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Do food banks

Jon May, Andrew Williams,
Paul Cloke and Liev Cherry

Food insecurity in the UK



Food insecurity is usually associated with countries in the global South. But a study by the United Nations (UN) in 2014 estimated that 8.4 million people in the UK were living in moderate or severe food insecurity. In the same year, Britain's Faculty for Public Health reported a 19% rise in the number of people admitted to hospital for malnutrition. Within Europe, only Albania has more people in severe food insecurity.

The number of food banks in the UK has increased dramatically. The UK's first food bank, operated by the Trussell Trust, opened in 2001.

- By 2009 the Trust ran 56 food banks, providing 40,989 emergency food parcels a year.

- By 2017, it operated 1,371 food banks and distribution centres, providing 1,182,954 food parcels a year. There were a further 651 independent food banks across the UK.

What is food insecurity?

Food was first declared a universal human right by the UN in 1948, and a Right to Food was incorporated in its International

Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966. The UN defines food security as being achieved when:

“all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

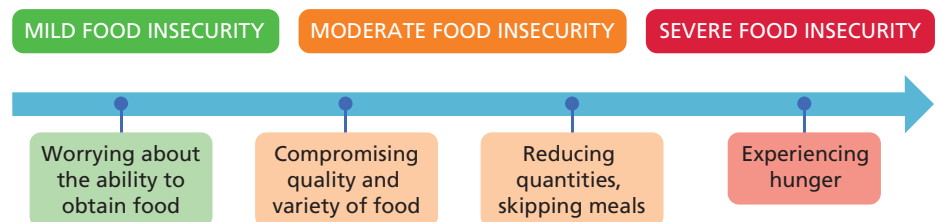
Though it is a signatory of both the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1966 International Covenant, the UK government has not incorporated the 'right to food' into national law, despite growing

political pressure, and it does not measure the number of households suffering food insecurity.

A poor diet and malnutrition are associated with a range of health risks, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, increased fatigue, increased childhood mortality and poor mental health. Food insecurity has varying degrees of severity (Figure 1).

The causes of food insecurity

Research has found that for low-income households food is the third largest item of household expenditure (after housing and



Source: Taylor, A. and Loopstra, R. (2016) *Too Poor to Eat: Food insecurity in the UK*, Food Foundation

Figure 1 Degrees of food insecurity

help?

Food insecurity is a growing issue in the UK. This article shows how geography is vital in understanding the role of food banks in relieving the problems of those who do not have enough to eat

fuel). When poorer households have a sudden reduction in income, or a major expenditure, the food bill is the most 'flexible' cost and the one they seek to reduce first.

There is disagreement over why food insecurity is increasing.

The right-wing view

For those on the right of the political spectrum, food insecurity is the result of an individual's inadequacies: an inability to budget effectively, a poor understanding of healthy eating, or limited cooking skills. In line with the current government's emphasis on the 'behavioural pathways to poverty', in 2014 the Conservative MP Edwina Curry

reported that she was 'very, very troubled at the number of people...using food banks... [who]...never learn to cook...never learn to manage, and the moment they've got a bit of spare cash [are] off getting another tattoo'.

The left-wing view

Those on the left explain food insecurity as an outcome of structural changes that can leave households unable to afford an adequate diet. In the UK these include:

- a 22% rise in food prices, but 9% decline in average incomes (2007–13)
- a 25% rise in domestic fuel bills (2010–15)
- a 14% rise in average private-sector rents (2011–17)

Households have also come under increasing pressure as a result of:

- a growth in part-time, insecure and 'zero hours' work and the 'gig economy'
- cuts to social-welfare spending (with benefits increases below the rate of inflation) following the government's 'austerity drive'

The government has also imposed much stricter criteria on who can claim benefits, and much harsher penalties for those who fail to comply with their conditions, for example, not trying hard enough to find work, or missing an appointment at the Job Centre. If people break these conditions — or fail to provide enough evidence to show they have met them — they may be sanctioned and lose all benefits for up



Economic changes that have added to food insecurity include unpredictable income from jobs in the gig economy

Further reading



The End Hunger UK website gives information on food insecurity in the UK and how to tackle it: <http://endhungeruk.org/menu/>

The Conversation has accessible articles by academics offering a range of views and the latest research on UK food banks: www.tinyurl.com/yc3qfwnk

For a short but powerful film documenting the experiences of food insecurity and food banks see: www.tinyurl.com/y893cna2

In rural areas it may be harder to find fresh affordable food

to 3 years. Since May 2010 more than 900,000 disabled Job Seekers have been sanctioned.

