



Food Poverty and Mental Health

What does the current evidence tell us?

The Hadley Trust

Food Poverty and Insecurity

1. Key facts

- Foodbank use in the UK is roughly 90 times higher than it was a decade ago, and in the past year alone there has been a 6% increase in foodbank use.¹
- Delays to benefit payments and low income are among two of the most common reasons behind foodbank use.²
- While the Government has suggested that foodbank use has increased due to greater availability of foodbanks, this is not the best explanation for the available data. The best explanation is that food poverty itself has increased.
- There is a strong association between food insecurity and people's mental health and wellbeing, and numerous sources of evidence suggests this link is causal.

2. Introduction

In this paper, we present evidence that food poverty in the UK has increased since 2008; that it is being driven by a range of factors, including welfare policies and low income; and that it is taking a severe toll on the mental health and wellbeing of our communities. While foodbanks provide temporary and vital relief, they should not be part of a long-term strategy to end food poverty. Instead, it is imperative that the Government act to address the causes of food poverty, such as benefit sanctions, the benefits freeze, and low-paid and insecure work.

For many families in the UK, food poverty is a distant issue of which they have little experience. Some families, doubtlessly, will notice the food donation points at their local supermarket or football stadium, and will have read about foodbanks in the news. Many, too, will remember the distressing scene in a Newcastle foodbank from Ken Loach's 2016 film, *I, Daniel Blake*, about the inhumanity of the welfare system in the UK. For many, that over one million food packages were handed out by the Trussell Trust to over half a million people in 2016 represents a social injustice and is a dire indictment of recent government policy, yet food insecurity remains an unlikely prospect for their families.³ However, the number of families who are unaffected by a growing crisis in food poverty and food price inflation in the UK is quickly decreasing.

Community Links is a charity which aims to generate change and improve lives in east London. Through the frontline services and programmes we deliver, we have become increasingly aware of greater numbers of people in need of assistance with food. This has prompted us to study food poverty in more depth to identify the drivers, consequences, and possible solutions.

We aim to foster Ready for Everything Communities. Ready for Everything Communities are defined by what they dream of, not what holds them back. They are communities with ambition, resilience and influence; that care for themselves; are keen to collaborate and share; and are proud of their diversity. Communities that are supported by an effective network of voluntary, private and public sector partners that recognise they are a fundamental part of the picture. We view food poverty as a fundamental barrier to Ready for Everything Communities. If people are hungry, they are likely to have low levels of wellbeing now, and will be focused on day-to-day survival (rather than planning for the future and participating in civic life). If we can address food poverty, then we are one step closer to Ready for Everything Communities.

3. Current situation of food poverty in the UK

In the current era of austerity, public attention has become focused on the recent growth in foodbank use in the UK as a potential indicator of growing food insecurity. Food insecurity is defined as going hungry, at risk of going hungry or worried about going hungry due to not being able to afford food.⁴ Although there are conflicting figures as to the true extent of foodbank use, it is clear that more people have become reliant on foodbanks since 2010. Kellogg's estimated in 2013 that the amount of people fed by foodbanks had increased from 26,000 to 280,000 in three years; the number of people receiving food from Trussell Trust foodbanks in a six month period tripled to 350,000 between 2012 and 2013; and a Church Action on Poverty report from 2013 estimated that over 500,000 people in the UK were reliant on food aid.⁵

¹ Trussell Trust, '[End of Year Stats 2017/18](#)'.

² Oxford University, '[Strong link between increased benefit sanctions and higher foodbank use](#)', 27 October 2016.

³ BBC, '[Reality Check: Did a million people use food banks?](#)', 4 November 2016.

⁴ End Hunger UK, '[Shocking figures showing hidden hunger show why we need to find out more](#)', 30 January 2018.

⁵ Kellogg's, *Hard to Swallow: The Facts about Food Poverty* (London: Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2013); House of Commons Library, '[Food Banks and Food Poverty](#)' (2014).

Trussell Trust figures from 2018 highlight that food insecurity has continued to grow quickly as the charity gave over 1.3m emergency food supplies to people in crisis in 2017/18, a 6% increase on the previous year.⁶ Research by End Hunger UK has found that, in 2017, 1 in 6 adults in the UK had skipped a meal because they could not afford it, a figure which rises to 1 in 4 for those with children under 18.⁷

i. Why is foodbank use increasing?

