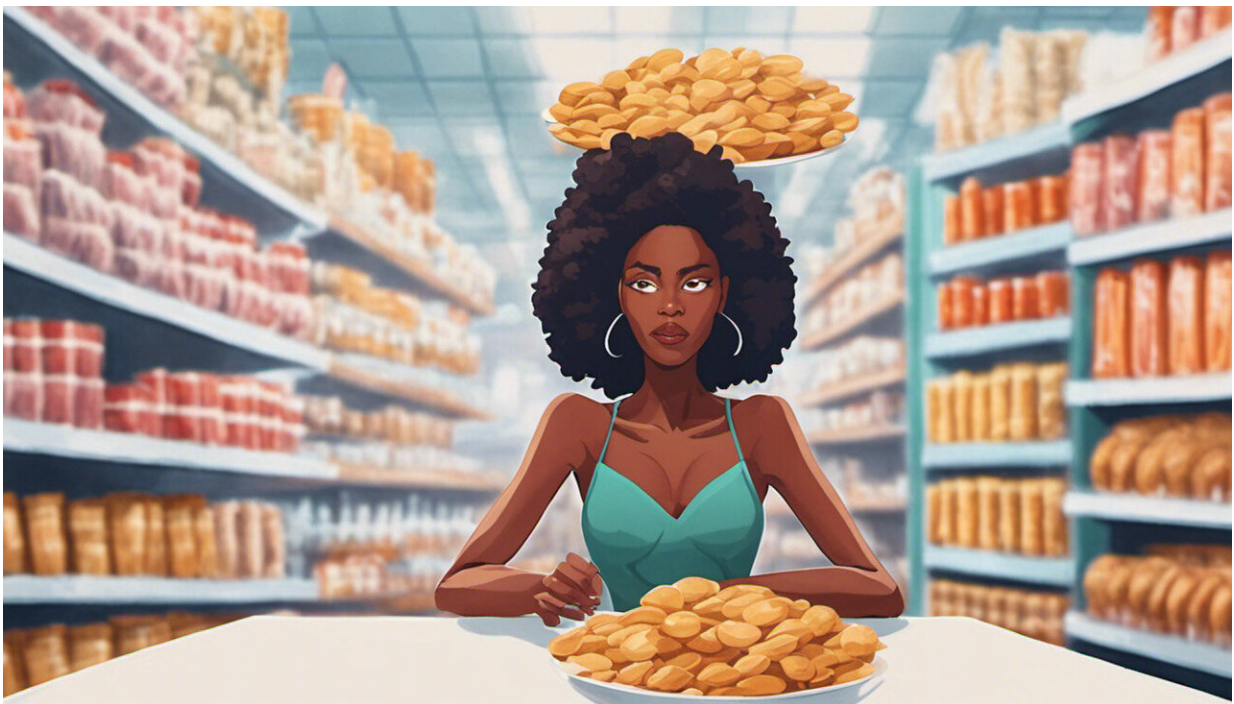


Food bank use surged during the pandemic – but they can rarely provide all the help people need

March 11 2021, by Wolf Ellis



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Many families have faced a number of [new economic challenges](#) since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Although some incomes have been [bolstered](#) through a [£20 weekly universal credit uplift](#) or protected through the job retention scheme (furlough), it wasn't enough to prevent

a [further surge](#) in the use of food banks. But research shows that while services such as food banks provide marginal help, they are ultimately limited in scope—often leaving people still in dire situations.

So what is it like to navigate this system when it isn't equipped to provide the necessary help? Recent research can help us to understand the scale of the challenges many families are still facing.

[Hundreds of thousands](#) of UK households now use [food banks](#). Comprehensive figures for all services are not available, but judging by [data](#) from organizations working with [food](#) redistribution charity FareShare, the full number of families turning to charity food aid may exceed a million. This would have been unimaginable a decade ago.

However, such services are still only used by a [minority](#) of low-income families. [Difficulties accessing the services](#) are one reason for this. Trussell Trust food banks, for example, are typically only open for [short periods of time](#) during weekday working hours. But many people facing hardship also avoid using these services because of [stigma](#) related to [seeking this kind of support](#), as well as issues with fulfilling people's desired food [needs](#).

A [review of the evidence](#) on food banks and other community food programs in [high-income countries](#) found that the services' ability to meet the needs of people experiencing food insecurity was limited. There was little evidence of these services effectively reducing food insecurity. Cash transfers and food subsidies were far more effective.

My Ph.D. research (not yet published elsewhere) backs this up. I conducted in-depth interviews with 47 people who visited food banks or community meals in the London Borough of Southwark. My findings suggested that as useful as these and other food services were in terms of short-term help, almost everyone still needed more substantial support.

Although essential costs (especially housing) and the proportion of people unable to afford them are [higher in London](#) than the rest of the UK, most interviewees had relatively low housing costs—very few could afford to rent in the private sector. But their incomes were still insufficient to meet their bills and food needs. Nationwide, food bank clients' average incomes are [far below](#) the official poverty threshold.

While many of my interviewees described great relief from using food aid services, even after factoring in the food they received, almost all of the families' total incomes fell short of a minimum socially-acceptable standard of living. This is based on [minimum income standard](#) budgets and some actual costs, a method used to work out the incomes different households need in order to live at a decent basic level.

Food provision doesn't fix all

Food alone cannot fill deficits of the observed magnitude. It is just [one](#) of people's [many needs](#). Food bank parcels have also been shown to contain [far cheaper \(and by implication lower-quality\) food](#) than the minimum income standard food baskets and average household food spending.

Families participating in research for the Child Poverty Action Group charity "overwhelmingly" thought [direct payments](#) were better options than vouchers or food packages when children are unable to have meals in school, as they provided families with choice, dignity and convenience.

Similarly, most interviewees I spoke to would have preferred to receive money instead of the food from food aid services—or at least to have a choice. A food option could continue to cater for people who value not having to shop for (and sometimes prepare) food. It would also help people who might not trust themselves to spend money wisely, would be

concerned about money reducing their benefit entitlements, or for whom social contact at food services was important. Money, however, would allow people to buy food that is more in line with their preferences and to make their own spending decisions.

Uplifting?

The extended £20 uplift to universal credit has been a crucial boost. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation [briefing](#) forecast that half a million more people would have moved into poverty if the uplift hadn't been retained. Figures like these show how precarious people's financial situations are.

Yet even with the extended uplift in place, an estimated [21.1% of people](#) will have been living in poverty in 2020/21. The uplift only partly compensates for [a decade of reductions](#) to benefit entitlements and should be made permanent—ending the needless jeopardy caused by merely [postponing](#) its removal for another six months.

As well as increasing standard benefit rates, more needs to be done to reduce [delays](#) in receiving benefits, [protect](#) a higher minimum amount from [deductions](#), and to increase eligibility. Extra support should also be provided for [people receiving legacy benefits](#) (those predating universal credit).

The temporary extension of eligibility for [free school meals](#) and other schemes for low-income families with no recourse to [public funds](#) is a step in the right direction—and like the universal credit uplift, it should continue beyond the pandemic. Amid worrying levels of [destitution](#), people need a lot more help to stave off hardship.

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