The geography of food insecurity

Recent research shows the number of food banks rising fastest in areas of high unemployment and where the number of benefits sanctions is also high. People's ability to access healthy and affordable food is also shaped by a number of environmental factors.

Very few areas of the UK suffer from the 'food deserts' found in some larger US cities (see Box 1). But poorer households may still struggle to access healthy and affordable food. For people without a car, or money for public transport, it can be difficult to reach supermarkets selling fresh and affordable food. Instead the poorest households often face a 'poverty premium' (see Box 2).

Box 1 Food deserts

A 'food desert' is an area where residents are unable to access affordable and/or healthy food, especially fresh fruit and vegetables, usually because of the absence of a major supermarket within convenient travelling distance. In some US cities, poorer neighbourhoods have very few, if any, large fresh-food markets, grocery stores or supermarkets.

Though poverty and deprivation are often considered 'urban issues', there is growing evidence of poverty and food insecurity in rural areas. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs reported that 16% of rural households were in relative income poverty in 2017. Poorer households often face an especially high 'rural premium'. Larger supermarkets and services tend to be clustered in bigger market towns that can be difficult to reach by limited and expensive rural buses.

What is a food bank?

Food banks provide emergency food aid to people in times of crisis. All the UK's food banks are run by voluntary organisations or charities, mostly churches, but also mosques and synagogues, tenants' associations and community groups. Two thirds of them are franchises of the Trussell Trust which, in return for an annual fee, provides a shared set of procedures for running the food bank, and access to donations from corporate sponsors (Tesco and Asda). The other third of UK food banks operate independently.

The size of UK food banks, and the services they offer, varies widely. Some independent food banks offer a range of both packaged and fresh food, and allow people to choose the food they need. But the majority, including those operated by the Trussell Trust, provide a standardised food parcel designed to offer a balanced diet of complex carbohydrates (rice

Box 2 Poverty-premium case study: Greenwich

A recent study of food insecurity in the London Borough of Greenwich measured how many, and what kind of, food shops were within walking distance (400 metres) of local residents, and the cost of an average basket of food in different retailers.

The study found that residents in 14 of the borough's most deprived neighbourhoods were not within walking distance of a large supermarket. Comparing prices, the research found clear evidence of a 'poverty premium'. The cost of a healthy food basket in 18 smaller retailers on which these residents relied ranged from £18.40 to £34.50. In Tesco and Lidl, neither of which they could easily access, the same basket cost £12.60 and £12.50.

or pasta), protein (tinned meat or fish) and (tinned) fruit and vegetables. In addition, many food banks offer benefits advice, debt advice and help with household budgeting, or they may 'signpost' users to services elsewhere.

Most UK food banks operate some kind of rationing and referral process. Before they can be given food, people using a Trussell Trust food bank must obtain a voucher from a local

'referral agency' that determines their needs (typically, Citizens Advice, a Job Centre, GP, social worker or school). This voucher is then exchanged for 3 days' worth of food. Because they are focused on providing help in times of crisis rather than long-term support, Trussell Trust food banks expect people to be referred to them no more than three times in any 6-month period.

Can food banks solve food insecurity?

Food banks receive a lot of public support in the UK, including more than 4 million volunteer hours a year. The support food banks offer can be vital in helping people cope with a crisis. However, many scholars are sceptical of the ability of food banks to solve problems of food insecurity.

Issues with the way they work

There are no reliable data on the number of individuals using food banks in the UK. But it is clear that the 560,000 people estimated to have used Trussell Trust food banks in 2016–17 are only a small proportion of the millions experiencing food insecurity in the UK. It is also clear that 3 days of food is not enough to meet the needs of people for whom food insecurity is an ongoing problem. Similarly, restricting the number of times people may use food banks does not meet the

needs of those who move in and out of food insecurity on a regular basis. This happens to people who, for example, struggle to cope with expected but unaffordable bills, or rely on low-paid and insecure work.

