

Research brief update: Understanding food poverty and the transitional behaviour of vulnerable individuals

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Introduction

“It is patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty.”

Philip Alston,
UN Rapporteur, 2018

Over 10% of the UK population live in ‘persistent poverty’, facing a daily struggle to acquire enough food to eat and experiencing vulnerability on multiple dimensions¹. Also, four million workers now live in poverty, a rise of half a million over five years². Despite rising demand year-on-year for emergency food aid, the UK Government only recently announced plans to measure food insecurity as part of the Family Resources Survey, with the first set of results expected in March 2021³.

To date, UK statistics on food insecurity are largely drawn from the Trussell Trust, who operate approximately 1,200 foodbanks⁴. However, these data exclude the community-based food aid provided by what the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN)⁵ suggests are about 805 independent organisations. Consequently, this omission conceals the full scale and nuances of food insecurity across the UK.

The research presented here offers a more inclusive picture of individual experiences of living with and through food insecurity. More specifically, it identifies the valued aspects and services offered by community-based, independent food aid providers.

About the research

Existing research highlights the escalation of emergency food support initiatives via networked food banks and reasons for access. However, it does not specifically explore the individual transitions in and out of food poverty.

The invisibility of transitions from short-term emergency to everyday food access raises important questions for policymakers and NGOs that remain unanswered, and which this research seeks to help address.

Consequently, the aim of this research was to provide a greater understanding of the nuanced experiences of those living with food access exclusion, and how these individuals,

finding themselves in phases of vulnerability, navigate this period of transition.

The research draws on unique insights from qualitative in-depth interviews with 24 people receiving food aid and 10 food aid providers including Trussell Trust food banks, independent food banks and food clubs/pantries. The interviews took place between August and December 2018, in Birmingham and Greater Manchester.

Key findings

Echoing previous research, various forms of social and economic alienation, including factors such as benefit delays, caps and sanctions, contribute to individuals’ need for emergency food support:

“I’ve just got to wait for them now to see how I figure out my benefits...I’m currently seeking a diagnosis for Asperger’s as well, and that’s making it difficult because I just - there’s just too much to get my head around. It’s really difficult” (Elizabeth, Birmingham, not working).

These factors drive the ‘emergency phase’ of food support, which usually requires referrals and tends to be limited to very few food parcels during a short time period (i.e., the three parcels only model).

For many participants, major intersecting life ‘crises’ like bereavement, divorce and mental health issues prove to be the tipping point in creating food insecurity and prolonging periods of vulnerability and the resulting complex needs people have when in these periods:

“My mum and dad’s death, I moved home and I gave up my relationship with my girlfriend...I’d been with her for nine years, and when you get that phone call that your dad’s got cancer, it’s like, ‘I’m moving on.’...People think that you can get over it and it’s like - they say, ‘Come on, it’s been so many years...’” (Larry, Greater Manchester, not working).

In fact, a state of prolonged vulnerability exists for many of our participants, leading many people to transition from emergency food consumption states to a longer-lasting use of alternative types of food aid such as food clubs/pantries:

“I come here when I can, when I’m short of food, because I only work two days a week and I don’t get benefit, so sometimes I need to build up on my food stock so I come here” (Stuart, Birmingham, working).

People's use of community-based food aid services was sporadic rather than continuous. However, only a small number of clients could foresee a time when they would no longer need at least occasional access to food aid, even though many of them were working or in households with someone who was in work:

"I still have to come here now and again to get a few bits for over the weekend to see me through. If you're on benefits, you get ten items for £2.50 but not everybody's always got £2.50, so if you get a referral form...that means that...they'll give you a bag of shopping. Might not be what you need but if you're starving, you're going to eat it" (Evelyn, Greater Manchester, working).

The stigma attached to using community-based food banks and food aid was evident and continues to act as a barrier to seeking support:

"No matter what you're going through, the food bank's degrading. It's like, I know a lot of people have to use it and it's the thought, you just feel so low that, to me, it could bring on depression and stuff like that because it's like, I can't afford to feed my kids, I've got to go and beg for food" (Caroline, Birmingham, working).

Importantly, the design of the donating space was paramount, with some avoiding visiting food banks and clubs at busy periods to avoid being seen by people they know outside the space of food aid providers:

"You'd go in there and you'd see ex-school colleagues and you wouldn't - because it's all glass-fronted. So you wouldn't go in. It took me hours to go in, I had to make sure the shop was shut - well not shut, but empty" (Larry, Greater Manchester, not working).

