or how data were
313 analysed^{25, 26, 32, 35}, which raises questions about the appropriateness and credibility of their results.

314

315 Eight of the studies included in this review used multiple qualitative methods, allowing comparison
316 between data sets and adding strength to their results^{21-23, 26, 30, 31, 33, 34}. Another strength of the
317 literature is the common categories that emerged across the studies, which verify the findings and
318 provide a consistent perspective on user perceptions of food banks. The studies included in the
319 review were all conducted in high-income countries with commonality in the way the food banks
320 were run, and similarity in the people accessing the services. As the included studies spanned across
321 16 years, they provided insight and information on more than a decade of user perceptions.
322 Interestingly there is consistency in user perspectives across time and countries.

323

324 **Implications for research**

325 Despite best efforts, these studies demonstrate that food banks are not meeting users' needs when
326 compared with the Committee on World Food Security's definition of food security, which states
327 that people should have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods that meet their specific dietary
328 needs and food preferences¹. Studies consistently reported limited food choice and poor food
329 quality, along with shame, stigma, humiliation and embarrassment associated with food bank use.
330 The poor food quality and limited food choices clearly have an impact on the way users experience
331 food banks. However, even if food banks were providing nutritionally suitable food and meeting
332 users' needs according to this definition of food security, it would be likely that they would still
333 experience some of the negative feelings associated with food bank use such as shame and stigma.
334 The poor food quality and limited choices acts to compound these psychosocial issues. These
335 findings raise questions about food banks being a widespread model and the dominant response to
336 alleviating food insecurity for vulnerable people. Furthermore, this paper provides valuable
337 information for re-orienting and improving the service delivery of food banks, in order to address
338 users' dissatisfaction of particular aspects of the current model.

339

340 **Conclusion**

341 This review indicates that for many, food banks are seen and indeed used as a last resort. Perceived
342 dependence on them is often disliked, and for some can lead to feelings of embarrassment, shame,
343 humiliation and perceived stigma. Most participants valued the presence of food bank, and spoke
344 positively about volunteers, and the social support sometimes provided by the food banks and other
345 recipients of the service. Across these studies there was a dislike of the food provided, often said to
346 be old, inappropriate and/or inedible. Worryingly, this is at a time when the food bank industry is
347 expanding, significantly in some regions, due in no small part to continuing State reliance upon
348 their services. While respondents appreciated these services, many wish to move away from

349 reliance upon them, indicating that these measures are simply ‘band-aids’ that do little to challenge
350 or shift the structural forces that created the food insecurity that brought them to the food bank’s
351 door. This review suggests that provision of food through food banks would benefit from scrutiny
352 with respect to meeting the social and psychological needs of people who are food insecure.

353

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