

Hunger on the rise in UK

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Hunger is on the rise in Britain according to some of the UK's leading food charities, even as government austerity measures cut at the remnants of social services for the poor and working class.

The food charity Fareshare began life as an environmental charity against food waste but says it is now the plight of the hungry that drives its work. It has seen a 20 percent rise in demand for its services this past year. Fareshare redistributes food from manufacturers and supermarkets to charities. Food that is either out of date, surplus to requirements, or has package printing errors usually ends up in landfill sites. Fareshare redirects a small percentage of this food waste, 1 percent out of a total three million tonnes of waste, to alleviate the desperate plight of an increasing number of people.

The total number of people Fareshare feeds has risen this last year from 29,000 to 35,500. The number of homelessness hostels and drop-in centres that Fareshare serves has also grown from 600 to 700 from last year, and 40 percent of these charities report a 50 percent increase in demand, which they are struggling to meet.

Fareshare in the town of Leicester, for example, has seen its food distribution rise from 41 tonnes only three years ago to 98 tonnes today. The Centre Project in Leicester, a drop-in centre providing hot meals, now feeds 70 or 80 people a week as opposed to the 30 or 40 last year. Project 5000 in Loughborough reports a similar increase in demand over the last six months. Also in Loughborough is Joseph's Storehouse. The hostel for the homeless, run out of a converted pub, previously helped a dozen people a week. Now 100 people a week knock at its doors.

The Trussel Trust food bank saw the numbers it helped this year soar to 61,500 people, up from 42,000 last year. This food charity opened its first food bank in 2004 and now runs 100 food banks throughout the UK that distribute emergency food parcels to the needy

referred to them by Social Services. The Trussel Trust says they are helping increasing numbers of 16 to 30 year olds. In fact, one-third of people now receiving food parcels are young people, due to the high rates of youth unemployment. In areas like Exeter, Cardigan, and the Isle of Wight as much as 80 percent of those seeking food are young. In Okehampton, where unemployment shot up six-fold, they are helping 200 people a week, up from 20 last year.

It is not only the 16 to 18 year olds or the single homeless who are experiencing increasing hardship. Both the Trussel Trust and Fareshare are reporting poor, working families turning up for help, who after paying the mortgage and utility bills cannot afford to put food on the table. There are also grandmothers whose extended families have a high proportion of unemployed members, or people who have just lost their businesses. People who in the past were not considered in danger of hunger are now increasingly turning to food charities for help.

For the newly jobless, the time lag between signing on as unemployed initially and receiving benefits can mean destitution. For those with work, low wages relative to the cost of living has led to a burgeoning category known as the working poor. According to the Resolution Foundation Thinktank, one in five of those with work earn less than a living wage. Thirteen million people are living in poverty in Britain, defined as earning 60 percent of the average national wage, a figure compiled by Martin Caraher, professor of Food Policy at City University London. His research also shows that four million people are suffering "nutritionally related consequences."

Professor Caraher's studies are echoed by a report from the food chain Asda, which notes a record fall in the disposable income of shoppers due to rising prices. According to Asda the spending power of its customers has slumped by 7.9 percent, the biggest squeeze since

the 1920s. With annual inflation at 4.5 percent in August, up from 4.4 percent in July, price rises are exceeding the growth in incomes. This is expected to worsen in 2012 as public sector spending cuts mount. Along with increases in transport costs, electricity prices went up 5.1 percent from last year and gas prices 8.3 percent.

Uswitch, which compares the prices of UK energy suppliers, recently published a survey of ten developed European countries and put the UK at the bottom, behind Ireland and Italy, in terms of its high cost of living. The UK has the fourth highest retirement age and working people enjoy 5.5 fewer holidays a year.

More and more people over age 50 are also being pushed into poverty, according to Saga, a consumer body for this age group. These so-called “baby boomers” are now facing the prospect of rising unemployment due to public sector job cuts, and with it the danger of food poverty. This will affect women in particular who make up three quarters of the workforce in local government.

The austerity measures of the coalition government are further devastating vital services to the most vulnerable families in Britain.

According to the UK’s biggest children’s charity, Barnardo’s, local authority cutbacks are impacting on the services provided to the 120,000 so-called dysfunctional or troubled families, who also often happen to be the poorest. Barnardo’s supports 18,000 children and 80,000 families annually.

Originally founded in 1866 to care for orphans and young people in destitution and now operating worldwide, Barnardo’s reports a catastrophic cutback in its funding. This major charity has lost 9 percent of £156 million in statutory funding due to government cutbacks as well as two-thirds of its funding for its family support services. Barnardo’s also helps children with such diverse needs as autism, parents in prison, and provides parent support advisers to work with schools.

Barnardo’s is only one of more than 2,000 charities struggling to fill the many gaps in social provision that is being dismantled by the state.

Increasing numbers of people are threatened with being deprived of the most basic essentials of life, such as food on the table and a roof over one’s head. Such is the reality of life under capitalism in a so-called

developed country.

Not everyone is having it bad though. While unemployment goes up, while wages lag behind prices, and hunger hits the headlines, it’s not only the super-rich who are increasing their wealth. The total pay of the six-figure salaried general secretaries and chief executives of trades unions in the UK rose by 5 percent last year.



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