’I’ve seen you all in the queue’: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Independent Food Bank Users in South-East London

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Introduction

This study represents qualitative research into the experiences of independent food bank users in southeast London. It looks to answer two questions: '*how do independent food bank users experience food insecurity?*' and '*how can food aid be provided in order to mitigate the negative impact of discourses of poverty?'*.

For more than a decade cuts to public services and social welfare, increasing in work poverty, and precarity of jobs and housing have put pressure on individuals' wallets and their abilities to feed themselves sufficiently. People are making challenging decisions while prevailing political and public discourses are individualising, shaming, and depoliticising the issue of food security.

Lewisham is an inner London borough with a high prevalence of populations who have higher risks of food insecurity, namely: those who are not White British, on low income, and those who live in social housing. Lewisham is home to many independent food banks and this study's subjects are users of 3 of these sites across the north of the Borough, namely: Christ Embassy UK Zone 1: Life Giving Project, Evelyn Community Store and Feed the Hill Social Supermarket.

The vast majority of data collection in the available food aid and food insecurity literature, particularly qualitative research, occurred prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequent economic crises and lockdowns also exacerbated inequalities of health, income and opportunity. This study will attempt to capture the ways that people who use independent food banks experience food insecurity and the discourses that shape perceptions of them. By eliciting brief written responses and conducting depth interviews to gather experiences and meanings from users, internalised sources of shame and discomfort are uncovered as well as opportunities for compassionate design of food aid.

47 participants gave brief written responses, of whom 8 took part in semi-structured depth interviews to give their opinions and report their experiences. Respondents reported food insecurity restricting their agency and social outlook, as well as negatively affecting their mental health and relationships with others. Significantly, participants reported a flattening of the experience of shame in using food banks due to the widespread effects of economic crises bringing a broader range of people in contact with food insecurity. Respondents challenged individualising framings of food poverty by asserting the universality of the effects of economic crises and explicitly used structural political critiques in their responses. Independent food bank users were found to be politically conscious and aware of discourses affecting their lives. They reported feeling disillusioned with institutions they felt should support them, namely national government and social welfare.

This research uses the experiences of independent food bank users to inform recommendations for more inclusive, compassionate food aid that contests hegemonic discourses that dehumanise and shame food bank users. This study looks to amplify the voices of those for whom the consequences of political choices and discourses are most dire, and those who are overlooked by academia and media most often: the users of food banks. Building on the experiences shared, I recommend that to reduce the negative impact of stigmatic discourses, food aid must be provided with minimal bureaucracy, open arms, and opportunities for community building and expressions of user agency.

Literature Review

State of food aid and food insecurity in the UK

Charitable food initiatives have grown exponentially in the UK since 2010 (Loopstra at al 2019a, Trussell Trust 2022a). Local voluntary and faith sector organisations have stepped into the breach in food provision left by a decade of social welfare reform, retreating local government funding and increasing precarity of income (ibid, Jenkins et al 2021, Strong 2019, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015, Purdam et al 2016). Demand for food aid has increased year on year since 2010, with 3 million parcels given out by the Trussell Trust network alone in the year to April 2023, compared to 41,000 in 2010 (IFAN 2022, Trussell Trust 2013, 2022a, 2023a).

Food banks are food aid organisations that provide food - typically the equivalent of up to 3 days' worth – at a regular location at least once a week (Loopstra et al 2019a, b). Although there are many ways individual food aid organisations self-describe, the term 'food bank' will be used as a catch-all term for the sake of simplicity throughout this dissertation. Food banks primarily distribute food that has been donated either directly from the public or through schemes such as FareShare which distribute food that has been rejected by supermarkets or is near sell-by date, although many food banks also buy in food to distribute (ibid, Williams et al 2016). Broadly the limitations of access are: time-based, as most foodbanks are operational in single 2-3 hour slots on a weekly basis; and knowledge of where food banks are, and access to a referral (Loopstra et al 2019a, b). Most food banks in the UK are within the Trussell Trust network, a network of around 1300 food banks that share branding, referral models and a single database (ibid, Trussell Trust 2023a). The Trussell Trust's referral model, like many others, requires a third-party (i.e social workers, schools, GPs) to refer an individual to the food bank, who receives a code which entitles them to one parcel of food (Loopstra et al 2019a). The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), an initiative to identify independent (read: outside of the Trussell Trust network) food banks, have identified 1200 independent food banks in the UK (IFAN 2023).

Food insecurity in the UK – defined as the inability to acquire or consume sufficient food in socially acceptable ways - has been estimated to be the highest in Europe, with 14% of people (1 in 7) in the UK experiening food insecurity in the past year, the equivalent of 11.3m people (Davis and Geiger 2017, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015, Taylor and Loopstra 2016, Trussell Trust 2023b). Associations have been found between food insecurity and lower income, receiving social welfare payments, disability, having children in the household, wage and contract precarity, housing precarity and minoritized racial identities (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015, Purdam et al 2016, Hadfield-Spoor et al 2022, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015, Clair et al 2020, Department for Work and Pensions 2023). Increasingly, local statutory services are referring to food banks in order to support their service users (Garthwaite 2016a, Loopstra et al 2019). Food bank parcels are overwhelmingly given out to those on low incomes, in precarious temporary or private housing, in receipt (or delay) of state benefits, and/or after a 'tipping point' (i.e relationship breakdown, grief, loss of a job) (ibid, Jenkins et al 2021, Reeves and Loopstra 2021, Lambie-Mumford 2015). Food banks are framed as short term relief, however for many of their users they are a regular lifeline to supplement their nutritional needs (Rizvi et al 2022, Garthwaite 2016b). What is clear is that millions of people in the UK are at high risk of hunger, and the social welfare system is no longer an effective safety net for those who need it (May et al 2019, Jenkins et al 2021).

Although using food bank data as an indicator of food insecurity is likely to underestimate levels of food insecurity, the data gives light to a growing and significant crisis of hunger in the UK (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2015, Purdam et al 2016). Food insecurity and food bank use are not well correlated; the vast majority of those who use food banks are food insecure, but not all who are food insecure use food banks (ibid). This is due to inconsistencies of knowledge and access and internalisation of discourses of need that result in individuals only turning to food banks at the point of most acute need (ibid, Williams et al 2016). In the UK this has made it difficult to directly gauge food insecurity from nationally representative research as it was only the most recent Family Resources Survey had an instrument regarding food insecurity and food bank use (Department for Work and Pensions 2023). From this research they report that in 2021/2 3% of households (769,000) had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, and 1% (193,000) in the 30 days prior to being surveyed (ibid). While food bank use is not perfectly correlated with food insecurity, it has been found to be consistently associated with acute levels of food insecurity (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015, Taylor and Loopstra 2016, Hadfield-Spoor et al 2022). Extrapolating from the distribution of 3 million parcels from 1300 Trussell Trust food banks to include the 1200 independent food banks identified by IFAN, up to 6 million food bank parcels may have been distributed in 2022/23 (Trussell Trust 2023a, IFAN 2022).

Experience of food insecurity and the embodiment of austerity

An inability to access food affects individuals and families far beyond their immediate circumstances; food insecurity disempowers, damages and shames. The impact on individuals and communities is dire, affecting social solidarity and forcing the internalisation of austere discourses of scarcity (ibid, Pemberton et al 2016, May et al 2016).

The experience of food insecurity severely limits individuals' agency and wellbeing, necessitating strategies of constraint in order to survive (Purdam et al 2016, Garthwaite 2016b, Macleod et al 2018, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2016). In the face of acute crisis, individuals are restricted to purchasing lower-nutrition low-cost food if they are able to afford it at all (ibid). In the face of rising utility costs, they make choices between 'heating and eating', people skip meals altogether or they turn to theft and other unregulated ways of generating income (ibid, Hadfield-Spoor et al 2022). The threat of this constraint forces those who are able into insecure, low-paid employment in order to survive (Garthwaite 2016b, Lambie-Mumford 2016). Significant levels of food insecurity in the 2010s have also been associated with an increase in diseases of deficiency and poverty, including a doubling in the number of cases of malnutrition, scurvy and Rickett's since 2010 (NHS 2021). This constraint results in poorer physical and mental health, with the poorest embodying austerity's restriction and withdrawal of support (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015, Macleod et al 2018).

