

Years of austerity and welfare cuts lead to record number of foodbanks in the UK

By Margot Miller
7 March 2020

Entrenched poverty in the UK is manifested in the escalating number of foodbanks, which provide emergency food parcels to the needy. There are now over 2,000 foodbanks across the country, not including those that operate in schools. This is substantially more than the 1,300 branches of McDonald's fast food chain in Britain.

According to the Trussell Trust foodbank charity, in 2019 there were 1.6 million visits to foodbanks—approximately 250,000, or 19 percent, more than the year previous. In 2008/9 there were under 26,000, and since the economic crash this number increased each year. (Figures refer to the number of three-day emergency parcels issued, so someone returning is counted twice.)

An investigation initiated by the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) into the impact of the draconian Universal Credit benefit system on the uptake of food parcels has yet to see the light of day.

The DWP was scheduled to release its findings in October 2019. On January 28, Scottish National Party MP Chris Stephens asked Conservative government DWP under-secretary Will Quince when the DWP would “place in the [House of Commons] Library a copy of the evidence review undertaken... on the drivers of food bank use, that was commissioned in 2018.”

Quince's reply, “in due course,” prompted Stephens to submit an Early Day Motion to bring the issue to the attention of Parliament.

In a written Commons question from Labour MP Gareth Thomas asking what the government was doing to reduce food bank use, Quince referred to the Family Resources Survey, introduced last April, which included a new series of questions relating to food insecurity!

Such callous indifference is predictable and an admission that the Johnson government intends to do nothing to alleviate poverty.

The DWP investigation was launched in secret, at a cost of £217,000, and classed as “sensitive,” according to the *Guardian*. Those involved were forced to sign non-disclosure agreements to prevent them revealing the

findings to the public. No wonder.

The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrats coalition government was aimed at slashing the welfare bill, and to terrorise workers into taking low paid employment, for fear of total impoverishment and homelessness. Claimants would not receive their first payment until five weeks after submitting an online claim. The results have been catastrophic.

The Trussell Trust revealed that where UC has been in place for a year, the uptake of food parcels increased by 30 percent. This rose to 40 percent where it was in operation for 18 months and 48 percent after two years.

These figures are derived from the “*The State of Hunger 2019*” report published in November by the Trussell Trust, based on research carried out by Heriot-Watt University.

The Trussell Trust operates 1,200 of the UK's foodbanks. As there are a further 822 foodbanks outside the Trussell Trust, the figures from the study on foodbank usage are an underestimate. The Trussell Trust's ongoing three-year study, nevertheless, is the largest investigation into food bank use to date.

The report states that over the past five years foodbank uptake in the Trussell Trust network increased 73 percent. Just for the years 2018/19, two percent of all UK households received food parcels.

Households most likely to suffer from food insecurity were the unemployed, single parents, single-person households, those in rented accommodation (mostly in social housing), people suffering ill health and employees on low income. Some 14 percent of households referred to foodbanks had someone working.

Those in the age range 25-54 comprised 77 percent of recipients. Shockingly, 94 percent of users were found to be “facing real destitution,” lacking the means “to stay warm, dry, clean and fed.”

Around 86 percent of food bank users in the study said benefits—usually UC—were a component of their incomes.

The report found the benefits system to be one of the main

drivers of the increased use of foodbanks:

It states, “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’ (a deduction if a household has a spare bedroom).”

The reforms to the benefits system “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 [benefits stopped on the slightest pretext], and being on Universal Credit.”

About 40 percent of people referred to foodbanks are in hardship due to indebtedness, mainly to the DWP. To survive the first five weeks without UC, claimants can get an emergency loan, which is deducted when their claim kicks in.

The Trussell Trust study provides incontrovertible evidence of the injurious effect benefit cuts have had in driving down the living standards of the working class.

These grim statistics compiled by the Trust come as no surprise to workers and volunteers on the front line.

Dave Kelly, co-founder of Fans Supporting Foodbanks, told the WSWS that football fans at two Premier League clubs, Everton and Liverpool, have been donating food destined for foodbanks for the past five years. The project “started with humble beginnings.” The first collections began with “a few carrier bags”.

“We are the only constituency [Liverpool Walton] to have two Premier football clubs,” Kelly said. “We now collect a ton of food at every single Everton and Liverpool game.

“On December 6, 2018, the day UC was rolled out in Liverpool, we called for the whole city to stand together against UC. We collected 30,000 tons of food in December 2018 showing solidarity in a humanitarian crisis.”

Kelly explained that all the food goes to the North Liverpool Foodbank. “We sit down with the North Liverpool Foodbank regularly, and they plan what is needed.

“One of the problems is, as quickly as food is collected, it’s going out through the front door to people in need. The most startling thing I’ve found, a relatively new phenomenon, is in-work poverty. If you’re in work you should have enough for basics, not have to make the decision to heat or eat.

“We have a mobile kitchen where we feed 70 or 80 homeless. They don’t think austerity is over [contrary to government claims]. There’s a humanitarian crisis going on all over. It’s becoming an epidemic. There are 30 other football clubs collecting not for charity but for solidarity, for basic human rights.”

The Trussell Trust report ends with an appeal to the government to change course, end the five-week wait for

UC to become available for claimants and “Fund proper local crisis support so people aren’t forced to food banks.” Such appeals are futile.

Retired advice worker Terry Craven supported claimant Stephen Smith from Liverpool when he was turned down for Employment Support Allowance (ESA). Stephen was seriously ill yet declared fit for work and subsequently died.

Speaking to the WSWS, Craven explained that “Esther McVey [former Conservative DWP secretary] said the introduction of food banks were a positive reaction to austerity, a needed project system to support poverty.”

Terry said the line has not changed, referring to current DWP head Therese Coffey’s remarks in parliament that foodbanks are “a perfect way to try to address the challenges that people face at difficult times in their lives.”

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government intends poverty to be a permanent feature. It is hell bent on driving down living conditions as the main pre-requisite in boosting the competitiveness of the UK’s corporations post-Brexit, under conditions of growing trade war internationally.

It was Labour’s refusal under Jeremy Corbyn to offer any alternative to the pro-capitalist Blairites that dominate the Parliamentary Labour Party that enabled Johnson to come to power. The 1997-2010 Labour government played a major role in inaugurating the onslaught against the welfare state. After taking over from Blair, Gordon Brown’s Labour government introduced the draconian work capability assessments for ESA in 2008. It was this medical assessment that Stephen Smith failed.

In 2015, just 48 Labour MPs out of over 230 voted to oppose the Conservative government’s Welfare Bill which imposed a further £12 billion in cuts, leading to further impoverishment.

Under nominal left leader Corbyn, Labour’s position on UC was to alternatively “reform” or review it, with Corbyn only finally calling for it to be scrapped during the last general election.

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