

Increased use of food banks by middle-income families in UK as food poverty surges

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Charities have identified an increase in the number of middle-income families being forced to use food banks.

These families are defined as the “new hungry” and constitute a growing layer of those who had previously had decent incomes and led a comfortable lifestyle. Now they are increasingly having to claim welfare benefits and use food banks to be able to feed themselves and their families.

The Feeding Britain network, a charity working with food banks, reports that its members have started providing food to middle-income families, often with mortgages and cars. They were typically business owners and the self-employed, thrown into financial crisis because they had lost their jobs during the pandemic and not been picked up by the benefit system.

“We now see families at food banks who before the pandemic were able to pay their bills and still be comfortable enough to put food on the table. For the first time in many years that is no longer the case,” said the charity’s national director, Andrew Forsey.

The wider use of food banks by what would have only recently been considered a more affluent layer is a growing trend and an indicator of how the pandemic has created a far-reaching cost of living crisis.

Prior to the pandemic, the majority of those using food banks were typically destitute, without financial means, awaiting welfare benefit payments or low-paid workers not earning enough to feed themselves or their families.

Food banks have been handing out more and more food parcels throughout the pandemic as increasing numbers of families and individuals struggle to survive. Feeding Britain’s network of charities reported a staggering increase in demand from those needing food aid between March and September. This is expected to

get a lot worse during the current lockdown.

The Beaumont Leys Food bank in Leicester went from providing food to 50 families to 500 families a week as the pandemic took hold in March. The NewStarts food bank in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire reported that demand had risen by 700 percent over the same period. Bonny Downs community association in East Ham, London handed out food to 4,000 people between April and June and there were lengthy queues forming an hour before the food bank opened.

Many of those who have lost their jobs are having to claim Universal Credit (UC) for the first time and are confronting the bitter reality that what they receive is not enough to live on. The Tory government increased UC by a meagre £20 a week following the onset of the pandemic, taking the total amount for an individual’s living expenses from just £73 to the still paltry £93 a week.

Jen Coleman from Black Country Food Bank said, “The £20 increase [in Universal Credit] has not meant that those in poverty have suddenly become better off, it has meant that they have been able to survive.”

While the UC increase was minuscule, millions will be thrown into yet deeper poverty if the government press ahead with their proposal to remove the £20 a week top-up, planned for April 2021.

For millions of workers and young people, the preceding decade was characterised by the imposition of austerity and cuts to essential services, driving a rise in the number of families depending on food banks to feed themselves. In the last five years, demand for emergency food has increased and since the onset of the pandemic the number of those being forced to use food banks has shot up—with half of those using food banks doing so for the first time.

Food charities reported that the first full month of

lockdown in April this year was their busiest ever, with Britain's biggest food bank network, the Trussell Trust, reporting that in the last two weeks of March demand for food parcels increased by 81 percent compared to the same period in 2019. It gave out 89 percent more food parcels in April than the same time last year, with the number of families requiring help doubling.

In the first six months to September, a record 1.2 million emergency parcels were handed out by the Trussell Trust. The number of food parcels the organisation handed out to children rose by 122 percent, with 470,000 parcels going to them.

In May, the Food Foundation reported that over 5 million people in the UK were living in households with children who had experienced food insecurity during the lockdown. The government and the Labour Party had to be forced by a popular campaign launched by England footballer Marcus Rashford to extend its free school meals programme to include the six-week summer holidays.

Data from the Trussell Trust, which runs 1,300 food banks, showed that greater demand was due to people moving from a wage income to benefits and people working for low wages. Low income, benefit delays and sickness or ill health were the three main reasons people were being referred to a Trussell Trust food bank, according to its latest report.

In 2017, 1.5 million people experienced destitution and were not able to afford essentials. Modelling carried out by Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University forecast that the economic impact of the pandemic in 2020/21 will lead to 670,000 additional people being pushed into destitution for the remaining part of 2020—a consequence of losing jobs, income and businesses.

This will translate into an additional 300,000 emergency food parcels having to be distributed in the last quarter of 2020, an increase of 60 percent on the same time last year.

Many of those who have been furloughed throughout the pandemic have lost 20 percent of their income as the scheme only covers 80 percent of wages. This disproportionately affects the low-paid who were typically already living a hand-to-mouth existence when working full-time. In the coming winter months, many of these families face the stark choice between paying for heating or putting food on the table.

The government's main concern during the pandemic

was to protect the interests of big business and finance, handing billions to the banks and the corporations, implementing a "herd immunity" policy and providing pitiful to non-existent financial support to furloughed workers and those who lost their jobs. The effect of this policy was to starve especially low-paid workers back into unsafe workplaces.

The burden of feeding the increasing numbers of people unable to find work has meanwhile been placed at the foot of overstretched food banks and charities, now feeling the strain of growing demand as more and more people end up hungry.



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