

UK food bank usage at record high

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Food bank usage in the UK has reached an all-time high, with a record 1.2 million emergency food parcels handed out by the Trussell Trust, the largest food bank charity. The 2016-2017 period marks the ninth successive year in which demand has risen. According to the Trussell Trust, 436,938 of its food parcels went to children.

This report comes after nearly a decade of welfare cuts in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. Since 2008, the number of emergency three-day food parcels handed out by the Trussell Trust has multiplied a staggering 45 times—up from 25,899 in 2008 to 1,182,954 between April 2016 and March 2017.

Research by the Trust has found that issues with welfare benefit payments are one of the main reasons for referral to a food bank. Nearly 43 percent of food bank users in the 2016-2017 period reported that they were in a crisis situation due to changes or delays to their benefit payments. After benefits issues, the most common reason cited was low income (26.45 percent), with debt (7.78 percent) and homelessness (5.43 percent) also listed as important factors.

Both indebtedness and homelessness have seen a significant rise in recent years. According to the Bank of England's Governor Mark Carney, household indebtedness is "high by historical standards," with the average household now owing around £13,000, excluding mortgages. Total unsecured debt is at an all-time high of £349 billion. Levels of homelessness in England have doubled since 2010, with at least 3,600 people sleeping on the streets each night, according to a Shelter charity report from December 2016.

The Trussell Trust raises particular concerns over the impact that the rollout of Universal Credit is having on vulnerable people. The 2012 launch of Universal Credit—the Conservative government's amalgamated benefits payment "reform"—has seen the introduction of some of the most severe and punitive benefit cuts for

decades.

The introduction of Universal Credit involves lowering the amount of money claimants can earn before low-wage subsidies, in the form of Universal Credit benefits, are reduced. This reduced allowance and strict eligibility conditions imposed by the government amount to the loss of up to £200 a month for many working families. A six-week waiting period is also enforced before claimants can collect their first payment, effectively depriving recipients of a large portion of their income for weeks on end.

According to the Trussell Trust, this six-week delay can have grave consequences, leading to referrals to food banks, mental health issues, debt, rent arrears and even eviction. "These effects can last even after people receive their Universal Credit payments, as bills and debts pile up," the report stated.

Sixty-five percent of Trussell Trust food banks reported that this six-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment has led to an increase in the number of people being forced to rely on food assistance to feed themselves. Over a quarter (27 percent of food banks) say that this increase has been significant. There have been instances of food bank users being forced to wait for much longer periods for their benefits payments, with some users experiencing delays of up to 13 weeks.

One in four food banks said that Universal Credit has led to an increase in mental health problems.

Two in five food banks also stated that the rollout of Universal Credit is linked to an increase in debt, while one in five consistently noted that their clients feared eviction from their homes or were in rent arrears due to the new method of payment.

While Universal Credit will not be fully in place until 2022, the Trussell Trust established a clear link between those areas where Universal Credit has already been fully introduced and an increased use of food banks. Food banks in areas of full Universal Credit

rollout have seen a 16.85 percent average increase in demand, more than double the national average rise in demand of 6.64 percent.

The Trust's report comes in the wake of other studies revealing growing levels of poverty and food insecurity in the UK. Nearly 3 million children in Britain are threatened with malnutrition outside term time, when they are not provided with school meals. A Department of Health report released in December also found a 44 percent rise in UK hospital admissions related to malnutrition over the past five years.

This vast increase in reliance on food banks is massively overstretching the Trussell Trust's resources, with some food banks running out of food and having to appeal to the local population and other food banks for more donations.

These figures are an indictment of the vicious austerity policies carried out by successive Labour and Conservative governments alike. The Trussell Trust research reveals only a portion of food bank usage.

According to a separate report by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), a network of smaller food aid providers, the real level of reliance on food banks is far greater than the Trussell Trust's figures suggest.

IFAN reports that there are at least 651 smaller "grassroots" food banks operating outside of the Trussell Trust network. This brings the estimated total number of food banks in the UK up to more than 2,000.

Sabine Goodwin, an IFAN researcher involved in the writing of the report, labelled the increased use of food banks as "a national crisis that cannot be underestimated." She continued, "People arrive regularly into food banks across the country not having eaten for days while the government hasn't even begun to monitor food poverty."

The Conservative government has made their indifference to the plight of the most vulnerable people clear. In a recent interview with the BBC, senior Conservative MP Dominic Raab sought to downplay the catastrophic effects of Tory welfare cuts by asserting that food bank users are not "languishing in poverty" but are merely suffering from an occasional "cash-flow problem." In response, Raab was jeered by audience members.

This campaign to whitewash the impact of decades of cuts to social spending and to demonise welfare claimants has been enthusiastically taken up by the

bourgeois media. A recent article in the nominally liberal *Guardian* by columnist Deborah Orr endeavoured to shift the blame for the enormous increase in food bank usage from the government to individuals, by promoting the Victorian idea that there are "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.

Orr's article was written as a response to the comments of a right-wing audience member on the BBC's *Question Time* programme, who claimed that people use food banks because they spend all their money on cigarettes, alcohol and television. While this remark, as with Raab's, provoked widespread public condemnation, Orr responded with a vicious diatribe against the poor in which she slandered those who defended food bank users and questioned: "Seriously? It's left-wing to insist that the recipients of charity are always deserving?"

Orr denounced welfare claimants that she selectively chose to focus on as scroungers, without attempting to examine the real reasons behind escalating food bank usage: "Victims are not always good. Messed-up people are not always good ... Privileged or socially excluded, some people are gits. The left just looks naive and childish when it asserts otherwise," she concluded.

Despite these attempts to absolve the government of any responsibility, what is apparent from the latest food bank usage surveys and many other reports on falling living standards is that large swathes of the UK population are being deliberately pushed further and further into poverty.



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