

**Foodbank Use and Food Insecurity in the UK**  
**Submission for United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme  
Poverty and Human Rights**

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Word count (minus references): 2,496

## **Executive Summary**

Food insecurity is an increasing social problem in the UK, closely intertwined with poverty and austerity. Our interview data exploring the experiences of foodbank clients in the Nottinghamshire area of England speak to the following issues of interest to the Special Rapporteur: austerity, the UK benefits system, and adult and child poverty. Our findings revealed the following primary features of foodbank use:

- Experiences of extreme poverty
- Experiences of food insecurity
- Problems with the UK Benefits System
- Child poverty
- Foodbanks as alternatives to Government Services
- Lack of government support fostering desperation

These data reveal the circumstances that lead some members of the UK population to foodbank use.

We use these insights to make a series of recommendations on how foodbanks can shed light on the impact of poverty, austerity, and governmental policy in contemporary UK society.

## 1. Background

Food insecurity, defined as lack of secure access to “sufficient, safe and nutritious food” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2017, p. 107), is increasing amongst the richest nations, with one in eight children affected: a finding that Sarah Cook (UNICEF Innocenti Director) considers ‘a wake-up call’ (UNICEF, 2017). The UK is no exception: UNICEF’s data (Pereira, Handa, & Holmqvist, 2017) reveals food insecurity affects 19.50% of UK children below the age of 15 years. Those affected could seek help from community or charitable foodbanks. The Trussell Trust are the biggest provider of emergency food in the U.K., with over 420 foodbanks within their network. In 2017/2018 they provided 1,332,952 three-day emergency food parcels to people identified as ‘in crisis’ by professionals such as GPs and social workers (Trussell Trust, 2018a). These numbers have increased steadily (13% between 2017 and 2018), but due to the stigma surrounding foodbank use (Garthwaite, 2016) the actual number of people needing help is likely to be far higher. In 2017/18 the primary reasons cited for Trussell Trust foodbank referral include (in order of magnitude): benefit changes, benefits delays, low income, and debt. In light of this, the TT has been a key supporter of the End Hunger campaign petitioning the Government to change UK benefit provision, including the highly-controversial Universal Credit (UC). The TT has stated that the introduction of UC has been responsible for a 52% increase in foodbank use over 12 months (Trussell Trust, 2018b).

## 2. Evidence

We conducted and analysed semi-structured interviews with eighteen foodbank clients in two Trussell Trust (TT) foodbanks in two areas of Nottinghamshire characterised by relatively low socio-economic status to investigate the lived experiences of UK foodbank clients. Specifically, we were interested in exploring the factors that might encourage needy individuals to seek foodbank help, despite the associated stigma. For details, please see our appended journal article (currently under revision in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*). Our data touched on many topics not directly

relevant to our research question, but which we consider to be informative to the Special Rapporteur. These include: austerity, the UK benefits system, and adult and child poverty. We have categorised our data into relevant themes below. We use pseudonyms to preserve participant anonymity, squares brackets to add necessary information, and ellipses to indicate where words were removed from extracts for brevity. For each of the themes listed below, further examples of data can be provided upon request.

## 2.1 Experiences of Extreme Poverty

Many people in our sample (17/18) report experiencing extreme poverty due to life circumstances beyond their control, e.g., ill health, job loss, family breakdown, caring responsibilities, homelessness, debt, and the increasing cost of living. As in previous studies we have found that foodbank users typically experience multiple vulnerabilities, which are exacerbated by poverty and food insecurity (e.g., disability, mental/physical ill-health; Loopstra & Lalor, 2017). Twelve of our eighteen participants shared experiences of mental ill-health which has affected their ability to work and has led to issues such as alcoholism, further increasing of destitution.

Jane: “They never give anyone in this country, well our government, help with such things as when I was going through my chemo, I was cold. And I couldn't afford the heating on. Because I was on sick pay. And that is really bad...I was sat wrapped in blankets, going through chemotherapy, and it was a hard time. I have worked all my life and the government can't even keep me warm.”

