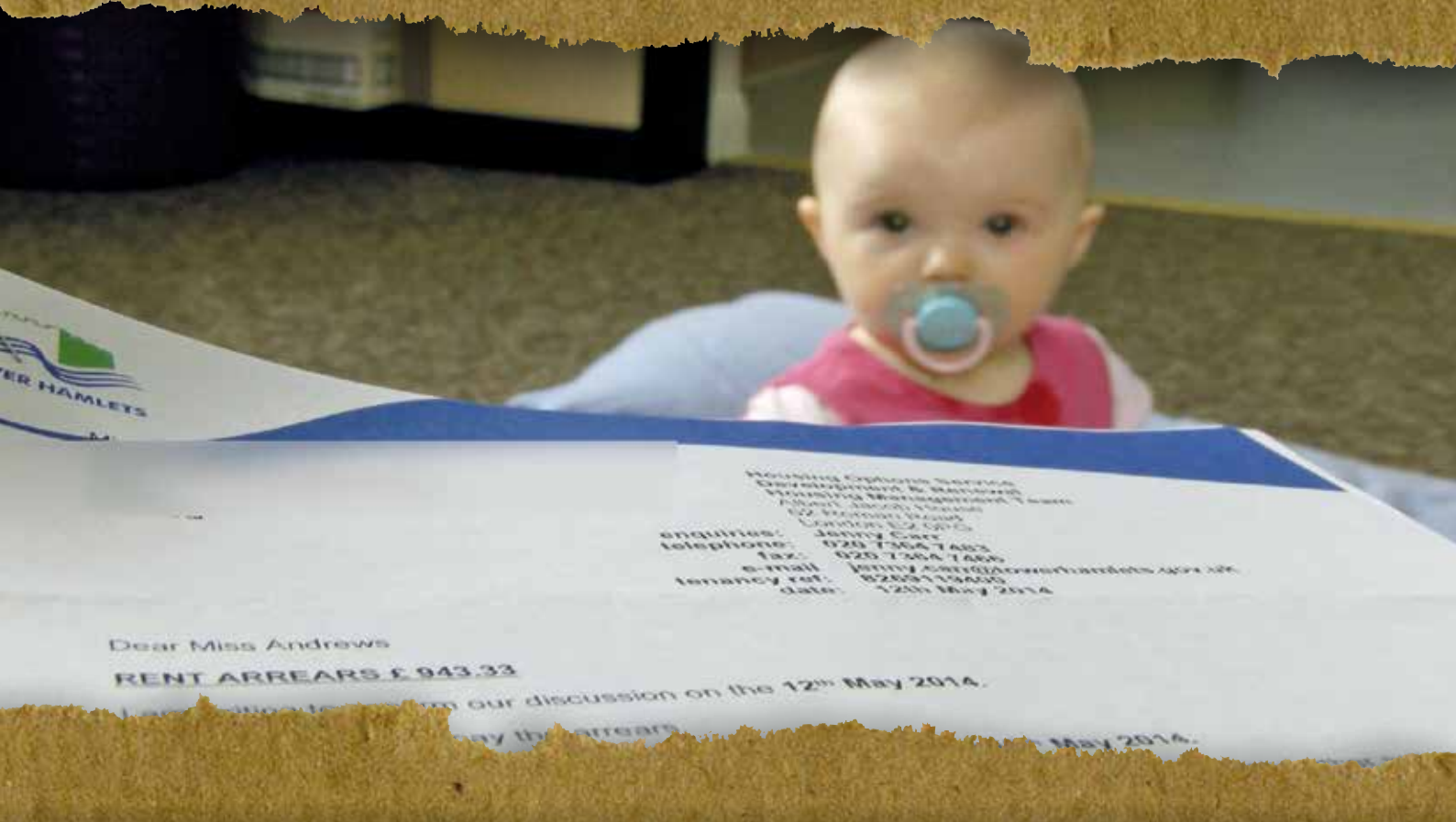


below the breadline

The Relentless Rise of
Food Poverty in Britain



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Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally. Further information can be found at www.churchpoverty.org.uk Registered charity number 1079986. Company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales, number 3780243.

Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 organisations networked together in more than 90 countries as part of a global movement of people who share the belief that, in a world rich in resources, poverty isn't inevitable. It's an injustice which can, and must, be overcome. In the UK, we work to overcome poverty by developing projects with people living in poverty to improve their lives and show how things can change, and working with policy makers to tackle the causes of poverty. For more information visit www.oxfam.org.uk/uk. Oxfam is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 202918) and Scotland (SC039042). Oxfam GB is a member of the international confederation Oxfam.

The Trussell Trust is a Christian charity that runs a network of over 400 UK foodbanks. We partner with churches and communities to launch foodbanks across the UK that provide three days nutritionally-balanced emergency food and support to people in crisis. Over 90 percent of food given out by Trussell Trust foodbanks is donated by the public. Every foodbank recipient is referred by a frontline care professional such as a doctor, social worker or schools liaison officer. Our foodbanks also help people to break out of crisis long-term by working with them to find ways to address the underlying cause of the problem. The Trussell Trust's vision is to create a nation where no-one needs to go hungry. www.trusselltrust.org/foodbank-projects.

The Trussell Trust is a registered charity in England & Wales (1110522) and Scotland (SC044246).

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Church Action on Poverty, Dale House, 35 Dale Street, Manchester M1 2HF

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY

The report, and other resources on food poverty, are available at www.church-poverty.org.uk/foodfuelfinance. The report, and other resources on global poverty, are available at www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice. The report and further information on UK foodbanks can be found at www.trusselltrust.org/stats

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Executive summary

■ The UK is the seventh richest country in the world. It is also a deeply unequal country. In May 2014, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that the richest one percent of Britons own the same amount of wealth as 54 percent of the population.¹ The same month, the Sunday Times reported that the 1,000 richest people in the country had doubled their wealth in five years.

■ Yet at the same time, millions of families across the UK are living below the breadline. Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty have calculated that 20,247,042 meals were given to people in food poverty in 2013/14 by the three main food aid providers. This is a 54 percent increase on 2012/13.

■ Protecting its citizens from going hungry is one of the most fundamental duties of government. Most of us have grown up with the assumption that when we fall on hard times, the social security safety net will kick in and prevent us from falling into destitution and hunger. The principle of this crucial safety net now appears to be under threat.

■ Food banks are a service of last resort for people living in poverty. As the authors of a report commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on food poverty stated: *'There is no evidence to support the claim that increased food aid provision is driving demand. All available evidence, both in the UK and internationally, points in the opposite direction. Put simply, there is more need and informal food aid providers are trying to help.'*

■ People on low incomes have traded down and down again to the cheapest food products; after which they simply have to buy less food. We have spoken to people living on one meal a day, drinking hot water and lemon to tame hunger pangs, trying to think how they can survive on a household budget of £6 a

week. More than half a million children in the UK are now living in families who are unable to provide a minimally acceptable diet.

