

Rise of UK food banks linked to local spending and central welfare cuts

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The expansion of food banks across the United Kingdom is associated with cuts in spending on local services, welfare benefits and higher unemployment rates, conclude researchers in *The BMJ* this week.

In collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Rachel Loopstra and David Stuckler at the Department of Sociology at Oxford University and colleagues say action is needed "on the root social and economic factors that trigger reliance on [food](#) banks."

The number of local authorities with food banks operated by the Trussell Trust, a non-governmental organisation that coordinates food banks across the UK, has risen from 29 in 2009-10 to 251 in 2013-14.

This rapid spread of food banks is a new phenomenon and its cause is a topic of considerable debate, they write. Some commentators argue that people are taking advantage of food made freely available, while UK food charities claim that they provide emergency food aid in response to economic hardship and [food insecurity](#).

A joint report from the Trussell Trust, the Church of England, and the charities Oxfam and Child Poverty Action Group found that [food bank](#) users were more likely to live in rented accommodation, be single adults or lone parents, be unemployed, and have experienced a "sanction," where their unemployment benefits were cut for at least one month.

So the researchers decided to test whether the rise in emergency food

assistance is linked to [economic hardship](#), austerity measures, and sanctioning or whether it is a result of food charities creating their own demand.

They linked information on the Trussell Trust's food bank operations to budgetary and socioeconomic data from 375 UK local authorities from 2006-07 to 2013-14. They adjusted for the proportion of people identifying as Christian, as Trussell Trust food banks are only initiated by Christian churches.

They found that food banks were more likely to open in local authorities with higher unemployment rates - and that greater local authority and central government welfare cuts increased the likelihood of a food bank opening.

For example, they estimate that the likelihood of a food bank opening in an area that did not experience a cut in local authority spending in either of the past two years was 14.5%. This figure tripled to 52% for a local authority that experienced a budget cut of 3% in spending in both years.

They also found that greater central government welfare cuts, sanctioning, and unemployment rates were significantly associated with higher rates of food parcel distribution after accounting for the capacity of food banks to provide food.

For example, each 1% cut in spending on central welfare benefits was associated with a 0.16 percentage point rise in food parcel distribution. Similarly, each 1% increase in the rate of benefit sanctions was associated with a significant increase of 0.09 percentage points in the prevalence of food parcel distribution.

In some of the most deprived areas of England, such as Derby, where sanction rates rose to 13% of benefit claimants in 2013, this equates to a

substantial rise in food parcel distribution, to an additional one parcel for every 100 persons living in the area, they explain.

"More food banks are opening in areas experiencing greater cuts in spending on local services and central welfare benefits and higher [unemployment rates](#)," write the authors. "The rise in food bank use is also concentrated in communities where more people are experiencing benefit sanctions."

Food parcel distribution is higher in areas where food banks are more common and better established, they add, "but our data also show that the [local authorities](#) with greater rates of sanctions and austerity are also experiencing greater rates of people seeking emergency food assistance."

They acknowledge that data are not always easy to obtain and call for further research into other factors that may influence emergency food aid. But say, "we have likely underestimated the true burden of food insecurity in the UK."

Finally, they point out that physicians have key roles as advocates.

According to statistics from the Trussell Trust, an estimated 27,000 front-line care professionals provided referrals in 2013-14. "Rather than accept this situation, an alternative is to call for action on the root social and economic factors that trigger reliance on food banks," they conclude.

More information: Austerity, sanctions, and the rise of food banks in the UK, The *BMJ*, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.h1775

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