

The growth of food bank provision to children in England and Wales

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Abstract

Since 2010 UK social policy has been dominated by austerity and welfare reform. These policy platforms sit on a wider set of shifts in policy framings, in terms of both understanding the issue of poverty and the most effective solutions to it. The resulting strategies employed have had significant impacts on children and their household incomes over the last ten years.

Within the context of the changing nature of state welfare and the drive for more privatised (non-state) provision, this paper focuses on the effects of this on assistance to children in particular, employing charitable food banks as a case study. In the first instance, empirical data is explored to chart the rise of this provision as an example of the increasingly important role charitable organisations are playing in care for children in the face of a reduced welfare state.

The paper then goes on to use the case of the rise of food charity as a lens through which to 'problematise' this state-charity shift. Particular challenges specific to this case study are discussed, notably the fact that children lack rights in these systems, that children's access is highly variable and unassured,

that foodbank use is often a last resort and can be experienced as stigmatising and that this type of provision focusses on relieving symptoms of poverty and food insecurity, rather than addressing the structural root causes. The paper argues that children need to be placed back at the forefront of social policy and that policy responses to food insecurity are most effectively targeted upstream at structural drivers.

Key words

Food insecurity, child poverty, austerity, welfare reform, food bank, UK

Introduction

In 2010, in the wake of the financial crash and facing continued economic uncertainty, a Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition Government was elected in the UK which implemented an extensive and ambitious programme of public finance austerity in pursuit of a smaller government deficit. The austerity programme in fact sat on a wider set of shifts in social policy framings, in terms of both the understandings of the problem of poverty and the most effective solutions to it. Both these policy programmes and framings have had particularly significant impacts on children and their households.

The Coalition policy framework for understanding the problem of poverty and child poverty has involved a shift in focus away from children themselves and towards the family unit as a whole, with an emphasis on parental behaviour. This focus on the family unit is also tied up with increasingly behavioural explanations of poverty, with a shift in attention away from structural drivers towards culture and notions of individualised dysfunction (Churchill 2013; Hancock et al 2012). These changing conceptualisations of the policy problems have served to make children and their specific needs less visible in policy making. The increasing focus on the family unit, rather than the individual child has been identified as a key driver of the privatisation of child poverty issues and the marginalisation of children in policy making (Ridge 2013; also Churchill 2013).

At the same time, there has been a corresponding movement in policy understandings of the solutions to poverty and appropriate responses, namely a reduced role for government and increased emphasis on individual responsibility and community responsiveness (Cabinet Office 2010). Tied up within this policy framework (alongside the deficit and austerity narratives) is also extensive welfare reform and an increased emphasis on privatised (non-state) provision of support and assistance. This welfare reform in particular, but also the effects of austerity programmes, have been found to have hit families with children particularly hard compared to other population groups (Steward 2015; De Agostini et al 2014).

Within the dynamic welfare context, this paper focuses on the changing nature of care (in terms of support and assistance relating to poverty relief) for children, employing charitable food banks as a case study. Food banks are a particularly high profile example of the increasing role of charitable organisations in the care of people in or at risk of poverty, in the context of a retrenched welfare state. The Trussell Trust foodbank Network for example increased their overall provision from 128,697 food parcels in 2011-2012 to 1,084,608 in 2014-2015 (Trussell Trust no date). Their rise in recent years has received extensive media coverage and a highly charged response from politicians (Channel 4 news 2014,

Morris 2013). Food banks are seen by some to represent the virtues of community care and responsiveness and simultaneously, from other perspectives, the failure of the welfare state (Conservative Home 2012, Dugan 2014).

The paper explores patterns in food bank provision amongst children in England and Wales using the Trussell Trust Network as a case study. Empirical data is explored to chart the rise of this provision as an example of the increasingly important role charitable organisations are playing in care for children in the face of a reduce welfare state. The analysis sets out the nature of the growth of this provision and how it has become increasingly targeted in areas of likely need.

In our discussion, we then use the case of the rise of food charity as a lens through which to problematise this state-charity shift to build on our findings. Particular aspects of this provision are discussed, notably the fact that children lack rights in these systems, that children's access is highly variable and unassured, that foodbank use is often a last resort and can be experienced as stigmatising and that this type of provision focusses on relieving symptoms of poverty and food insecurity, rather than addressing the structural root causes.

Impacts of recession, austerity and welfare reform on children and their households

Evidence suggests that the impacts of changing social policy (including welfare reform and austerity) and wider economic conditions since 2010 have been particularly severe on children and their households compared to other groups in the population (Stewart 2015, De Agostini et al 2014). Welfare reform policies have focussed on both social security and service provision. Changes to social security have seen financial support becoming increasingly conditional and contractual, and reduced in many areas through changes to particular benefits (Ridge 2013; Whitworth 2013).

Changes to tax and benefits have affected the incomes of households with children, particularly those with young children, especially hard (Ridge 2013; Stewart 2015). The analysis by De Agostini et al (2014) shows that in terms of changes to household disposable income as a result of Coalition policy changes (between 2010-2014) , lone parents have fared most badly and families in general (large families in particular) have done worse than average.

As a result of funding cuts, spending per child in the key areas of 'early education, childcare and sure start services fell by a quarter between 2009-10 and 2012-2013' (Stewart 2015).

However, it is also important to remember that these specific

policy changes are part of a wider changing social policy framework, dating back to the end of the 1970s which has seen increasing amounts of emphasis placed on individual risk and community responsiveness and privatised rather than public modes of care (Dean 2008; Ellison and Fenger 2013).