Ian: “It puts a lot of pressure on my mental health...When you've got a limited amount of money and, you know, you have to pay it out on certain things like bills and stuff, and then you get more bills and it is just a continuous pattern. By the time you've finished you don't get any money for food.”

## 2.2 Experiences of Food Insecurity

Unsurprisingly, most participants also described their experiences of food poverty and food insecurity (16/18) which led them to draw upon the help offered by foodbanks. Many participants described struggling to pay for food, relying on food donations from friends and family, eating only cheap and unhealthy food to survive, and often going without food for several days.

Ian: "...today is the first time I've eaten in four days because of my financial difficulties."

Henry: "I had a place...I had no electricity, no food...And I went to my work every day, and I was so starving. And erm, I think in between I had a bag of chips or something like that. Some guy must have given me a pound or something...And erm, God, I was starving."

Ethan: "And I was, I was struggling last week, okay. Just as bad. And I got a voucher to come [to the foodbank], and I was that scared of coming, nervous. I didn't come. And I really, really, had a really, really, bad week."

Paul: "I came down [to the foodbank] I think last week or the week before. But going months before that I've sat indoors and I've thought should I go, I might go. And I will make do with what I've got indoors, even if I haven't got meat to go with pasta or rice...So that's why you've got to come down... Some people suffer in silence you know."

While our research highlighted the stigma often associated with the 'foodbank user' label, our interviewees explained that their sheer desperation at their impoverished circumstances led them to feel they had little choice but to attend the foodbank. However, those psychologically unable to enter the foodbank are at even worse risk of food poverty, with Alexander talking of friends who "go in the skips" to find food instead.

## 2.3 Problems with the UK benefits system

In line with the above data provided by the Trussell Trust, a large majority of participants (16/18) cited issues with the UK benefits systems as being a causal factor behind their foodbank use. One of the key circumstances cited was the use of benefit sanctions caused by situations such as lateness to appointments or missed appointments. In several cases, this occurred due to ill-health and the need to attend medical appointments.

Edward: "Well, I should have been paid today, my benefits...I have rang the benefits agency, they said 'Yes well you've been sanctioned', 'Why have I been sanctioned?', 'Late for an appointment'."

David: "I am in a situation now where I've been sanctioned for failing to make an appointment, even though I was at the hospital...And they just stop it automatically before they listen to any explanation or anything like that. As soon as you miss it, they stop it."

Changes in circumstances that led to either a halt in benefits or delays in benefits being paid were also another primary cause of poverty and food insecurity.

Jack: "I was on JSA [Job Seekers' Allowance] and when I went to the doctors they diagnosed me...with depression. I had to go back to the Job Centre to let them know...So then they put me on ESA, then I have to go to their doctors so they can give me an assessment...then it took 6 weeks for me to get my money sorted from JSA to ESA. Which, I thought was diabolical."

Paul: "They [Government] push you in a corner...So prime example is this Bank Holiday. I should have been paid on Friday. They are not going to pay me till Tuesday...Went to the cash point this morning, no money. Got back indoors. Sat down for an hour. What am I going to do? Then I thought,

the foodbank. And I was fighting with it, and then I thought I've got no choice. I have to come to the foodbank..."

Changes to the benefit system were also commonly cited, e.g., stoppage of crisis loans, complex and inaccessible claiming procedures, and inability to meet eligibility criteria (e.g., difficulties participating in work experience). Many people also stated that benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) were insufficient to cover the cost of living due to increasing bills and debt in the current austerity climate.

Albert: "...when I have been to interviews about my claims, into town and you sit and you try to explain to them. And they look at you vacant, you know what I mean. And then you wait three or four weeks thinking oh, you might get something. And then they just send you a letter saying you didn't even claim one point [on the eligibility scale]."

Michael: "You get different stories depending on which department you talk to and person you talk to. How is the lay man supposed to make any sense of it all? First time I went, they put me online on one of their computers, filled this online form out. It took me two hours!"

At the time of data collection, Universal Credit had not been rolled out in the data collection locations, and as such it does not appear in the majority of participants' statements about benefits. However, one participant did express anxiety and confusion regarding its forthcoming introduction.

