

WELFARE BEYOND THE STATE

Big Society or welfare failure: how does food insecurity reflect future welfare trends?

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Introduction

The use of food banks has become increasingly prominent during the Coalition governments term in office, prompting a concern that levels of hunger are increasing in the UK. This contribution explores the rise in the use of food banks as well as the underpinning causes of this rise. The latter point enters the political debate which surrounds this explanation before moving on to argue that food bank use is not simply a result of the recession and social security reform, but a symptom of a longer term crisis in welfare provision.

Use of food banks

Stevenson (2014: 5) draws upon Trussell Trust data to show how the number of people using food banks has increased since 2010 (figure 1). Explanations for this increase however are heavily debated in the political sphere. From the normative end of the spectrum, Michael Gove has argued that food bank use demonstrates a family's inability to manage their finances – a sentiment echoed by Edwina Currie who went further, to suggest provision fostered increased demand and dependency. Others have drawn upon investigations into reasons for referral and use of food banks to offer a stronger evidence base. For example, Perry et al. (2014) and Lambie-Mumford et al. (2014), suggest life-shocks (unemployment, bereavement, etc.), problems with benefits (delays and sanctions) and chronic low income lead people to rely on food bank provision.

Additionally the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger (2014) suggests that the cost of living (combined housing, food and fuel costs) has been steadily increasing as a proportion of household expenditure since 2004. Consequently for the bottom income decile their expenditure on these three items has increased from 31% of income to 40% between 2003 and 2012. Recent data on expenditure, *Family Food* (DEFRA, 2014: v), illustrates how 'on average, UK households purchased 6.1% less food in 2013 than in 2007 while spending 20% more. They saved 5.6% on their unit prices by "trading down" to cheaper products of the same type'; however 'Households in income decile 1 (lowest income group) spent 22% more on food in 2013 than in 2007 and purchased 6.7% less. Trading down saved these households 1.0%'. The context in which low income households can afford food is drastically changing. Not only are they less equipped to protect themselves against financial/life-shocks, they have lower incomes resulting from cycles of no-pay/low-pay and wage stagnation, an increased proportion of which needs to be spent on purchasing food.

The evidence base contradicts the normative claims of Currie and Gove, supply is not driving demand. Previously Lord Freud has claimed that no causal link between social security reforms and food bank use exists. The growing evidence illustrates that these reforms are part of a wider picture. It is the combination of insecure/low incomes, an inability to (financially) manage life-shocks and increased living costs alongside social security reforms which are at the root of driving up food bank use, which is symptomatic of increased levels of hunger in the UK.

Figure 1: Use of Food Banks

Period	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Number of people given 3 Days Emergency food and support by the Trussell Trust	61,500	128,500	347,000	913,000
Year over Year Percentage Increase	N/A	109%	170%	163%

*Data contains rounding error

Source: Stevenson (2014)

Big Society or welfare failure

Isabel Hardman's article in the *Spectator* presents food banks as a sign of a strong moral fabric in Britain. There is some truth here charity ensures that people do not starve. Yet, despite this good work, here is the core of the argument: food banks, despite being an excellent example of non-state provision to meet welfare needs, are symptomatic of failed welfare and economic systems. Consequently it is possible to see that different parts of the political spectrum are highlighting a range of contradictory explanations for the use and expansion of food banks – symbolic of wider differences in explanations of current social problems and potential solutions.

Little mention is now given to the Big Society as we reach the end of the Coalition Governments' term in office, yet its shadow looms large. Seeking to re-imagine the role of the state, Cameron articulated a narrative of the Big Society which saw the state take a step-back in welfare provision to allow other sectors to step in and fill the void. Here the voluntary and community sector, referred to by Cameron as the 'first sector' was to lead the way in providing innovative, local welfare services. Dismantling the welfare state was a key part of this project, for, it was argued, the state monopoly of the provision of services diminished non-state actors, preventing them from fostering self-help at the local level.

Within such a narrative food banks illustrate the Big Society in action. Welfare needs are met by agents outside of the state, communities pull-

ing together so that others can survive in these turbulent economic times. Yet Perry et al. (2014) illustrates how those turning to food banks are doing so because they are constrained by their circumstances. The state does not adequately support them, their incomes are too low or they lack the financial assets to protect them from shocks such as bereavement and unemployment. Households, churning in and out of low pay and no pay alongside increasing levels of in work poverty are indicators of fundamental problems with the current economic system as families lack the financial resources to meet their basic necessities. Welfare provision, which once sought to provide social protection against such hardship, is now a factor contributing to the use of food banks. This is not a symbol of a Big Society resolving social problems. Adequate food consumption is a fundamental and basic need which is going unmet. Food bank provision is a fundamental failure in welfare and economic systems in the UK.

Conclusion

The growing evidence-base, briefly outlined above, indicates that food banks are used as a last resort – when all other strategies for cutting back and social network support have been exhausted. The stigma and shame of having to rely on this provision is so great that families delay as much as possible. Unemployment, low wages, insufficient hours of work, precarious work – these are not under the control of individuals using food banks. Nor can these same

individuals predict and protect themselves from bereavement, homelessness, and other unexpected life shocks. Increasingly the social security system which once helped citizens manage these turbulent events in their lives has been replaced by workfare initiatives which seek to drive people back in to the low paid precarious work which caused harm in the first place. Such reforms have recently become highly suspect as 6.6m households are in 'in-work poverty' (McInnes et al., 2014).

Linking briefly with the international literature we see support for this argument. In a comparative text, edited by Graham Riches (1996), the use of food banks in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the USA are linked to prolonged unemployment and underemployment, growing inequalities in wealth, declining real value of wages and benefits, and the subsequent decline of purchasing power. Riches, talking about the Canadian experience, argues that food banks only 'nibble' at the problem whilst simultaneously propping up the causes of hunger.

The broader problem of poverty and social exclusion in the UK has reached a point whereby people are going hungry. The developing evidence base suggests that there is a need to look beyond 'food poverty' to focus instead on the wider economic and welfare context in which people live. In responding to the problem of hunger, food banks unintentionally maintain the social harms caused by economic and/or welfare systems. Rather, alongside this good will, there needs to be a stronger challenge to social security reforms and a continued campaign effort to tackle low wages and insecure employment. Accepting food banks as part of the Big Society will maintain the status quo rather than seek to challenge the contextual causes of food bank use – poverty and social exclusion. The Canadian experience reflects, to a certain extent, the institutionalisation of food banks: the acceptance of their use when times are tough which consequently legitimises their place in the wider welfare tapestry. Such a development in the UK will not only indicate the final stages of welfare dismantlement, but the abandonment of collective provision to address social needs which

formed the core of welfare provision set out in the 1940s by Beveridge.

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