



UCL INSIGHTS: RESEARCH BRIEFING

Who uses foodbanks and why? The impact of financial strain on food security

Rising demand for foodbanks and increasing hospital admissions as a result of malnutrition are a reflection of growing food insecurity in the UK. Food insecurity and the resulting impact on dietary quality, health and general wellbeing are a growing public health concern.

New research from UCL, and the Universities of Bedfordshire, Bath, and Southampton, has investigated some of the underlying causes of growing use of foodbanks, in inner London, and suggests recommendations for addressing these challenges.

- Currently an estimated **8.4 million people in the UK are food insecure**
- This results in **1.1 million requiring emergency food aid from The Trussell Trust foodbanks in 2016/17.**

Food insecurity: People are considered to be suffering food insecurity when they struggle to provide sufficient, safe and nutritious food for themselves and their families

KEY MESSAGES

Who uses foodbanks?

- Most people using foodbanks are **single adults, lone parents, and often unemployed or homeless**, compared to the more varied group of people seeking support or assistance from community Advice Centres.
- **Half of foodbank users are women**, with a **third having child dependants**.
- **Delay or stopping of benefit payments doubles the risk of using foodbanks.**

Why do people use foodbanks?

- **Delays to receiving benefits** are the most common reason foodbank referral.
- Foodbank users are often **experiencing financial strain aggravated by adverse life events** such as loss of earnings or ill health.

What does foodbank use tell us about food insecurity?

- **Three out of four people who visited Advice Centres were food insecure**, but less than 10% had been to the foodbanks in the last six months,
- **The use of foodbanks does not fully reflect levels of food insecurity** in the UK.

Who uses foodbanks?

The majority of those referred to foodbanks are lone mothers and single men, in comparison to other disadvantaged groups such as those attending advice centres for support on issues with housing, debt and money advice for example. Half of foodbank users were women, single, receiving benefits and living in local authority or housing association accommodation, with **one in three having dependent children at home**.

In addition, single, unemployed men made up a large proportion of foodbank users. One explanation for this is that the current unemployment welfare benefits only cover between 30% and, at most, 60% of the minimum income standard for single adults and lone parents living in inner London, respectively. Thus, they lacked financial resilience to weather unexpected events or loss of income.

Foodbank users experience high levels of financial strain, including difficulty paying bills, buying sufficient food or clothing and perceiving they have less than enough money to meet basic needs. A large number also report that they are often hungry but **do not eat due to lack of money**.

For those already living on very marginal budgets, financial shocks, such as loss of income, ill health or the breakdown of a relationship, can easily tip them over the edge into not being able to feed themselves or their families and relying on emergency food support.

What causes food insecurity?

There are a number of factors leading people to use foodbanks, the most dominant of which are:

- **Inability to access benefits** owing to payment delays or being 'sanctioned'
- **Adverse life-events** such as job loss, financial crisis, illness or relationship breakdown
- **Financial strain**, resulting in less than enough money to make ends meet and making a choice between buying food and paying bills
- Many users were experiencing a **combination of these factors**, pushing them into severe food insecurity.

CONTACT UCL PUBLIC POLICY

Sarah Chaytor

s.chaytor@ucl.ac.uk

Director of Research Strategy & Policy

Katherine Welch

k.welch@ucl.ac.uk

Acting Head of UCL Public Policy

Conclusions

With evidence of increasing demand on foodbanks for emergency food support, it is important to identify and tackle the underlying causes of food insecurity in the UK.

The most common reason for foodbank referral are benefit-related problems such as delays or changes, but in comparison to people at advice centres, those at foodbanks also report significantly more adverse life events over the past six months – for example, illness, job loss or benefit problems.

Nearly **one third of foodbank users identified in the research were classified as having a long-term disability**, and **one third were families with children at home**. This suggests there may be large numbers of children at risk of poor nutrition and other food-related health problems.

Furthermore, **growing food insecurity and demand on foodbanks has the potential to cause a serious public health concern** with poor diet increasing the risk of health problems including diabetes, malnutrition, mental health problems anaemia and greater risk of infection, and must be tackled to avoid additional strain on public health services.

Finally, not everybody who is experiencing food insecurity will be referred to foodbanks, making foodbanks a poor proxy for the overall levels of food insecurity in the UK. There is a need to regularly monitor food insecurity nationally, in order to understand the true extent of the problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Minimise benefit delays**, one of the most common causes for referral to foodbanks. Minimise waiting times for first payments and **increase access to advanced payments**. These measures would reduce the risks of pushing those with existing financial strains into destitution.
- **Provide improved guidance and support**. Clear guidelines should be provided at Job Centres to make claimant aware of the support and help available to them whilst waiting for benefit payments, and to prevent them falling into destitution and having to rely on foodbanks.

Reference:

Prayogo E, Chater A, Chapman S, Barker M, Rahmawati N, Waterfall T, Grimble, G. [Who uses foodbanks and why? Exploring the impact of financial hardship and life events on household food security](#). Journal of Public Health.

This work was initially facilitated by a UCL Grand Challenge for Human Wellbeing Small Grant: Edwina Prayogo (UCL School of Pharmacy), Dr Angel Chater (Practice and Policy, UCL School of Pharmacy) and Dr George Grimble (UCL Institute for Liver and Digestive Health) [Exploring the psycho-social determinants of food consumption in parents and individuals who attend Foodbanks](#)

UCL INSIGHTS: RESEARCH BRIEFINGS

UCL Public Policy connects researchers with policy professionals, to inform policy with evidence and expertise.

The UCL Insights: Research Briefings series presents summaries of UCL research and briefings on topical public policy issues.

See more at www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy

**UCL
Public
Policy**