

A record high 9.3 million food banks users in UK

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A total of 9.3 million people in the UK, including 3 million children, currently experience levels of poverty and hunger so extreme they rely on charitable food.

Research conducted on behalf of the Trussell charity, the UK's largest food bank network, warns that without a drastic shift away from austerity policies—entrenched by successive governments since 2009—a further 425,000 people, including 170,000 children, will experience extreme hunger and hardship by 2027.

Trussell, formerly the Trussell Trust, operates more than 1,400 food banks around the UK and distributed 3.1 million food parcels last year. The charity was founded in 1997 initially to feed children in Bulgaria, but opened their first food bank in Wiltshire, England a quarter century ago, such was the developing hunger crisis in the country.

Trussell's interim report, "The Cost of Hunger and Hardship", is based on analysis of government data and their final report on the need for emergency food in the UK is due to be published spring 2025.

The report predicts that the incoming Labour government will fail to deliver their election manifesto promise to end the "moral scar" of food banks unless they raise the household incomes of the poorest.

This is approximately one in seven of the UK population, struggling in a state of deep and extreme poverty Trussell terms "hunger and hardship". The term was created by the charity to define the almost 9.5 million people whose low household income and extreme financial vulnerability makes them most likely to rely on using food banks or at risk of needing them.

Those typically suffering "hunger and hardship", explain Trussell, are on low incomes, have zero or negligible savings and may also have crippling financial debts including money owed to the state. Typically, these households struggle and frequently fail to make ends meet. They cannot afford enough food, pay their energy bills nor afford basics like new clothes and shoes. A single unexpected financial crisis, like a job loss, a large bill or the replacement of a cooker or freezer, can tip limited budgets over into crisis and trigger

reliance on food banks.

The new terminology, incorporating "absolute poverty" is designed by Trussell, in part, to hold the Labour government to account over their election manifesto pledge to "end mass dependence on emergency food parcels".

However, those suffering from "hunger and hardship" are a growing section of a more numerous group of almost 14.5 million who are experiencing relative poverty. A family is said to be in relative poverty, i.e., relative to the prevailing standards of living in society, if their income is below the poverty line of 60 percent of median income. Those facing "hunger and hardship" are typically to be found more than 25 percent below the poverty line.

Mass poverty in the UK today is increasingly not relative but absolute, not about falling behind prevailing living standards but not having the essentials required to maintain human life. Hence their reliance upon food banks to maintain their caloric intake. Many of these same working class families live in substandard housing in the poorest neighbourhoods with the poorest public services.

One in five UK children fall into the "hunger and hardship" cohort, including fully one in four of those children in their first four years of life. More than half of the numbers suffering "hunger and hardship" (approximately 5 million) are from a household where one or more adults is disabled. A third of larger families, with three or more children, were also at high risk of dependency on food banks, particularly because of the two-child benefit cap first imposed by the Tories and maintained by Sir Keir Starmer's government.

Trussell contends that cuts to welfare benefits by successive governments over decades have seriously damaged the "social safety net" meant to be provided by the welfare state. Recent decades, especially since the austerity cuts following the 2008 global economic crash, have witnessed a rapid rise in food bank use. The rise is being driven by poor wages that fail to maintain families above the poverty line and the decreasing value of already paltry benefit levels, including completely inadequate disabled and

pensioner benefits. Trussell estimates that almost four in 10 people receiving the universal credit (UC)—the main benefit—face hunger and hardship.

In January, there were 6.4 million people on UC in England, Scotland and Wales, according to official government statistics. Revealing the prevalence of low pay in Britain, nearly 40 percent of claimants have jobs.

The Trussell study found there were 1 million more people suffering from “hunger and hardship” than five years ago, and nearly 3 million more than there were in the mid-2000s when then Trussell Trust began providing food packages.

To mark the publication of the Trussell findings chief executive Emma Revie, said, “It’s 2024 and we’re facing historically high levels of food bank demand. As a society, we cannot allow this to continue. We must not let food banks become the new norm.”

Whilst Revie’s sentiment is well meaning, reality has already outstripped such wishes—food banks are a well-established fixture of working class life because searing, mass poverty have been normalised by governments over decades.

Trussell calls for the abolition of the two-child benefit cap to make inroads into reducing child poverty levels in larger families. Scrapping the two child benefit cap would reduce the number of people facing hunger and hardship by 9 percent, or 825,000 people.

But the charity notes that this move would do nothing to address the needs of most people at high risk of “hunger and hardship”, including many disabled people and their unpaid carers. “We know that removing the two-child limit would be a positive step for larger families... but, as indicated by this research, the majority of people who are facing hunger and hardship would not benefit from that one change alone,” stated Helen Barnard, Trussell’s director of policy.

The report states “Scrapping the household benefit cap and the two-child limit in combination would lift 620,000 children out of absolute poverty, compared with 540,000 from reversing the two-child limit alone.”

Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves has no plans to reverse the Tory enacted two child benefit cap. The Treasury claims the relatively insignificant figure of the £3 billion cost of abolishing the cap is unaffordable given other demands for investment. Meanwhile the government is pledged to handing 2.5 percent of GDP to military spending as soon as conditions allow, with Reeves making a high profile trip ahead of next week’s budget to visit Ukrainian troops being trained in Britain.

Other calls made by Trussell are for government to bolster the incomes of 2.2 million people whose universal credit income is reduced by monthly deductions for historic loans and debts.

This, Trussell claims, can be achieved by introducing a legal minimum income floor on the standard allowance for universal credit, limiting the amount claimed back by the state each month from claimants’ payments. Another recommendation is for the lifting of housing benefit rates in accordance with rent increases, and protection for disability benefits.

In response to the Trussell findings a government spokesperson could only piously respond “No child should be in poverty”—which is meaningless because children cannot be lifted out of poverty without their parents or guardians incomes being substantially raised first, which won’t happen under the “most pro-business government in history”.

Labour’s 2024 election manifesto promised to “end mass dependence on emergency food parcels”, adding they have no place in a “just and compassionate society”. But Starmer has restated his Thatcherite beliefs that “handouts from the state do not nurture the same sense of self-reliant dignity as a fair wage”—a policy which will see welfare benefits cut by up to £3 billion in the budget.

Work will set you free, according to the Labour mantra, but workers are not receiving a “fair wage”. The Trussell findings revealed that approaching two thirds of those facing hunger and hardship were members of a household where at least one adult is in paid employment.

Trussell figures show how over two thirds, 68 percent, of working households in receipt of universal credit have gone without essentials like basic toiletries and prescriptions, over the last six months—only a little lower than the level among people receiving universal credit who are not in paid employment of 79 percent.



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