

# STATE OF HUNGER



2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A STUDY OF FOOD INSECURITY  
AND POVERTY IN THE UK



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## BACKGROUND

Over the last decade, there has been growing public and media concern about more signs of severe material poverty, particularly the rapid growth in the number of charitable food banks and parcels distributed. Despite some new evidence on the root causes of these changes, there is a clear need for more definitive research on the nature and drivers of the problem and how these are changing over time.

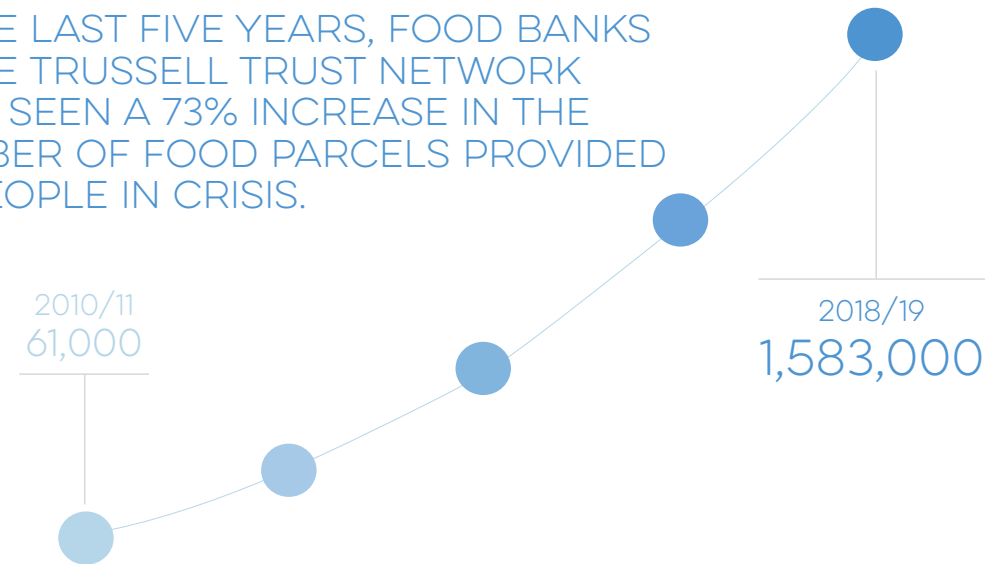
The State of Hunger is a three-year research project designed to provide the evidence base required to address hunger in the UK. The research provides the best available data yet on how many people are affected by hunger, which groups of people are most affected and where, and what drives people to food banks.

*Hunger is understood as 'household food insecurity,' which is an 'economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food' at household level.*

This conceptualisation of hunger provides a rigorous means of measuring hunger, allows for international comparisons, captures the inability to afford a nutritionally adequate diet, and contextualises the lack of food as just one aspect of wider poverty rather than as a stand-alone phenomenon.

This approach enables us to look at hunger affecting people other than just those who have used a food bank, even though the larger part of this research is primarily focused on this group.

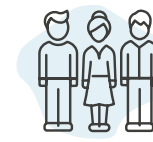
IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, FOOD BANKS IN THE TRUSSELL TRUST NETWORK HAVE SEEN A 73% INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF FOOD PARCELS PROVIDED TO PEOPLE IN CRISIS.



## DATA COLLECTION



Review of literature and expert opinion



Survey of 28 food bank managers



Survey of over 1,100 people who have used food banks in the Trussell Trust network



In-depth interviews with people who have used a food bank in the Trussell Trust network



Survey of 306 referral agencies in 13 areas



Statistical modelling of the drivers of food bank use

## THE SCALE AND PROFILE OF HUNGER IN THE UK



8-10%  
of UK households  
were **food insecure**  
in 2016-18



2.8%  
were **severely food insecure**  
in 2016

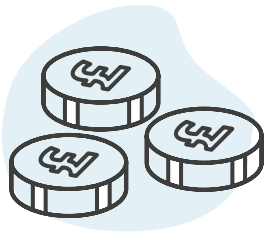


UP TO 2%  
of UK households  
**used a food bank**  
in 2018/19

*Households are classed as severely food insecure if one or more adults skip meals, under-eat or go hungry because of lack of money.*

The prevalence of food insecurity among children was higher than among adults: around 11% of children lived in food insecure households in 2016. The study found evidence that women living in a couple with children also tended to be more food insecure, because they were more likely to skip or reduce meals so that children have enough to eat.