■ Despite their best efforts, many people cannot earn enough to live on. UK food prices have increased by 43.5 per cent in the eight years to July 2013 and food expenditure as a proportion of total household expenditure has continued to rise. The UK has one of the highest levels of housing costs in Europe, while between 2010 and 2013 energy prices for households rose by 37 per cent. At the same time, low and stagnant wages, insecure and zero-hours contracts mean that for many low-income households, the money they are bringing home is less every month than their essential outgoings.

■ Evidence shows that changes to the social security system are a driver of food poverty. Cuts to social security since April 2013 have had a severe impact on poor and vulnerable families across the UK. These cuts have been coupled with an increasingly strict and often misapplied sanctions regime – 58 percent of sanctions decisions are successfully challenged,² suggesting that many people needlessly suffer a loss of income through no fault of their own. The abolition of the Social Fund has prevented thousands of households from being able to access crisis loans. The Trussell Trust, the largest food bank network in the UK, estimates that 49 percent of people referred to food banks are there due to problems with social security payments or because they have been refused a crisis loan.³

■ In the last year, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty has been set up with broad cross-party political support, and is conducting an Inquiry into the issue. The Work and Pensions Select Committee has considered the link between social security reforms and the increased use of food aid. These developments are welcome.

■ However, far more needs to be done and with a greater sense of urgency. The government is failing more broadly to properly investigate or address the causes of the significant increase in food bank use. While we welcome the APPG Inquiry into the issue, this should not be used as an excuse for inaction at a wider level. All political parties must clearly commit to urgent action if we are to begin to tackle the growing problem of food poverty in the UK.

20,247,042
meals were given
to people in
food poverty in
2013/14

Recommendations

All political parties should commit to re-instating the safety net principle as a core purpose of the social security system.

The government should urgently commission and publish independent systematic research on the reasons for referrals to food banks and the underlying reasons behind growth in the need for food aid. This research should include an investigation of the impacts of rising living costs, low wages, insecure work, and multiple changes to the social security system and sanctions processes, and consider the differential impact on men and women.

Based on the findings of this research, the government should develop and implement an action plan to address food poverty.

All political parties should set out clear plans for addressing and preventing food poverty in the UK.

All political parties should commit to increasing the minimum wage to the Living Wage by 2020 and set out their strategy for doing this.

The government should undertake a sector-by-sector review of the use of zero-hours contracts and their impact, and take action to ensure that people who are in work are able to earn sufficient income to survive. Checks on the balance of power in zero-hours contracts must be created, and an automatic trigger identified for a permanent contract for average hours worked.

The government should undertake a broad and independent review of the operation and impact of social security sanctions. Research carried out for this report indicates that sanctions are not an effective device for encouraging employment, their stated policy goal. The application of the policy is poor and inefficient, causing unnecessary hardship and hunger.

Changes should be made to the current sanctions system including

- removal of the right of advisers to arbitrarily suspend social security payments pending investigation. There should be a presumption towards eligibility and shorter, fixed consideration times;
- review of the implementation of policies (who is sanctioned, why, appeals, why they are successful) to that ensure practice is transparent, evenly applied and fair;
- addressing the performance of JCP advisers who repeatedly incorrectly sanction claimants whose sanctions are overturned on appeal.

To ensure that no one who is eligible for social security is left without money, the entitlement basis for crisis loans and short-term benefit advance for those waiting for social security payments should be immediately reinstated. This should be paid through the Jobcentre Plus and not via a separate application process to the local authority.

Introduction

In May 2014, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that the richest one percent of Britons own the same amount of wealth as 54 percent of the population.⁴ The same month, the Sunday Times reported that the 1,000 richest people in the UK had doubled their wealth in five years. As this elite gets richer and richer, millions of people across the UK are living below the breadline.

Food poverty is one of the starkest signs of inequality in the UK, and, as the evidence in this report shows, it is increasing fast. Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and The Trussell Trust believe that no one should go hungry in the UK today.

‘It feels like we’re going back in time. The welfare reforms are causing a sort of famine – because people are struggling.’ Melissa, Manchester

Tackling inequality and food poverty means paying people fairly for their work. Low and stagnant wages, insecure and zero-hours contracts all mean that for some households the money they are bringing home is less every month than their essential outgoings. Despite their best efforts, many people cannot earn enough to live on.

As this report also shows, current changes to the social security system, including a more punitive sanctions regime, are contributing significantly to food poverty. Despite ambitions for reform, the Universal Credit system has yet to be fully implemented. Meanwhile, the cumulative impacts of the raft of other changes implemented since 2012 are the final squeeze on the budgets of many of the poorest households. Most of us have grown up with the assumption that when we fall on hard times, the social security safety net will kick in and prevent us from falling into destitution and hunger. We are deeply concerned that the principle of this crucial safety net is now under threat.

‘Without welfare reforms, many people at the bottom would have been pushed into using food banks, although the cuts in benefit that are now occurring can have only increased this pace.’ Frank Field MP, Chair APPG on Hunger & Food Poverty⁵

Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and The Trussell Trust support reform of the social security system and believe that there needs to be a radical vision for social security that is fit for the twenty-first century. It must:

- provide the safety net when people need it;
- support people into sustainable and reasonable work;
- provide for those unable to work.

‘I thought the system would protect me. I never thought I would be completely ignored. I feel I was let down hugely. My benefits are my safety net – if they’re removed how are families like ours meant to survive?’ Jane, helped by Epsom Foodbank

The richest one percent of Britons own the same amount of wealth as 54 percent of the population

Food poverty in 2014

There is increasing scrutiny of the true picture of food aid provision in the UK and the number of people having to access these services. Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty have calculated that 20,247,042 meals were delivered to people in food poverty in 2013/14 by three of the main food aid providers (Trussell Trust, Fareshare and Food Cycle). This is a 54 percent increase on 2012/13, when the same providers distributed just over 13 million meals (see Appendix).

The Trussell Trust is the main national food bank provider, with more than 400 food banks in the UK. The Trussell Trust alone has reported that it gave out three days’ emergency food to 913,138 people between April 2013 and March 2014, of whom 330,205 were children.⁶ This is a 163 percent increase on the previous year, when the Trussell Trust gave three days’ food to 346,992 people.

The Trussell Trust statistics are the most robust nationally collected statistics on food bank use and therefore provide the best available data on the number of people accessing food banks across the UK. However, the Trussell Trust is far from the only

Case study

Tracy lives in Ilford, Essex with her partner and baby daughter. Her partner is a teaching assistant; Tracy has been in and out of low-paid work since leaving school at 16. She also suffers from long-term depression and is currently on ESA (Employment Support Allowance).

Tracy and her baby daughter came to Tower Hamlets Food Bank after being referred by her daughter's social worker. Tracy's partner is only paid during term-time, but their social security payments are paid at the same rate throughout the year. This means that during school holidays the couple receive just £6 in social security payments, which is their total weekly income.

'You don't manage on £6 a week. We have had to borrow off friends and family.'