It also seems likely that fewer people than might be expected turn to food banks because of the stigma attached to asking for charity.

Making the problem worse

More radical critics suggest not only that food banks cannot hope to solve problems of food insecurity, but that by 'plugging a gap' that should be filled by government they may make it worse. They may be institutionalising food charity and legitimising cuts to the welfare state.

Critics also suggest that the referral systems used by many food banks can make people feel judged and stigmatised, as they do when they apply for benefits. The fact that some food banks offer advice on household budgeting and debt tends to suggest that the individual rather than the system is responsible for their poverty.

Another argument against food banks is that they give major supermarkets valuable PR by accepting funding and 'surplus food' from them but the supermarkets are not challenged on:

- over-production in the food system (which is damaging to the environment)

- high food prices (donating surplus food instead of selling it keeps prices artificially high)
- low pay for supermarket workers (some of whom have to rely on food banks themselves)

Box 3 Food-bank case study: Greenwich and Tower Hamlets

A key criticism of charitable welfare is that uneven coverage leads to a 'postcode lottery', with the amount and form of assistance dependent on where people live. Though fewer (26.9%) residents in the London Borough of Greenwich live below the poverty line than in Tower Hamlets (38.99% of residents), Greenwich has eight food banks, Tower Hamlets only three.

This might suggest people in Greenwich have greater access to emergency food, but all the food banks in Greenwich are run by the Trussell Trust, which operates a referral system and three-visits rule. In Tower Hamlets, the First Love Foundation's two food banks have similar rules. However, people can approach Bow Food Bank without a referral, choose the food they need, and visit up to 15 times.



A food bank run by the Trussell Trust

The geography of food banking

Like many voluntary organisations, some food banks have a lot of volunteers and donors, others — notably those in poorer communities — struggle to find either. The distribution and type of food banks also varies in different areas, so where you live may have a significant impact on whether you can access emergency food (see Box 3, p. 33).

These problems are especially acute in rural areas. Research by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) shows that 28% of England's independent food banks are in districts classified by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as 'mainly' or 'largely' rural. But the number of food banks varies widely by area, for example there are 15 in rural Northumberland, only one in rural Sussex and none in rural Gloucestershire. Even where there is a food bank in their county, people in remote rural locations may struggle to access it (or a referral agency to obtain a food voucher) because of the cost of transport.

In response to these challenges, rural food banks often operate differently from urban ones. They may give larger food parcels, supply food parcels through other providers such as GP surgeries, or operate delivery services.

Conclusions

Food banks offer an obvious response to growing problems of food insecurity in the UK. But although they provide vital support to people in crisis, they cannot solve the problems of food insecurity. They may even make a solution to those problems harder as they shift food security from a right (enshrined by the UN, and to be met by the state) to a question of charity.

Many food-bank providers are aware of these tensions, and are working on both 'downstream' and 'upstream' solutions, providing food now to those who need it, while campaigning for changes to the food system, benefits system, and low pay. But while they continue to draw on supermarket donations, and reinforce individualistic constructions of poverty, it will remain difficult for UK food banks to challenge either the supermarkets or the government about their role in perpetuating food insecurity.

Questions for discussion

- 1 What are the main causes of food insecurity?
- 2 What are the positives and negatives of food banks as a response to problems of food insecurity?
- 3 What can geographers add to understandings of food insecurity, food banking, and welfare provision?

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Key points



- A growing number of people in the UK are struggling with food insecurity.
- Food insecurity is associated with poverty, but is also shaped by the accessibility of healthy food and affordable food retailers.
- The number of food banks in the UK has grown dramatically in recent years.
- Though they enjoy wide public support, and provide essential emergency help, food banks are unlikely to solve problems of food insecurity and may make those problems worse.
- The distribution and type of food bank varies geographically, leading to a postcode lottery in the availability of emergency food.

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