

In Germany, more and more depend on food banks

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As more and more people in Germany now need support from *Tafeln* (food banks), food donations are declining. A study shedding light on this increasingly precarious situation is already outdated. As a result of war, inflation and the energy price explosion, the number of people seeking help has doubled in two years from 1.1 million to more than 2 million.

The DIW (German Institute for Economic Research) study examined who and how many people use food banks in Germany. The results cover the first half of 2020, during which time 1.1 million people who did not have enough money to provide themselves with food used food banks.

In the meantime, this number has already doubled. In mid-July 2022, Jochen Brühl, chairman of the umbrella organization Tafel Deutschland, was already talking about a new record level. According to him, as more people are affected by poverty than ever before, “well over two million” are using food banks, which are increasingly unable to cope with the onslaught.

The DIW study by Markus M. Grabka and Jürgen Schupp is titled “Around 1.1 million people in Germany visit food banks—especially single parents and separated couples.” It is based on the longest-running survey of households in Germany by the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP).

In 2020, a question was added to the annual household questionnaire for the first time asking whether at least one household member had used a food bank in the last 12 months. Based on this, DIW researchers arrived at the following findings:

In 2019-2020, 1.1 million people visited food banks to have enough to eat. That is about 1.3 percent of people in private households. Residents of homes for the elderly, nursing homes, students and refugee shelters were not included in the survey, indicating that the numbers underestimate the true extent of poverty.

Three-quarters of food bank users receive basic welfare benefits, and more than two-thirds live in poverty. The official poverty rate has risen to 16.6 percent in 2021, which

corresponds to 13.8 million poor people. This means that even last year, for more unemployed people, single parents, low-wage workers and pensioners, their income was no longer enough to live on.

According to the DIW, many food bank users suffer from health problems; 32 percent are disabled, receive a poverty pension due to inability to work, or are severely disabled.

One group of people who are particularly affected by poverty, according to the DIW study, are those caring for relatives. In Germany, one in five such caregivers are affected by poverty or is at risk of poverty. For women carers, the figure is as high as one in four. These caregivers sink into poverty because they either no longer work or can only work part-time. As a result, they also cannot afford to make adequate pension contributions and old-age poverty is pre-programmed for them.

Overall, food bank visitors spend one fifth of their net income on food. This is well above the average for the rest of the population. Vulnerable social groups are dependent on food banks to be able to feed themselves at all.

The study examined food bank users by employment status and household type, this showed 76 percent of users were not employed. Three percent of food bank users work part-time, 3 percent are in training and 7 percent are in irregular, marginal employment. Eleven percent must use a food bank even though they are fully employed!

These figures are particularly alarming, showing that despite having a job, these working poor earn so little that it is not enough to adequately feed themselves. Undoubtedly, their numbers, like those of food bank users, have increased sharply in the last two years as more workers can only find temporary employment and at low wages.

In terms of household type, 33 percent of food bank users live in a one-person household and 27 percent are single parents; 19 percent are couples with children under age 17, 12 percent are couples without children, and 8 percent are couples with children ages 17 or older. One percent is distributed among “others.”

The number of children dependent on food bank assistance

is particularly striking. According to the DIW study, by age group, no less than 25 percent were children in 2019-2020. 28 percent were 30-44 year's old (including the parents of the children concerned), alongside 12 percent over 65 and older.

In the 2021 Tafel Deutschland annual report, children comprised 28 percent of recipients, in addition to the 48 percent of working-age adults and 24 percent of pensioners and retirees.

On September 20, World Children's Day, broadcast news programme *Tagesschau* reported that child poverty in Germany was at its highest level in years. In 2021, child poverty stood at 20.8 percent, meaning that more than one in five children in society is affected by poverty. In Germany's most populous state North Rhine-Westphalia, for which only 2018 figures are available, the poverty rate of children and young people was as high as 22.6 percent.

In Schleswig-Holstein, 100,000 children and young people lived in poverty last year (20.8 percent). And the numbers keep rising. As the Schleswig-Holstein Child Protection Association reports, the current energy crisis has already dramatically exacerbated the situation in some cases. Some of the first families have already had their power turned off. For these families, money is often "already so scarce from the second half of the month that those affected only put noodles with ketchup and toast in their shopping cart when they go grocery shopping."

There are currently around 960 food banks in Germany. Sixty thousand helpers, 90 percent of them volunteers, take care of collecting food and distributing it to neighbourhoods. 26 percent are themselves customers of food banks, from which only designated needy people are allowed to receive help. In Germany, the poverty line is 60 percent of average income. This was €1,266 per month for a one-person household in 2019, but many pensioners and the unemployed bring in far below that figure.

The minimum hourly wage has since been raised to just €12. The Hartz IV welfare rates, which will be renamed "citizen's income" from the beginning of next year, are then to be increased by €53 to €502. These are pittance and have long since failed to compensate for inflation and the explosion in energy prices.

With the growth of poverty in Germany, the number of food banks has risen sharply in the last 20 years. The Hartz "reforms" of the Social Democratic/Green government (1998-2005) contributed significantly to their spread. The Schröder-Fischer government ensured the growth of a huge low-wage sector with the introduction of Hartz IV welfare as a subsistence minimum, which in reality was never sufficient, and directed job centres to use punitive measures to put pressure on the unemployed to accept any job offered.

To make ends meet, both Hartz IV welfare recipients and low-wage workers are increasingly forced to resort to food banks.

As a result of the NATO proxy war in Ukraine, inflation and the explosion of energy prices, even middle-income households are now increasingly pushed to their limits and unable to continue paying electricity, gas, and heating costs, which have doubled or quadrupled. DIW President Marcel Fratzscher said in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* over the weekend: "A household of four with an annual income of €35,000 has up to €5,000 in additional costs."

Everywhere, social welfare associations, consumer protection agencies, debt counselling centres and the hotlines of municipal utilities and other electricity and energy producers are choked because there are so many inquiries and emergency situations due to the high bills and additional payments.

For poor households, actual inflation is 30 percent or more because they must spend almost all their disposable income on immediate living expenses such as rent, electricity and heating, and food.

As a result, the run on food banks continues to increase, while they are already barely able to cope with it. Food donations are decreasing because supermarkets are planning differently and, in some cases, reselling food that has almost expired. In addition, extremely high energy costs are also causing enormous problems for food banks. Food has to be transported and, in some cases, refrigerated until it is distributed to recipients.

As early as July, Jochen Brühl, the head of Tafel Deutschland, pointed out that food banks were reaching their limits. "The *Tafelnare* at their limit and report to us that many people come to them who have so far just managed to make ends meet and have to call on help for the first time," Brühl said. According to him, one in three food banks was already having to turn away new referrals.

As a result, and as the colder months approach, more and more people are being faced with the alternative of either freezing or starving—or both. Many who cannot pay their bills will have their electricity and heating cut off. And still others are threatened with losing their homes because they can no longer afford to pay rent and utilities.



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