A growing amount of literature links austerity policies explicitly with rising food insecurity (Loopstra et al 2019, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015, David and Geiger 2017, Jenkins et al 2021). Cuts to public services and social welfare have reduced the income of those most at risk of hunger (ibid). Increased conditionality of social welfare and disability benefits have been directly associated with food bank use and has resulted in far fewer claimants receiving income from the state (Loopstra and Reeves 2021, Kaufman 2019). Conditionality – the linking of eligibility for welfare to socially acceptable modes of disability – acts as a disciplinary system sanctioning the income of those unable to perform need as the DWP prescribe (Kaufman 2019, May et al 2018, JRF 2014). Sanctions can be applied for reasons such as mis-logging job applications in an online portal, missing an appointment due to the death of a child, or failing to update your address after fleeing Domestic Violence (Garthwaite 2016b, Macleod et al 2018,

Trussell Trust 2022b). The Trussell Trust report that nearly half (47%) of those referred to their food banks are referred due to deductions in their welfare to pay back an advance or overpayment, loan or other fine (Trussell Trust 2022b)

The UK's unravelling social safety net is directly linked to the rollout of Universal Credit (Jenkins et al 2021). Universal Credit is an umbrella benefit rolled out in the early 2010s that agglomerates previous disability and in-work benefits into one payment (ibid). While it was designed to simplify the benefits system, its implementation and structure have been linked directly to increasing food bank demand (ibid, Loopstra et al 2019, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015). Universal Credit is paid in arrears, meaning that at the point the first payment is made the claimants would not have received any income in 5 weeks (Trussell Trust 2023a, IFAN 2022). It is within this period that many claimants turn to food aid organisations for support (ibid).

There is a significant association between being in receipt of social welfare and food insecurity (ibid). 25% of those in receipt of state benefits in 2021 were food insecure and half of families on Universal Credit experienced food insecurity in the month prior to a Food Foundation survey (Department for Work and Pensions 2023, Food Foundation 2022); 82.7% of independent food banks reported waiting for benefit payment or decision on appeal or application was one of the top 3 reasons for those requesting parcels (Loopstra et al 2019). In a paternalistic and austere role, the state looks to reduce costs by withdrawing its support, and this leaves a gap that the third sector have had to fill to provide people with the food they need (Loopstra et al 2019, Strong 2019). Prior to the implementation of austerity policies in Britain in the early 2010s, there were only 100 food banks across the UK (Loopstra et al 2019). In 2023 there are now over 2500 food banks throughout the country (Trussell Trust 2023a, IFAN 2022).

Food bank users are increasingly embodying the effects of austerity as food insecurity affects their bodies and minds (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015). Fasting strategies and making choices based on caloric content and price rather than nutritional content has short- and long-term health impacts (ibid, Centre for Economic and Business Research 2013, Garthwaite 2016b). In the short term, weight loss, lack of energy and illness are significantly correlated with poor nutrition; longer term effects include negative impact on a child's physical and cognitive development, stress and anxiety (ibid, Rizvi et al 2022). Financial difficulty itself causes stress and anxiety; low incomes and increasing costs can lead those who can work into precarious work with longer and more physically strenuous hours (Garthwaite 2016b, Macleod et al 2018).

Food bank users' bodies exist with intersecting issues of poor nutrition, rest, mental health and limited resources to support one's own wellbeing. The discourses that create this embodiment of austerity maintain structures of power with those with the fewest resources at the bottom, without agency to contest identities thrust upon them (ibid, Chase and Walker 2012, Strong 2019)

Food insecurity, shame and the construction of poverty

Lack of access to food in the UK is overwhelmingly an issue of financial resources (Taylor and Loopstra 2016). Those on low incomes are constructed as undeserving and shameful, and the reasons for their poverty are assumed to be due to individual moral failures, lack of education or criminality (Purdam et al 2016, Williams et al 2016, Wells and Caraher 2014, Pemberton et al 2016).

Prevailing discourses categorise those in poverty into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' based on their social desirability and engagement with the economy (Wells and Caraher 2014, Strong 2019, Chase and Walker 2012). The spectre of the 'undeserving' poor haunts most discourse around poverty, which comes through in politics, media as well as statements from those who are food insecure (Wells and Caraher 2014, Garthwaite 2016a). The boundaries of 'deserving' are amorphous, and foreground the vilification of 'benefits cheats', 'scroungers', and the 'workshy' to homogenously frame those who receive benefits as fraudulently receiving public money (Wells and Caraher 2014, Briant 2013). Briant refers to this framing - particularly for disabled people who cannot engage with the job market - as the creation of 'folk devils', reprehensible individuals who do not 'contribute' to society and are placed by media and politicians as the cause of public ills (2013; 883, Wells and Caraher 2014, Pemberton et al 2016). Within the modern UK context where social, moral and economic capital are closely correlated, if an individual is not seen to be economically productive, they do not have the resources to gain social capital (Chase and Walker 2012). Proximity to these discourses is heavily stigmatised; respondents in qualitative studies often discursively distance themselves by avoiding the word 'poor' altogether, or by highlighting their social worth through their work history (Purdam et al 2016, Garthwaite 2016a, Chase and Walker 2012). The construction of poverty as an individual failing emphasises individual responsibility and emphasises community (rather than state) intervention (Lambie-Mumford 2019). This also draws attention from extensive cuts in public services and social welfare reforms over the last decade in order to discursively distance the state from responsibility for intervention in poverty (Pemberton et al 2016, May et al 2018).

Discourses around poverty provide many arenas to produce shame (Chase and Walker 2012, Wells and Caraher 2012, Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015, Williams et al 2016). Social welfare bureaucracy and by extension food banking also present as arenas of shame production, as contact with dehumanising bureaucracy reduces those asking for help to their circumstances, their job history, and their 'needs' (Purdam et al 2016, May et al 2019). Inherent within post-Austerity social welfare institutions are discourses of categorisation and quantification, where moral judgments based on worthiness are projected onto individuals by actors of the state (May et al 2019). These discourses serve to produce and reduce power, supporting hyperindividual austere decisions and those who make them while reducing those who suffer as a result to a homogenous other who are vilified and excluded from rights to support and food (Briant 2013, Chase and Walker 2012). Shame associated with appearing to be asking for help or not being in 'enough' need to justify support results in individuals waiting until acute crisis before they engage with social welfare or food aid (van der Horst et al 2014, Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015, Chase and Walker 2012, Garthwaite 2016a).

Food banks and discourses of need and scarcity

Food bank users exist at the intersection of food insecurity, poverty and shame as inflicted and exacerbated by the welfare state and its institutions, while food charity interventions depoliticise hunger, mirror the violent bureaucracy of social welfare and reinforce discourses of need and scarcity (Lambie-Mumford 2016, May et al 2018, May et al 2019, Strong 2019).

The majority of food banks in the UK are run by the Trussell Trust, a network with a franchise model whose members distribute parcels with 2/3 days' worth of food after being referred by a local statutory or charity sector partner (Loopstra et al 2019a, Loopstra et al 2019b). This study seeks to contribute to the gap in research at sites that are independent of the Trussell Trust network. This hegemony is a double-edged sword - on one hand the broad network allows for uniformity of data collection which provides robust reporting and advocacy for food justice (e.g Trussell Trust 2023b), as well as sites for ethnographic research (see Clair et al 2020, Loopstra et al 2019a, Williams et al 2016, Garthwaite 2016b). On the other hand this hegemony results in the Trussell Trust becoming the default model for charitable food interventions and the sole source of widely reported data (Williams et al 2016, Loopstra et al 2019b).

