

New research reveals why people really use food banks

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Food banks have become the subject of heated debate in the UK. For some they are an indictment of 'austerity Britain' and reflect an increase in the numbers living in extreme poverty, while others see them as little

more than a 'free lunch for scroungers', but findings from a new study suggest that the reasons for people's use of them is often more nuanced than is presented by politicians and commentators.

The study, published in the journal *Voluntary Sector Review*, which involved in-depth interviews with 25 [food bank](#) users in Bristol found that [benefit](#) penalties and precarious employment were both important factors in [food](#) bank uptake, but that use was very often more complicated than being an 'unmediated response to hunger'.

All interviewees for the study reported significant financial hardship. Some were in low-paid employment but were facing short-term financial difficulties due to changing jobs, moving home, servicing debt or other unusual costs. More frequently, participants were benefit claimants whose income had been reduced by delays in processing new or revised claims.

Sudden loss of income

The researchers heard many reports of benefit penalties causing financial hardship, such as the under-occupancy penalty or 'bedroom tax', or cuts in Jobseeker's Allowance. Typically, a sudden loss of income, caused by benefit penalties or delays, job losses, or equally sudden unanticipated costs, often relating to housing or heating, created a short-term budgetary crisis, which had caused hardship.

Although, all of the people interviewed faced financial hardship, their use of the food bank was not always caused by hunger or lack of food. Some people used the food bank to free up income that they would otherwise have needed to spend on food.

Extracts from interviews on why some of the people interviewed used the food bank in Bristol suggested:

I missed an interview by five minutes with the Jobseeker's Allowance people and they sanctioned me so I lost two weeks' money. This is why I'm here today. I was just five minutes late, and I phoned them up beforehand and told them as well, but they still didn't accept it.

I wouldn't have any, [food] yeah. No, because I haven't got the money, you see. I've only just claimed it. It's not just filling up the holes in the cupboard. I really haven't got the food there.

I know I couldn't really afford to get a car, but it's a catch-22 thing really. I need a car to get a job, because I can't really do a lot of work without a car, but then I can't really afford the car. ... Basically if I didn't have to do the car then I would have been all right. The head gasket. I would have been all right.

Supportive volunteers

Another reason for using the food banks was the supportive and non judgemental approach adopted by the volunteers who staff them. This contrasted with the way that many of the users said they had been treated by staff in the state benefits system. Welfare professionals must follow strict rules about who is entitled to receive what, and they also have to impose penalties on people. The research suggests the food banks have a more flexible set of rules, which means they can respond to people's needs promptly, with less bureaucracy or conditions:

I was slightly nervous and a little bit embarrassed, but once I came down it disappeared. It was so nice when you walked in and wasn't what I was expecting. People didn't judge me. I felt like I was begging, and I shouldn't be begging, but when you come down here they're so friendly and they put you at ease. You understand that there are a lot more people out there, like myself, who struggle as well.'

You get treated like a human being here. At the benefit place, they just look at you as though you're a name and number, and they look at you and think: "Well, you should work. You shouldn't be on benefits." This is better, voluntary style. It's a lot better, a lot more human, where before it's like more pen and paper, everything's got to be done by the book. You don't get nothing for nothing from them, but these places are a lot better.

Lead author, Dr. David Wainwright from the University of Bath's Department for Health explained: "The public debate about food banks has become highly polarised and politicised. For some commentators, food banks serve no other purpose than an alarm signalling the hardship caused by austerity measures and benefit penalties—an emblem of 'Broken Britain' - for others, they signify the Big Society in action. Our findings suggest a more nuanced reality.

"Certainly, participants involved in our study faced genuine hardship that was often exacerbated by an inflexible and unresponsive benefits regime. They benefited from and appreciated the greater flexibility and deprofessionalised support that food banks can offer.

"Many of these benefits are only possible because food banks sit outside formal welfare structures. A key implication of our study is that food banks should maintain their independence from the state, in order to preserve the benefits of flexibility and informal relationships with users. Food banks can never replace statutory welfare benefits and services, but they provide a way of responding to the tension and their expansion perhaps should not be entirely viewed in negative terms."

Having documented the experiences of food bank users, the researchers plan to return to the food banks to interview the volunteers who work at them. The aim is to explore why people volunteer, what they gain from their involvement and how they relate to the people who use the food

banks.

More information: David Wainwright et al. Why do people use food banks? A qualitative study of food bank users in an English city, *Voluntary Sector Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1332/204080518X15428930047072](https://doi.org/10.1332/204080518X15428930047072)

Provided by University of Bath

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