Nevertheless, many community-based food aid providers are facilitating appropriate spaces for clients by providing a non-judgemental, positive, compassionate, caring and safe space:

"I'd always heard of food banks but never thought... I thought, I'm never going to be that bad... but I did get to that position. So I did some research and came down here - the first time would be after Christmas last year. They were so nice... You're embarrassed, quite ashamed to want to admit that you've got to come to somewhere like... But they don't make you feel like that at all; they talk to you about your circumstances and what you're claiming and what you're getting" (Yasmin, Birmingham, not working).

The benefits of utilising additional support services where available (e.g., clothes banks,

benefits advice, skills training) were mentioned by all clients, with some even pointing towards improved confidence levels as a result of accessing these services:

"Well, they've given me clothes, they've given me food obviously, they give me a bit of confidence as well because beforehand, I would never have walked in there if there was a load of men in there, not on my own but now I just go in and I've gained a bit of confidence through going there" (Evelyn, Greater Manchester, working).

Aside from the food itself, meeting new people, forging new relationships of mutual support and the food aid services help participants to engender a sense of community, reciprocity and duty of care towards themselves, others and the community volunteers who help. This is particularly the case in independent food aid providers:

"Yes, Julie's starting up a crocheting group again, and because a lot of people are lonely and then live on their own, the pantry and the café, because we're now linked together, it's like, 'Are you coming to the pantry? We'll have a brew at the café" (Caroline, Birmingham, working).

There is a type of 'paying it forward' that enables the continual embedding of non-judgement, positivity, compassion and care in these food aid spaces:

"Because I'm taking free food...I'd like to give something back if I can, but I don't know what, like. So that's probably my way of doing the [karate] lessons here to keep the people and that. Actually, thinking about it now and building with Liam, the plant potters and selling them on to fund for this place if we can, and to show people that we're not all bums" (Arnold, Greater Manchester, not working).

All of these elements, in turn, help to create positive coping strategies that help people to deal with the negative effects of perceived stigma, personal circumstances and lack of support from core welfare systems and government services.

While many food aid providers discussed at length the range of support activities they had on offer, there were concerns this could contribute to advancing the institutionalisation of food banks in the UK. Therefore, it is essential to concede that we cannot resolve food insecurity without addressing the impact of welfare reform and austerity, to which much of food poverty is attributable.

Recommendations

1. Reduce barriers to accessing food aid

Food banks and community-based food aid providers must attempt to provide a less stigmatising system for accessing emergency food and food aid. The use of a voucher referral system, for instance, appears to intensify client stigma by having to “jump through hoops”, “beg” and/or “prove you’re worthy” of receiving a food parcel. Similarly, the design and process of accessing food aid (e.g. waiting in queues, glass-fronted doors), could be improved to reduce stigma.

2. Introduce legislation ensuring the right to a just food system

England and Wales need to implement a ‘right to food’ and enshrine such access to food in law. Already lagging behind the Scottish Government’s Good Food Nation Bill, a joined up food policy could help to improve food insecurity and food quality for all, also enabling a better structured and less restrictive and stigmatising system of food access provision.

3. Accelerate legislation around a sustainable surplus food policy

Aside from the Courtauld Commitment 2025, which aims to cut waste CO2 gases associated with food, more rigorous policies and legislation are needed around a circular economy for surplus food. A legislative ban around surplus food disposal and fewer liability concerns regarding expiry dates can help to ensure that surplus food from retailers and catering outlets reach those community-based food aid providers who need it most.

4. Undertake a review of the impact of welfare reform on food insecurity

The linkages between insufficient welfare support and the escalating demand for emergency food, community-based food aid and their add-on support services are widely acknowledged. Consequently, it is imperative that policy makers carry out a comprehensive review of the impact of welfare reform, with a recognition of the intersection between such reforms and increased food insecurity.

When doing so, it is important to acknowledge the complex needs of the vulnerable people experiencing food insecurity and enhance the statutory services available to these individuals, so that they are supported more appropriately. Enhanced services can include better and more sustained mental health support, community-building activities that can foster socialisation and integration (e.g., through free classes and workshops, free coffee and nibbles in community centres), as well as support in accessing benefits by reducing barriers related to digital literacy.

References

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- ³ End Hunger UK (2019). Campaign Win! UK Government Agrees to Measure Household Food Insecurity. February 27. Available at <http://endhungeruk.org/campaign-win-uk-government-agrees-to-measure-household-food-insecurity/>
- ⁴ The Trussell Trust (2019). About. Available at <https://www.trusselltrust.org/about/>
- ⁵ IFAN (2018). *Mapping the UK’s Independent Food Banks*. Independent Food Aid Network, London. Available at <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/mapping>.

