

RADICAL STATISTICS ESSAY COMPETITION 2014

FIRST PLACE: OPEN COMPETITION

The rise in foodbanks: What can statistics tell us about the current landscape of food insecurity and food aid in the UK?

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Introduction

The growth in food insecurity and the associated rise in food aid provision in the UK have touched the public nerve deeply and become an important social policy issue. The United Nations describes food insecurity as lacking access to “*sufficient, safe and nutritious food*” (FAO 2003) and in recent years, food aid has become an increasingly visible, public response to food insecurity. Much of the increased awareness of food insecurity relates to so-called foodbanks, which provide short-term emergency food relief, mostly in the form of parcels of non-perishable goods. Foodbanks are staffed mainly by volunteers and rely on food donated by the public and organisations such as FareShare and FoodCycle, who source and redistribute surplus food to charitable projects. Alongside foodbanks, many other charitable organisations

provide food aid through soup kitchens, lunch clubs and other initiatives.

Much of the data on food aid is collected by the Trussell Trust, a Christian social action charity that runs the UK's largest foodbank network. In 2013/14 the Trussell Trust distributed 913,138 food parcels, a near 15-fold increase in just three years from 61,468 parcels in 2010/11, suggesting that food insecurity is rising sharply and prompting concerns that government responsibilities have transferred to voluntary initiatives. Some commentators have interpreted this rise as evidence that the government is not fulfilling its legal duty under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to provide food of sufficient quantity and quality to meet people's dietary needs (Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights 1999).

The rise in food insecurity has prompted lively debate from politicians, journalists and charities, among others. In December 2013 a group of doctors wrote to the British Medical Journal, stating that the increasing number of malnutrition-related hospital admissions warned of food insecurity as a public health emergency (Taylor-Robinson et al. 2013). Meanwhile, a letter to the Mirror newspaper calling on the government to end in-work poverty and improve the welfare system was signed by 27 of 59 Church of England bishops plus representatives from the Quakers and Methodist and United Reformed Churches (Mirror 2014). Consequently, an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty was commissioned in February 2014 to investigate the causes of food insecurity; their findings were published in December 2014.

Against the background of political debate and the disbelief that people could go hungry in the UK is a lack of reliable and robust data on both food insecurity and the supply of food aid. The Government holds no such data, arguing that this would not be possible without placing "*unnecessary burdens*" on volunteers (House of Commons Deb 2013). Several researchers and charities have also recognised the challenges in accurately estimating the number of foodbanks and food aid recipients in the UK, making it difficult to estimate the scale of the problem (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014; Perry et al. 2014). This essay examines the data that are currently available on food insecurity and food aid to explore the role statistics can play in understanding food insecurity in the UK.

What can statistics tell us – and not tell us – about food insecurity and food aid in the UK?

The difficulties of understanding the current landscape of food insecurity and provision of food aid are compounded by the absence of up-to-date, robust and reliable data. However, three sources of data can help us understand food insecurity in the UK. These are (1) data on foodbanks collected by the Trussell Trust, (2) survey data on food sufficiency and constraints; and (3) survey data on food expenditure. These are discussed below with respect to what they can – and cannot – tell us about food insecurity in the UK.

Trussell Trust data

The Trussell Trust records the number of food parcels distributed by their foodbanks, basic information on recipients' characteristics and their main reason for seeking food aid. As consistent data from other suppliers is not available, only figures from the Trussell Trust will be discussed here. These figures suggest a sharp rise in food insecurity in recent years. Assuming that a three-day emergency food parcel provides nine meals, in 2013/14 it was estimated that 20,247,042 meals were distributed by the three organisations the Trussell Trust, FareShare and FoodCycle. This is an increase of 54 per cent from 2012/13 when 13,151,728 meals were distributed. The largest component of this increase was in the meals provided by the Trussell Trust: a 2.6-fold increase from 3,122,928 in 2012/13 to 8,218,242 in 2013/14 (Cooper et al. 2014). The number of UK foodbanks also rose from 201 to 421 during this time, suggesting an increase in food insecurity. However, these data have several limitations that are discussed below.

Critics have suggested that part of the documented rise in uptake reflects increased supply, not increased demand. In other words, more people may be accessing food aid not because food insecurity is a growing problem, but because food aid is more readily available. This attitude was expressed in a House of Lords debate when Lord Freud argued that *“food from a foodbank—the supply—is a free good, and by definition there is an almost infinite demand for a free good”* (House of Lords Deb 2013). This claim was strongly rejected by researchers who argued that there was no clear evidence linking increased supply with increased uptake, and that the available evidence suggested the opposite: that increasing demand had prompted the growth of food aid (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014; The Guardian 2014). Additionally, interviews with foodbank users in Manchester revealed that recipients

had been reluctant to seek help, expressing feelings of pride as a deterrent, the belief that food aid was a last resort and feelings of embarrassment at possibly being considered a ‘scrounger’ (Purdam et al. n.d.). These experiences strongly suggest that people were not simply taking advantage of a perceived free good. Furthermore, the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty cited increased demand at existing foodbanks (All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom 2014), and 59 per cent of charities supported by FareShare reported rising food needs (FareShare 2015), further suggesting that increased supply was not driving uptake.