In recent years, it is unambiguous that foodbank use has increased. Figures from the Trussell Trust, the UK's largest foodbank provider, show that the number of food parcels provided by them has increased from 15,899 in 2008/09 to 1,332,952 in 2017/18.⁸ However, the Government has argued that increased foodbank use may reflect the growing number of foodbanks available and increased publicity, rather than an actual increase in hunger. In 2013, the then Conservative Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud, stated: "My Lords, there is actually no evidence as to whether the use of foodbanks is supply-led or demand-led" and that if the numbers of foodbanks increased, there would be inevitably more people who would use them: "food from a foodbank—the supply—is a free good, and by definition there is an almost infinite demand for a free good".⁹ Similarly, in December 2014, Matthew Hancock, the Business Minister, said that he believed the use of foodbanks was driven by the publicity surrounding them. Education Secretary Michael Gove suggested that foodbank users were themselves to blame, guilty of taking decisions that showed they were "not best able to manage their finances".¹⁰

Food poverty in the UK is not officially measured and the Government has explicitly stated that it has no plans introduce such a measure.¹¹ This means we do not have a direct answer to the question of whether hunger has genuinely increased. However, the evidence we do have is not consistent with the 'supply-side' argument; instead it suggests that food insecurity and food poverty have genuinely increased in recent years. Firstly, foodbank users cite welfare issues as one of the biggest reasons why they need to access foodbanks and a growing number of foodbank referrals are due to welfare payments "not covering the costs of essentials".¹² At the same time we have been through a period of increasing conditionality in the welfare system, and real-term cuts. The use of sanctions has increased; benefit levels have been frozen; a benefits cap has been introduced; and the level at which the cap was set was then lowered.¹³

Secondly, matching local statistics on foodbank use with local statistics on the application of benefit sanctions shows a clear relationship. As an Oxford University study has concluded "for every ten additional sanctions applied in each quarter of the year, on average five more adults would be referred to foodbanks in the area".¹⁴ This relationship would seem improbable if people, in general, were just taking advantage of a "free good". Instead, it appears that foodbank use is being led by an increase in demand. Thirdly, studies looking at welfare policies and food poverty in the United States, including strong longitudinal evidence, have shown that welfare assistance does indeed reduce food insecurity.¹⁵

Given the freeze on welfare allowances, introduction of a benefits cap and increasing welfare conditionality in the UK, it seems more than likely that foodbank use is being driven by reductions to household income which have resulted in increasing levels of food poverty.

ii. National economic context

The growth of food poverty and downward pressure on household income are linked to, and likely driven by, a range of economic and financial factors, in national and local contexts, during the recent and continuing period of austerity. Below is a brief summary of the economic trends and policy changes made in the past decade which have undermined food security in the UK.

Government data shows that the proportion of people meeting official definitions of poverty has remained stable. Relative poverty is defined as households that are below 60% of median income. The proportion of people in the UK meeting this definition between 2014/15 and 2016/17 (the latest year that statistics are available) remained static at 16%

⁶ Trussell Trust, 'End of Year Stats 2017/18'.

⁷ End Hunger UK, 'Shocking figures showing hidden hunger show why we need to find out more'.

⁸ Trussell Trust, 'End of Year Stats 2017/18'.

⁹ Quoted by Jessica Elgot, '[Food Banks Not Linked With Growing Poverty, Says Millionaire Lord Freud](#)', Huffington Post, 3 July 2013.

¹⁰ Quoted by Patrick Wintour and Patrick Butler, '[Tories seek to avert rift with Church of England over food bank report](#)', 8 December 2014; BBC, '[Michael Gove 'insulted' food-bank users, says Labour](#)', 10 September 2013.

¹¹ Parliament.UK, '[Food Banks: Written question – 109156](#)'.

¹² Trussell Trust, 'End of Year Stats 2017/18'.

