

Food banks and austerity: what the data tell us about rising food insecurity in the UK and Europe

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Since the 2008 crisis, there have been substantial rises in food insecurity across Europe, writes [Owen Davis](#). His research suggests a link between the welfare regimes of EU countries and such rises, with the increase in the UK and Ireland having been sharper compared to countries with a different system. This link between social policy and food insecurity is not news to researchers but the evidence must be communicated to the public, if government is to be held into account.



It is no secret to those working in food banks that the rise in food bank usage in the UK is at least partly driven by rising economic insecurity. Yet what to frontline practitioners may appear obvious continues to be debated at the highest levels of [government](#). There are suggestions that the phenomenon of rising food bank usage may simply reflect the [increased availability of food bank services](#). In other cases, the government has conceded that the need for food banks may have intensified, but have shrugged off responsibility and instead blamed [macro-economic forces outside of their control](#).



In a [forthcoming article](#) with [Ben Baumberg Geiger](#), we provide evidence that refutes these government claims. There are no ideal measures of food insecurity over time, so we used the best measure available – people’s answers to the question ‘can your household afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish every other day?’, from the European Quality of Life Survey. We find first that there have been substantial and statistically significant rises in food insecurity across the majority of European countries (from 6.5 to 8.7 per cent between 2003 and 2011 on average). In the UK, we saw a rise in food insecurity from 3.8 to 8.8 per cent. This suggests that rising food bank

usage may at least partly reflect increased demand for food bank services, which is part of a wider European trend.

But our data also provoke a more politically contentious question: why did food insecurity rise the most in the UK over the course of the recession?

Social policy and food insecurity: a causal link?

For many in the field, the answer to this question is simple. Evidence has been mounting around the role of social policy changes in explaining rising food bank usage and, by implication, food insecurity. [The Trussell Trust reports](#) that delays in benefit payments and changes to benefits eligibility were two of the three major causes of food bank referral (accounting for 28 and 13.5 per cent of referrals, respectively) in 2015/6. A [cross-party review led by Frank Field MP](#) also noted the significance for food insecurity of “unreliable income from wages and benefits” and a recent article by [Loopstra et al.](#) in the *British Medical Journal* found strong associations between rates of sanctioning, unemployment and cuts in central welfare spending, and rising food bank usage.

Our research design did not allow us to make any claims about causal links between social policy changes and rising food insecurity and/or food bank usage. However, we were able to explore whether there was evidence that the rise in food insecurity differed according to social policy arrangements across countries. To do this, we clustered European countries in to five ‘welfare regimes’, which reflected broad differences in social policy generosity and design.

We found that the Anglo-Saxon welfare regime (UK and Ireland) had the steepest rises in food insecurity over the 2008 crisis (3.7 to 8.4 per cent). This was particularly noticeable when compared with other advanced welfare states such as those in Central Europe (3.6 to 5.7 per cent) and Scandinavia (1.3 to 2.4 per cent). According to welfare regime theory, the Scandinavian and Central-European welfare states are better able to mitigate against poverty and economic insecurity than Anglo-Saxon countries, which would explain the lower rise in food insecurity. Moreover, recent welfare reforms and austerity measures in the UK have differentiated the Anglo-Saxon countries further from these parts of Europe. Therefore, although we cannot say with any certainty that changes in social policy explained differences in rising food insecurity across Europe, the evidence from our research nonetheless points in this direction.

Implications for policy and research

The findings from our research will come as little surprise to those already familiar with the evidence on food banks and food insecurity in the UK. The Trussell Trust [reports](#) that the majority of referrals to food banks in 2015/6 resulted from poverty and income insecurity – underlying causes of food insecurity. Ethnographic research from [Garthwaite and colleagues](#) also finds a persistent relationship between food insecurity and food bank usage in the UK, as does qualitative research from [Lambie-Mumford](#).

What is needed is for more political action on the issue of food insecurity. The Trussell Trust has been scathing of government policy and has even been [threatened](#) by the Department of Work and Pensions for its protests about the social injustice of food poverty in the UK. However, academics have been less vocal on this issue. Yet we have a responsibility not only to research food insecurity but also to communicate the importance of these findings to the wider public. Kayleigh Garthwaite is soon releasing a [book](#) which does just this, by reaching out to both academic and non-academic audiences. This is not simply a matter of filling ‘impact’ quotas but should represent a duty of obligation that the academic community has to both the wide dissemination of important scientific evidence and the democratic imperative to hold the government to account.

Note: the above draws on the author’s [published work](#) in *Social Policy and Society*.

About the Author

Owen Davis is an ESRC-funded doctoral candidate in Social Policy at the University of Kent and was recently a visiting scholar at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. His PhD examines how cash benefit policies impact on social inequalities in mental health, particularly in a time of austerity. Owen has previously worked in the social care and homelessness sectors and continues to work closely with lobbyists and local groups. He tweets at [@opdavis87](https://twitter.com/opdavis87) and can be contacted at od60@kent.ac.uk.

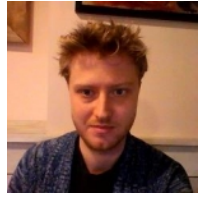


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