Responses to Findings

The research proved to be timely and attracted a variety of stakeholders to our project dissemination event, which took place at Media City UK, Salford. In addition to a variety of NGOs, charities and businesses, our findings were shared directly with policymakers from both Birmingham (Cllr John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities, City of Birmingham) and Greater Manchester (Paul Dennett, City Mayor of Salford). The following short quotes establish the nature and scale of our research impact, as featured by our expert discussion panel at our end of project event.

[Mike Hawking, Policy & Partnerships Manager \(Work\), Joseph Rowntree Foundation:](#)

“I really welcome this report. I think the thing that is really valuable about it is hearing from the voices of people who are experiencing poverty because that's just something that too often goes unheard”.

[Catherine Connors, Principal Officer, Welfare Rights & Debt Advice Service, Salford City Council:](#)

“We really welcome this report and for two reasons I think, in particular. One is the recognition from speaking to people who have used food banks that that really was a last resort to them...so we've been trying to do some work around early help. The other reason that I really welcome this report is around that recognition of the prolonged periods of precarity...so this sort of really reaffirms something that we've decided in the council in 2017 which was that we would work with our local welfare scheme more closely. The report is useful for those reasons for us and actually, hopefully, reaffirms that we're moving in the right direction with our response to what people need”.

[Kate Cooper, Executive/Board Director, Birmingham Food Council:](#)

“As so many said, this is an outrageous state of affairs in our society today...In a nutshell, the ‘food poverty’ that drives so many people to hunger, isn't about food. It's about poverty and about inequity. There has been considerable development in the thinking around emergency food provision since 2015. There's widespread acknowledgement, too, that city politicians can and do make a difference — despite the drivers of the huge inequities in UK society being out of their direct control”.

[Tom Skinner, Director of GMPA, Greater Manchester Poverty Action:](#)

“I think the greatest strength of this research is that it's all about talking to experts by experience, that the expertise being their experience of food poverty and I think the more we're engaging them in the design of services that they access, the more those services will work for them. I welcome all the recommendations. I think especially talking about enshrining the right to food in law because that forces governments essentially to legally poverty proof future legislation. It should lead to a review of existing approaches as well including welfare reform”.

We also presented our findings separately to the Social Justice Unit of the Scottish Parliament in June 2019, feeding into their review of food poverty across Scotland.

About the Authors

Morven G McEachern joined Huddersfield Business School as Professor of Sustainability in 2017 and co-ordinates SURGE's Sustainable & Resilient Communities Cluster. Morven's research interests lie within a variety of sustainable production and consumption contexts as well as focus on the everyday impact on austerity upon European households. She has presented at a number of international conferences and in a range of academic journals such as *Marketing Theory*, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, *Sociology* and the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Current research includes projects on strategies for reducing food waste, social supermarkets and how vulnerable individuals navigate food poverty as well as sustainable fashion.

Caroline Moraes is Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham. Her research interests converge at the intersection of the sociology of consumption, marketing ethics and sustainability. Caroline has researched a wide range of consumption contexts, including food, and is now focusing on food poverty and consumer vulnerability. Caroline is committed to theoretically informed, qualitative research and has published her work in several journals, including *Psychology & Marketing*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, *Journal of Travel Research* and *Sociology*.

Andrea Gibbons is an Urban Planner and Geographer with experience in the US and the UK as a popular educator and community organizer on environmental and economic justice issues. She is currently teaching in Social Policy and a researcher with the Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford on housing, homelessness, community and health. She is an editor of the journal *City*, and author of *City of Segregation: 100 Years of Struggle for Just Housing in Los Angeles*.

Lisa Scullion is Professor of Social Policy and Associate Director of the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford. Over the last 13 years, Lisa has led and delivered research projects assessing the needs and experiences of a range of socially excluded and vulnerable communities. Lisa is academic lead and a founder member of the Salford Anti-Poverty Taskforce; an innovative research and knowledge exchange collaboration with Salford City Council. Through this Taskforce she is leading a programme of projects that directly support Salford's Anti-Poverty Strategy. Lisa is currently leading the UK's first ever research to focus on the experiences of Armed Forces Service leavers within the social security system, funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT). Lisa is also an Editorial Board member of the journal *Social Policy & Society*.

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