¹³ On the increasing use of sanctions and "conditionality" in the welfare system see Joseph Rowntree Foundation, '[Welfare Sanctions and Conditionality in the UK](#)' (London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014); Community Links, '[Tipping the balance? A qualitative study on the cumulative impacts of welfare reform in the London Borough of Newham](#)' (London: Community Links, 2014).

¹⁴ Oxford University, '[Strong link between increased benefit sanctions and higher foodbank use](#)', 27 October 2016.

¹⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, '[Measuring the effect of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program participation on food security \(Summary\)](#)', August 2013.

before housing costs. However, taking housing costs into account the proportion of people meeting the definition has risen slightly from 21% to 22%.¹⁶

While important and useful, the Government's official measures mask severe geographical inequalities and do not tell us about the severity of poverty people are facing. In the London Borough of Newham, for example, only two wards have a poverty rate of less than 31%, whilst several have a poverty rate above 40%.¹⁷ To get a picture of the severity of poverty, we can look at changes in real terms income. The data shows that while most people's incomes have increased, the incomes of those at the very bottom of the scale have decreased. For those in the poorest 10% of households, income has fallen from £193 per week in 2014/15 to £188 in 2016/17 before housing costs – the only decile for which incomes have fallen. Income in this decile has also fallen after taking housing costs into account, from £110 in 2014/15 to £104 in 2016/17.¹⁸ A study published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in June 2018 found that 1.5 million people in the UK, including 350,000 children, have experienced destitution in the last year, 62% of whom cited food as the most common necessity which they could not afford.¹⁹

In part, the reduced incomes of the poorest households can be explained by government policy on welfare. Both short-term reductions (through sanctions, or the numerous errors and delays which have been associated with the rollout of Universal Credit [UC]) and long-term reductions (benefits cap, cuts to Local Housing Allowance) to household income have been associated with an increase in food poverty. For instance, the Trussell Trust has argued that “the effect of a six-plus week waiting period for a first UC payment can be serious, leading to foodbank referrals”, and demonstrate that areas undergoing the full rollout of UC had seen an average 16.85% increase in emergency food referrals.²⁰ The Chartered Institute of Housing found in November 2017 that, a year after the introduction of the benefit cap, one third of the 68,000 affected families had seen their income reduced by up to £100 a week, pushing them into poverty and causing further food insecurity.²¹ Whilst the initial waiting period for UC claimants has since been slightly reduced, there remains significant issues with the implementation of the reform which have resulted in further delays and error in payment.²² Furthermore, attempts to restrict immigration through the exclusion of some migrant families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) from particular welfare benefits risks causing further destitution and food poverty.²³

In short, there is strong evidence that government policy on welfare reform, particularly in the past decade, has played a significant role in reducing the incomes of vulnerable households, putting them at greater risk of food insecurity. This has led the JRF to declare that many people are “destitute by design”. However, the JRF also highlights that levels of all forms of destitution fell 25% between 2015 and 2017, with a reduction in welfare sanctions being cited as the most significant factor.²⁴ Whilst this is welcome news, it has not prevented a continuing rise in the number of families using foodbanks, and further changes in welfare policy are needed to reduce food poverty (particularly as the impact of full UC rollout threatens to undo recent progress).

It is also important to consider recent trends in terms of pay and employment. Whilst the UK employment rate has continued to slowly improve since 2011, the Resolution Foundation has demonstrated that wages were significantly squeezed 2008-2014, and since then have only grown slowly (whilst being outstripped by inflation).²⁵ This is particularly relevant to our local community in East London as weekly pay in London has fallen for the last decade and 36% of Newham residents are low paid, the highest of any borough.²⁶ The prevalence of part-time and low/zero-hours contracts means that growing employment is no guarantee of long-term security for households. Although the number of low-paid people in the UK has fallen since the introduction of the National Living Wage in 2016, the number of those in work who are paid less than the voluntary Living Wage (“how much families need to reach an acceptable standard of living”) has risen to 6.2m, representing 23% of all employees. Again, it appears that although the government has fostered some overall improvements in figures on employment and low-pay, the very worst paid employees continue to suffer, and to a greater degree than the rest.²⁷

Against this backdrop of lower pay for the lowest-income families has come the increased pressure of rising food and housing costs. After remaining at low levels (0-1.5%) for most of 2015-16, the Consumer Price Index has remained

¹⁶ Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), [Households Below Average Income: An analysis of the UK income distribution: 1994/95-2016/17](#) (ONS: London, 2017), p.7.

