

# UK foodbank organizer says most recipients are working poor

Robert Stevens  
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More than a million people in the UK now rely on foodbanks in order to eat. This is the direct outcome of years of austerity measures, welfare cuts, energy price increases and low pay.

Almost one million people were assisted by just one of the main foodbank providers last year, the Trussell Trust. According to their figures, 913,138 people, including 330,205 children, received three days' emergency food from their foodbanks in 2013-14 compared to 346,992 in 2012-13. This is close to triple the number helped in the previous year. The trust now operates 433 foodbanks nationwide with two more opened each week to meet demand.

According to a recent survey, another 182,000 parcels of food are being donated each year by a further 45 foodbanks. In total there are now some 1,000 foodbanks in operation in the UK.

Commenting on the extent of the crisis Trussell Trust chairman Chris Mould said "It's close to triple the numbers helped last year, shocking in 21st century Britain. But perhaps most worrying of all is this figure is just the tip of the iceberg of UK food poverty.

"It doesn't include those helped by other emergency food providers, those in towns where there is no foodbank, people too ashamed to seek help or the large number who are only just coping by eating less and buying cheap food.

"In the last year we've seen things get worse, rather than better, for many people on low incomes. It's been extremely tough for a lot of people, with parents not eating properly in order to feed their children and more people than ever experiencing unfair and harsh benefits sanctions."

Ewan Gurr from the Trussell Trust commented this month: "All the empirical evidence and research shows that welfare reform is the main force driving increasing

demand for foodbanks."

According to regional figures supplied by the Trust, more food for meals is given out in the North West of England than anywhere else. A total of 138,644 people, including 51,083 children, received emergency assistance last year in the region.

Robert Skelton, one of the Socialist Equality Party's eight candidates in the North West region for last week's elections to the European parliament, spoke to Scott Tulloch, who runs a foodbank at Lower Broughton in central Salford, one of the nationwide network belonging to the Trussell Trust. The trust has another foodbank in the Salford Quays area of the city.

The Salford Central Foodbank is one of 17 in the Greater Manchester area and relies on 45 volunteers in addition to Tulloch as the only paid employee, to keep it going. Most food comes from supermarkets, which provide boxes for their customers to fill.

"We are very busy," Tulloch said. "We have helped 1,000 people since January and given out food for 10,000 meals. This year we will need 25 tons of food—double last year. In November, December and January the number of people needing help went up 9 percent a month. Christmas was really heartbreaking. Last Friday we had 45 people coming to us in two hours."

Contrary to media reports, the foodbanks are not full of "benefit cheats" or the workshy, said Tulloch. "Firstly, people have to be referred to us with a voucher from one of our 64 partner agencies such as job centres, citizens' advice bureaus, doctors and churches. More agencies want to send people to us, but we have to make sure we have enough food.

"Secondly, we are only a crisis foodbank. That means people can only have three vouchers for three days of food every six months. If people need more help than

that we will refer them to other charities, churches or drop-in centres which may provide hot meals.

“Most are working poor people who can’t make ends meet. Not so much young or very old people, but like one middle-aged man who told me, ‘I’m 40 years old and never thought I would end up begging for food’. They are really poor trying to survive on £60 a week. Some have mental health issues or have no one to turn to.

“Many of those we see are jobless people who have had their benefits stopped—often for ridiculous reasons. Many say they have been ‘sanctioned’ for not turning up to a job interview. They claim that they did not receive the letter telling them about it—and I believe them. There are too many like this for it not to be true.

“But there are no proper jobs anyway. The majority advertised are for cleaners and carers on zero-hour contracts. These contracts are a real killer. People work just 10 hours then have to apply for benefits again, which can take up to five weeks to come through and are forced to come to us in the meantime to get by. They need to feed their kids.”

Tulloch described how people go the foodbank as a result of debt problems and the “bedroom” tax, where housing benefit is cut by £16 if the home is judged to have a spare bedroom. Because of a shortage of single-bedroom accommodation, many have been forced to stay in bigger properties and have the tax automatically deducted, leaving them unable to pay for other necessities.

Skelton asked Tulloch about reports in the local press recently about special food parcels called “kettle boxes.” Tulloch explained that the foodbank tries to make up food parcels that are nutritionally balanced, not just “beans and pasta.” However, fresh food usually needs cooking.

“For the really poorest we have to make up ‘kettle boxes’ of things like instant noodles that only need a cup of hot water. But you’d be surprised how many people do not have electricity. We had one guy recently who couldn’t afford to have a shower and used to boil a couple of kettles of water and fill a bucket to stand in. We try to direct people to the Social Fund offices, to get the £20 to help, but that money is discretionary, not bottomless, and has been cut.”

Tulloch concluded, “I really want to answer all the misconceptions that the people we are helping are

‘scroungers’. They really are poor. No one chooses to be like that.”



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