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Fixing holes in social security support would reduce need for food banks, users' experience shows

Gaps in the social security safety net are a key reason why people are turning to food banks, according to the first in-depth study into the personal experiences of recipients of emergency food aid in the UK.

The findings of the jointly commissioned research published today by Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group, Church of England and The Trussell Trust, also highlights some relatively simple fixes to the benefit system that could dramatically reduce the number of people who are left with little or no money to put food on the table.

The report, 'Emergency Use Only' interviewed 40 food bank users at seven Trussell Trust food banks across the country whose experiences help shed light on the factors that are driving food bank use in the UK. These interviews were backed up by additional data collected from more than 900 recipients at three Trussell Trust food banks and an analysis of the cases of 178 clients accessing an advice service at one food bank.

Key findings from the research showed:

- Food banks were predominantly a last-resort, short-term measure, prompted by an 'acute income crisis' – something which had happened to completely stop or dramatically reduce their income
- Income crisis could be caused by sudden loss of earnings, change in family circumstances or housing problems. However, for between half and two thirds of the users from whom additional data was collected, the immediate trigger for food bank use was linked to problems with benefits (including waiting for benefits to be paid, sanctions, problems with ESA*) or missing tax credits
- Many food bank users were also not made aware of the various crisis payments available in different circumstances, and even fewer were receiving them
- 19-28% of users for whom additional data was collected had recently had household benefits stopped or reduced because of a sanction* and 28-34% were waiting for a benefit claim which had not been decided*
- Many food bank users faced multiple challenges, including ill-health, relationship breakdown, mental health problems or substantial caring responsibilities. Many were unable to work or had recently lost their job. The frequency of bereavement among food bank users was also a striking feature of this research

Use of emergency food aid in the UK, particularly in the form of food banks, has dramatically increased over the last decade. Figures from The Trussell Trust show that numbers receiving three days' food from their food banks rose from 128,697 in 2011-12 to 913,138 in 2013-14.

Most food bank users interviewed spoke of how severe personal financial crises were often the last straw that had brought them there, only turning to food banks as a last resort when other coping strategies had failed. Deciding to accept help from a food bank was frequently described as ‘embarrassing’ and ‘shameful’ but users reported that they would have been completely bereft without it. Considerable personal strength and dignity was also shown by participants, with many displaying great resilience in spite of their circumstances.

The research showed that the very real challenges people face are too often being compounded – rather than assisted – by their experience of the social security system*.

One mum***, who had to give up work to care for her son with serious medical conditions and required intensive support, spoke about her experience when her Child Tax Credits were halved without notice and was horrified by how she was treated. “When our money was stopped, there was no compassion, there was no way to get support,” she said, adding “we got behind on all our bills; everything just got swallowed up, and my direct debits were bouncing.

“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?”

Key findings and recommendations from the study have been presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty to inform the debate on emergency food aid.

A central recommendation from the report is to improve access to short-term benefit advances for people waiting for benefits by increasing awareness, simplifying the claim process and improving data collection to identify support needs. Further recommendations include:

- Reform sanctions policy and practice: increase access to hardship payments, clarify communications about sanctions, mitigate the impact whilst a sanction is being reconsidered and address issues for Housing Benefit
- Improve the ESA (Employment and Support Allowance) regime: ensure claimants are not left without income whilst challenging a decision, or because of missing medical certificates or missed appointments
- Sustain and improve access to emergency financial support through Local Welfare Assistance Schemes and the Scottish Welfare Fund
- Improve access to appropriate advice and support, particularly at Jobcentres

Rachael Orr, Head of Oxfam’s UK Poverty Programme, said: “Food banks are both a lifeline for people at a time of crisis and a symptom of fundamental failure in our society. This report gives a voice to food bank users in the UK and highlights relatively simple policy changes that could significantly reduce food bank use. MPs and their party leaders can’t solve individuals’ personal problems but they can and should act to provide an adequate safety net for those at a time of crisis.”

Alison Garnham Chief Executive of Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) said: “Food banks have boomed not because they’re an easy option but because people haven’t got money to eat – often because of problems with claiming and the payment of benefits. A delay in a benefits decision or a period pending a review can force hunger and humiliation on families, leaving them no option but the food bank. Rather than protecting these families from poverty at the time when they most need help, the system leaves them with almost nothing to live on.

“With more than one in four UK children now growing up poor there is no excuse for inaction. Politicians from all parties need to commit to reforming the system so that families can get short-term advances of benefit payments, the quality of sanctions decisions is improved and disabled people are not left without income whilst challenging unfair decisions.”

The Bishop of Southwark, the Rt Rev Christopher Chessun, said: “This report offers a picture of people facing acute crises in their lives with fortitude and dignity. That this happens is no surprise to thousands of Church of England parishes around the country who help to provide care and relief for their neighbours by running and supporting food banks.

“It is vital that the measured and practical recommendations set out in this report are actively considered and acted upon by politicians of all parties to ensure that more and more people are not forced into relying on emergency food aid.”

David McAuley, Trussell Trust CEO said: “This new evidence brings into sharp focus the uncomfortable reality of what happens when a ‘life shock’ or benefit problem hits those on low incomes: parents go hungry, stress and anxiety increase, and the issue can all too quickly escalate into crippling debt, housing problems and illness. The Trussell Trust has consistently said that too many people are falling through gaps in the social security system. The voices of food bank users heard in this report have informed the united call from four respected anti-poverty bodies to implement simple fixes to the welfare system. We welcome the opportunity to engage positively with politicians of all parties in order to work together to enable solutions for the poorest in the UK.”

Ends

*Between half and two-thirds of food bank users at the three food banks where additional data were collected reported a specific problem with benefits:

- 28-34% were waiting for a benefit claim which had not been decided
- 19-28% had been sanctioned
- 9-16% had their ESA stopped because they were found ‘fit for work’

Statistic is based on more than 900 users across three Trussell Trust food banks and not nationally representative

** Case studies throughout the report come directly from in-depth interviews. Used with permission, personal details have been changed to protect participants’ anonymity.

For a copy of the full report or interview requests please contact:

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Notes to editors:

The full report will be formally launched to MPs across parties at 8:30am at the House of Commons on Wednesday 19th November.

Report Methodology

Research for the report used a combination of approaches. 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with clients at seven Trussell Trust food banks in diverse areas across the UK, charting the course of their journey to the food bank in their own words, using a methodology informed by the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. Additional data was collected from more than 900 clients at three of those food banks regarding the reasons for their referral, enhancing existing data collected by the Trussell Trust. A caseload of 178 clients was also analysed accessing an advice service at one food bank, available since summer 2013, to explore the specific issues they faced and to identify the policy areas involved.

About Trussell Trust foodbanks

Trussell Trust foodbanks give three days' emergency food and support to people in crisis in the UK. Everyone who goes to one of Trussell Trust's 400 foodbanks is referred by a front-line professional such as a social worker, health visitor or schools liaison officer. Over 27,000 professionals referred people to Trussell Trust foodbanks in 2013-14, and 50 percent were statutory agencies.