¹⁷ New Policy Institute (NPI), [London's Poverty Profile 2017](#) (New Policy Institute: London, 2017), p.39.

¹⁸ DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#).

¹⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [Destitution in the UK 2018](#) (JRF: York, 2018), p.2.

²⁰ Trussell Trust, [Early Warnings: Universal Credit and Foodbanks](#) (Trussell Trust: London, 2017), p.3.

²¹ Chartered Institute of Housing, [‘A year on lower benefit cap is pushing thousands into poverty’](#), 2 November 2017.

²² Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), [Universal Credit Full Service Roll Out: What the Early Warning System Cases Studies Are Telling Us](#) (CPAG: London, 2017).

²³ Jonathan Price and Sarah Spencer, [Safeguarding Children from Destitution: Local Authority Responses to Families with ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’](#) (COMPAS: Oxford, 2015).

²⁴ JRF, [Destitution in the UK 2018](#), p.2.

²⁵ Conor D’Arcy, [Low Pay Britain 2017](#) (Resolution Foundation: London, 2017), p.4.

²⁶ NPI, [London's Poverty Profile 2017](#), p.95.

²⁷ D’Arcy, [Low Pay Britain 2017](#), p.4.

above 2% ever since with a peak of 2.8% between September and November 2017.²⁸ UK food inflation also increased significantly in the final quarter of 2017, from 2.1% in August to 4.1% in November (although this has since fallen gradually to 2.3% in May 2018).²⁹ The current UK housing crisis (discussed in greater detail in the paper on housing and mental health) has dramatically increased the pressure of housing costs on UK households. Whilst, nationally, 15% of households in 2015 were below the poverty line before housing costs (BHC), this figure increased to 21% when housing costs are taken into account (AHC). This picture is even starker in our local community of Newham with 35% of households in poverty BHC and a staggering 45% below the poverty line AHC.³⁰

This evidence highlights the increasing economic pressures on the lowest income households in the UK, factors which, in combination, push families into food poverty. As foodbank use increases, it is becoming increasingly clear (from anecdotal and qualitative evidence) that food poverty is having a detrimental effect on the mental health of families. There also exists, however, a considerable body of scientific and medical evidence which demonstrates a link between food insecurity and poor mental health. In order to better understand the link between food poverty and mental health and make evidence-based policy recommendations, we have analysed and summarised this evidence below.

4. Impact of food poverty on mental health and wellbeing

There is significant evidence in the current body of literature of a strong association between food insecurity and poor mental health, based on research conducted primarily in the UK and North America.

A study from 2017, based on over 300,000 responses to the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), aimed to assess whether the level of food insecurity was associated with graduated mental health outcomes and found a food insecurity gradient in six of these. Furthermore, this study found that “a decrease between 8.1% and 16.0% in the reporting of these mental health outcomes would accrue if those who are currently severely food insecure became food secure, after controlling for covariates”.³¹ Another study of 80,000 Ontario residents who responded to the CCHS between 2005 and 2012 found that food insecure individuals were far more likely to have made use of mental health services, with “odds of utilization highest [among those with] severe food insecurity”.³²

A 2016 study by Chung et al., based on responses to the Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2012-2013, found that “after adjusting for sex, age, education, household income, smoking/alcohol consumption, physical activity, marital status, and receiving food assistance”, food insecurity significantly affected mental health status. The paper concludes that “food insecurity may be significantly associated with adverse mental health indicators and decreased [quality of life]”.³³

Research from the United States by Althoff et al. has found that food insecurity is not only associated with parental mental illness, but also with child mental illness, high Body Mass Index (BMI) and poor diet quality. This study highlights the importance of preventive medicine and nutrition interventions in reducing the effects of food poverty on mental health.³⁴ Similarly, another Canadian study from 2015 by Davison and Kaplan found that that food insecurity was significantly more prevalent among those with mental health disorders than in the general population, and that there was a “significant association between food insecurity and mania symptoms”.³⁵ As with the study by Althoff et al., Davison and Kaplan’s paper highlighted the potential for preventative nutrition interventions to be significant in tackling mental health disorders.³⁶