In addition, budget cuts have meant that her partner's hours were slashed from 13 to seven a week. *'Before my maternity pay we used to have just half a meal a day. We'd shop at Iceland. We don't get frozen ready meals as they're expensive but they do have like eight chicken breasts for £2. We'd have one of them each and maybe some chips and that would be all we'd eat for the day. And we'd just drink water, and occasionally have tea or coffee.'*

Tracy was concerned about the quality of their food, but felt she had no choice.

'Meat is so expensive these days. When I was growing up we'd only have fish fingers or something once or twice a week, and proper food the rest of the time, now it's the other way around. We only have proper meat once a month now.'

'I'm disappointed I've had to use a food bank as you want to be able to survive on your own, but at least there are people out there who help, that is nice.'

food aid provider in the country; there is an extensive network of other charities and independent providers in operation. For example, in Tameside, Greater Manchester, there are two Trussell Trust food banks and 13 independent food banks. Sheffield's food bank network lists nine food banks, three of which are Trussell Trust and six independent. Meanwhile, in Dundee, the Trussell Trust provides two-thirds of the food parcel provision, whereas in Inverness it is the only provider of food parcels.⁷ This patchwork of providers demonstrates the determination of communities across the UK to prevent people from going hungry. However, it also means the Trussell Trust's statistics on their own cannot account for the total number of people receiving food aid. The true scale of food poverty is under-reported.

It is very difficult to tackle a problem without understanding its true scale. In 2013, in the report *Walking the Breadline*, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty recommended that 'all referrals to food banks/emergency food aid provision made by government agencies, be recorded and monitored in order to establish more accurate numbers on people experiencing food poverty in the UK.'⁸



In January 2014, the Work and Pensions Select Committee published a report following its inquiry into the role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed social security system. The report considered, among other things, the link between sanctions and food aid. The inquiry heard evidence from Oxfam, The Trussell Trust and Church Action on Poverty that the increased numbers of people using food banks were in part due to the increased numbers of sanctions given out.⁹ The report recommended that the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) take urgent steps to monitor the extent of financial hardship caused by benefit sanctions, including by collecting, collating and publishing data on the number of claimants 'signposted' to food aid by Jobcentres and the reasons for claimants' need for assistance in these cases.¹⁰

More than half a million children in the UK are now living in families who are unable to provide a minimally acceptable diet.

However, the government rejected the recommendations of the Select Committee report. Oxfam, The Trussell Trust and Church Action on Poverty fully support the recommendation of the Work and Pensions Select Committee that this data be collected and monitored, but further to this, we believe that systematic research is needed into what is driving the growth in food bank referrals not just from Jobcentres, but from the statutory and voluntary sectors as a whole. Indeed, as food poverty is growing, we believe that the government must commission systematic research, administered by the Office for National Statistics, on the reasons for referrals to food banks and the underlying reasons behind the growth in the use of food banks. This research should allow impact assessments on the cumulative effects of the drivers to food banks, such as living costs, low wages, insecure work, multiple changes to the social security

system and sanctions processes. It should also encompass a gender analysis to reflect the differential impact on men and women. From the findings of this research, the government must implement an action plan to begin to address food poverty.

Impacts of food poverty on women and children

Food poverty, as with all poverty, affects women and men differently. Many women will go hungry in order to feed their children,¹¹ whether they have a partner or not, and it is women who tend to provide the majority of childcare. Lone parents, 89 percent of whom are women,¹² are twice as likely to live in poverty as couple families.¹³

'I started my own shop... In January Phoebe my daughter was taken seriously ill and I ended up taking nearly all of January off and so the shop had to close, so I had nothing coming in. I literally had nothing when I came back from the hospital, everything had gone off that was in the house and there was no money in the bank account. I had to raid her penny jar so we could have some milk.'

Holly, Chichester

Because women take time off work for maternity leave, it is often their partners who become the breadwinners. Women may find it hard to return to work, have difficulty in obtaining hours to fit around childcare and sufficient flexibility to allow for emergency care. This is especially true for lone parents.

'It was freezing cold, there was no wood for the fire. I was on the emergency on the meter and I knew the lights were about to go out, and I had no food. I had no money to get my children to school which costs £35-£40 a week. I was desperate.'

Jane, mother of four sons, Epsom

The number of children in the UK living in poverty increased by 300,000 over the year to April 2012,¹⁴ and 66 percent of children in poverty are in families where at least one parent works.¹⁵ More than half a million children in the UK are now living in families who are unable to provide a minimally acceptable diet.¹⁶ Kellogg's have responded to the situation by helping to set up more than 1,000 breakfast clubs across Britain, and aim to donate 15 million breakfasts by 2016.¹⁷ Magic Breakfast, a charity dedicated to ensuring that every child gets the right breakfast, has set up clubs in 242 primary schools in areas with high levels of free school meal eligibility.¹⁸ Breakfast clubs are part of the mix in emergency food provision, helping to feed children in poverty when their parents cannot afford to.

What has happened in the past year

As the number of people resorting to food banks continues to grow, so does academic and political interest in the extent of – and reasons for – food aid in the UK.

In February 2014, DEFRA finally published the report it commissioned the previous year Household Food Security in the UK. In the midst of much discussion on whether food banks are supply or demand led, this report explicitly states that 'There is no systematic evidence on the impact of increased supply and hypotheses of its potential effects are not based on robust evidence.'¹⁹

In a statement accompanying the report its researchers further stated: *'There is no evidence to support the claim that increased food aid provision is driving demand. All available evidence, both in the UK and internationally, points in the opposite direction. Put simply, there is more need and informal food aid providers are trying to help.'*²⁰

The report cites unemployment, delays to social security payments and sanctions as a trigger for the increased use of food banks in the UK. It also found that a combination of shrinking incomes, low pay, rising food prices and increasing personal debt meant an

There is no evidence to support the claim that increased food aid provision is driving demand.



increasing number of households could not afford to buy enough food. In late 2013 Barnardos reported the results of a nationwide online survey and in-depth interviews with 118 of their own services to find out the extent of food poverty. The report found that 94 percent of services reported that food poverty was an issue for the families and young people they work with, and 90 percent referred to food banks in the past 12 months.²¹

In December 2013, the Scottish government published 'An Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland' in response to growing concern about increased food bank provision.²² The report found that the fast growth experienced by the Trussell Trust recently was broadly indicative of the growth observed by other food parcel providers. The report also concluded that the Trussell Trust data on the reasons for referral 'are largely representative of what has been happening nationally for other food parcel providers' and that 'providers who participated in the study were in agreement that welfare reform, benefit delays, benefit sanctions and falling incomes have been the main factors driving...increased demand.'

Also in December 2013, following on from a high profile media campaign in the Mirror newspaper fronted by campaigner Jack Monroe, a petition calling for a debate on food poverty in parliament gained over 130,000 signatures. The heated debate was held with significant representation from all political parties. It was clear from all sides of the chamber that MPs are seeing people experiencing food poverty in their surgeries and constituencies and are increasingly concerned about it.

Faith leaders have also spoken out strongly on the issue of food poverty and hunger. In February 2014, more than 43 Anglican Bishops and non-conformist church leaders signed an open letter calling for urgent action to 'End Hunger Fast.'