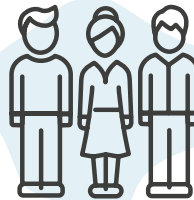
The risk of being food insecure was higher among:



households who  
had a **lower income**



people who were  
**unemployed**



people who were  
**younger**



lone-parent or  
**single-person households**



households who **rented**  
(particularly social renters)

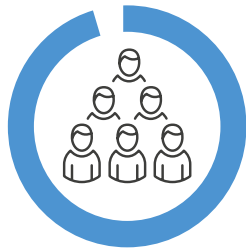


people affected  
by **ill health**

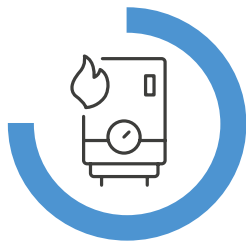
# PROFILE OF HOUSEHOLDS WHO HAVE USED A FOOD BANK

## DESTITUTION

Households who have used a food bank are, on average, very deprived, with an *average weekly income after housing costs of just £50*.



94% met the definition for being *destitute*.



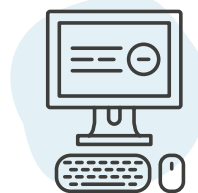
OVER 75% were *in arrears*, often on two or more bills.

## INCOME

The most common sources of income for people referred to food banks are state benefits. Other sources of income, such as paid employment or family/friends, are much less common.



86% of households referred to food banks said state benefits were one of their current sources of income.



*Universal Credit* was the most commonly received benefit.



Around 14% of households referred to food banks have someone in employment.

## GEOGRAPHY

The pattern of food bank use across the UK is very similar to that for destitution.

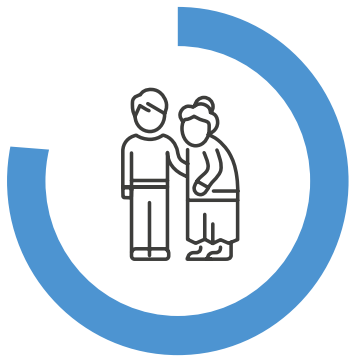


There are higher rates of food bank use in *former industrial urban areas* in the North and Midlands, some *coastal towns*, and a range of *London boroughs*.

At a local level, areas with the highest provision of emergency food parcels clearly show a *high prevalence of economic disadvantage and poor health*.

## RISK FACTORS

Most of the demographic risk factors for being food insecure were also risk factors for being referred to a food bank in the Trussell Trust network.



**77%**

of people referred to food banks were **aged 25-54** and had an increased risk of being referred to a food bank. People of pension age (65+) constituted a very small minority (2%).



**46%**

of people referred to food banks were single people **living alone**, while 22% were **lone parents**.

Couples with and without children were under-represented against their national share.



**70%**

live in **rented properties**, mostly social housing. Home-owners constituted only 4% of households referred.



**NEARLY 75%**

reported someone in their household had a **health issue**. Poor mental health was the most common issue.

## DRIVERS OF FOOD BANK USE IN THE UK

The scale of deprivation experienced by people referred to food banks reflects the strong economic need underlying food bank use. Statistical modelling showed that the increased number of food banks (the 'supply factor') had an inevitable effect on parcels provided but was far from the whole or main story in most years. Instead, the more detailed evidence collected on drivers of food bank use showed that demand for food parcels resulted mainly from **three simultaneous factors**:

### BENEFITS: INADEQUACY, GAPS AND REDUCTIONS



**Problems were widespread:** two-thirds of people referred had a problem with the benefits system in the last year.

- Drops in benefit income were not just caused by errors, but were primarily designed into the benefits system - for example, the five week wait for Universal Credit, the benefit cap, and the 'bedroom tax'.
- Key reforms to welfare have had a sizeable and significant effect on food bank demand: a reduction in the value of benefits, being turned down for disability benefits, being sanctioned, and being on Universal Credit.
- Benefit rules on debt repayments also caused hardship, with 40% of people referred to food banks having money taken off their benefits to repay debts, the vast majority of these to the DWP.

