

Growing use of food banks in the UK

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Nearly 130,000 people, including more than 45,000 children, used food banks operated by the Trussell Trust in the UK last year.

This represents an increase of more than 100 percent over the previous year. The trust is a Christian charity, whose remit is “to empower local communities to combat poverty and exclusion in the UK and Bulgaria.”

People who use its food bank services are given a minimum of a three-day supply of emergency foodstuffs made up of milk, sugar, fruit juice, soup, pasta sauces, tinned fruit, rice and sponge puddings, tinned tomatoes, pasta, tinned meat and other basic staples.

The Trussell Trust is the only body operating food banks in the UK. They are a relatively new phenomenon. A Coventry University report of November 2011 noted that although charitable food assistance programmes were well established in some developed countries such as the US and Canada, they were not common in the UK. But since the early 2000s, there had been a rise in organised food provision “in the form of both community food banks and food redistribution programmes.”

The Trussell Trust established its first food bank in Salisbury in 2000. The first half of 2011 “saw the launch of a new food bank every week.”

In its press release last month, the Trust explained that it now operates 201 food banks, of which 100 had been opened in the previous 12 months. The most common reason for people turning to food banks was delays in the payments of their benefits (reported by 29 percent), while 19 percent reporting low income in general. Other reasons included homelessness and the absence of free school meals during school holiday periods.

The Trust’s executive chairman, Chris Mould, stated,

“Food banks are seeing people from all walks of life turn to us for help when they hit crisis. The current economic crisis means that times are tough for many. Every day we meet parents who are skipping meals to feed their children or even considering stealing to stop their children going hungry. It is shocking that there is such a great need for food banks in 21st Britain, but the need is growing.... As the government’s latest budget begins to take effect we anticipate that more people will turn to food banks.”

The Trust foresees having to provide emergency food packages to more than half a million people by the financial year 2015-2016. It plans to operate a food bank in every major British town.

People are referred to the Trust by frontline care professionals, including doctors, social workers and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

The Trust website gives a snapshot of some of those facing food emergencies, such as: “Anne-Marie and Danny, 22, [when] a delay in benefits hit at the same time as Danny was off work with flu. He received no sick pay and finances got so tight that they were faced with eviction as well as having no money for food. The couple and their 18-month-old daughter, Tia, were living and sleeping in one room to reduce heating bills. They resorted to borrowing a tin of soup from their neighbours to stop little Tia going hungry. When the food bank delivered an emergency food box to the delighted family there was ice on the inside of their windows.”

With incomes and benefits either flatlining or being cut, and the cost of living rising, many are struggling to put food on the table. A recent Which report found a fifth of people having to borrow money to buy food, a quarter having to use savings to buy food and a fifth having gotten into debt to provide food for themselves and their families. A further 10 percent said they expected to have to borrow money in the future to

purchase food.

Two recent separate reports highlight malnutrition in children. In a survey by YouGov of more than 500 teachers conducted on behalf of the Prince's Trust and the *Times Education Supplement (TES)*, almost half reported regularly seeing children going hungry. The *TES* magazine quoted one teacher: "Whilst on lunch duty I often see scavenger pupils finishing off mate's scraps as they haven't eaten enough."

The *TES* article went on: "Others said that free school meals were often the only food that some students were given to eat.... Several teachers reported buying food or clothes for pupils."

The other report, "Fair and Square", produced by the Children's Society, highlighted the importance of free school meals for children living in poverty in giving them at least one nutritious meal each day. The report warns that proposed government benefit reforms would mean around 120,000 families losing entitlement to free school meals.

It warns that in England around a third of school age children (700,000) living in poverty are not entitled to free meals. Another half a million children who are entitled are not in receipt of free school meals, often over fears of being stigmatised.

Britain is seeing a return to conditions associated historically with the "Hungry 30s", as all postwar welfare state provisions are dismantled.



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