The way the Trussell Trust distributes food aid also suggests rising demand: care services including social services, church pastoral workers and health visitors distribute vouchers to individuals judged to be in need and these vouchers are then exchanged for a food parcel. This informal means-testing helps ensure that levels of need between food aid recipients should be comparable over time. However, while this suggests that rising demand does not reflect improved supply, the number of vouchers for distribution is determined by the availability of donated food to avoid demand outstripping supply. This makes it very difficult to make comparable judgements of need over time (Lambie 2011).

Changes to data collection have also contributed to difficulties in understanding the increase in food aid. The Trussell Trust records the reason for referral in their data to help identify the circumstances of people experiencing food insecurity (Lambie 2011). In the first half of 2014/15 the three main reasons for referral were benefit delays (33 per cent), low income (22 per cent) and benefit changes (15 per cent) (Trussell Trust 2014). However in April 2013, vouchers used by Job Centres had the reason for referral removed without consultation, making it impossible to identify why people were seeking food aid. Although only a small number of people access foodbanks via Job Centres, this decision was interpreted as a deliberate attempt by the Government to conceal information that could be used to link welfare reform with food insecurity (The Independent 2014; Trussell Trust 2013). Subsequent research has more clearly demonstrated a link between welfare reform and the rise in food insecurity (Garratt 2015). Regardless of the reasons for this decision, these changes in data collection reduce our understanding of the circumstances of people seeking food aid and whether they are changing over time.

There are several further limitations in the quality of data on food parcels and meals issued. The most significant limitation of Trussell

Trust data is that its headline figure of distributing 913,138 food parcels in 2013/14 does not distinguish between independent and repeat visits – in other words, between people who received one food parcel and those who received two or three parcels on separate visits. While this should not detract from the dramatic rise in food provision, the scale of food insecurity is very different whether it is assumed that users each received a single food parcel, or that this figure represented a third as many individuals each receiving three parcels. The true figure will, of course, be somewhere in-between but without information on repeat visits it is not possible to disentangle the number of food parcels distributed from the number of recipients.

Finally, while the figures cited above include data from three large providers (the Trussell Trust, FareShare and FoodCycle), comparable data from other food aid providers is scarce. The different contributions made by the Trussell Trust and other food aid providers vary between areas, making it more difficult to estimate overall provision. It is also unknown how many people are helped through other means, including soup kitchens and informal sharing. While encouraging all food aid suppliers to collect data on the number of people receiving food aid, their characteristics, reasons for seeking food aid and number of repeat visits would provide a more complete estimate of food aid supply in the UK, this would be impractical for many voluntary organisations. The quality of data collected by volunteers with potentially little training might also be limited. Even if more providers were to collect such data, the extent of ‘hidden hunger’, in which people do not receive food aid due to availability, embarrassment or other access issues is also unknown. Inevitably, therefore, the figures cited above will underestimate the level of food aid provision in the UK but the extent of this shortfall is not possible to quantify.

Survey data on food sufficiency and constraints

Data from government social surveys provide information on experiences that are suggestive of food insecurity. These data are of high quality and in some cases can provide estimates of the total number of people affected by food insecurity in the UK. Recent social surveys have included measures on food sufficiency, constraints and vulnerability and in some cases it is possible to make comparisons over time. For example, measures of sufficiency capture the basic adequacy of people’s diets and data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) suggest that food insecurity – measured in terms of sufficiency – is a growing problem in people aged 50 and older. The proportion of older people who reported that they (or someone else in their household) had

skipped meals or reduced the size of their meals in the last year because there wasn't enough money for food nearly doubled from 1.6 per cent (265,484 people) in 2004 to 2.8 per cent (523,970 people) in 2012. Similarly, 1.2 per cent (or 83,827) over-65s interviewed in the 2011/12 Family Resources Survey (FRS) reported not eating a filling meal every day. In 2008/09 this figure was 1.1 per cent, suggesting no major change over time in this group. In contrast, 1.8 per cent (or 767,534 adults) in the 2012 Health Survey of England were identified as clinically underweight. In 2005 this proportion was 1.6 per cent (656,845 people), suggesting a small rise in undernutrition over this period.

Questions on food choice can help us understand how easily people can afford to feed themselves and whether they are making compromises to do so. Overall, 1.7 per cent of respondents to the 2009 British Household Panel Survey said they would like to eat meat, chicken or fish at least every second day but could not afford to. Similarly, the proportion of over-50s interviewed in ELSA who reported that having too little money stopped them buying their first choice of food items rose significantly from 5.3 per cent (892,229 people) in 2004 to 9.1 per cent (1,724,811 people) in 2012. Together this suggests that affordability is an important determinant of people's food choices.