Independent food banks have the opportunity to provide food aid through different models, for example by working in conjunction with mutual aid organisations who directly politicise issues with food systems, austerity and financial crises that contribute to inequalities of access to food (Loopstra et al 2019b, Williams et al 2016). While many independent food banks use similar third-party referral systems, many explicitly distance themselves by highlighting the Right to Food, providing food aid without lengthy interrogation, and by using models that provide more agency to the users (Loopstra et al 2019b, Lewisham Homes 2022). Community Stores and Social Supermarkets allow users to move freely through their space and choose the food they take in exchange for a recommended (but not necessary) donation of a nominal amount of money in exchange for access to a quantity of food with a higher value, which provides users more agency and access to a broader range of food products (ibid). These models allow choice over the food they take home; this is in stark contrast to the typical food bank approach of providing a plastic bag with a pre-defined amount of food (ibid).

The threat of the consequences of being categorised as 'unworthy' as well as the threat of sanctions to benefit payments received serve to create a welfare system that is opaque and designed to police bodies and behaviour rather than support (Strong 2019, May et al 2019, Kaufman 2019).These discourses place the power to categorise in the hands of assessors, making moral judgements that have material consequences (May et al 2018, Strong 2019). The more that food banks mirror social welfare, the more negative psychosocial impact they will have on individuals and fewer of them will reach out for support they are entitled to (ibid, Taylor and Loopstra 2016). Discursive mirroring results in those who are excluded from statutory services feeling excluded from third sector services that reflect similar impulses and discourses. For example, independent food banks report a higher proportion of service users who are without Recourse to Public Funds due to their immigration status (Loopstra et al 2019).

Food charity depoliticises hunger by positioning it as an individual issue and drawing attention away from the inherent demand for structural reform and state intervention (Loopstra et al 2019, May et al 2018, Williams et al 2016). Food aid individualises the response to hunger, constructing food insecurity as a matter of charity as opposed to a political obligation or human right (Strong 2019, May et al 2019, Lambie-Mumford 2016). By plugging the gaps in the UK's failing social safety net and further embedding

within statutory services, food charity enables the neoliberalisation of state welfare and pushes aside the possibility of critiquing whether foodbanking is effective at managing food insecurity (ibid, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2016, Macleod et al 2018). The institutionalisation of foodbanking as a pipeline for near-to-expiry food also provides a mask for issues with food systems as a whole (Loopstra et al 2019, Lambie-Mumford 2016). Half of independent food banks in 2019 reported receiving donations of surplus food, and many other food banks use organisations that distribute near-to-date supermarket stock in order to receive food (ibid). The organisational practices of food banks heighten the stigma and sense of precarity through the provision of out of date or 'surplus' food (May et al 2019). Inequalities in our food systems are laid bare when those who cannot access food due to affordability are fed directly by the food that is discarded by those who have the choice. With very limited funding, the majority of food banks rely extensively on volunteer labour to be able to operate, with 75% of surveyed independent food banks relying on 5 or more volunteers to be able to keep up with capacity, and 21% relying on 20 or more volunteers weekly (Loopstra et al 2019). Foodbanks have the potential to be arenas for contestation of discourses of poverty, need and community, but have been institutionalised and embedded into a neoliberal welfare system that limits ideas, shames people and forces more and more people to consider themselves in competition for fewer resources (May et al 2019, Williams et al 2016).

Methodology

Aims of Research

This study intends to use the experiences of independent food bank users to inform more compassionate ways of providing food aid. Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this research to consider how to prevent hunger, but to provide evidence for methods of alleviating hunger through food aid – even briefly – that do not reinforce shaming, disempowering and dehumanising discourses. Food bank users that feel less stigmatised go back into the world and have greater resources to improve their wellbeing, create community and create opportunities for themselves.

Taking on a post-stucturalist framing, this research also looks to view the ways in which food bank users' identities are contested and constructed through relations of power, how they experience these discourses in their everyday lives, and how best to empower users to contest their own identities and needs in relation to food aid. As the research draws on the experiences of the participants, the data analysis will be approached with an inductive lens. This research looks to use qualitative methods to answer the questions: '*how do independent food bank users experience food insecurity*?' and '*how can food aid be provided in order to mitigate the negative impact of discourses of poverty?*'.

The choice to use independent users as subjects was due to the hegemony of the Trussell Trust within academia, for both qualitative and quantitative research (see Reeves and Loopstra 2021, Clair et al 2020, Loopstra et al 2019a, Williams et al 2016, Garthwaite 2016b). Scant research has been conducted within independent food banks, and that which has used staff and volunteers as subjects (see Loopstra et al 2019b, IFAN 2022, Lewisham Homes 2022). The voices of food bank users are rarely heard in academic and public discourse (Garthwaite 2016a, Wells and Caraher 2014). The choice to study their experiences is rooted in the knowledge that discourses of poverty, need and austerity reduce the agency and voice of those who use foodbanks and a desire to allow their experiences to be heard.

This research represents the first qualitative study of foodbanking within London. London is a centre of financial activity and opportunity, the gravity of which affects most of the rest of the UK. However, it has not been the site of food aid study, appearing only as part of national samples in quantitative research. Other qualitative studies have been undertaken in communities in the North-East (Garthwaite 2016b) and Glasgow (Macleod et al 2018) due to post-industrial contexts that will structure the material and social resources of the subjects. Though London is on average more wealthy and food secure than the rest of the UK, the inequalities of access and income within it make an intriguing site for the study of poverty. The top and bottom deciles in London have a 10:1 ratio of income, compared to 5:1 in the rest of the UK (London Datastore 2023). London has on average a higher income than the rest of the UK, although when taking into account housing costs the bottom decile of earners in London receive ⅔ the income of the bottom decile of the rest of the UK (ibid).

This study also seeks to fill the gap in research into food aid post-2019, when the most recent data collection available occurred (see May et al 2019). In the subsequent years, Covid-19 and related lockdowns and financial crises, as well as the 'cost of living crisis' of 2022 onward have had significant impacts on the outgoings of most people in the UK. These crises are likely to have exacerbated already existing risk factors for food insecurity, resulting in more people accessing food aid and more acutely experiencing negative impacts of poverty.

Context of the Study

The study took place in 3 food banks in the north of Lewisham, south-east London. Lewisham is an inner London borough with above average rates of demographic factors associated with food insecurity. 51% of the population live in the bottom 3 deciles of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (measures used to compare relative deprivation in England) and 35% of the population are living in poverty (Lewisham Council 2022a, 2023). 38.5% of the population of Lewisham are in the bottom decile, and 90% of the population are within the bottom 3 deciles of the the Housing and Services domain (concerning the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services) (ibid, Lewisham Council 2022a, 2023). Increased housing costs and insecurity have been linked by Clair et al with increased food insecurity (2020). Minoritised ethnic groups have also been found to have higher rates of food insecurity than white groups: Lewisham's population is 52.2% non-White British, and 27.2% Black African/Caribbean, compared to London's 13.3% and 3.5% across England (Lewisham Council 2022b). Households in which the head was Black were also found to be 13% less likely to be food secure, and twice as likely to be very food insecure than households with White heads (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2021, see Fig.1). The council have not reported directly on food insecurity, however there is a groundswell of efforts to tackle food insecurity from voluntary and charity organisations in partnership with the local authority to create a Food Justice Action Plan (Lewisham Council 2023).

