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Food bank demand and the rising cost of living

Insight

Published Tuesday, 18 October, 2022

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What effect is the rising cost of living having on food banks and the people who use them?

The rise in the cost of living is putting pressure on food banks and their users. Food bank networks have reported increased demand and falling food donations in the first half of 2022.

With [inflation predicted to reach between 10 and 11%](#), charities expect a [further "surge in demand"](#).

This Insight explains the effect of increasing cost of living on food bank use in the context of changing demand since 2008/09.

The rising cost of living is increasing the need for food banks

In the 12 months to August 2022, [domestic gas increased by 96% and domestic electricity prices by 54%](#). Food prices have also risen, with [food and non-alcoholic drinks inflation at 13.1% in August](#). People's budgets are likely to be under further strain as the [Bank of England is expecting inflation to remain over 10%](#) over the next few months.

Food banks are struggling with a surge in demand and a drop in donations

Food banks were already stretched during the coronavirus pandemic. The Trussell Trust, a charity representing over half of UK food banks, found [the number of food parcels given out fell after the Covid-19 pandemic](#) number of food parcels given out fell after the Covid-19 pandemic but remained above pre-pandemic levels. This means coronavirus-related pressures on food banks were still apparent when cost of living pressures started to show.

As early as May 2022, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), representing 550 independent food banks, found 93% of IFAN food banks surveyed in May 2022 reported an increase or significant increase in the need for their services since the start of 2022. Of the food banks reporting increases, 95% said it was due to the rise in the cost of living.

In August, IFAN surveyed its organisations once again. Between April and August 2022, nearly 90% of IFAN food banks saw a rise in demand. IFAN also found 72% of food banks reported a drop in food donations and 87% said they were experiencing supply issues since April 2022, with 19% having to reduce the food parcel size. If need continues to increase, according to IFAN, “68% of organisations say they may not be able to support everyone who needs their help or may have to reduce the size of their food parcels to meet increasing demand”.

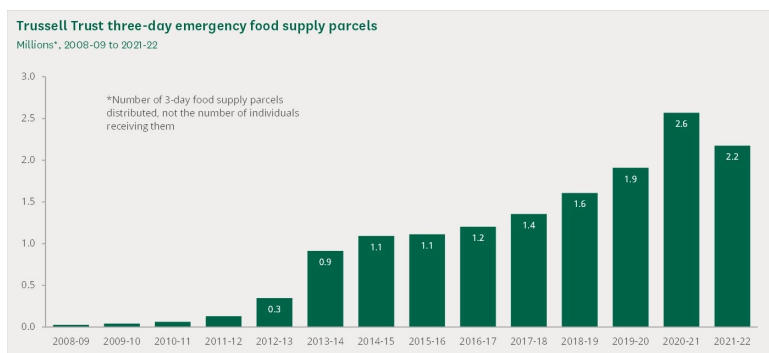
In the summer of 2022, the Trussell Trust distributed 50% more food parcels compared to before the pandemic.

Citizens Advice, one of the organisations that can supply food vouchers to access a food bank, publishes statistics on food bank referrals. In August 2022 it gave out 14,704 vouchers, around 6,500 more than in August 2021, despite Government support paid out over the summer.

The decade-long rise food bank use continues

The number of parcels given out by the Trussell Trust has been gradually rising for over 10 years, with sharp increases around 2013 and during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020-21.

In 2021/22 the Trussell Trust supplied 2.2 million three-day emergency food parcels – an increase of 14% compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019/20. There was a decrease of 15% between the pandemic year of 2020/21 and 2021/22, but the general trend shows a gradual steady increase. The sudden jump in demand during the pandemic put a large strain on food banks with only a short reprieve in spring before the consequences of the rise in cost of living began to be felt.



Source: *The Trussell Trust – End of Year Statistics 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022*

Who uses food banks?

The rise in the cost of living will have a worse effect on those already reliant on benefits or experiencing problems with health, accommodation, family circumstances or a combination of different factors. These are the people already most likely to use a food bank.

Citizens Advice statistics on food bank referrals for the last three years to August 2022 show the groups most likely to need a referral are social tenants and those with a disability or a health condition. Also, more referrals are given to single people and single people with children compared to couples with or without children.

A study by the Trussell Trust and the Heriot-Watt University, the State of Hunger, looked at the circumstances of those who are referred to food banks. They found of those referred to a food bank in early 2020, before the pandemic:

- 86% households received benefits 72% people had experienced a “challenging life experience” in the previous year

- 51% households had someone with poor mental health, which rose to 72% in mid-2020

More people are turning to food banks for the first time

Between April and August 2022, over half of [food banks surveyed by IFAN](#) found 25% or more of the people they supported hadn't used their services before.

There are also signs that a wider range of the population is resorting to using food banks – [social workers](#), [public sector workers](#), [teachers](#) and [people in employment](#) more generally. In June 2022, the [National Union of Students carried out a survey](#) of 3,417 students and apprentices. Roughly 11% of respondents had used a food bank, up from 5% in January.

[Families with children are reportedly utilising uniform banks](#), as well as food banks.

Within the context of high inflation and energy costs, charities anticipate demand for food banks will rise further.

Further reading

- House of Commons Library, [Food Banks in the UK](#), July 2022
- House of Commons Library, [Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals](#), 23 September 2022
- House of Commons Library, [Rising cost of living in the UK](#), 28 September 2022

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- <https://www.nus.org.uk/articles/cost-of-living-rise-sees-96-of-students-cutting-back>
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