*'We must, as a society, face up to the fact that over half of people using food banks have been put in that situation by cut backs to and failures in the benefit system, whether it be payment delays or punitive sanctions. There is an acute moral imperative to act. Hundreds of thousands of people are doing so already, as they set up and support food banks across the UK. But this is a national crisis, and one we must rise to.'*²³

A second letter addressed to the three main party leaders in April was signed by more than 30 bishops and more than 600 other church leaders.

As a result of the increased level of interest in the issues, Frank Field MP and Laura Sandys MP set up the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty with broad political representation. In April 2014 they formally launched an inquiry into food poverty, co-chaired by the Bishop of Truro, which is due to report at the end of 2014.

In addition, the Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee has examined the rise in food bank use in Scotland and concluded that the UK government's welfare reforms are a 'significant cause'. In its report, released in June 2014, the Committee says it is 'convinced by the volume and strength of the evidence' that there is 'a direct correlation' between welfare reform and the increase in use of food banks.²⁴ The Committee calls on the UK government to acknowledge this link and 'recognise that welfare reforms are contributing to demand for food aid'. The report described food banks as a 'sign of a Dickensian model of welfare which should have no place in a prosperous nation' with MSPs voicing particular concern about the impact of sanctions. As well as welfare reform, the Committee points to the economic downturn and increases in food and fuel prices as contributory factors to the rise in food bank use. The report added that food banks should not be 'welded into the infrastructure of the welfare state'.

What is driving people to use food banks?

Living costs

'People who are using food banks are not scroungers who are cynically trying to work the system. They are drawn from the six million working poor in this country, people who are struggling to make ends meet in low-paid or bitty employment.' Revd Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and patron of Cambridge City Foodbank

Rising living costs have placed a strain on incomes since the recession, greatly reducing the purchasing power of many households, particularly those at the lower end of the income scale. Purchasing power in earnings today are lower than they were 2007, meaning people on low incomes have less money per month to meet ever-rising costs. Some 40 percent of low-income households report being faced with the 'heat or eat' dilemma, while 20 percent of parents with children regularly say that they go without food to ensure that their children have enough to eat.²⁵

A combination of factors is stretching household budgets to breaking point: rising food prices, high housing costs, increasing energy bills, low wages and insecure contracts. In many cases, this is leading to insufficient money to afford food.

Food costs: spending more, buying less

'We don't get to eat real food like fruit and vegetables. The Healthy Start vouchers are good but they don't go very far. We only have proper food once a month now.' Tracy, mother of one daughter, helped by Tower Hamlets Foodbank

UK food prices have increased by 43.5 percent over the eight years to July 2013, with rises ranging from 24 percent to 55 percent. DEFRA publishes an annual report on family food. The most recent report, for 2012, found that the average weekly food budget is £41.37 per person, an increase of 3.6 percent on 2011. On average, 11.6 percent of household spending goes on food, rising to 16.6 percent for families in the lowest-earning 20 percent.²⁶ The amount of food eaten has been in steady decline. However, food expenditure as a proportion of total household expenditure has continued to rise. Households purchased 4.7 percent less food while spending 17 percent more in 2012 than in 2007. This is exacerbated further for the poorest households. Those in the bottom income decile spent 22 percent more on food in 2012 than in 2007 and bought 5.7 percent less.

Recent research has found that many people experiencing food poverty now buy cheaper, lower quality food and spend less on fruit, vegetables, meat and fish.²⁷ However, this strategy has not helped lower-income households who could not trade down, as they were already buying the cheapest products. The lowest-income households (the bottom 10 percent) simply had to buy less food.²⁸

The incidence of people buying less food but spending more is leading to a growing number of cases of malnutrition, particularly among children. This has prompted 170 public health professionals to warn of a public health emergency that could go unrecognised until it is too late.²⁹ In May 2014, they wrote an open letter to David Cameron expressing their concern at the situation, calling it a 'public health crisis' and calling on the government to take bold action and create 'equitable food policy ... central to the global fight against undernutrition, malnutrition, and non-communicable diseases.'³⁰

'I have lost a lot of weight. My survival tactic is hot lemon and water and sugar because it breaks the wind down and stops the hunger pangs. Sometimes I feel so sick. When I get paid I can eat for the first two weeks. I cook from scratch a lot. I eat chicken and rice, spaghetti bolognese, I eat tins of sardines, frozen mixed veg and stuff, Iceland pizza. And then I'm out of money, then I go to my neighbour.'
Patricia, East London, helped by Tower Hamlets Foodbank

'You're going (to) a million different supermarkets to try and get the best prices. It's difficult. As if you don't have enough stress on your hands without going from supermarket to supermarket ... You really, really, have to watch your budget or else you have to go without something somewhere else ... The supermarkets are doubling prices on everything and it's always on the value ranges ... Tuna used to be 30p in the Tesco value range and it's now 89p!' Mary, single mother to four children, helped by East Bristol Foodbank

Housing

The UK has one of the highest levels of housing costs in Europe, with people spending an average of 40 percent of their income on rent or a mortgage.³¹ Lack of housing supply has driven up the cost of buying a home, and historically low levels of house building have also applied in the social housing sector, with the result that 1.8 million families are waiting for social housing. While these families wait for social housing, they are renting privately. In the UK, 4 million households now rent their homes from private landlords.

Housing costs have risen sharply, especially for renters in the private sector, with rents increasing by 67 percent between 2002/03 and 2011/12. Renting costs are rising by twice the level of incomes, to the point where average rents are unaffordable in almost half of English local authority areas. In London, the pressure from housing costs is more severe, with weekly rents at more than 50 percent of average local wages in 17 boroughs across London.³²

IN 17 BOROUGHES ACROSS LONDON THE AVERAGE WEEKLY RENT IS MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF THE AVERAGE INCOME



Case study

Michael finds that he often does not have enough income to cover his rent and bills, particularly his electricity bill. In times of crisis he cuts back his spending as much as possible, and copes by borrowing money or going to the food bank.

'This is where the food banks have to come in. I've got one bag of chips and two loaves of bread and that's me 'til next Wednesday [six days away]. I'm now up to my limit with food bank vouchers as you can only get four.'

Michael is an ex-soldier and feels there is a stigma when he uses the food bank. *'I don't think it's ever going to change, how ex-soldiers are treated, I feel let down.'*



A recent survey by YouGov and Shelter found that nearly four million families were only one pay cheque away from losing their homes, and that 2.4 million families would lose their home immediately if they lost their jobs tomorrow.³³ Shelter identifies high housing costs and stagnating wages as the causes of this situation, with people living from month to month with no money left over to save.

This analysis supports the evidence from food banks: that people have nothing to fall back on, so when they are hit with an unexpected cost – their rent going up, their boiler breaking – they have no choice but to use a food bank.