### CHALLENGING LIFE EXPERIENCES OR ILL HEALTH



A majority of people referred to food banks have had **at least one challenging life experience** (such as eviction or divorce) in the year prior to using a food bank, lowering their capacity to earn or engage with the welfare system, or increasing their expenses.

A substantial minority also reported having at least one adverse work-related experience (such as losing a job) in the year prior to using the food bank. A large proportion of households had someone who was **ill or disabled**.



### LACK OF INFORMAL SUPPORT

The vast majority of people referred to food banks had either **exhausted support** from family or friends, had a **resource-poor** social network, or **could not access support** due to social isolation.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY AND HUNGER

Qualitative interviews with people referred to food banks and key informants shed light on the experience of hunger and poverty. For the majority of people referred to food banks interviewed, poverty, financial struggle, ill health and/or adversities in life were a **long-term or a cyclical experience**. Often these experiences interacted with each other, making people's situation worse, for example when debt problems adversely affected respondents' mental health.

People referred to food banks spoke about the impact of hunger on their daily functioning, as well as the detrimental impact on their mental health, wellbeing, and self-esteem. Key informants, in turn, emphasised that children suffer emotionally when they become aware that their parents go without food. People referred also described the strategies they used to cope, like drinking lots of water or sleeping longer to disguise hunger.

*"It got in the end to the point where in the winter if we couldn't afford gas, we were going out foraging for wood."*

Qualitative respondent, female

*"I do [skip meals]. The kids don't, but I do. I can go three days without eating. When I first started doing it, it was like, oh my God, I feel ill. Now, I'm used to it."*

Qualitative respondent, female

*"It's very depressing. You feel very hopeless. You feel a failure in some ways, I suppose."*

Qualitative respondent, male

*"When I get my ESA I get £138, and out of that £130 goes on bills [arrear]. So that leaves £8 a fortnight, and that's to get gas, electric, pay my water, pay my TV licence. So it's just impossible. I go to bed at night wishing I won't wake up in the morning."*

Qualitative respondent, female

*"If people absolutely haven't had enough to eat, it's very hard to think straight, it's very hard to make good decisions. If it goes on and on and on, chronically, you ... increasingly lack, literally, the energy to make anything, a change."*

Key informant



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To address the problem of hunger and poverty in the UK today, **the Trussell Trust** is urging the government to:

**1** *As a priority, make sure people are paid their benefits more quickly.* Ending the five-week wait for Universal Credit is the first step, so people aren't pushed into poverty when they're most in need of support.

**2** *Ensure benefits provide enough money for people to have a decent standard of living* - the value of benefits must be restored to make up for the losses experienced under the benefits freeze.

**3** *Be a responsible lender* - particularly, the Department for Work & Pensions should not be forcing people to pay back money they can't afford to do without.

**4** *Restore emergency local welfare provision* for people in crisis, funded by central government, so people aren't forced to food banks.

## FIVE WAYS YOU CAN HELP

**1** *Tweet about what needs to change with #ThisCanChange.* Help us get the word out about the reality of hunger and poverty in the UK and add your voice to the call for action.

**2** *Write to your politicians telling them why you think things need to change.* It's time for the government to step in and take action - and you can help by reminding them of what they can do.

**3** *Join our #5WeeksTooLong campaign calling for an end to the wait for Universal Credit.* Five weeks is too long for people to wait for a first payment when they're in need of support. Sign up now at [trusselltrust.org/five-weeks-too-long/](https://trusselltrust.org/five-weeks-too-long/).

**4** *Donate to the Trussell Trust to help us create change.* Whether you donate money, food, or time, your contribution makes a real difference, helping food banks serve their local communities and helping us campaign for change. You can help at [trusselltrust.org/donate](https://trusselltrust.org/donate).

**5** *Sign up to hear from us on our website.* Head to [trusselltrust.org/newsletter](https://trusselltrust.org/newsletter) to register for our regular newsletter so you can stay up-to-date with our work.



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**#THISCANCHANGE**

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