## **2.4 Child Poverty**

The TT reports that 484,026 of the 1,332,952 three-day emergency food parcels handed out in 2017-18 went to children (Trussell Trust, 2018a). Moreover, single-parent families constitute the largest number of people receiving foodbank aid (Loopstra & Laylor, 2017). Seven of our eight participants

who cared for children described worries around meeting their children's basic needs, and how they and those they know have had to rely on the foodbank to be able to feed and clothe their children:

Mary: "It is not nice, thinking that you can't feed them [children]. And they've [TT volunteers] given...me a bag of clothes for him. Which is grateful."

Jack: "It was at the Job Centre...I went in for a crisis loan. Because I wasn't getting any money, I says 'well I need to feed my kids'."

Ian: "My friend who has got three children, she was in desperate need...and she came down here and got a food voucher and took her out of financial and physical difficulty...So when you've got no money and you've got three kids running about and no food, it is one of the hardest things in the world to watch."

## 2.5 Foodbanks as Alternatives to Government Services

Although participants tended to lament society's need for foodbanks, they recognised that foodbanks possess many qualities that differ dramatically to Government services: rather than being impersonal and perfunctory, foodbanks offer personalised and humanised assistance bound up with an understanding of clients' need for emotional support and companionship. Five of our participants made stark comparisons between experiences of Government services and foodbanks.

Paul: "I thought...you came in [to the foodbank], gave them a piece of paper, take your food and go. But the good thing about here, if you've got any problems you can talk to them about it."

Ethan: "I was expecting it to be a lot more sort of military sort of 'Right OK, voucher number 258 yes that is yours, go', you know. And off you go. Erm, but it is very sort of, it is nice atmosphere. People are nice, pleasant."

Rachel: She [daughter] says 'they [Job Centre staff] just look down their noses at you and say there is a water thing there if you want a drink of cold water'. She says 'and all they offer you is water'. She says 'a lovely cup of tea [at the foodbank]."

## 2.6 Lack of Government support fostering desperation

Seven of our participants talked about how the lack of timely and effective support from the Government is creating stark choices for them between attending the foodbank, committing crime, starving to death or taking their own lives.

Edward: "But it does my head in because they keep sanctioning you, they don't realise that they sanction you, and they wonder why the crime rates are going up...If it weren't for the foodbank, places like this, I would be out robbing."

Michael: "Well it [foodbank] is a safety net isn't it? You know, the alternative is, you starve or go out shoplifting. So, you know, needs must really."

Albert: "You just have to grin and bear it best you can...If I didn't, I'd be hanging over Arch Bridge. You know, I have been out to do it three times now. But I just ain't come to the right place to do it yet."

## 3. Conclusion

Across 18 interviews with foodbank users in Nottinghamshire, we have found strong evidence of the nature of poverty and food insecurity in foodbank users. Impoverished people are reluctant to use foodbanks unless they have no other option, and frequently experience extreme food insecurity.

One of the primary determinants of foodbank users' current needs involves circumstances relating

to the provision of government benefits, including sanctions, delays, inaccessibility, and the insufficient nature of benefit provision in the current economic climate. Indeed, several participants shared a sense of disappointment and disgust in relation to the need for gaps in government support to be filled by the charitable sector, and reliance on charitable organisations to shoulder the responsibilities of a relatively rich government. Finally, our data reveal the potential impact of austerity and governmental policy on experiences of poverty, food insecurity, and multiple vulnerabilities (such as mental/physical ill-health, trauma, and unemployment), and people's ability to access basic human rights such as the right to social security and food and shelter for all.

#### **4. Recommendations**

- Foodbanks should be visited as a mean of gathering insight into the lived experience of individuals experiencing extreme poverty in the UK
- Food insecurity should be used as one indicator of the extent of poverty and the impact of the benefits system in the UK
- Foodbank use can be used as a measure of the impact of poverty on the lives of children and families in the UK
- Data should be collected in areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out to be compared with data from areas where the roll out is ongoing (e.g., Nottinghamshire).
- Recommendations must consider the complex interplay between experiences of poverty and multiple vulnerabilities to provide a full account of the impact of austerity and governmental policy on the UK population.

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