'The neighbours were always in the hallway smoking drugs and letting their dogs foul. We had to sleep in the lounge with the door closed. But the council refused to move us. My parents gave me their savings so I could put a deposit down on a private rented property near them but the rent doubled. I was getting into debt; we were barely getting by. But when my daughter got ill I had to stop working and I couldn't keep up with the rent. We came back from the hospital with no money and no food. That's when I went in search of a food bank. Even if I worked full time I wouldn't be able to pay my rent and live. We have to raise wages, lower rent, do something so that people can afford to live.' Holly, single mother to one child, helped by Chichester Food Bank

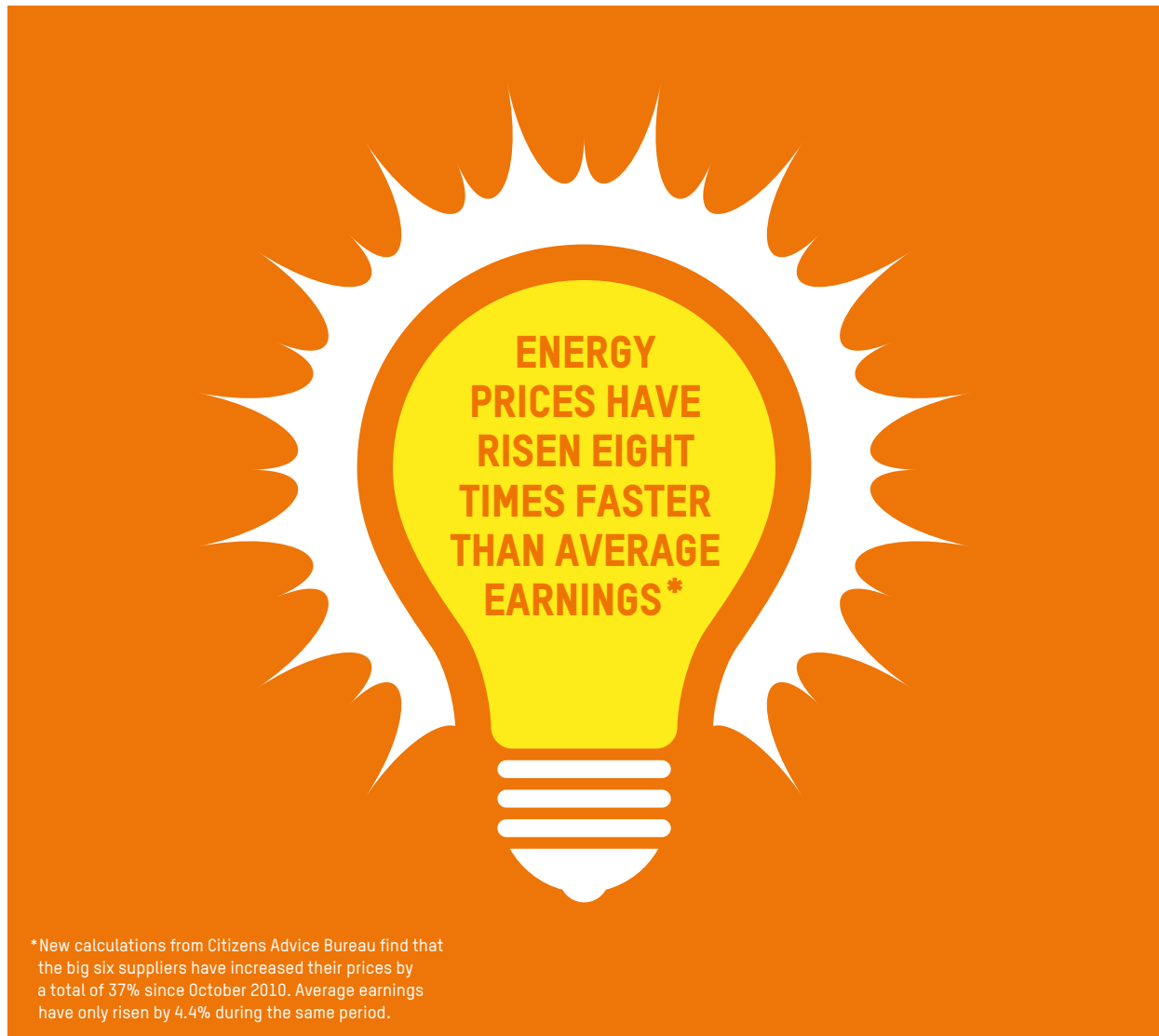
Energy

'I'm dreading winter ... what I do is buy the thick fleecy pyjamas and when the kids come home, I say "Hey let's have fun, let's get in our PJs!" but it's really so I don't have to have the heating on. It's quite bad.' Mary, Bristol

Between 2010 and the end of 2013, energy prices for household gas and electricity rose by 37 percent, with the Citizens Advice Bureau warning that prices have risen eight times faster than average earnings. This is an increase of three times the rate of inflation.³⁴ Average household energy bills are now £1,152 a year according to the Department for Energy and Climate Change,³⁵ although household usage has declined since 2002 by 17 percent.³⁶ This is in the context of increasing profits in the energy sector. In 2013, energy companies' profits rose 77 percent, despite increases to residential customer bills.³⁷

'It was March and April time and when my meters run over I had no electricity. No lights, no cooker, no heat. I'd just take myself up to my bedroom and just wrap myself up in my bed.' Melissa, Manchester

Where households can, they have reduced their costs on food and on energy. However, despite this, costs have increased, meaning that households have less income, and fewer options available to them to help meet those costs. For some, this forces them to use food banks as a last resort.



Low wages

'I ended up at the food bank because all my debts got on top of me, and I couldn't find any way out. My wages were so low, and there was no overtime. I had Thames Water knocking on my door, debt collectors knocking on my door. And I'm showing them my wage slip saying 'How can you expect me to pay you every week when you can see what I'm paid a month. I have no other form of income coming in.' Patricia, East London

UK average weekly earnings fell in real terms in the year to February 2013. While wages only increased by one percent, annual inflation (as measured by the Consumer Prices Index) was 2.8 percent in the twelve months to February 2013.³⁸ This means that households have less money to meet ever rising costs. The Trussell Trust is now seeing an increasing number of people in work who rely on their food banks.³⁹

The National Minimum Wage is due to be increased in October 2014 to £6.50 an hour for people over 21, a rise of three percent.⁴⁰ This is the first real cash rise for the national minimum wage since 2008. However, since previous increases were significantly below inflation, those on low wages have actually seen the real cash value of wages decrease since the start of the recession. The National Minimum Wage is still a long way from covering the cost of living, even when social security payments are taken into account.⁴¹ This has meant that many more people who are in work have to rely on social security to top up those wages. In effect, the social security system is subsidising companies who pay their workers low wages.

The Living Wage is calculated as the minimum amount of money that someone needs to earn to live, and is calculated annually. It is currently at £7.65 an hour, and £8.80 in London.⁴² The Living Wage Commission

estimates that 21 percent of the UK workforce is paid less than a Living Wage; that is, 5.8 million people. It has been estimated that by increasing the National Minimum Wage to a Living Wage some 4.8 million workers would see an extra £4bn in take home pay. At the same time, the Exchequer would benefit from a reduction of £1.1bn in social security payments⁴³ and a gain of £3.23bn in increased tax receipts and National Insurance contributions. The Living Wage Foundation and ShareAction have found that only six of the FTSE 100 companies pay their staff a Living Wage, and 13 are working towards accreditation.⁴⁴



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Insecure contracts

'Agencies are the only people hiring round here and many only offer zero hours. You can work full time one week and be idle the next. You can't plan or budget or keep a family on that basis. I was losing money with all the days not working and quit and then had my Jobseekers docketed for leaving a job.'