One study of a high quality longitudinal methodology, based on over 1000 responses to the Environmental Risk Longitudinal Study in Britain, found that among low socioeconomic status households, food insecurity co-occurred with maternal depression and domestic violence, whilst also predicting higher likelihoods of childhood behavioural problems.³⁷ Building on similar cross-sectional research which had previously established an association between food poverty and childhood behavioural problems, a 2012 study has also found that food insecurity is distinctively associated with

²⁸ ONS, ‘[CPIH ANNUAL RATE 00: ALL ITEMS 2015=100](#)’.

²⁹ Trading Economics, ‘[United Kingdom Food Inflation 1989-2018](#)’.

³⁰ Newham Council, *Understanding Newham, Findings from Wave 8 of the Newham Household Panel Surveys* (Ipsos Mori: London, 2016), p.82.

³¹ G Jessiman-Perreault and L McIntyre, ‘[The household food insecurity gradient and potential reductions in adverse population mental health outcomes in Canadian adults](#)’, *SSM Population Health*, 31:3 (2017), pp.464-472.

³² V Tarasuk, J Cheng, C Gundersen, C de Oliveira, P Kurdyak, ‘[The Relation between Food Insecurity and Mental Health Care Service Utilization in Ontario](#)’, *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* (forthcoming 2018).

³³ HK Chung HK, OY Kim, SY Kwak, Y Cho, KW Lee and MJ Shin, ‘[Household Food Insecurity Is Associated with Adverse Mental Health Indicators and Lower Quality of Life among Koreans: Results from the Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2012-2013](#)’, *Nutrients*, 16:8 (2016), pp.819-831 (p.827).

³⁴ RR Althoff, M Ametti, F Bertmann, ‘[The role of food insecurity in developmental psychopathology](#)’, *Preventive Medicine*, 92 (2012), pp.106-109.

³⁵ KM Davison and BJ Kaplan, ‘[Food insecurity in adults with mood disorders: prevalence estimates and associations with nutritional and psychological health](#)’, *Annals of General Psychiatry*, 14:21 (2015), pp.1-7 (p.4).

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.6.

³⁷ M Melchior, A Caspi, LM Howard, AP Ambler, H Bolton, N Mountain, TE Moffitt, ‘[Mental health context of food insecurity: a representative cohort of families with young children](#)’, *Pediatrics*, 124:4 (2009), pp.564-72.

children’s symptoms of hyperactivity and inattention.³⁸ Another longitudinal study by Heflin et al., on the impact of food insecurity on women’s mental health, found that food insecurity has “potentially serious consequences” for the mental health of women in low-income, food insecure households.³⁹

Evidence on the association between food poverty and poor mental health has also been gathered by frontline services. Wandsworth Foodbank, for example, has argued that “poverty and hunger severely impacts the health of those who experience it”. Their research found that:

- “96% of referral agencies cited poorer mental health (stress, anxiety, depression) as an impact of hardship and food poverty in clients, an increase from 84% the year before.
- 80% of guests said they had experienced poorer mental health in the previous year.
- 47% of referral agencies witnessed suicidality in clients, twice as many as the previous year.
- 30% of foodbank guests interviewed had considered or attempted suicide in the previous 12 months (6 of 20 guests). This is the same number as in last year’s research, suggesting that suicidality is a worryingly consistent experience for people in severe financial and food crisis.
- Three-quarters of referrers (76%) thought the benefits system catered badly or very badly for their clients with mental health difficulties. 19% said it catered neither well nor badly, and only 5% thought it catered well”.⁴⁰

This research builds on a previous study by The Trussell Trust and Oxford University which found that mental health issues were the most common health problem reported by foodbank users in the study’s sample, equivalent to 1 in 3 people.⁴¹

iii. A causal relationship?

The well-established correlation between experience of food insecurity and the likelihood of developing a mental health problem does not, however, reveal whether food poverty is actually causing mental health problems. It could, hypothetically, be the case that mental health problems lead people into food poverty, or that some third factor increases both the likelihood of being in food poverty and the likelihood of developing mental health problems.