Finally, questions on hosting family or friends provide an estimation of the vulnerability of households' food supplies. The 2010 Understanding Society survey reported that 7.9 per cent of UK households could not afford to host friends for a meal or drink every month, while 4.4 per cent of families with children could not afford for their children to host a friend for tea or a snack every month. This data illustrates how little food some families have to spare. Overall, these figures suggest that food insecurity is a small but significant problem and are generally suggestive of rising need.

While social surveys offer a broad perspective on food insecurity in the general population and not only those seeking food aid, there are limitations to this data. Response rates are typically lower among disadvantaged groups (Plewis 2007) and combined with the possible reluctance to admit food insecurity, survey data is likely to underestimate the scale of food insecurity. Existing social surveys also contain only a limited set of questions relating to food insecurity: for example, questions on sufficiency were only asked of respondents aged 65 and over in the FRS so there is no measure from younger people. The only exception here is the Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey, conducted in 2003-2005 with a sample of materially-deprived

individuals. It included a module on food insecurity using questions drawn from US surveys, which routinely examine food insecurity. Overall, 29 per cent of respondents were identified as food insecure, which was more prevalent in single-person working households (40 per cent) and lone-parent households (43 per cent) (Nelson et al. 2007). However, the survey has not been repeated so it is not possible to examine these measures of food insecurity over time. Adding the food insecurity module into longitudinal social surveys would enable estimates of food insecurity to be made over time alongside the demographics characteristics of people experiencing food insecurity. This would also crucially allow risk factors for food insecurity to be identified. The introduction of further questions on food insecurity across all age groups is therefore important to provide a more accurate and inclusive understanding of food security in the UK.

Survey data on food spending

Data about spending on food provides a further measure of the economics of food insecurity. The food and drink people buy and its nutritional content can be examined and compared over time using data from the government's Family Food surveys. These clearly identify increased pressure on UK households to provide sufficient and nutritionally adequate meals. Between 2007 and 2012, food prices rose by 12 per cent in real terms, with two main consequences. First, households were spending more on food but buying less: in 2012, UK households spent 17 per cent more on food than in 2007 but purchased 4.7 per cent less food, and total energy intake reduced by 4.1 per cent. These figures suggest that people are making real cutbacks to their diets. Second, and more worryingly, these changes were larger in disadvantaged households: the poorest income group spent 22 per cent more and bought 5.7 per cent less in 2012 than 2007, suggesting disproportionate sacrifices among already vulnerable groups (DEFRA 2013).

These data are valuable in identifying the rising costs of food and changes in purchasing choices, and how these vary between groups. They are strongly suggestive of an increased risk of food insecurity, particularly among disadvantaged groups. Their main limitation is that food spending only forms a proportion of household spending, and increased food expenditure may not confer greater risks of food insecurity if these extra costs can be met. The available data suggests that this is not the case: earnings adjusted for inflation have decreased every year since 2008 (Office for National Statistics 2014), while there was a small increase in the proportion of the population in absolute

poverty (from 8.6 per cent in 2009/10 to 9.1 per cent in 2012/13) as the effects of the recession took hold (Heath 2015). Furthermore, rising fuel costs (140 per cent), water charges (69 per cent), personal transport (71 per cent) and public transport (87 per cent) between 2002 and 2012 had large impacts on costs of living that were not matched by wages or benefits (MacInnes et al. 2013). The proportion of respondents to the British Social Attitudes Survey who reported struggling financially increased significantly from 17.4 per cent in 2010 to 19.6 per cent in 2013. Collectively, these data clearly demonstrate that the combination of declining incomes and large increases in food and other living costs have resulted in people spending more while buying less and reducing their energy intake. This indicates that food insecurity is a growing problem.

Conclusions

Data on food insecurity and food aid have a number of limitations that in combination make determining the true extent of food insecurity and food aid in the UK a challenging task. Nevertheless, the available data does suggest that food insecurity is a growing problem. While the expanding foodbank network has improved awareness and accessibility of food aid, and potentially reduced the stigma associated with receiving such help, large increases in food provision in recent years cannot be explained by these factors alone. The voucher-based system whereby care professionals act as gatekeepers to food aid through assessments of need means that increased uptake of food aid is not suggestive of increased supply or people taking advantage of readily available charity. However, the lack of detail contained in Trussell Trust data – particularly on repeat visits – limits the possible conclusions. Information on repeat visits and from other food aid organisations would provide a greater depth and breadth of information on the circumstances of food aid recipients. Government social surveys similarly include some important estimates of food insecurity using nationally representative data. These data are invaluable in identifying the level of food insecurity on a wider scale. The inclusion of additional food insecurity measures in future surveys will improve knowledge in this area. Further questions on how food spending relates to other household expenditures and whether these patterns have changed in recent years will also help identify how food spending interacts with broader household finances to influence the risk of food insecurity.

These recommendations to improve data collection are not new. Reports by Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and the Trussell Trust emphasised the importance of government-commissioned research into the extent

and experiences of food insecurity in the UK (Cooper & Dumpleton 2013; Cooper et al. 2014). Such data has potential to capture the true extent of food insecurity in the UK and provide a sound basis on which policy interventions to reduce food insecurity can be made.

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