Lee, Rhondda

The most recent figures from the DWP show that the number of people out of work has fallen to 2.2 million (March 2014),⁴⁵ with a significant boost to the figures coming from an increase in the number of people taking up self-employment. However, employment figures mask the fact that while the numbers of jobs is increasing, many of those are low paid and on insecure contracts with minimal rights for workers. Underemployment is estimated to have increased from 7.1 percent of the UK workforce in 2008 to 10.5 percent in 2012.⁴⁶ The TUC estimates that almost half of all new jobs created between December 2010 and December 2012 were temporary.⁴⁷ As well as increasing the in-work poverty rate, the nature of this work is creating a huge 'churn' of people in and out of work. Of the 230,000 claims for Jobseeker's Allowance made by men in the first quarter of 2013, 47 percent were made within six months of a previous claim ending. Of the 88,000 new claims by women, 34 percent were within six months of a previous claim ending.⁴⁸ This suggests that large numbers of people are unable to sustain long-term employment, as the economy is not creating enough good quality jobs.

There are now 1.4 million zero-hours contracts in the active workforce.⁴⁹ Zero-hours contracts vary in terms of how the employer uses them. Employers do not have to provide paid holidays or pensions; rights that are an integral part of normal contracted jobs. Many employers also add in exclusivity clauses to their zero-hours contracts that prevent employees from taking on any other work. In some cases, this even includes voluntary work.

The government is currently undertaking a review of zero-hours contracts, which it is hoped will address some of the concerns with these contracts. Nevertheless, there remain significant employment sectors that utilise zero-hours contracts, for example, social care. A sector-by-sector review of their use and impact needs to be undertaken to ensure that people who are in work are able to earn sufficient income to survive. Checks on the balance of power in zero-hours contracts must be created, and an automatic trigger identified for a permanent contract for average hours worked.

The cumulative impact of social security reform

Social security changes

'I'm in a two-bed flat. I've applied for a one bedroom (flat) but there just aren't any there. So I have to pay bedroom tax – I'm on discretionary housing at the moment which I have to apply for every three months. I've only got three months until I've used up my entire 12 months. Then I'll have to start paying £12 a week but I won't be able to pay it. It's a constant worry. I've never been on anti-depressants before but I am now because of the stress from being sanctioned and having no money. I need them now to cope.' Carol, helped by Knowsley Foodbank

The changes to the social security system which have been brought about through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 have had significant impacts on low-income households, and there is clear evidence that this is driving increasing numbers of people to food banks.

The cash value of the majority of social security payments has been lowered in real terms. At the same time, entitlement to Housing Benefit has been cut, and Council Tax Support has been reduced (and localised).⁵⁰

Research undertaken by Oxfam and the New Policy Institute in April 2014 found that as a result of cuts in

Housing Benefit and changes to Council Tax Support, around 1.75 million of the poorest families have seen an absolute cut in their income. Of these, 480,000 families are seeing their social security being cut twice, as they are affected by more than one of the changes.⁵¹

'A family in destitution, in a country as wealthy as this, is a disgrace that should not happen. I think the current welfare system does need reform and I don't disagree on the principles with which the government is working, but it cannot be at the cost of casting people into destitution.' Cardinal Vincent Nichols⁵²

In April 2014, 780,000 of the poorest families were experiencing a shortfall in their Housing Benefit as a result of the social security reforms since April 2011. Around 410,000 (52 percent) of these families are private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) changes; 345,000 (44 percent) are affected by the under-occupation penalty (commonly known as the bedroom tax) and 28,000 (4 percent) are affected by the overall cap on social security payments. On average, their Housing Benefit has been cut by £10.48 per week. There are 1.4 million families who have to pay on average £154 per year (£2.96 per week) in council tax, which they didn't previously have to pay before April 2014.⁵³

Research undertaken by Oxfam and the New Policy Institute in April 2014 found that as a result of cuts in Housing Benefit and changes to council tax support, around 1.75 million of the poorest families have seen an absolute cut in their income.

**SINCE APRIL
2014, 1.4
MILLION
PEOPLE
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ON AVERAGE,
AN EXTRA
£154 PER
YEAR IN
COUNCIL TAX**




Case study

In March 2013, Melissa was reassessed for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and had her claim rejected. Jobcentre Plus staff did not inform her that she could appeal or that she could apply for Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). She was without income for nearly six weeks. She had no food, heat, or light and relied on her neighbours and food banks for the occasional meal. She says: *'Sometimes I wouldn't eat for a couple of days, just drink water. My health deteriorated ... I have epilepsy and, it's essential that I eat when I take my medication. I ended up developing a kidney infection as obviously I had no money to buy food. I lost a lot of weight (1.5 stone) [9.5kg] while I was awaiting a decision to see if I would be allowed to receive help.'*

After advice from Cheetham Hill Advice Centre Melissa appealed against her ESA rejection, lost, and was placed on JSA. She then applied again for ESA with a new medical report and got her ESA. She has recently been reassessed and failed her ESA test, and is again without income.

These changes are having a significant impact on food poverty. The proportion of clients accessing Trussell Trust food banks due to a change in social security payments increased from 12 percent in 2011/12 to 18 percent in the period April – September 2013. Fifty two percent of referrals between April and June 2013 were due to problems with social security.⁵⁴

Evidence from research commissioned by the Scottish government ('Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland') echoes the findings of the Trussell Trust. It highlights the top three reasons for referral to food banks as delays to social security payments, changes to social security, and low income.⁵⁵ Social security recipients reported uncertainty about when they would receive their money and how much they would be getting. The bedroom tax charge was also identified as a driving factor, as were Council Tax Support reduction, the abolition of the Social Fund and the increase in social security sanctions. The Scottish government has recently acted to mitigate the impact of the bedroom tax and the loss of the Social Fund. Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and The Trussell Trust have found that just one change to social security payments can seriously affect a family's ability to cope, but that more than one change, compounded with rising living costs and stagnant wages, greatly increases the need for emergency food.



Case study

Michael in Durham has recently used Durham Food Bank on a few occasions. He was sanctioned twice for four weeks at a time as he was 'not adequately seeking employment'. Michael is aware that there is a lack of jobs in the north east, which makes it difficult to provide evidence that he is constantly looking for work.

'You have a work diary, you get sanctioned if you don't bring it in with you, fill it out correctly or do the right amount of job searches. I didn't do enough job searches. I had to do 22 a fortnight, it's too many. I live in a remote area seven miles from Durham and it costs me £5.90 return to get to the library to use the internet. How can I pay for that? I only have a pay-as-you-go phone and then just for incoming calls. If I do get a job please tell me how I'm going to get there. I've been told by employers, "You're never going to be able to do the early shift patterns when you're so far away." I don't get as far as interviews.'