Nevertheless, multiple sources of converging evidence do suggest a causal link. Evidence from people using foodbanks suggest the receipt of food aid has a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing, both in the UK and Canada.⁴² Furthermore, evidence from women in the US shows that food insecurity and mental health decline in tandem – a relationship that remains highly significant, even after controlling for other known causes of depression.⁴³ This suggests that rather than depression causing food insecurity, food insecurity is causing depression. Also, evidence from the United States suggests that for people who experience food insecurity, the provision of food support helps mental health, whilst its withdrawal prompts a decline in mental health.⁴⁴

The above evidence suggests that there is not only a strong relationship between food poverty and poor mental health, but that this is also a causal relationship in which worsening food (in)security can cause significant mental health issues. Thus, given what we already know about increasing food insecurity and foodbank usage in the UK, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that the current economic situation is causing both greater food insecurity and worsening mental health in the population. It is therefore important that we also analyse what the precise drivers of this worsening food insecurity are in order to present a range of policy recommendations which may limit, or reverse, the growth of food insecurity and related mental health issues in the UK.

³⁸ Maria Melchior, Jean-François Chastang, Bruno Falissard, Cédric Galéra, Richard E. Tremblay, Sylvana M. Côté and Michel Boivin, ‘[Food Insecurity and Children’s Mental Health: A Prospective Birth Cohort Study](#)’, *PLoS One*, 7:12 (2012).

³⁹ CM Heflin, K Siefert and DR Williams, ‘[Food insufficiency and women’s mental health: findings from a 3-year panel of welfare recipients](#)’, *Social Science and Medicine*, 61:9 (2005), pp.1971-82 (pp.1971).

⁴⁰ Wandsworth Foodbank, [Poverty, Hunger and Social \(In\)Security: Experiences of Foodbank Guests and Referral Agencies in Wandsworth Borough, 2017-18](#) (London, 2018), p.18.

⁴¹ The Trussell Trust, [Financial insecurity, food insecurity, and disability: The profile of people receiving emergency food assistance from The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network in Britain](#) (Oxford University: Oxford, 2017), p.ix.

⁴² Wokingham Foodbank, [What impact does the nutritional value of Food Banks have on client’s health & wellbeing?](#) (HealthWatch Wokingham Borough: Wokingham, 2014); F Roncarolo, S Bisset and L Potvin, ‘[Short-Term Effects of Traditional and Alternative Community Interventions to Address Food Insecurity](#)’, *PLoS One*, 11:3 (2016).

⁴³ Heflin, Siefert and Williams, ‘Food insufficiency and women’s mental health’, p.1977.

⁴⁴ Ashley L. Munger, Sandra L. Hofferth, and Stephanie K. Grutzmacher, ‘[The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the Relationship between Food Insecurity and Probability of Maternal Depression](#)’, *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 11:2 (2016), pp.147–161.

5. What are the drivers?

It appears that food poverty is strongly related to income, especially income after housing costs. It is also highly concentrated among the unemployed, those who claim benefits, those in debt, and those with high housing costs relative to their income. Below, we have briefly summarised some of the key drivers of food poverty in the UK.

Sanctions, delays and errors with welfare payments

Delays or problems with welfare payments have been cited by Wandsworth Foodbank as one of the most frequent causes of foodbank referrals, amounting to 41% of all referrals during their recent research period.⁴⁵ This has particularly been the case in areas of full UC rollout where a six-week waiting period for first UC payment has contributed to a 16.85% average increase in referrals for emergency food, more than double the national average of 6.64%.⁴⁶ UC rollout has also been linked with higher rates of benefit sanctions which can push families into food poverty.⁴⁷ These findings have since been corroborated by the National Audit Office's report on UC which highlighted that "the use of foodbanks increased more rapidly once full service had rolled out. Hastings foodbank saw an increase of 80%".⁴⁸

Housing issues

As Community Links has highlighted in our paper on the impact of the current housing crisis on mental health, housing costs have become increasingly unaffordable in London in recent years and this is having a significant knock-on effect on the ability of low income households to achieve food security. Wandsworth Foodbank's research found that more than half (53%) of their referral agencies had referred clients to the foodbank because of housing benefit not covering rent, leading to clients being short of money for food after they paid rent from their already low income.⁴⁹ As with other issues currently being faced by low-income households in London and across the UK, this highlights the way in which multiple issues including housing, welfare payments, work security, debt and poor mental health are tightly interrelated.

