

HUNGER PAINS:

RISE OF THE FOOD BANK

Falling incomes, harsh government cuts and the continuing rise in the cost of basic living: an increasing number of families across the UK are caught in a new poverty trap, argues **Anne Power**, and the growing need for food banks is just the tip of the iceberg.

Food banks are opening up in surprising, even well-off, places. The numbers of people using them has tripled in the last year to almost a million. People resorting to food banks say they feel humiliated and degraded by the experience and only use them out of desperation – in other words, hunger. The vast majority of low-income households hit by benefit cut-backs, shorter working hours and lower wages at the bottom do not, and say they will not, turn to a food bank or go into debt. They'd "rather starve". Some isolated people fall through even this net, and one young man did starve to death recently.

We know about food shortages because, over the last two years, LSE Housing and Communities have surveyed 400 low-income residents in East and West London, residents across the South-West of England, and tenant representatives in the North and the Midlands.

The facts are as follows: real incomes for the bottom quarter of the population have fallen, as pay has shrunk and both in-work and out-of-work benefits have been cut; food prices have risen far

faster than average prices, since the beginning of the crisis; so have rent and fuel bills. The poorest households are generally on the highest energy tariffs. Therefore, with a minimum income and rising costs for basic survival goods, it is more and more difficult to make ends meet.

There is extreme hardship in families caught in this new poverty trap. It used to be said that benefits provided a disincentive to work because they offered security at a very low level, which felt safer than insecure, low-paid work. Now people say that the safety net has gone, and if you are in low-paid work, renting from a private landlord, with three children, you may find your benefits suddenly shrink and you can't manage the rent. You then face eviction and further costs. If you live in a local authority where the council decides to levy a partial council tax on even the poorest households in order to balance its reduced budget, you may find you can't pay and are unexpectedly taken to court. This can then cripple your ability to pay rent and you will be evicted.

Alternatively, you may be drawn by the friendly Provident lenders at your door, who persuade

you they can help you out – landing you with compound interest, on what seems a helpful basis. Or BrightHouse, the hire purchase goods company, may offer to help you out for as little as £5 when your washing machine breaks and you end up paying the company over £1,000 for it, including interest, when its real value is £350. Or worse, they may confiscate it if you fail to pay and you lose all your money and your machine.

Food banks, in fact, are only the tip of the iceberg. Walk down any high street in a less affluent part of any British city. You'll be stunned by betting shops, offering you a £10 gift voucher to "get you started"; pawnbrokers, "dolloped" as electrical service stores, selling computers that have been confiscated due to failure to pay agreed instalments which have often been buried in unintelligible contracts; glittering jewellery shops, all second-hand goods, also pawned at knock-down prices; or "Cash Converters", willing to cash your benefit cheques for a handsome fee. It is hard to find a decent charity shop among this sea of predatory new institutions. Local authorities say that they lack the planning powers to prevent



this proliferation of exploitative “take-aways” that live on desperation.

So if most people resist debt and food banks, why is this wave of troubles now so visible? In a time of economic instability and uncertainty, people do not support paying higher taxes to pay for more equal access and incomes. On the contrary, a “survival of the fittest” mentality grows. When cuts are imposed on the most socially disadvantaged groups – generally those on low incomes, with low skills and, in hard times, more often unemployed – it is very hard to reverse the process of cuts in benefits. The tax revenues are no longer there, and the number of people needing help has grown, so costs are rising for governments too.

There is a contradiction between the state’s overarching role in protecting all citizens equally and its need to capture votes to stay in power with a tax-averse public. Can the Big Society change this? The Conservatives, led by David Cameron, hoped that community enterprise and initiative would plug the gaps left by a retreating state. In some ways, food banks are the proof positive of this idea.

But the Big Society is politically dead. At the same time, harsh government cuts prove the opposite of the Big Society. Only when people are driven to desperation will they throw themselves on the mercy of strangers. So willing outsiders running food banks are an important but last-resort form of help. In practice, the widening gaps are filled neither by the state’s increasingly shaky safety net nor by help from charities like food banks, vital as they have become.

Rather, the gaps are closed by family, friends and neighbours – the poor helping the poorest.

In one community in South-East England, tenants on a low-income estate have organised an “extra meal” scheme, recruiting local volunteers to cook for an extra person when they cook at home, and to bring a plate of food into the Community Centre, to share with local families who are stuck without food that evening. In that way, they hope to avoid stigma, by turning all tenants on the estate into helpers, sharers and receivers. There are many similar projects across Europe.

The vast majority of people in difficulty do not starve; they turn to their family, friends and neighbours when in trouble. It’s the people who lack these supports who become the casualties. And it is to prevent casualties that safety nets were invented. A more confident, purposeful and progress-oriented society works better with a safety net in place. ■



Anne Power is Professor of Social Policy and head of LSE Housing and Communities.

This article draws on research for Newham Council, Orbit Housing, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, HALLO, Octavia Housing Trust, Hammersmith and Fulham City Council and Trafford Hall National Communities Resource Centre. For more information, see <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/LSEHousing>

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ALUMNI VIEWPOINT



A single mum arrives at our food bank in tears. She has no food to feed her family. She tells me that she had been sent a final warning from her electricity provider and, out of fear, paid what she owed them. It left her without any money

for food. With no family living nearby to support her she asked her son’s school for a food voucher and was referred to our food bank. She tells me about how she has tried to get a job, but can’t. She is currently on a training course trying to get extra qualifications. We give her advice about dealing with financial problems and refer her to other organisations who can help. We give her three days’ worth of food for herself and her family. She leaves hopeful and smiling.

Food banks bring hope to the hopeless by providing emergency food and a listening ear for those in crisis. The Brixton branch of our food bank is based at my church, St Paul’s Brixton. We run it in partnership with many other churches in the area including the Beacon Church, Brixton and St Luke’s, West Norwood, who host our Norwood Branch.

Since opening three years ago we have seen demand double and now feed on average 140 people per week. Things are starting to change though. In partnership with our local council and advice centres we are able to provide skills advice workers at every session who are able to give benefit advice and signposting to where people can get help. We are starting to see fewer people come back as a result.

Our long-term aim is that food banks won’t be needed anymore so we are exploring setting up a debt advice centre as Churches Together. A recent pattern I have noticed is that a lot of clients suffer with addictions. Detoxes do help people but what people also need is support and accountability. Many people in our community are lonely – are we prepared to love our neighbour by giving them more than just food?

For more information visit www.norwood.foodbank.org.uk or call 07538 888415.

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