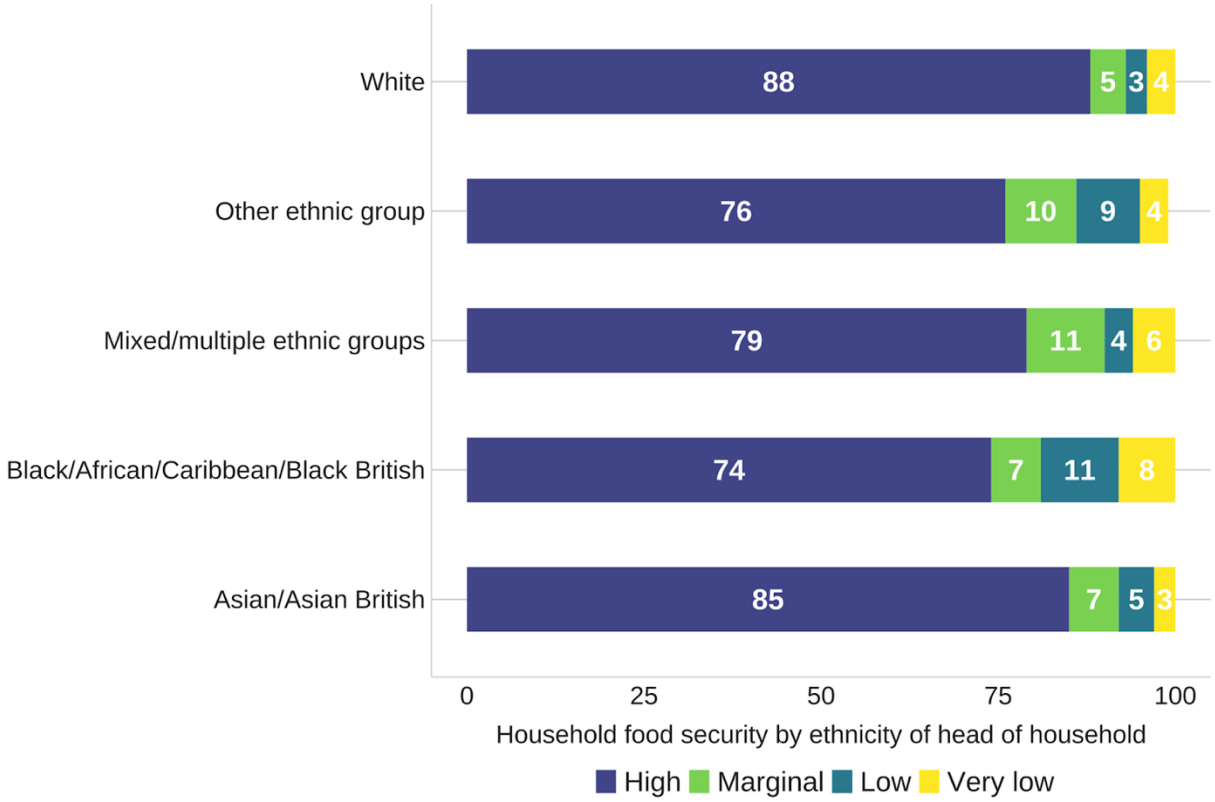

Fig. 1 Percentage household food security in the UK by ethnicity of head of household (DEFRA 2021)

London as a whole ranks highly in terms of food access compared to other regions in the country. However, it's important to note that certain neighbourhoods in the city fall within the lowest decile nationally (Consumer Data Research Centre 2022, Trust for London 2020). Lewisham generally performs well in terms of food access and proximity to food retail, nevertheless, the specific locations of the study sites in this area are classified as relative food deserts (ibid). This situation is likely a result of social housing estates' relative isolation, leading to limited availability of shops and services for the population in these areas, including the food banks. Food banks often acquire their supplies from large supermarket chains' overstock or near-date produce, indicating that affordability might indeed be a more prominent factor than physical access.

Each of the food banks seek to serve their communities in more open methods of food aid; while they accept third-party organisations signposting to their sites they do not require formal referrals and documentation. None of the sites are within the Independent Food Aid Network, which suggests that even with 1200 independent food banks identified (2023), this is still likely to be an underestimate of the volume of food aid outside of the Trussell Trust network in the UK. 2 of the three sites operate using a minimal intake form, consisting of a name and post code, the other site has a longer form asking for contact details and other specifics of their circumstance. The number of people served each day varies from week to week but each report between 30 and 70 individuals being given food on each operational day. One of the sites also delivers food parcels to individuals and families who are not able to attend the site in person, the bank reports delivering to 180 households per week.

They were all founded in2015 as a response to local need for food, reporting increase in demand year on year. Covid-19 was cited by all as a major factor in increased demand for aid at each site, as well as benefits sanctions and delays, the ‘cost of living’ crisis, low income, and immigration issues. 2 of the three sites operate a ‘social supermarket’ or ‘community store’ model. The individual is then free to walk through the space taking the groceries they would like from the shelves, deliberately evoking the feeling of walking through a supermarket. The other project operates similarly experientially but without the donation and with a slightly reduced variety of food offering.

Much like other food aid organisations throughout the country, these food aid sites rely almost entirely on volunteer labour for their operations: including management, delivery and monitoring (Loopstra et al 2019b). Each of these sites are supported in whole or in part through the local council-led social housing association, Lewisham Homes. The majority of their food is provided by the Felix Project, the London-based operations of Fareshare, an organisation that distributes surplus food from supermarkets to local food charity projects. The staff report that this food supply is variable in quantity and quality, dependent on what has not been sold. Over the two-week period I spent collecting data there was a considerable surplus of courgettes, and a 10kg box of out of date lemons was delivered to one of the sites during operation. Staff also report that when the food that they can receive is insufficient, staple items such as cooking oils, milks and cereals are bought from supermarkets to make up the difference.

	Referral model	Access	Opening Hours	Offer
Christ Embassy UK Zone 1: Life Giving Project	Name and Post code	Free	Saturday 10-12am	On site food aid
Evelyn Community Store	Intake form	Recommended donation of £3.50	Tuesday and Fridays 2-4pm	On site food aid
Feed The Hill Social Supermarket	Name and post code	Recommended donation of £2	Wednesday 10-12am	Delivery and on-site food aid

Fig. 2 Overview of operations of each food bank

The area was chosen due to my personal and professional links to the borough. I grew up in Lewisham and currently work for an organisation that is a third-party referrer for food banks and other services in the borough, so I had had previous contact with the sites on a professional basis. The food banks were contacted in April 2023 to gauge their interest in taking part in the research. All of them responded positively and engaged well with me, providing access and assisting me with the research.

Fig. 3 Food bank sites marked on a map of Lewisham within London

Methods of Data Collection

Qualitative methods were employed to collect the experiences of food bank users, namely: written responses on sticky notes from an open prompt, and semi-structured depth interviews. These methods were chosen to hear experiences in an individual's own words, initially with a low-intensity and commitment method and giving the opportunity to engage further in a depth interview to gather further insight into the meanings that individuals place in their own narrative. It was important to provide multiple levels of engagement with the study both to gather a wide range of experiences but also to allow for variation in the time-resources available to potential respondents. Food insecurity correlates with being time- and resource-poor, therefore the methods needed to be flexible to the ability of the subjects to engage.

Data collection occurred during July 2023, on-site collection and recruitment occurring first and interviews being conducted later in the month. On-site data collection was conducted at each site on one operational day for each project, where I was given a space by each food bank near their door to be easily accessible to users. The sites were attended for the full set-up and operational time to gain insight into the daily experience of a user of the food bank. This immersive approach was important as one intention of the research is to give operational recommendations for food banking. I felt an understanding and level of immersion was required to lend credence to these recommendations.

Food bank users at two of the sites were given brief context to my research and then asked if they would like to respond to the prompt 'what do you think of the food bank?', these responses were either written down by the respondent or researcher, the 47 responses were later transcribed.The post-it notes were transcribed by hand into a document for later coding. Respondents who engaged with the question and the research were asked if they were willing to take part in depth interviews. 16 individuals expressed interest in taking part and 8 took part, having been recruited from each of the 3 sites. 6 of the 8 interviewed were women, and 2 of the 8 interviewed were from White backgrounds.

The interviews were semi-structured, starting with a broad prompt – 'tell me a bit about your current situation' - to elicit the respondents' own narrative (Chase and Walker 2012). Then the interview followed a topic guide consisting of: experiences of using food banks, experience of food insecurity, constructions of poverty, and engagement with social welfare (for more detail see Fig. 4). Interviews were conducted in rooms adjacent to food banks or in other local community buildings where quiet, confidential spaces were available. The safety and confidentiality of the interview was paramount due to the potential emotional weight of sharing difficult experiences, as well as to allow the respondents to speak more freely. The interviews were recorded on a mobile phone then transcribed using Descript, an audio editing platform. These data were then analysed thematically using codes drawn from the text (Chase and Walker 2012, Bengtsson 2016).