Insecure work

The current employment and income situation in the UK, with near-stagnant wages and increasingly insecure work, also play a role in contributing to food poverty. Low pay is a particularly pressing issue in London, where weekly pay has fallen in the past decade, and Newham which had the highest proportion of low-paid residents of any London borough in 2015/16.⁵⁰ Wandsworth Foodbank's research with foodbank referral agencies and guests found that, when asked as to some of the key drivers of food poverty, 75% of both referral agencies and guests cited zero-hours contracts; 63% of referral agencies and 25% guests cited low pay (i.e. below the London Living Wage); 50% of referral agencies and 25% guests cited underemployment (not enough work hours available); and 31% of referral agencies and 25% guests cited lack of sick pay.⁵¹

Inflation and high costs

It has also been suggested that inflation and increasing living costs are reducing disposable income and driving higher levels of food poverty. One inquiry has released figures showing that the costs of basic necessities have increased at a greater rate than earnings since 2003, with food up by 46.4% and fuel up by 154%, significantly more than earnings which have risen by 27.9%.⁵²

6. Recommendations

Based on the available evidence and having assessed similar recommendations from researchers, campaigners and the third sector, Community Links believes the following recommendations are vital steps to begin tackling food poverty and reducing its impact on mental health in the UK. It should be noted that more detail recommendations related to housing issues and low pay / insecure work are contained within the relevant briefing papers on these topics.

⁴⁵ Wandsworth Foodbank, *Poverty, Hunger and Social (In)Security*, p.2.

⁴⁶ Trussell Trust, *Early Warnings*, p.2.

⁴⁷ Benefits and Work, '[Claimants 20 times more likely to be sanctioned on UC than JSA or ESA](#)', 21 May 2018; End Hunger UK, *Fix Universal Credit: Ensuring no one needs to go to bed hungry in the UK* (End Hunger UK; London, 2018), pp.6-12.

⁴⁸ National Audit Office (NAO), *Rolling out Universal Credit* (NAO: London, 2018), p.46.

⁴⁹ Wandsworth Foodbank, *Poverty, Hunger and Social (In)Security*, p.23.

⁵⁰ NPI, *London's Poverty Profile 2017*, p.95.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p.15.

⁵² Quoted by Gentleman, 'Food bank Britain'.

Welfare

1. **The government should undertake a full analysis of issues which cause delays or problems with welfare payments, particularly for claimants on Universal Credit**, and consider the possibility that tackling food poverty may require a full pause or postponement of Universal Credit.
2. **The government should increase rates for Universal Credit, Local Housing Allowance (LHA), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)** to levels at which households are able to achieve a minimum level of food security.
3. **A widespread review of conditionality in the welfare system is needed**, as suggested by the Welfare Conditionality project, with a long-term view to abolishing sanctions if necessary.⁵³
4. **Government / local authorities should assess the impact of welfare reforms (such as the benefits cap and introduction of No Recourse to Public Funds) on levels of food poverty** and consider abolishing them.

Better understanding food poverty

5. **Local authorities should develop a local Food Security Strategy** to identify how to meet the food needs of their local communities.
6. **The government must introduce an annual food poverty measurement** with an internationally comparable element.
7. **The government should explore models and funding for a preventative nutrition intervention pilot** to be delivered in areas of high food insecurity.

Better support for vulnerable households

8. **The government should foster cross-sector collaboration to deliver investment in wraparound, holistic advice services** which are able to support households with multiple needs through issues with housing, welfare, debt and health.
9. **The government should plan to deliver a more compassionate, trust-based social security system.** This system would be built on fostering Deep Value relationships between claimants and job coaches.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Hadley Trust for supporting this research.

This paper was written by Daniel Willis, Policy & Research Manager at Community Links.

If you have a question about this research or would like to find out more about Community Links, please visit www.community-links.org or contact us at Daniel.Willis@community-links.org.



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⁵³ Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change, [Final findings](#) (University of York: York, 2018), p.12.