Conditionality and sanctions

There is clear evidence that the social security sanctions policy is not working as intended, and at the same time is creating severe hardship and hunger for increasing numbers of people.

People in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) have to comply with a number of criteria as a condition of receiving their social security payment, e.g. applying for a certain number of jobs each week, attending meetings at the Jobcentre and being available for work. If a claimant is found not to be complying with these criteria, sanctions (or penalties) are issued, which can lead to their social security payments being withdrawn: four weeks for a first offence, up to 13 weeks for a second offence, up to 26 weeks or three years for a third offence.

Since the new sanctions policy was implemented in October 2012, more than one million sanctions have been applied. Twenty percent of these have been imposed on people with a disability. Overall, men and young people are being disproportionately sanctioned: 71 percent of those sanctioned are male, and 56 percent are young people.⁵⁶

Of the Trussell Trust food banks surveyed in March and April 2014, 83 percent reported that sanctions

to social security have caused more people to be referred to them for emergency food in the last year.

Research by Landman Economics for Oxfam shows that there appears to be no relationship between the extent to which sanctions to social security are used in each Jobcentre Plus district, and improvements in the labour market (that is, increases in the employment rate, reductions in unemployment, and/or reductions in inactivity) by district.⁵⁷ If there were a correlation, we would expect more of an improvement in the labour market in districts where sanctions were used more heavily. The fact that this has not occurred suggests that sanctions are not an effective device for encouraging employment – their stated policy goal.

Case study

Carol is 53. She has often worked as a carer doing 12-hour shifts, six days a week, with long travel either side and with gaps in employment. She has been claiming JSA for about two years. In May 2013 she fell sick, so called the Jobcentre to rearrange her appointment. They told her that it would be fine. She subsequently went to the rearranged interview and all seemed well. She then received a form from Jobcentre Plus about the missed appointment which she filled in and returned. Then in September 2013, she went to sign on and found that she had not received her money. When she queried it she was told she had been sanctioned because of the missed appointment back in May. She ended up being sanctioned in total for six weeks. She is now on anti-depressants and blood pressure medication as a direct result of the stress she has been put under. She had no money for food or fuel and was referred to a local food bank. Carol appealed but lost, as there was no record made of her calling Jobcentre Plus to cancel her appointment due to sickness. She provided the name of the young woman she had spoken to, but they were not able to find her as she no longer worked there. They ruled that as Carol could not 'prove' her version of events, the sanction would stand.

Regardless of the policy intentions, the speed at which it is being brought in, together with poor guidance, a lack of support and training for Jobcentre Plus staff, combined with redundancies at DWP mean that a significant number of people are being inappropriately sanctioned. Research by Policy Exchange found that 70,000 jobseekers have had their social security payments withdrawn unfairly, leading them to rely on food banks to feed themselves and their families. Only one-quarter of claimants who are sanctioned ask for reconsideration, yet 58 percent of those are successful in having the sanction withdrawn.⁵⁸

Research by Policy Exchange found that 70,000 jobseekers have had their social security payments withdrawn unfairly, leading them to rely on food banks to feed themselves and their families.

There are concerns that in many cases people claiming social security payments do not understand the conditions that they are required to fulfil, and are only made aware that they have been sanctioned after the event (when they subsequently discover that the social security payment has not been made). In light of this, we recommend that the current sanctions system should be urgently reviewed, including

- removal of the right for advisers to arbitrarily suspend social security payments pending investigation. There should be a presumption towards eligibility and shorter, fixed consideration times;
- review of the implementation of policies (who is sanctioned, why, appeals, why they are successful) to ensure policies are transparent, evenly applied and fair;
- review of the processes for implementing and using claimant commitments;
- addressing the performance of JCP advisers who repeatedly incorrectly sanction claimants whose sanctions are overturned on appeal.

Localisation of hardship fund

'When we moved in here we applied for help [from the local hardship fund] with the decorating and they refused us completely. I wasn't even working then so I don't know why they turned us down. After two years we've only just managed to complete the second room and we still haven't got carpets in most of the house. We got a second-hand carpet from a friend for my son and daughter's room but there's no underlay as we haven't got the money for it. Some of the boards have splinters and holes in them.' Vicky, Moreton, helped by North Cotswold Foodbank

70,000 jobseekers have had their social security payments withdrawn unfairly leading them to rely on food banks.

The abolition of the Social Fund in April 2013 has caused further hardship to low-income households. Previously, families and individuals could apply for an interest-free hardship loan that would be paid back through their social security payments. Designed to help people with emergencies, these loans provide financial assistance to families who suffer sudden financial crisis due to domestic violence, homelessness, ill-health or natural disaster.

Under the Welfare Reform Act 2012, funds were devolved to local authorities in England and to the Welsh government to run their own social security assistance schemes. However, the money available through these schemes is often insufficient. Many local authorities have imposed strict criteria which determine who can apply. Some schemes do not accept people who have been sanctioned by the Jobcentre. Others only accept people who have lived in the area for at least six months. A recent report⁵⁹ found that many English councils had underspent their hardship budget this year because of strict application criteria. Despite some councils opposing the government changes to social security, the situation has been exacerbated by the application of strict conditions. Additionally, some are not advertising the funds because they are concerned with getting too many applications and not having enough funds across the year.

The government now plans to scrap the £180 million hardship fund altogether.⁶⁰ Charities have warned that this will lead to a postcode lottery in terms of who gets financial assistance, and will further increase the number of families turning to food banks or becoming dependent on loan sharks or payday loans. As councils do not have a statutory duty to provide local social security, some may cut their schemes altogether when the government stops funding them. The scrapping of the scheme will add another hole to the safety net that once protected families in crisis.

Food poverty in the devolved nations

Wales

The use of food banks in Wales is disproportionately high, given the size of its population. The Trussell Trust gave out 711,000 meals⁶¹ for a population of three million, compared with 639,000 in Scotland with a population of over five million.

Over the year to 2013/14 the use of Trussell Trust food banks rose 120 percent.⁶² Rhondda food bank reported a 40 to 50 percent increase in visitors in the past year, with the major driver being problems with their social security payments.⁶³ Bridgend food bank, which opened in January 2010, saw a 123 percent increase in the numbers helped in 2013/14 compared with the previous financial year, giving three days' emergency food to 8,772 people.

Nia, 22, from northeast Wales, has mental health problems. She failed an Employment Support Fund Medical and had hunger cramps before she was referred to a foodbank. *'I was embarrassed going there. I thought it was for homeless people,' she says. 'But when I got there the people were all sorts – young, old, mums with young kids, people like me.'*

Around 690,000 people (23 percent of the population) in Wales live in households below the 60 percent low-income threshold after deducting housing costs.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, 25 percent of Welsh workers earn less than the recommended Living Wage of £7.45 per hour.⁶⁵ Zero-hours working is on the rise, with one-in-five employers admitting to operating such contracts.

The Welsh government has taken steps to mitigate the impact of the UK government's social security reforms. This includes maintaining full support for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme following the abolition of Council Tax Benefit and replacing the abolished components of the Social Fund with the Discretionary Assistance Fund.

