

Report: England has more food banks inside schools than regular food banks nationwide

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Table in a primary school for food donations from parents to be distributed to families in need. Credit: University of Bristol

Research shows schools have increasingly stepped in as a fourth emergency service and are now the biggest source of charitable food and household aid for families struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

The [working paper](#), led by the University of Bristol, reveals there are more than 4,000 school-based [food banks](#) in primary and [secondary schools](#) across England, which equates to one in every five schools running one. The study also found school food banks are more prevalent in deprived areas and schools, highlighting the severity of child food insecurity and the challenges facing low-income families.

The report calls for greater awareness among policymakers and reform, including an overhaul of the social security system, to address the growing issue.

Lead author Dr. William Baker, Senior Lecturer at the University of Bristol School of Education, said, "Our research shows there are now, quite shockingly, more food banks inside schools than outside of schools in England. In recent years inflation has sent the cost of essentials spiraling, while other forms of state support have withered due to severe cutbacks. Schools are on the frontline in responding to food poverty and many are offering crisis services to struggling families.

"Teachers and support staff see the devastating effects of poverty and the cost-of-living crisis daily, so they have felt compelled to act. The result is a flourishing patchwork of food banks, pantries, and food clubs, which have become well-established, are often highly organized operations distributing more than just food and are an indictment of this country's retreating welfare state. I'll never forget the stark image of dozens of boxes of new school shoes, bought out of school funds, stacked up ready for distribution as if this was business as usual."

The [survey data](#) used in the study indicates food banks exist in more than

a fifth (21%) of schools and this rises to a third (33%) in schools with the high numbers of students from deprived backgrounds.

Charitable and third sector organizations, chiefly The Trussell Trust and The Independent Food Aid Network, remain key players operating 1,646 and 1,172 food banks respectively. But the latest data indicates schools now outstrip this, running an estimated 4,250 food banks.

"The fact so many schools now offer a food bank raises the possibility they may have already become completely normalized and institutionalized within schools in England," Dr. Baker added.

The report builds on Dr. Baker's previous research which uncovered how school food aid operations varied in size and structure, ranging from discreet food parcels given to parents and funded by staff donations to larger-scale, well-advertised regular provision with food supplied by large supermarkets and food waste charities.

Examples of this included a free, help yourself pantry in the form of a shed next to the playground and a weekly stall set up at school pick-up time for parents to select what they need. In addition to food, schools were providing essential children's clothing and footwear. Household products including soap and washing powder, or in some cases even a free laundry service, were also on offer.

The report claims [policy makers](#) are largely unaware of the nature and scale of the problem, in contrast to previous high-profile media campaigns for universal free school meals and holiday food vouchers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Baker said, "There is a policy vacuum around charitable food aid in schools in England and across the UK. Although much attention has been given to free school meal provision, the pressing wider problem of

children going hungry routinely at home due to rocketing food costs and other budget pressures, such as fuel prices and interest rates, isn't being properly addressed.

"The fact schools are running food banks en masse is falling under the radar with no national support, guidance, or oversight. Food charity is not the solution: people need secure, fairly-remunerated jobs, and support through the benefits system so they can afford to properly feed and clothe their kids."

The report also aims to spark serious consideration about whether schools should be filling this role, and to such an extent, in the first place. But since food insecurity and school food banks look likely to stay for the foreseeable future, the report calls for more training so staff are better equipped to tackle the issue and best practice can be shared.

Over the past 15 years, the number of food banks in the UK has risen dramatically, growing from dozens to many thousands. The report recounts how they have become a safety net amidst an ongoing period of austerity and welfare state decline.

There are also global implications and the paper furthers international debates about the development of food banking systems, child poverty, declining welfare states and how schools are filling the gap to support vulnerable families.

More information: Report: [Feeding Hungry Families: Food Banks in Schools in England](#)

Provided by University of Bristol

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