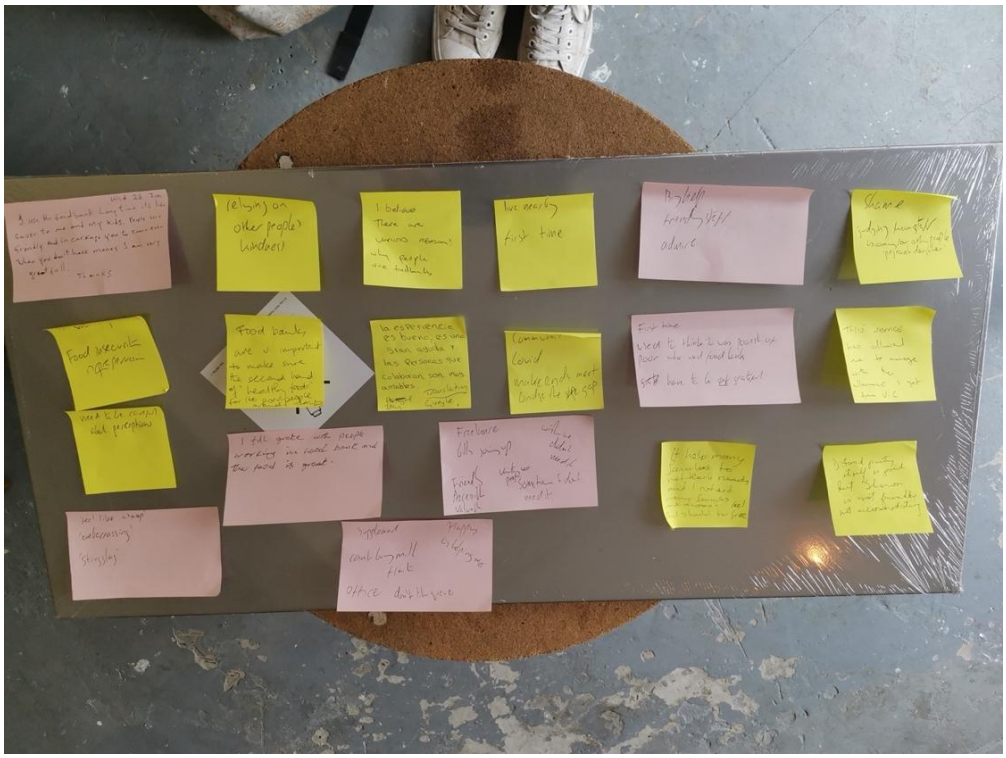

Fig. 4 Example of Sticky Note data collection

Food banks	How has your experience of using [Food bank] been?
	Have you used others?
	How did you start going to [Food Bank]?
	What do you think about the role of food banks in addressing food insecurity?
	What else do you think would help in addressing food insecurity?
Food insecurity	What has been your experience of food insecurity?
	How do you manage your food intake when you can't access enough food?
	Has it affected your physical/mental health?
	Do you feel that food insecurity is taken seriously? Why/why not?
	Do you think the government care about people who go to food banks?
Construction of poverty	How do you think society views poverty? Why?
	How is that opinion made?
	How does it make you feel that people think that?
	What do you think society should know about people who use food banks?
Welfare	Do you think people in need are treated fairly in our society?
	Do you think people in need are given enough support in our society?
	Have you had any experiences with trying to get benefits?
	How did it feel?
	What do you think can be done to improve the experience and support that people receive?

Fig. 5 Topic guide for depth interviews

Pilot, Considerations and Limitations

The methods were finalised and refined through a pilot at one of the sites. Initially there was intended to be a survey instrument as part of data collection for this project. This survey would have collected demographic data, scales of physical, mental and financial wellbeing and scales of trust in government and support for those in need. The intention behind this survey was to generate quantitative data from which regression analysis could be run on the relationships between the variables collected.

This was trialled on the first day of data collection and it shortly became clear it was untenable; those who are looking for food aid are time-poor and do not have the time or motivation to take part in a 10-minute survey. The survey had 2 respondents, the surveying of whom took long enough that many other potential respondents had left before they could be reached for comment. The survey instrument was removed due to time constraints, as well as the irony of its reminiscence of bureaucracy within the context of the research.

The prompt for written responses was also refined through the pilot stage. Initially there were two prompts; 'how do you feel about using a food bank?' and 'what stereotypes are there of people who use food banks?'. I found that respondents did not engage well with the prompts, needing reframing and further explanation of what I wanted to know. I encountered a similar issue as the survey instrument in terms of time spent per respondent preventing a wider variety of respondents reached. I found much higher levels of engagement with the simpler and more open prompt 'what do you think of the food bank?'.

Social desirability bias within the interview could have been relevant as it has been found to be significant within situations where subjects feel they could be judged (Blair et al 2020). It was possible that if subjects perceived that their food aid was contingent on their engagement with my research then that would both coerce individuals into engaging and likely bias their answers positively toward the food bank. This was addressed through clear communication that the research was independent of the food banks and by seeking to avoid asking questions of subjects before they had received their food.

The potential effect of a researcher presenting as a White man asking for information of those requesting food aid should also be acknowledged. My positionality may have affected the nature and level of engagement with me and by extension the research, for better or worse. This was addressed in my explanation of the research as well as deliberately presenting a friendly and casual demeanour; at every stage consent was sought and subjects were made aware that they could withdraw at any time. I also leveraged my status as a local and my relationships with key informants in order to encourage trust in what I was doing, as I did not want the research to be perceived as intrusive or extractive.

There are limitations to the chosen methods given the on-site data was collected cross-sectionally, making it limited to those who could attend the sites on that day. I was also unable to approach any of the users who were receiving deliveries, whom I would expect to have experiences of further barriers to accessing food aid and other support for the reasons they were unable to attend the food bank on the day.

Recruitment for the in-depth interviews was based on engagement with the topic, as those who gave brief answers or were not interested in responding to the initial prompt were not asked to interview. This limited the subject pool for interviews to only those who were willing to engage with the research

on this day. The subjects were also limited to those who had time to be interviewed. As discussed above, users of food banks tend to be time-poor and this was borne through the research as 16 individuals expressed interest and shared their details although only half of those individuals were eventually interviewed. This is particularly notable as many of those who did not have the time for interview were parents with young children, a group overrepresented among food bank users (Trussell Trust 2023b). This could affect the analysis as those who were the most pressed for time are likely to have insight into how to create food aid that is more inclusive to people with the same barriers.

Interviews also limited the subjects to those who were able to communicate in spoken English, which excluded a proportion of those who attended the sites when data was collected. There are two examples of this limiting the subject pool: a user attended who had been using the food bank for 2 months, but who could only speak and write Spanish- their written response to the prompt was collected and fortunately a volunteer was able to translate their response into English. Another user was communicating in British Sign Language, and so was only able to respond in writing. This limitation is salient as those who have barriers to communicating in English will have additional issues engaging with social welfare, food aid and other support that is available.

The short-term nature of the methods also limit the level of immersion and understanding of the experience of independent food bank users. A cross-sectional approach was implemented due to time constraints, however a more ethnographic approach over time would elicit more trust in the researcher, gain deeper insight into the experiences and allow for more observation of behaviour of users as well as institutions.

Analysis

The data collected from transcripts of interviews and written responses suggests that there are negative psychosocial impacts of food insecurity, internalised discourses that produce shame and categorise individuals based on perceived 'need', and the perception of being ignored by institutions they believe can support them. In ways that have not been noted in other studies, responses were highly politicised and contained structural critiques of society and the economy. Respondents were quick to blame structures of power and 'the system' for their poverty and insecurity. Respondents also consistently noted they had increasingly felt their expenses were stretched by the recent 'cost of living' crisis in the UK, and that food aid was a consistent source of nutrition rather than a short term intervention.

Users reported strategies well established in the literature, namely: avoiding eating food themselves in order to feed dependents and relying on low-cost low-nutrition food in order to consume enough calories to survive. Respondents also noted the role that the food banks themselves have in reproducing or contesting discourses of need, reflecting that their ways of operating can either produce or reduce shame for their users. The study also sheds light on novel themes including the flattening of stigma associated with poverty due to recent economic crises in the UK, and the preference of presenting food aid as a food waste intervention. Respondents also praised alternate forms of food aid that provide them with more agency and contest discourses that produce shame at food banks.

