

# The value of foodbanks goes well beyond the food they provide, offering social contact and a safe place where users

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The value of foodbanks goes well beyond the food they provide, offering social contact and a safe place where users find care, dignity and respect, according to new research released today by the University of Glasgow.

Conducted by the University's GoWell Programme, the research examined the scale of food bank use in 15 communities in Glasgow, each of which lie within the 15% most deprived in Scotland.

It found that those affected by welfare reforms were more likely to use a foodbank. It also showed that young single men and those with [mental health problems](#) were also more likely to use a foodbank.

But while foodbanks cannot solve the problem of food insecurity, they offer valuable social support and could be an example to other organisations of how to treat people in difficult circumstances with dignity, care and respect.

The research, conducted by Professor Ade Kearns and researchers Mary Anne MacLeod and Louise Lawson, was in two parts – a household survey and follow up in-depth interviews.

The survey results are published in a research paper called Understanding the prevalence and drivers of foodbank use: evidence from deprived communities in Glasgow and published in the journal

Social Policy & Society.

Professor Kearns said: "Our research shows that foodbanks are a course of last resort for many people and cannot be relied on to tackle the scale of [food insecurity](#) in our poorest communities.

"However, in debates about the future of foodbanks, it is important to recognise their value to users beyond the food itself, so that the ability to offer contact and support to often isolated individuals with complex needs is extended rather than reduced as food aid is reformed".

The [household survey](#) was conducted in 15 deprived communities in Glasgow. It has produced the first estimate of the prevalence of foodbank use anywhere in the UK.

It found that 4.2% or 1-in-25 households in these poorer communities had used a foodbank in the past year.

However, it also found that a further 3.8% of households were categorised as "non-accessors—those who said they 'had not wanted to use a food bank' or 'had not been able to use or access a food bank (without a referral)'. Only 15% of those who reported having difficulty paying for food also reported having used a [food bank](#).

The survey analysis also revealed some of the main drivers of foodbank use:-

- Financial factors were important, not least the impacts of UK Government welfare reforms since 2010.
- The more welfare reforms people were affected by, the more likely they were to use a foodbank.
- The likelihood of being a foodbank user were higher for those out of work and who were long-term sick or disabled.

- The link between foodbank use and poor health was further emphasised by the high rate of foodbank use among those with a mental health problems, of whom 10% were users and a further 6% were "non-accessors".
- Foodbank use was highest among single adults with no family or friends to fall back on in times of need.

The second part of the research involved follow-up, in-depth interviews with foodbank users. The outcome of these interviews mirrored the survey, showing not only a link between foodbank use and poverty but also foodbank use and social isolation.

Professor Kearns said: "We found that people appreciate the role of the foodbank in helping them through an acute financial crisis. But we also found that users of foodbanks also valued the social contact and support offered by foodbank staff and volunteers, sometimes in a café atmosphere. Some people became regular users of foodbanks for this reason, as much as for the food.

"And we found that there was huge praise and appreciation for the dignity, respect and care users were treated with when they went to a foodbank for help. Many people felt they did not get this from other agencies dealing with things like benefits or employment issues. Many commented that this positive treatment at a foodbank gave them back some of their humanity when often they felt ashamed and guilty at having to access this help in the first place."

The qualitative research is published as *Food and Beyond: Exploring the Foodbank Experience* and is available at: [www.gowellonline.com](http://www.gowellonline.com).

Provided by University of Glasgow

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