Scotland

The amount of food aid distributed by the Trussell Trust in Scotland has increased dramatically, with over 639,000 meals given out by their food banks in the 12 months to April 2014, a fivefold increase from the

IN THE UK, PEOPLE ARE BUYING LESS FOOD IN 2012 THAN IN 2007 BUT SPENDING MORE AS A PROPORTION OF THEIR HOUSEHOLD EXPENDITURE



previous year.⁶⁶ Large increases have been reported by other food providers in Scotland, who cite delays to social security payments, low pay and sanctions as the key causes. The Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee inquiry into food banks found that welfare reforms were 'a significant cause'.⁶⁷

'Charitable organisations like us either had to intervene and help people in need or stand aside and let people starve. That isn't a choice. We hoped this would be a temporary measure but we fear this is being encouraged as the new norm for delivering welfare to the destitute.' George Kirkpatrick, West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare

The Scottish government is supporting food aid provision directly by providing £1m worth of funding through the Scottish 'Emergency Food Aid Action Plan'.⁶⁸ It has also put in place a number of measures intended to mitigate the impact of various UK government reforms to welfare. This includes absorbing the 10 percent⁶⁹ cut in Council Tax Benefit to ensure this does not apply to any local authority in Scotland, replacing the abolished components of the Social Fund with the Scottish Welfare Fund, and providing funding to offset reductions in Discretionary Housing Payments, otherwise known as the bedroom tax.

The impact of these mitigation measures is difficult to assess. However, as a proportion of the total population, the Scottish statistics for food bank use are slightly lower than for the UK as a whole. While the Trussell Trust has slightly more food banks, per capita, in Scotland than the entire UK, it provides slightly fewer meals in Scotland when measured on a per capita basis.⁷⁰ However, it is not possible to attribute this to government mitigation measures without looking at trend data.

The use of food banks in Wales is disproportionately high, given the size of its population. The Trussell Trust gave out 711,000 meals for a population of three million, compared with 639,000 in Scotland with a population of over five million.

The future of the social safety net

The future of the social safety net

'Social protection is both a human right and sound economic policy. Well designed social protection systems support incomes and domestic consumption, build human capital and increase productivity.' Guy Ryder, Director General of the International Labour Organization⁷¹

Protecting its citizens from going hungry is one of the most fundamental duties of government. Most of us have grown up with the assumption that when we fall on hard times, the social security safety net will kick in, and prevent us from falling into destitution and hunger.

The social security safety net principle is now being fundamentally undermined. For many people with little or no other regular income, and no savings to draw on, a regular social security payment is a lifeline; a means of keeping their head above water in difficult times. The Trussell Trust estimates that 49 percent of people who are referred to food banks are there due to problems with social security payments or because they have been refused a crisis loan.⁷² Social security, or its failures, should not be making people destitute, forcing them to turn to food banks.

Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and The Trussell Trust believe that in the seventh richest country in the world no one should be going hungry. Central and local government must adopt policy which is aimed at ensuring that food banks only serve those facing an immediate crisis. We also firmly believe that food banks should not become part of the social security system, and that it is not sufficient to fund a food bank as a response to public health concerns of malnutrition, for example.

Lessons from other countries tell us that, unless we act, food aid can become a replacement for a failing social security system. In the USA, Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief charity, provides 37 million people a year with food – more than one in 10 Americans. Working poverty has been identified as a driver of demand, with 36 percent of Feeding America's clients coming from working households.⁷³ In Canada, some 800,000 people a month are supported through the Food Banks Canada network.⁷⁴

The network points to a lack of decent jobs and a failing social security system as drivers behind the sustained demand.⁷⁵ Similarly to the USA, food banks were introduced in Canada in the 1980s as a stop-gap measure and have slowly become institutionalized, with demand from more than 700,000 people per month in the past 15 years.

There has long been widespread recognition that social security has needed reform, and many organizations in the charity and civil society sector welcomed the government's reforms, in particular the principles behind Universal Credit. However, against a backdrop of wider reform and cuts, including redundancies across the Department for Work and Pensions, the impacts of these reforms have hit millions of the poorest families across the country. The difficulties that Universal Credit implementation has faced, in particular, has meant that the process of reform has been heavily criticised.

Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and The Trussell Trust therefore call for a return to the basic principles of a social safety net, and within this context for a process to determine what a fair social protection system should look like for the twenty-first century. The current system is simply failing to provide an adequate safety net for increasing numbers of people struggling to keep their heads above water and food on their tables.

Conclusion

Food banks, and their army of volunteers, offer a vital lifeline to those in need. But they are a sign of fundamental failure and they should not become an ever-growing feature of life in twenty-first century Britain. The government must first commit to really understanding and monitoring the true scale of this problem, then set out ambitious steps to tackle it. This will require a willingness to accept where mistakes in

policy and practice are being made, and put in place measures to repair the social safety net. It will also mean taking steps to ensure that people have decent, secure jobs so that they can earn their way out of poverty and to tackle the rising cost of living. This will mean visionary policy making; but if these issues are not addressed, many people are going to continue to struggle, living below the headline.



Appendix

Estimated number of meals provided by Trussell Trust, FareShare and FoodCycle in 2013/14

2013/14 Meals distributed	
Trussell	8,218,242
FareShare	12,000,000
FoodCycle	28,800
Total meals	20,247,042

Percent Increase Over 2012/13
54 per cent

2012/13 Meals distributed	
Trussell	3,122,928
FareShare	10,000,000
FoodCycle	28,800
Total meals	13,151,728

Numbers estimated using data for 2013/14 and 2012/13 reported by Trussell Trust, FareShare and FoodCycle (the three main providers in the UK).

Trussell Trust

<http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>

913,138 people were given 3 days emergency food and support in 2013-2014.

346,992 people were given 3 days emergency food and support in 2012-2013.

Reporting period is 1st April 2013 - 31st March 2014.

Meals for 2013/14 = 8,218,242 (assumes food bundle includes food for 3 meals/day or a total of 9 meals).

Meals for 2012/12 = 3,122,928 (assumes food bundle includes food for 3 meals/day or a total of 9 meals).

FareShare

http://www.fareshare.org.uk/about_us/

In 2013/14, the food redistributed by FareShare contributed towards more than 12 million meals.

2013 Report and Financial Statement lists number of meals served in 2012/13 as 'more than 10 million' (http://www.fareshare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Annual_Report.pdf)

Called media relations and was told that reporting period for this number is 1st of April - 31st of March (same as Trussell Trust).

FoodCycle

<http://foodcycle.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/FoodCycle-Fact-Sheet-March-2014.pdf>

Each month FoodCycle serves around 2,400 meals, created using almost 3,000kg of reclaimed surplus food.

Multiplied by 12 months in the year – estimated number for 2013/14 is 28,800 (same number used for 2013/14 and 2012/13).

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- 14 *Households Below Average Income* (HBAI) 1994/5 – 2011/12 (2013), Department for Work and Pensions, Table 4.4tr
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