

Poor quality of employment is responsible for UK workers' reliance on foodbanks, study shows

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University of Liverpool researchers have published the first-ever peer-reviewed study of workers using foodbanks in the U.K. The [study](#),

published in the *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, found that the primary reason for workers turning to emergency and community food support is the poor quality of available employment.

The [research](#) by the University's Professor Lydia Hayes and Feeding Liverpool's Dr. Naomi Maynard engaged with people using foodbanks and food pantries in Liverpool.

They found that 65% of participants, including 76% of those of working age, identified that the root causes of their food insecurity were jobs offering uncertain hours and insufficient pay; incompatibility of insecure jobs with the demands of parenting; and high levels of mental stress arising from poor quality employment.

It was in these circumstances that the inadequacy of [welfare](#) support then assumed enormous significance for workers struggling to manage on low incomes.

The research also found that post-pandemic welfare laws are interacting with inadequate employment rights to embed the risk of food insecurity in agreements to work in low-wage sectors.

Professor Lydia Hayes, Professor of Labor Rights at the University of Liverpool said, "Record numbers of workers are using foodbanks, and this is a symptom of inadequate employment rights (which have facilitated the rise of insecure employment to record levels) and restrictive trade union laws (which damage the ability of working people to collectively improve their term and conditions).

"In particular, post-pandemic welfare reforms are interacting with inadequate employment rights and effectively force growing number of workers to take any job, in any sector, under any terms and conditions."

Since the pandemic, a policy of "in-work progression" typically requires low-waged workers, who already have a job, to face benefit sanctions unless they take all reasonable actions to increase their hours or to take on an additional job until they are earning the equivalent of 35-hours a week at National Living Wage.

It means workers are increasingly exposed to higher volumes of poor quality employment. This leaves them reliant on access to [welfare benefits](#), enables poor quality employment to thrive and exposes them to the risk of food insecurity.

Professor Hayes said, "Our research shows that it is plainly wrong to assume that working people experiencing food insecurity are choosing to rely on welfare benefits. The vast majority of workers using foodbanks do not identify the welfare system as the cause of nor the potential solution for their problems.

"Workers using food support see the problem to be poor quality jobs and they want any job they take up to be at least good enough to prevent them from becoming food insecure. The research suggests that to end the phenomenon of workers using foodbanks we need legal change."

Measures set out by the incoming Labor government in the recent King's Speech (17th July 2024) could meaningfully reduce workers exposure to the risk of [food](#) insecurity. These include proposals to set the national minimum wage at rates which take account of the cost of living.

They promise to ban exploitative zero hours contracts and require workers to be compensated for cancelled shifts without reasonable notice, as well as to make [parental leave](#) and sick pay available to all workers from day one of employment and to provide day-one protection from unfair dismissal.

However, the research by Hayes and Maynard suggests that improving individual employment rights will not, on its own, be sufficient action to end workers' need for foodbanks. The researchers recommend the implementation of better systems for everyday rights enforcement, including stronger trade union representation in low-wage sectors; public legal education to raise awareness of rights at work; access to free legal advice in [employment](#) matters; the encouragement of collective bargaining and a welfare system in which no worker is forced to accept unwanted insecurity of terms and conditions.

"This last point is critical because current welfare policies are actively suppressing terms and conditions in available jobs," Professor Hayes added.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP, has announced a new long term welfare goal for an additional 2 million people to take up paid work and she has identified that goal will require claimants "to take jobs when they are offered."

The research by Hayes and Maynard shows that this requirement should only apply to jobs that offer adequate income, security of working arrangements, and support for good mental and physical health.

More information: L.J.B. Hayes et al, 'Workers using foodbanks': the embedding of food insecurity at the nexus of welfare and employment laws, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* (2024). [DOI: 10.1332/17598273Y2024D000000026](#)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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