Direct quotes are used below not as full bodies of evidence but to illustrate themes that arose from data collection, some are edited in part to maintain anonymity and brevity.

Necessity of Food Aid

> *'It's a godsend' 'It's a lifeline'*
>
> *'My family would not eat as well if I didn't come [here]''*

The predominant theme was that the presence of food aid within the respondents' lives was necessary and positive. Respondents were quick to say they were grateful for the help and were clear that without the food banks they and their dependents would not be able to access sufficient food. Unlike common framings of food aid, parcels given out were described to be a consistent source of nutrition as opposed to short-term intervention; respondents described having come to the food banks weekly for months and years in some cases. The regular reliance to be able to eat appropriately suggests that some nuance or further consideration for the framing of food aid is required. This creates a departure for food aid literature to interrogate the framing in order to contest the depoliticisation and individualising of hunger, removing responsibility for hunger from policymakers and placing blame it at the individual level as a moralised failing to manage their own resources (Chase and Walker 2012, May et al 2019).

‘My rent is extremely high, my bills are high, so I don't really have much money left at the end of the month for food’

'Money is a resource that's used in extreme situations'

'I had to go to a food bank because I literally couldn't afford to go shopping.'

Respondents all stated low income and increasing monthly costs had led them to seeking food aid. Some had been users pre-2020 but the majority had sought food aid for the first time after the initial Covid-19 lockdowns. They all described very restricted household budgets that forced decisions between vital payments and food. Money was foregrounded in the minds of all respondents, structuring their lives and restricting their agency. They also consistently noted they had felt their expenses were stretched by the recent ‘cost of living’ crisis in the UK, and bills ‘going up’ forced them into seeking support.

‘I go from shop to shop looking for the yellow prices’

‘I’d be stealing if not for the food bank’

Participants also reported strategies noted in the literature such as going to different stores to check for the lowest price, choosing low-nutrition high calorie foods to satiate themselves, and rarely eating meat or fish (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2016, Garthwaite 2016b). Respondents also stated their strategies in lieu of food aid, reporting that if needed they would steal, go ‘bin-diving’ or exchange sex for food and accommodation.

‘My wife passed away last year, so that affected me because that meant I couldn't work’

Interviews corroborated previous findings that food bank use is correlated with adverse life events, such as grief, relationship breakdown and loss of work (Garthwaite 2016b, Trussell Trust 2023b). The interviews also gave insight into how interacting personal crises can lead someone to be food insecure. One respondent described how the death of his partner led to a decline in his mental health during which he could not work. He then applied to Universal Credit to support himself and their 2 children which had led him to using the food bank because benefits were not enough to cover expenses and food. Another interviewee described their addictions leading them into debt and bankruptcy, their subsequent inpatient stay in rehab and then supported housing then meaning they continued to accumulate arrears and so could not afford food after payments had been taken out of their benefits. This testimony reinforces the existing body of literature of the lack of safety net for those on low incomes in the UK, and the need for compassion for those who are food insecure due to the likelihood of their recent or historic trauma.

‘Don't take a loan from them. Cause it's like you'll be paying that back forever and that's what's up. The problem for a lot of people, when they first started getting their money, they was getting like a handout. So when they're getting the rest of your money, you're already in debt’

‘That's the scariest part obviously, cause [when waiting for Universal Credit] it's five weeks worth of no food. If you've got a family that's very scary’

‘This service has allowed me to manage with the allowance I get from Universal Credit'

‘You have the adding pressure on top of the pressure, to find work but also to go online to check it. I’m not very good at online and I think it would also affect a lot of people mentally to live with that fear’

The data also reiterate the problematic structure of Universal Credit. The structure of Universal Credit ‘*guarantees [they’ll] be in debt*'. 5 of the 8 interviewees were in receipt of Universal Credit at the time of data collection, with 2 more receiving other benefits, and many more respondents reported receipt of welfare. The overrepresentation at food banks of those in receipt of benefits corroborates correlations that have been found between austerity-led welfare reform and food insecurity (David and Geiger 2017, Jenkins et al 2021, Reeves and Loopstra 2021).

Experience and effects of poverty and food insecurity

'[At] Christmas it’s been really, really hard because to your kids, you have to say no, you are not gonna get that much’

‘I used to cook all the time, for friends, family. I miss that.’

Participant experiences also gave us insight into the restricted experience of poverty, and the lack of agency that individuals have without money. Food insecurity and poverty restrict available resources to the extent that individuals are unable to express themselves and reinforce social bonds through food. This can lead to social isolation in conjunction with food insecurity. One respondent noted that since they had lost their job and had started relying on the food bank, they had stopped inviting friends to their home as they couldn’t provide hospitality and had also stopped leaving their home as they used to go to activities (gym, cafes etc) that require money to attend.

‘It just feeds the anxiety. It feeds the depression. I tend to overthink everything, so because I overthink, I then kind of dig myself into this black hole’

‘Being hungry puts people in survival mode’

Consistent with previous research, the interviews supported the notion that food insecurity has a severe negative impact on mental health. Interviewees reported depression and anxiety symptoms directly related to their financial situation. Respondents mentioned sleepless nights not knowing where their next meal would come from, heightened anxiety when it came to shopping and making plans, even total avoidance of opening letters they perceived to be bills.

‘If you came to somewhere like [the food bank], people did look down on you because it's seen as something you can't manage’

‘Have you noticed there is hardly an interaction between users? People might nod while they're waiting but nothing else’

‘When you have kids, yeah. You have no pride. You have to just swallow your pride and you have to do these things’

As well as negative mental effects there are psychosocial elements to the impact of using a food bank, they are a potent arena for shame production (Chase and Walker 2012, Garthwaite 2016a). Food banks, particularly the queues, were described often as places respondents were ashamed to be and to be seen to be associated with. Discourses around poverty and the shame associated with perceptions of not being able to engage appropriately in the economy are felt viscerally by users. Respondents stated they felt *‘ashamed’*, *‘embarrassed’* and *‘like a tramp’* for using a food bank. Many interviewees stated they were food insecure for some time before attending a food bank or even beginning to look for food aid, stating they had to ‘*swallow their pride*’ before attending because they didn’t have other options. Individualising discourses of poverty make those in food poverty feel ashamed for asking for help; within which the threat of shame is enough for people to wait until they are at their most acute need before seeking support (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015, Purdam et al 2016).

Reflection of Discourses

'You see people with mental illness. Yeah. More like intractable issues as opposed to it's their own fault'

‘*There's people that don't really need it and still use it as well, so it's kind of abusing the system really’*

'I wouldn't class myself for one of those that rely on it’

Respondents were not immune from reflecting damaging discourses themselves, as categories of deservedness and the folk devil of the benefits fraud were echoed in interviews and in written responses. Vocabulary of deservedness and the implicit placing of blame on those who aren’t in ‘enough’ need came through in responses, individuals used well-trodden discourses to classify kinds of individuals who are in need and those who are to blame for their use of the food bank. ‘*Abuse*’ of the system, and the vigilance of those who may be defrauding food banks was also apparent; in line with earlier scholarship, food bank users were watchful of and quick to speak about those who they perceived as not deserving food aid (May et al 2018, Strong 2019).

Drawing parallels with previous work, interviewees used discourses of reliance and their job history to position themselves as deserving (Chase and Walker 2012, Williams et al 2014). Respondents discursively distanced themselves from those who ‘rely’ on food banks, implicitly asserting their own relative financial independence in order to maintain social capital. A similar strategy was employed by other respondents who were keen to emphasise their job history prior to or during food insecurity in order to indicate that they had engaged in the economy and been ‘productive’ (Chase and Walker 2012).

