

Growing poverty leads to vast increase in UK food bank demand

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The enormous number of people in the UK depending on food banks for emergency food parcels is set to escalate.

Latest figures from the Trussell Trust, which operates more than 420 food banks across the UK, show a 2 percent rise in demand for the year 2015/2016 over the previous year. Some 1,109,309 food parcels, which provide three days of rations to tide people over an emergency, were distributed.

The rise in number of parcels runs parallel to the increasing levels of austerity imposed by successive governments following the financial crisis of 2008. In the year 2008/2009, immediately following the financial crisis, the Trussell Trust distributed just 25,899 emergency food parcels. Now it has reached 1 million emergency food parcels a year, with the Trust warning that this must not become the new normal.

The Trust, in collaboration with Hull University, has used data mapping to show an unfolding correlation between food bank use and areas with high numbers of people in skilled manual work, who have long-term illnesses or disabilities. It also noted that the main drivers for people turning to food banks were problems with benefit payments and low incomes.

These figures showing increasing dependency on food banks are backed up by a report issued in July by researchers at Oxford and Chester universities and authored by Dr. Elisabeth Garratt, a research fellow at the Centre for Social Investigation at Nuffield College, Oxford. They studied users at a Trussell Trust food bank in West Cheshire, which handed out nearly 2,900 parcels last year.

The report, titled “#stillhungry, Who is hungry, for how long, and why?”, highlighted the impact of austerity and hunger on children, revealing that one in three of recipients of food parcels during the year of

study was a child.

Dr. Garratt said, “We find that emergency food referrals rose in 2016 and there is every indication that food banks are here to stay. ... These findings show there are huge levels of poverty—even in a country as wealthy as ours.”

The report claims to represent “the most systematic and detailed exploration yet conducted of people receiving emergency food in the UK. ... Over forty percent of referrals reflected problems in the benefits system—whether changes, delays or sanctions. Problems of low incomes and debt were also prevalent. ...”

The Trussell Trust also released a press report on July 25 highlighting the impact school holidays have on parents. For many parents, the summer break puts increased financial pressure on already tight budgets and increases their anxiety over how to feed their children, particularly as there are no breakfast clubs or free midday meals for their children.

The report noted that around 20 percent of parents, with children between the ages of five and sixteen, would skip meals over the school holiday period to be able to feed their children. For younger parents aged between 25 and 34, the figure rises to a third. In total, around 1.5 million parents will miss some meals over the school holiday period. It also pointed out that last year, the Trust gave out an additional 5,000 emergency food parcels to children in July and August compared to the previous two months.

Trussell Trust Food Bank Network director Adrian Curtis said, “Families who rely on free school meals during term time can find themselves facing hunger in the school holidays, when there is an extra financial pressure to provide main meals. No one knows the full scale of hunger in the school holidays yet, but these figures make one thing clear: many families are closer

to crisis than we think. It should be a wake-up call to us all that so many children will have a parent expecting to skip a meal or more this summer so they can feed the family.”

To try to address the need for food aid over the summer holiday, the Trussell Trust has initiated a pilot project of holiday clubs providing meals and other support, and plans to set up 50 over the next two years.

The evidence from the Trussell Trust showing increased reliance on food banks is confirmed even more sharply by Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS). A recent CAS report, “Living at the Sharp End,” noted: “Last year Scottish CABs [Citizens Advice Bureaus] gave advice relating to food banks on over 7,400 occasions...an increase of 47 percent on the previous year. During 2014/15, 1 in every 42 Scottish CAB enquiries featured advice regarding food banks.”

The extent of poverty was such that “Almost two thirds of our survey respondents (63 percent) said they sometimes cut down on gas and electricity and 71 percent said they sometimes cut down on food.”

Commenting on the report, CAS head of policy Susan McPhee said, “It is clear that the social security system is simply not working for the most vulnerable people in our society.”

That those attending food banks have multiple problems related to their level of poverty was also revealed in a recent survey published by the Rutherglen and Cambuslang Food Bank in the city of Glasgow. Of the almost 2,000 people fed in the past financial year, 433 were children.

In the survey, recipients of food parcels at the food bank’s three outlets were asked about problems paying for fuel usage. Of those experiencing fuel poverty, 90 percent were using pay-as-you-go meters (the most expensive method of buying fuel), 40 percent had gone without electricity for up to a week, and 18 percent without gas for a similar period. Another gruesome statistic involved two food bank clients unable to afford gas for more than a month.

Half of people reporting fuel poverty had experienced Job Centre sanctions (in which their benefits are cut or delayed as punishment). Others reported that paltry Universal Credit payments did not go far enough or that debt was the reason for their fuel shortages.

Some 79 households were given a £25 top-up for pay-as-you-go electricity or gas meters, but this was only

made possible due to a £680 donation made to the food bank.

Ian Robertson of the Rutherglen and Cambuslang food bank committee explained, “This survey, while short and limited in scale, shows clearly that food and fuel poverty are linked, with the vast majority of food bank clients being obliged to use the most expensive forms of energy—prepayment meters.”

The imposition of Conservative Theresa May, a hard-line Thatcherite, as prime minister following the Brexit referendum vote to leave the EU, indicates the determination of the ruling elite to maintain the policy of imposing austerity on the working class. This can only mean the exponential increase in the use of food banks will continue.



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