

Briefing Paper

UK Household Food Security: A Review of Existing Research

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1.0 Introduction

Household food security in the United Kingdom has become a prominent social and political issue. This is because, in concert with provision, evidence shows that there has been a rapid rise in ‘food aid’ demand across the UK in recent years. Food aid has been defined by Defra as: “any type of aid giving activity which aims to provide relief from the symptoms of food insecurity” (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). In order to develop greater understanding of the ‘food aid’ landscape, in 2013, Defra commissioned an expedient, nine week, Rapid Evidence Assessment Report (REA) into Household Food Security in the UK. Following revisions, the final University of Warwick and Food Ethics Council report was published in February 2014 (Butler, 2014).

This briefing paper will focus on food banks, which have been defined as being, charitable organisations that store and distribute donated food (California Association of Food Banks, 2013). For example, a UK Trussell Trust food bank, distributes a three day supply of emergency food to each individual, following referral from external parties, such as doctors and the Citizens Advice Bureau (Morse, 2013). However, it must be noted that food banks

are only one type of food aid provision amongst a 'broad spectrum' of types of food aid activities (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014).

Firstly, the paper will examine the key findings from the REA, including the fundamental question as to why people turn to food banks. Furthermore, the paper will examine findings from the report, highlighting reasons why there has been such a dramatic change in demand. Finally, using statistics from The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network, this report will indicate the recent growth of UK food bank demand and provision.

1.1 Why do households turn to food banks?

The Defra commissioned research found that deprived households turned to food banks after exhausting various strategies aimed at resolving their personal difficulties. For example, the REA research found that food banks were used by households as a last resort after other alternatives had been tried, such as: discretionary spending cutbacks; turning to family and friends; and the utilisation of debt finance capacity (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). A specific UK example highlighted in the REA, supporting this research finding is that in Rotherham, Sleightholme found that 'many respondents had exhausted other avenues of support' (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). In agreement with the views of some charities, such as the Church Action on Poverty, evidence was found to suggest that individuals used food banks following a series of personal crises.

However, the REA research indicated that even some of the most deprived households still fail to turn to food banks in the event of crises. For example, the review cites evidence from Canadian research by Loopstra and Tarasuk (2012) as well as Engler-Stringer and Berenbaum (2007). In these studies it was found that some deprived individuals did not use

third sector assistance because of reasons such as: they felt ashamed; or believed they would not meet the criteria; or suffered information failure related to the extent of food aid provision (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). However, it must be stated that the Canadian social policy context is different from the United Kingdom's.

1.2 Reasons for the rise in food bank demand

The REA review noted that there was a “lack of systematic peer-reviewed research” from the UK on the reasons why food aid demand has increased (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). As a result, it was not possible for the REA to draw any conclusions on particular triggers for food bank use. However, claims made and presented by non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and local-level research were examined by the REA. The REA review found that NGO's and local-level research believed that alongside other reasons, three main triggers for the recent increase in food bank demand were: benefit reductions and delays; benefit changes; and low incomes.

The REA review suggests that delays to benefits were seen as the main trigger for the use of food aid assistance and food banks, by charities and NGO's. This assertion is supported by preliminary findings from Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) survey research (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). However, individuals using CAB services are not representative of the wider UK population, the REA notes. Similarly, the REA research used quantitative data from the Trussell Trust and the corresponding qualitative workshops. This evidence also pinpointed 'benefit delays' as the notable trigger for food aid usage (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). In addition, in 2012-2013, data from one food bank in Birmingham, Aston and Nechells (ANFB), showed that 30% of users suggested benefit delays was the cause of the use of a voucher

giving entitlement a three day food parcel (Robinson, 2014). Further, data also collected from the ANFB in Birmingham showed that in 2012-2013, 16% of people cited benefit changes as the stimulus for food bank need (Robinson, 2014). The REA report has noted that preliminary research from the CAB, showed a high percentage of individuals stated that 'benefit sanctions' acted as the primary catalyst for the need of food aid provision (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014).

Since the coalition government came to power in May 2010, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, has proceeded with the implementation of a series of welfare reforms and the wholesale restructuring of the welfare state, which has impacted on the benefits system. The series of significant reforms has included the introduction of the universal credit, the introduction of a benefits cap for working age people and the removal of the 'spare room subsidy'/introduction of the 'bedroom tax' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). It is argued by some stakeholders that the significant welfare changes, not all of which have been fully implemented yet, have negatively affected food security for some of the poorest members of UK society.

In addition, low income, is one of the main suggested reasons highlighted from the REA research for the recent growth in the use of food aid, as a solution of last resort. The REA uses evidence from Defra which highlights the reducing affordability of food. For instance, the REA notes that the 2012 Defra handbook shows that food affordability has fallen by over 20% in the last few years, for households in the lowest income decile (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). This is because, a large proportion of low income households in the UK have been suffering both falling real wages and working age benefit payments. The sharp rise in

food prices coupled with a fall in inflation-adjusted wages and benefits, some stakeholders have suggested has caused a severe strain on already constrained household budgets. Consequently, it has been argued, this has led to some people requiring food aid from providers, such as the Trussell Trust.