Previous research found that individuals who did not have 'visible' disabilities were far more likely to be labelled as 'scroungers' or 'cheats', there was a departure from previous formulations of the 'benefits fraud' evidenced as a greater sympathy for those who were unable to work due to mental ill health (Briant 2013, Wells and Caraher 2014, Pemberton et al 2016). Respondents' own experience of mental ill health may have allowed them to deconstruct notions of blame, as many of them explicitly mentioned histories of Anxiety and Depression among other diagnoses. It is worth noting that the users of these food banks tended to be from groups that are othered in national political and media discourse, and so this could explain why they did not replicate this othering based on their race or origins as often as other studies have found (e.g Chase and Walker 2012).

Politicisation of Users

> *'Really wish we weren't in a state where we had to rely on food banks, because that's taking the ownership from the powers that be, the government, other important people to manage the money better'*
>
> *'No-one cares about the poor. [Food banks] fill a need but shouldn't be here. They should give enough money for Universal Credit'*
>
> '*They don't care' 'They just don't see us'*

An emergent theme was the politicisation of the responses, explicitly stating the government's role in food insecurity. Previous studies had not noted this in their responses so this may be emergent due to recent crises of policy that have affected household incomes. They may also be a result of the memory of government's furlough intervention in the economy during Covid-19 lockdowns. Contrary to some previous studies, respondents' narratives were not often centred around personal failure- many respondents felt left behind or ignored by institutions they felt should be supporting them, particularly national and local governments but also utility companies and supermarkets (Chase and Walker 2012).

> *'For the powerful to continue to be the powers that be, you have to whip up a sense of information or non-information, whether it's through the tabloid media or whether it's through the governments and what their stakeholders and what they pay for'*
>
> *'[The food bank is] a lifesaver, but the system's broken. It's unfortunate that we're in this kind of place in the 5th richest country in the world'*
>
> *'Big, big companies being profitable like that. Imagine we pay more tax than Amazon, and these people, they make billions and billions, so that shouldn't be. It should be balanced, you know?'*

A significant concept to draw out of this is that food bank users are aware that their precarious position is maintained by larger structures and institutions deliberately maintaining their own power. There is implicit discourse analysis within their blaming structures of power and 'the system' for their struggle and highlighting the ironies of modern capitalism in the UK. Many interviewees referenced the media and politicians when asked about food bank user stereotypes. This reflects a sentiment among users that they believe stories that are told about them are incorrect and used in order to maintain poverty and avoid accountability.

Universality of Food Poverty

> *‘I think society's views on it is changing. It's changing because it's, before it was viewed upon or even frowned upon that, you know, it was the poorest of the poor that use food banks. That's not the case now.’*
>
> *'We're all not so far apart'*
>
> *‘I don't care if you are black or white. You older or young. I've seen you all in the queue.’*

A novel theme that came out of the interviews was the concept of flattening experiences of stigma for those that use food banks. Many respondents noted that they thought the level of shame in using a food bank or asking for help had been reduced recently due to the perceived universality of the ‘cost of living’ crisis and Covid-19 lockdowns. This mirrors governmental reporting that rising essential costs and inflation result in a fall in real incomes for all demographics across the UK, although those on the lowest incomes are likely to be more severely affected by increasing costs of essentials as they represent a larger proportion of their total spending (House of Commons Library 2023, Purdam et al 2016). There were respondents from groups that are not often mentioned in food poverty discussions, namely high-skilled freelance workers and home-owners. This universality contests a common discourse which constructs poverty as outside of the mainstream (Pemberton et al 2016). This contestation is significant; if poverty and food insecurity is common and acknowledged, then there is increased dissonance in the discursive othering of those on low-income which therefore makes hegemony easier to dispute.

Effects of food aid models

> *‘I walked in and I already felt awful for asking for help. I got to the desk and [the volunteer] smiles at me and says ‘don’t worry you’re welcome here’ and it made me so relieved’*

Respondents also noted the role that the methods of food aid have in reproducing or contesting discourses of need, giving space to reduce the stigma associated with asking for support. Given the food bank is an interface of shaming discourses that tends only to be engaged with when an individual is at their most food insecure, therefore those who are engaging with food banks are making themselves vulnerable when reaching out for support (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015). The same respondent who gave the above quote also described another food bank they had attended which had a very long line, did not communicate well and made them feel like the volunteers at the food bank were revelling in the power discrepancies between them. No matter the sentiment behind the volunteers at that time, an atmosphere within which anxious people are made to feel more fraught is one that reinforces the psychic impacts of food insecurity and poverty.

‘[You can] try a variety that you otherwise wouldn't, expanding one’s pallet'

‘[The Food Bank] helps me supplement with stuff like oil and pasta which is going up’

Interviewees praised alternate models of food banking, enjoying the agency and variety of food they had access to compared to the standard model. Respondents reported the community store meant they could have kinds of food that they hadn’t tried before, allowing them to experiment with food in ways that they had been restricted from previously. This agency and flexibility allows for more joy to be generated from food, and is contrary to typical strategies used during food poverty, namely restriction of varied and nutritious food (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2016). Respondents also consistently mentioned that the food bank helped to ‘supplement’ their food shops, by providing basics so they would have more flexibility in their budget to buy meat, or food that is culturally significant to them. Corroborating Lewisham Homes’ findings, users reported that the community store model lessened users’ feelings of receiving charity, and increased a sense of fairness as they were giving something in exchange (2022). This form of exchange was present in each food bank, as some volunteers were also users, who exchanged their labour for food aid as opposed to a donation.

‘I was trying to get rid of some food, and no-one came, but once I said it was going to waste they came’

‘I like that it was going to waste like, that somebody is going to eat it’

‘A lot of our fruit comes with fur coats on’

Another emergent theme was the preference of food bank users to frame food banking as prevention of food waste. The food sites respondents were recruited from all relied heavily on the local charitable food distribution centre, and much of the food was close to out of date. This may be a strategy to justify use of food banks outside of acknowledging personal economic insecurity, presenting a utilitarian argument to rationalise the use of food banks. The distribution of close to date foods was also acknowledged in interviews, the ‘fur coats’ comment for example is a respondent making light of the decaying fruit they often receive.

For the respondents, food aid represents a long-term strategy in order to maintain their nutrition, finance and mental wellbeing in the face of increasing bills and other life costs. Food banks and their volunteers mediate the interface at which the most food insecure ask for support. They should be cognizant of the discourses they take on and evoke during their provision of food aid in order to prevent undue psychological harm to individuals who are likely to have already undergone trauma in their personal history and/or through state institutions.

Recommendations

The intention of this research is to use the lived experience of those who use independent food banks to give recommendations for ways of providing food aid to reduce internalised experiences of shame and anxiety because of food insecurity. Based on the experiences shared with me during this research, I would argue that in order to reduce the negative impact of stigmatic discourses, food aid must be provided with minimal bureaucracy, open arms, and opportunities for community building and expressions of user agency.

The experiences and life history of those who use food banks must be considered by those providing food aid. It is very likely that users will have experienced emotional or physical trauma prior to attending the food bank. In addition, the act of attending the food bank is highly fraught due to the shame surrounding poverty. Those in receipt of social welfare are overrepresented in populations of food bank users, and these people will have all experienced the trauma of categorisation and bureaucracy as well as having to restrict and budget on low incomes. Taking these into account, food bank users should be treated at the very least with compassion and awareness that their history prior to attending a food bank has likely been difficult.

Multiple participants praised the food banks' atmospheres, the feeling of being welcome, and comfort in asking for support. This is significant for the contestation of hegemonic discourses of poverty where individuals are blamed for their lack of resources and shamed for asking for support. In a country where there is an accepted human right to food, it is key that those who are asking for food are treated with respect, made to feel comfortable, and are given food that they are entitled to. Food aid organisations should lean into the universality of the experience of food insecurity, making it clear that neither food insecurity or its interventions should be isolating. Communal responses to individualising discourses act as a powerful counter in which groups can come together not only to provide food but to maintain and develop food's influence as a social good.

