

Food bank use rises dramatically in Britain

Dennis Moore
9 February 2012

Tens of thousands of Britons are struggling to make ends meet, forcing ever greater numbers to resort to the use of food banks.

There are now 163 food banks in the UK. In 2011 alone there was one opening every week.

Food banks were first launched in 2000 by the Trussell Trust to address the problem of providing emergency provisions of food to people who had no money. People are referred from Citizens Advice, GPs (doctors), social workers and school liaison officers. Each person is entitled to three vouchers at a time, with each voucher exchanged for an emergency bag of food that lasts approximately three days.

Food banks have seen a rise in some cases of between 15 percent and 30 percent in traffic since the beginning of the recession. The level of generalised poverty in the UK has grown to 13 million people living below the poverty line.

Chris Mould, executive chairman of the Trussell Trust, has estimated that 1,000 food banks are needed across the country. The charity is planning to expand its operation to 445 food banks by 2015 to be able to feed 450,000 people a year, but this will rely on receiving £1.6 million in funding.

There has been a marked increase in the number of young people needing help since January, 2011 when the government scrapped the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) paid to working class youth to seek higher education. The manager of the Salisbury Food Bank, Mark Ward, says, “We have kids at college coming in. They might live at home, but the parents have issues, or they may be sofa surfing—living at friends’ houses”.

In September 2011, the Trussell Trust said that the numbers of young people using its food banks had risen from 41,000 to 65,500 in the previous 12 months.

Many young people are not entitled to welfare benefits. Now the government is launching a major

attack on existing welfare arrangements that will force many people already on the bread line over the edge.

It is estimated that up to one third of the UK population have little or no savings, or any available funds to fall back on. Mould said, “We have people who are going without food in order to feed their children, sometimes for days, for all sorts of different reasons, but fundamentally because their incomes are too low to support their basic needs of housing, clothing and food.”

The growth in the use of food banks is not restricted to those on benefits, or the lowest incomes. Ten percent of those using food banks would be considered middle income people, who have had to suffer pay freezes or have lost their jobs.

In 2011 FareShare, an organisation founded in 2004 that redirects food trade surpluses to those in need from 17 sites in the UK, saw an increase in the number of people it feeds from 29,000 to 35,500. The number of organisations who have signed up to receive food from FareShare rose from 600 to 700. Some 42 percent of those organisations recorded increases of up to 50 percent in demand for their services, the largest annual increase in the number of charities asking for help.

For those dependent on benefits, it has become a hand-to-mouth existence. One woman who was eight months pregnant had to resort to burning shelves to be able to keep warm.

In 2011, three factories closed down in the small town of Okehampton in Devon, leaving 350 workers redundant. A local food bank run from a Baptist church, which had previously sent food parcels to impoverished East European countries, had to redirect some of its aid to Okehampton, due to the unprecedented demand. As many as 200 people a week sought food assistance following the closures. Many of the workers had not been paid for weeks, and then had to wait up to five more weeks before they started to

receive any state benefits.

This exemplifies how the sharp rise in food and fuel prices is leaving many people with a stark choice: either pay the rent, try to keep warm or eat.

Martin Caraher, professor of food policy at City University London, told the *Guardian* that recent research confirms the massive increase in the use of food banks recorded by the Trussell Trust and FareShare.

He said, “There are around 13 million people in Britain living in poverty, which is defined as earnings of 60 percent of the national average. Of those, four million are suffering nutritionally-related consequences. And the big new group are working families.”



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