



Background

Food poverty is defined by the Department of Health as “the inability to afford, or have access to, food to make up a healthy diet.” It is an increasing problem in the UK, most prominently represented by the rising use of **foodbanks**, charitable organisations which usually provide a three-day supply of non-perishable food to people who have been referred and who would otherwise not have access to food. **Universal Credit** is a new UK benefit which is being rolled out across the UK. It consists of a single monthly payment per household, uses a digital system, and has more conditionality than previous benefits, meaning that sanctions (the removal of all or part of a person’s benefits in response to them failing to fulfil requirements) are more common. It has come under criticism for increasing food poverty from many charities, including The Trussell Trust, who found that there is a 52% increase in foodbank use after six months in areas where Universal Credit has been implemented. Political debate around Universal Credit, food poverty and the charitable response to hunger is live and contentious, while academics are also investigating the associations between Universal Credit and food poverty, sanctions and food poverty, and the environment of the foodbank. This research sought to understand the aspects of Universal Credit that are affecting foodbank use and the experience of those coming to foodbanks.

Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods approach. I attended fourteen different foodbank sessions in Bath, East Bristol and Oxford where I helped other volunteers welcome those coming to the foodbank and prepare their food. During these sessions, I had many conversations with foodbank clients, support workers and volunteers which, with their consent, formed part of my research. I carried out twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews with foodbank volunteers and managers I met while volunteering and then analysed this interview data to draw out repeated themes. I also analysed the data of 1053 people coming to the Oxford foodbank between February 2018 and February 2019 according to household type and reported reason for coming, and I carried out a wide-ranging literature review drawing on work by academics, charities and government bodies.

Rosie Sourbut

How is Universal Credit affecting foodbanks?

- More people are coming to foodbanks, and people are coming for longer. In the foodbanks I visited, the “three times in six months” guideline to prevent dependency had either been abandoned or exceptions were becoming more common. Foodbanks are becoming institutionalised; local councils are relying on them as a safety net.
- A strain across the third sector is being felt from increased demand on services by those experiencing Universal Credit problems.
- Many volunteers and clients suggested that the increased reliance on charities was deliberate: that the Universal Credit system was “designed cynically”, “setting people up to fail” and “all part of the government’s plan.”

“I think the government know exactly what they’re doing and it’s really, really dangerous.” Michelle, volunteer

What aspects of Universal Credit are increasing foodbank use?

- Delay before first payment – Universal Credit has a built-in delay of five weeks before claimants receive their first payment. Many claimants don’t have savings so they are left with “nothing to live on”.
- Loan repayment and debt – many claimants get into debt during the wait, and this then means they have less to survive on when they do receive Universal Credit, leaving them “constantly catching up”.
- Monthly payment – unlike previous benefits, Universal Credit is paid monthly. This creates budgeting problems for those used to a fortnightly payment.
- Direct payment of housing benefit to the claimant, rather than the landlord, causes problems for some who are struggling to survive on Universal Credit as they are tempted to “dip into the housing benefit” for necessities like food.
- Not enough money – only 8% of claimants think the amount they are paid is adequate to live on; one disabled man I met in the foodbank had just £13 left a month to survive on after rent, gas and electric.
- Bureaucracy and complexity – the system is so complicated that even a volunteer who had worked in housing for a decade struggled to understand it.
- The online system creates difficulties for those with low levels of computer literacy and can also prevent people from receiving benefit if they receive two wages in one month.
- Benefit sanctions are more common under Universal Credit. Some volunteers felt they were drowned out by all the other issue with the system and that they were hearing about sanctions less than previously; no volunteers I spoke to thought sanctions were effective.
- Local JobCentres in all of the cities I visited were criticised for failing to offer support to people and having overly rigid working systems.

“They’re having to be desperate and their cupboard’s empty before they’re coming to the foodbank.” Barbara, volunteer

What other factors are driving foodbank use?

- Food banks are more available and better known than they used to be. Some of their increased use is due to them meeting a previously unmet need, not a new need.
- A lack of social networks and support is leaving people vulnerable to hunger.
- Some volunteers said that some clients have budgeting issues.
- Low income was a large factor driving foodbank use, particularly among single women with or without children. In-work poverty was identified by volunteers as a cause of foodbank use.

Who is Universal Credit driving to foodbanks?

- While a wide variety of people used foodbanks and volunteers stressed there was “no typical person, no typical cause”, there were some groups which were disproportionately represented in foodbanks.
- Many older single men came to foodbanks. Single men were also disproportionately likely to be coming due to the Universal Credit delay.
- Disabled people are disproportionately likely to need a foodbank, and disproportionately likely to experience delays and receive inadequate funding within the benefits system. People with specific learning difficulties were often not taken seriously or were penalised for related difficulties during the benefits application process. Mental health problems were exacerbated by Universal Credit.
- Increasing numbers of employed people were coming to the foodbanks, and more families came during the holidays due to holiday hunger.

“You have to make yourself look terrible in the eyes of these people, which means that you feel terrible. You know that it’s for nothing. It’s like a torture, it affects your mental health... and then they expect you to be motivated for work?” Ella, client

What is it like to go to a foodbank?

While volunteers usually tried to be welcoming, offering hot drinks and listening if people wanted to talk, there was an uncertain client/volunteer relationship, with many volunteers not knowing what word to use to describe clients. Many clients were “ashamed” and felt the need to explain themselves, justifying their presence and that they weren’t “scroungers.” Clients were often reluctant to express dietary preferences and some did not even raise allergies and intolerances, suggesting they did not feel entitled to choice. The foodbank support available varied greatly from location to location, with some providing fresh food and others not, and some communities more supportive than others.

Key Recommendations

To government and politicians:

- Remove the delay before first payment
- Replace the emergency payment loan with an emergency grant
- Give claimants choice around the frequency of payments and direct payment of housing benefit
- Increase the amount which claimants receive
- Introduce a free phone service and provide JobCentre support for those struggling with online applications
- Clients with disabilities and caring responsibilities should be allowed to report over the phone
- Modify the real-time online system
- Give people time to appeal before applying sanctions
- Investigate the efficacy of sanctions and cease their use if they are found to be ineffective
- Calculate the welfare costs being footed by charities and take this into policy considerations.
- Carry out wide-scale research into gender and food insecurity.
- Urgently address the disparities in treatment of disabled people, and introduce reasonable adjustments for clients with disabilities.
- Assessments for disability benefits should be carried out by qualified doctors.
- Re-skilling should be provided for older workers.
- Investment should be made into counselling services.
- Government funding should provide all children with access to food during the holidays.
- Publicly announce that the right to food is a human right to reduce feelings of being undeserving.
- Tackle environmental and health issues in our food system alongside food insecurity through a universal food voucher system.

Recommendations to foodbanks:

- More thinking is needed about the most empowering structures within which to serve clients.
- A sustainable volunteer pool will require foodbanks to reach out beyond their base of religiously motivated older volunteers.

Further research

- Gender and food insecurity – my research suggests many women could be suffering from “hidden hunger”.
- Manual labour and disability – many clients I met were too disabled for the jobs they had previously worked in and were trained for, but “not disabled enough” for disability benefits. Research is needed to understand how to best help this group.
- Creative solutions should be found combining environmental and social issues within the food system.