Given the restriction of budget, opportunity, and experience inherent within food insecurity, food aid organisations should look to promote users' agency where possible. Models such as community stores and social supermarkets go some way to achieving this; by providing users with choice, by giving freedom to choose for themselves the alternate models contest discourses that strip power and agency from users, and even expand their culinary horizons when different foods are available. A flexibility in the method of exchange for food aid may also allow agency to be given back to users by allowing them to volunteer their time or provide other resources as opposed to money. Food banks should be careful in their framing of this offer, as while research suggests that individuals feel less shame and a greater sense of 'fairness' if they provide something in return for their food aid, damaging notions of 'deservedness' can begin to be reinforced in the process of providing food that should be available to all.

As the experience of food insecurity is shaming and isolating, food banks should provide opportunities for community building outside of simply providing food. Involvement of service users in the executive function of the food banks or involving them in steering groups can give an opportunity to engage users further with the food bank. This is another space in which food banks can lean into the universality of food insecurity, to reduce shame and bring people together in the space. Often food banks operate out of community assets (halls, schools etc.) and so have ready access to space for community building, such as social groups. Food banks can also leverage the politicisation of their users to build political power and influence; the structural analysis of many respondents within this research suggests that there is opportunity to advocate and campaign for issues such as equality, food security, social welfare and other issues critical in the lives of food bank users.

Implications

In considering the implications of this work, I come back to the two questions I sought to answer through this research, namely: '*How do independent food bank users experience food insecurity?'* and '*How can food aid be provided in order to mitigate the negative impact of discourses of poverty?'.*

This study replicates previously established themes of the experiences of food poverty, namely the restriction of experience and nutritional variety, shaming discourses of poverty leading to poor mental health and the necessity of food aid in allowing users to access sufficient food to survive. It is significant to acknowledge that in the years since the last qualitative research into food aid there are similar effects of discourses and experiences of users. There were challenges to consensus on the experience of shame however, as many respondents contended that they felt there was a reduction in shame due to perceived universality of the effects of 'cost of living' crises and Covid-19 lockdowns. This is potentially a rich vein of future study, though it is outside of the scope of this study to establish a theory of universality in food insecurity. Other research can investigate the extent to which different groups have been using food aid or how this perception has developed.

The Trussell Trust and Independent Food Aid Network both support alternate ways of alleviating poverty outside of food banking. For example suggesting a 'cash first' approach which provides money directly to those in need to give them the choice of how to spend their income, or with an 'essentials guarantee' whereby households on the lowest incomes are given support with bills to give them some financial room to breathe (Trussell Trust 2023, IFAN 2022). These recommendations however are implemented at a higher level than the scope of this study. Respondents were clear that their experiences of using food aid was shaped by the model and phenomenology of the food bank itself. Participants were able to praise independent food banks for helping to mitigate their shame, and to assert the negative impacts of food aid done uncompassionately. The practical implications and recommendations for food banks are predominantly around actively contesting dehumanising, shaming and isolating discourses of poverty. Based on the experiences shared, food aid should be provided universally, warmly, and act as a catalyst for community and agency building.

This research has also found that independent food bank users consider food aid to be a necessary and long-term supplement to their diets, which contends the conventional framing of food aid as a short-term intervention. There are multiple implications to this, particularly in combination with other findings within this study. The experiences of independent food bank users suggests that food insecurity is a long-term position, rather than an incident that occurs briefly to people. This represents a major contestation of hegemonic framings of the need for food aid, which is provided predominantly in small parcels; if food poverty is considered structurally – commensurate with respondents in this study – it can be addressed through public policy and through wider political will as opposed to the siloed, hyperlocal interventions that occur currently. When considered in conjunction with the perceived flattening of shame and the politicisation of responses, this research could represent a springboard for conversations among those who are experiencing food insecurity around solidarity and the right to food. This counter-argument is important to contest hegemonic discourses of poverty that are individualising, blaming and shaming. Framing food insecurity as a problem that must be contended with at a level far above the individual allows those experiencing it to be relieved of part of the shame associated with asking for support.

This research is limited in its scope and sample, and as such there are limits to the generalisability of the findings. The corroboration between the findings and previous research supports the external validity of the study. This study operates as general research to fill the qualitative gap in urban, independent food aid post-2020, however it acts as a useful baseline setting for future research into the experiences of the intersections of specific identities and/or disability with the experience of food insecurity and/or for research with longer-term, more immersive methods. Previous literature has established that there are groups who are overrepresented in food banks, and who are more likely to be food insecure (Loopstra et al 2019, Clair et al 2020, DWP 2023). There has also been some previous research into the intersection of disability with food insecurity finding disability to be intertwined with socioeconomic exclusion and social welfare (Hadfield-Spoor et al 2022).

There are opportunities for further study within the sites of this research. For example, one of the sites also has a Muslim family support group on site, and another delivers food to those who are unable to attend the food bank during operational hours. Further research into these groups could glean insight into differences in the interactions with food aid based on intersections of identity and mobility.

Given more time, ethnographic methods would be the preferred approach to collecting data on the experiences of food bank users. Rizvi et al note that long term studies into users of food banks are scarce, and the singular qualitative study in this field was a long term ethnography in the north-east of England (2022, see Garthwaite 2016). The cross-sectional method allowed the collection of data from many people across the three sites, however a more immersive method would give insight into the behaviour of users and staff in addition to the stated experiences of food bank users. Immersion into the food banks' operations would also provide comprehension of how users move through the site, how they interact with volunteers, and give evidence for further recommendations for compassionate food aid.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study provides valuable insight into the contemporary experiences of those who use independent urban food banks and uses those experiences to give recommendations for compassionate methods of food banking that contest discourses of poverty. This research represents the experiences of 47 people whose daily lives are likely to be fraught with worry around their next meal or their next bill. They were all asked how they feel about using a food bank, and 8 participated in interviews about their experiences of poverty, food insecurity and using food banks. Their testimony resonates with food banks' potential to be places for the contestation of shaming discourses, and to be places of community and solidarity rather than embedding and reflecting neoliberal welfare discourses.

This study indicates that there are few differences between the people who receive support from independent food banks and from the Trussell Trust. The significant differences are in the methods of food aid provision, and its stated effect on the wellbeing of those in receipt. Methods of food aid that allow for greater agency, less shaming, and greater community can help to mitigate the already negative effects of food insecurity.

The significance of this research shines through its corroboration of previous research as well as its departures from it. Independent food bank users in Lewisham in 2023, like other food bank users, are chronically seeking food aid, are consistently othered, have poor mental health, and tend to be people of colour in receipt of state benefits. All participants reported their lives becoming much more difficult after Covid-19 lockdowns and subsequent economic crises, as well as the ongoing 'cost of living' crisis. The temporal gap in the literature that this study fills is a significant period in the recent history of the UK, the economic crises post-2020 have affected a large proportion of household incomes and opportunity (House of Commons Library 2023). After a decade of austerity, health and wealth inequalities were already poised to be further expanded by the pandemic and related economic and political crises. This study is an important first step in establishing the state of food insecurity during these crises and provides a strong basis from which to study the experiences of food bank users outside of London who have also been failed by social welfare and experience symptoms of austerity.

It is not within the scope of this project to discuss how to alleviate food insecurity and hunger, but how to provide food aid more compassionately, to support those who are already in the position where they cannot readily access food. What is clear from previous research and the testimony within this study is that those who are food insecure feel left behind and unsupported, and they have clear ideas of what has exacerbated their social and financial insecurity. Reforms to social welfare, economic crises, and shameful framings of poverty cause those on the edge of food insecurity to avoid seeking support to the detriment of their mental and physical health. With the UK predicted to be one of the slowest growing economies in the world and the Labour party in opposition committing to austerity-era social welfare policy, it is likely that food parcel requests will continue in their current trend (IMF 2023, Macaskill 2023). Considering this, it is imperative to mitigate the suffering of those who ask for help, and to support the wellbeing and build community of those who have made that step.

Hegemonic discourses structure power dynamics within our society; they provide vocabulary with which to other and categorise individuals that are reflected onto and internalised by those whose power they most reduce. Food insecurity and poverty is suffocating in the UK; at every turn those in the most need are the most vilified. In light of this and the experiences shared above, and in lieu of radical structural reform, the minimal expectation for those concerned with food aid to advocate for empathy towards those simply asking for support to realise a fundamental human right to food.

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