

# Food bank use surges as hunger spreads across Britain

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Britain's biggest food bank provider, the Trussell Trust, has reported an explosion in food bank use as a direct outcome of austerity measures, welfare cuts, energy price increases and low pay.

Its findings confirmed that food bank use has tripled this year, with 355,985 people, including 120,000 children, receiving food parcels from its food banks between April and September 2013.

The Trust's report is only the latest in a series charting the growth of hunger across Britain. Charity Oxfam reveal that 500,000 rely on food parcels to survive. These figures only represent individuals referred to food banks by health and welfare professionals.

The Trust points out that one in five recipients of food parcels, 65,177 people, were referred to its food banks as a direct result of government attacks on welfare benefits in the first half of this year, compared with 14,897 in the same period last year. Delays in the payment of benefits resulted in 117,442 people being referred between April and the end of September, compared with 35,597 in the same period in 2012-2013.

An indication of the scale of the crisis is that FareShare, a major charity organisation involved in food banks, is supplying meals for more than 50,000 people a day. Tesco's supermarkets are to provide the equivalent of 7 million meals a year to charities in the UK associated with FareShare. Tesco is planning to divert all surplus fresh food from its distribution centres into the charities.

The British Red Cross has announced it is preparing to collect food and distribute food parcels in Britain through FareShare, for the first time since the Second World War. All indications are that it is the beginning of a long-term strategic reorientation. Juliet Mountford,

the Red Cross head of UK Service Development, said there is "strong evidence of an increased need for support on food poverty issues."

A survey by consumer group Which? revealed that due to stagnating and declining income, "rocketing food prices are causing stress and worry, and leaving people wondering how they are going to cope."

Eighty-six percent of people are spending a bigger proportion of their income on food, while three out of ten are buying less food.

Earlier this year, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's Department of Works and Pensions spokesperson revealed that "Jobcentre Plus—for the first time—is now referring people to their services."

Chris Price, executive director of Pecan food bank in South London, explained, "They [jobcentre staff] do not use it [the cash advances system] or they are advised not to use it. The jobcentre official is saying to the claimants in effect: 'We cannot give you any money, but here's a voucher for a food bank because we don't want to see you starving.' If claimants are coming to us instead of getting a short-term advance then they are getting food, but if we keep doing that it puts us in a position where we are becoming part of the welfare state."

As the personal tragedies driving food bank use escalate into a social catastrophe, a Department for Work and Pensions spokesperson declared there was no "evidence" government welfare cuts are "linked to increased use of food banks."

Education Secretary Michael Gove described food bank use as the consequence of poor financial "decisions." Works Minister and former investment banker Lord Freud accused food bank recipients of cashing in on a "free good" of which "there's almost infinite demand."

The *Paisley Daily Express* reported the fate of James O'Neill, 37, a nursing assistant after his wife Judith lost her job as a care worker.

“I’ve worked all my days and feel guilty about coming here because I don’t think I should be taking handouts,” he said. “Unfortunately, the cost of living has rocketed and we have been left struggling to eat, pay our mortgage, clothe ourselves, heat our house and put fuel in our car. The decision to come down here has been so painful but I can’t just sit by and watch my family go hungry.”

James works at the Golden Jubilee Hospital in Clydebank. He said, “Our tax credits and benefits have been cut and we just aren’t making enough money to get by. Without the food bank to help us, I don’t know what we would do.”

The *Guardian* reported, “Just over a year ago, Trussell’s Coventry food bank was overwhelmed after 23 local families, all from eastern Europe, who had had their benefits stopped, turned up without warning. The call went out to other network members, and more than 1,000 kg of food was shipped in practically overnight from food banks in Gloucester and farther afield.”

The Trust also reported, “A primary school boy from Gloucester stopped attending school recently because he could not face the embarrassment of having no money for lunch. On visiting his home to deliver a food bank parcel, the school’s liaison officer discovered there was no food, except a little oats and milk. The mother’s purse was empty. The mother of two explained that her husband had left her and that the benefits were in his name. He had not been contributing towards child care since leaving and when she informed the Benefits Agency all benefits were stopped, including child benefit, because of her ‘change in circumstances’. The support worker estimated that it would take two to four months for the benefits to be re-assessed. Officially, additional benefits like free school meals are not available to children unless parents can prove that they are in receipt of benefits.”

The response of Britain’s biggest trade union Unite to the Trust’s announcement, alongside the Labour Party, is to urge the government to organise an inquiry into the outcome of its own policies. The desperate conditions now facing the working class are the result of the utter failure of such bankrupt appeals.



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