Conversely, in July 2013, a government welfare minister, Lord Freud, asserted that the rapid rise in demand for food aid was not linked to government initiatives, such as the ongoing welfare reforms, but because ‘there were more food banks in existence’ (Morris, 2013). This claim was examined by the Defra commissioned REA research but no evidence was uncovered which supported this idea outlined by Lord Freud (Butler, 2014). As a result, Lord Freud has retrenched from his initial stance, stating in response to questioning by Baroness Lister that: “Clearly nobody goes to a food bank willingly” (Nelson, 2014).

1.3 Growth of the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network

Figure 1 Trussell Trust Data

Period	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Number of People Given 3 Days Emergency Food and Support by the Trussell Trust	61,500	128,500	347,000	913,000
Year over Year Percentage Increase	N/A	109%	170%	163%

***Data contains rounding error**

It is evident that since the financial crisis of autumn 2008 and following the advent of UK austerity policies, there has been substantive growth in the demand for and provision of food banks. This growing problem, especially in urban areas, has been highlighted through

the growth of the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network. It is important to note that this preeminent organisation is singular in the fact that it provides useful statistics regarding the changes in the scope of its operating activities. For example, on a UK wide level, The Trussell Trust recently reported that in the year ending 2013-2014, they had a network of over 400 food banks which assisted approximately 913,000 people (Trussell Trust, 2014). This headline figure equates to a 163% rise in numbers of people turning to the network of food banks, in 2013-2014, in contrast to the prior year. In addition, over a longer time horizon year the growth is even more pronounced as during 2007-2008 this Christian network assisted approximately only 14,000 people (The Trussell Trust, 2014). This shows the extent of the exponential growth in individuals turning to food banks in the UK. However, it must be noted that the third party nature of the Trussell Trust statistics calls into question it's robustness to some extent. For instance, the data does not track repeated visits. The data also excludes a number of varied community based independent initiatives; the REA review 'mapping' exercise mapped 60 independent food aid projects in the UK (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014).

1.4 Birmingham

On a local level, evidence suggests that the UK's second city, of over one million, Birmingham, is experiencing a sharp rise in food insecurity. In particular, the city's deprived wards of Aston, Nechells, Ladywood and Sparkbrook are locations where both food aid needs and food bank provision has surged. Data from Aston and Nechells Trussell Trust Foodbank (ANFB) shows that in 2012-2013 the Food Bank supported a total of 1675 individuals (Robinson, 2014). This is in comparison to 314 people in the previous year. The approximate five-fold annual expansion experienced by this particular food bank is greater

than the average annual Trussell Trust rate of growth of 163% and suggests an intensification of food insecurity in Aston and Nechells (The Trussell Trust, 2014). This will be investigated further through questioning with local stakeholders. Even though the statistics are stark, it must be noted however, that the accuracy of this data must also be treated with care.

1.5 Insufficient provision

Furthermore, The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network, a notable stakeholder, has also estimated that a gap of food aid provision exists. According to the Trussell Trust, approximately 750-1,000 food banks are needed in total (The Trussell Trust, 2014). In 2013, estimates by Cooper & Dumbleton argued 500,000 individuals in total could be in need of food aid (Robinson, 2014). For example, since the review was completed in March 2013, Niall Cooper, of the charity Church Action on Poverty stated that food banks have 'reported a doubling or trebling of demand' (Butler, 2014). In support of this assertion, The Trussell Trust Foodbank network released data which showed that in the six months post the REA, over 350,000 individuals accessed their assistance (Downing and Kennedy, 2013).

However, the REA research cites a 2009 REA paper from Canada, by Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk which found that food bank usage and household distance from food banks were not linked (Lambie-Mumford, et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Defra REA research noted that there is limited peer-reviewed research and evidence in the UK regarding specific gaps in provision, so specific conclusions cannot be drawn. However, it must be noted that the Trussell Trust is currently opening approximately three food banks a week to satisfy the rising UK demand for food aid.

1.6 Conclusion

In summary, the REA review found evidence to support the assertion that households only use food banks out of necessity, not because provision is more widespread, as some commentators have suggested. Furthermore, a social stigma still exists, regarding aid, which prevents some of the most deprived households from using assistance. It is also evident that food bank demand has dramatically risen. This is highlighted by statistics from the Trussell Trust network of food banks, showing a 163% annual rise in numbers of individuals using their 'food aid'. Assertions by charities documenting the continuation of growth, supports this particular picture of the UK 'food aid' landscape. However, specific conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the Trussell Trust's assertion that a gap in food bank provision exists. The review highlights three key reasons as to why there has been the change in recent food bank demand; benefit delays, benefit changes and low income. Yet, the review has noted that conclusions cannot also be drawn with regard to these reasons, because of the lack of peer-reviewed evidence. As a result of the controversial nature of findings in the area of welfare benefits, they are seen as difficult to interpret. Overall, this REA review provides an informative starting point for research because it offers a series of findings to key questions, using range of evidence bases. However, further research is required so policy makers can tackle the growing problem of food insecurity more effectively in the future.

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