The cumulative effects of these policy changes and shifts are significant for child poverty. An analysis by Brewer et al (2011) suggested that in the context of current policies, between 2009 and 2020 relative child poverty is expected to rise from 19.7% to 24.4% and absolute child poverty rise from 17% to 23.1%. Overall, Brewer et al (2011 p.3) concluded that ‘there can be almost no chance of eradicating child poverty – as defined in the Child Poverty Act – on current government policy’.

At the same time, the wider economic context of rising cost of living and stagnating incomes is also impacting on household budgets. ‘Minimum Income Standards’ research has highlighted that over the past six years the price of key essentials including food and fuel have risen particularly fast, with wages and benefits lagging behind (Davis et al 2014).

There is a concern regarding the cumulative effect on children and their families when looking at the impacts of austerity, welfare reform and rising cost of living and stagnating incomes (Churchill 2013).

‘Food security’ is a concept which enables a focus particularly on household (or individual) capacity to access ‘enough food for an active, healthy life’; according to this definition, that food has to be adequate and readily available and acquired in socially acceptable ways and people’s accessibility has to be assured in the present and into the future (Anderson 1999, p175-176). Existing evidence points to the importance of structural determinants of food insecurity, in particular income, economic security and costs of living (De Marco and Thorburn, 2009; Coleman-Jensen, 2011; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2011). This is important in the current context of austerity, given that many of these determining factors have been adversely affected by recent economic changes, recession and austerity.

Stagnating incomes and rising food prices since 2007 have meant that food is now 20% less affordable for the lowest income decile than in the mid-2000s (Defra 2014). In families with children, research highlights how parents will often go without food themselves to ensure children have enough to eat (Dowler 1997). But even so, recent data indicates that food insecurity may be getting worse for families. A survey of families by Save the Children (2012, p4) also found that 60.8% of families surveyed were cutting back on how much they spent on food, 39.1% were eating less fruit and vegetables and 25.5% were serving smaller portions (see Defra 2014 for further data

on changes to fruit and vegetable and carcass meat consumption).

The rise of food banks

‘Food banks’ in the UK have come to be recognised as charitable projects providing parcels of emergency food for people to take away, prepare and eat (see Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014). They sit within a wider category of ‘food aid’, a term the UK government uses to describe projects which provide help to people in immediate need on a short term basis and covers both charitable and state supported initiatives (Lambie-Mumford et al 2014).

The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network represents the UK’s first nationally co-ordinated group of community food banking initiatives. Established in 2004 with two projects in the South West of England, it has become the largest source of food banking in the UK.¹

The Trussell Trust Foodbank model was set up and designed to feed people in ‘crisis’ by ‘providing free emergency food for three days’ (Foodbank handbook cited in Lambie 2011, p.3). This emphasis on ‘crisis’ is important to note and highlights the fact that the Trussell Trust model aims to provide relief to

¹ N.B. ‘Foodbank’ is the registered name of the Trussell Trust franchise; ‘food bank’ refers to the wider category of food initiatives.

these experiences, with underpinning root causes of crisis circumstances necessarily beyond their reach (see Lambie-Mumford 2013).

Each individual Foodbank project is a community initiative, bounded geographically, and led by a church or group of churches. Food is collected in the form of donations from people in the local area and is distributed locally. In order to obtain a parcel of food from a nearby foodbank a person needs to be referred by an agency or other service provider who is working with the foodbank (such as a social worker, housing officer, or doctor). Each food parcel contains a prescribed combination of long-life food stuffs, with the amount of food varied according to household size.

The focus on the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network posits two major strengths. Firstly, it is the largest and most established network of food banks within England making it a prime source of empirical insight into this kind of response to food poverty. Secondly, and most importantly, the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network is a distinct group of food banking initiatives, defined through their not-for-profit social franchise approach. This franchising process ensures comparability and enables the research to explore the growth of provision.

Methodology

Data

End of year data for individual food banks in England and Wales were provided by the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network. These provide details not just on the locations of foodbanks affiliated with the charity, but also about the operation of individual open foodbanks, including information about date opened, food received, distributed and the number of recipients served (split by adults and children). We examined annual data (for the period 1st April to the 31st March) between 2007-2008 and 2013-2014.

Each member of the Foodbank Network was geo-referenced to Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) to link them to other administrative data. LSOAs were selected since they form a small geographical scale (~1600 people per LSOA) allowing for an accurate analysis of local populations being served (Martin, 2002).

Deprivation was measured to estimate the impact of social disadvantage in influencing foodbank provision. We used the ‘Children in Income Deprived Households Index’ which is a measure of deprivation that affects just children created using the Indices of Deprivation 2010 (DCLG, 2011). It measures the percentage of dependent children aged under 16 who live in income deprived households.

Other factors which could potentially relate to food bank usage included in the analysis were: percentage of individuals living in an area aged under 16, the percentage of individuals who identified as Christian, the percentage of individuals who were non-white (to explore differences by race), population density (persons per hectare), the percentage of lone-parent households and the year each food bank opened (all bar the last variable were available from the 2011 Census).

Statistical Analysis

Summary statistics for the food bank operational data were calculated and plotted on a series of graphs to improve their interpretation. We then analysed the geographical factors associated with food bank provision. Linear regression models were fitted to the data. All analyses were performed in STATA/SE v13.

Results

Growth in provision to children over time

In 2013-14, the Trussell Trust served 302,594 children in England and Wales across 325 food banks (8.5% of the total

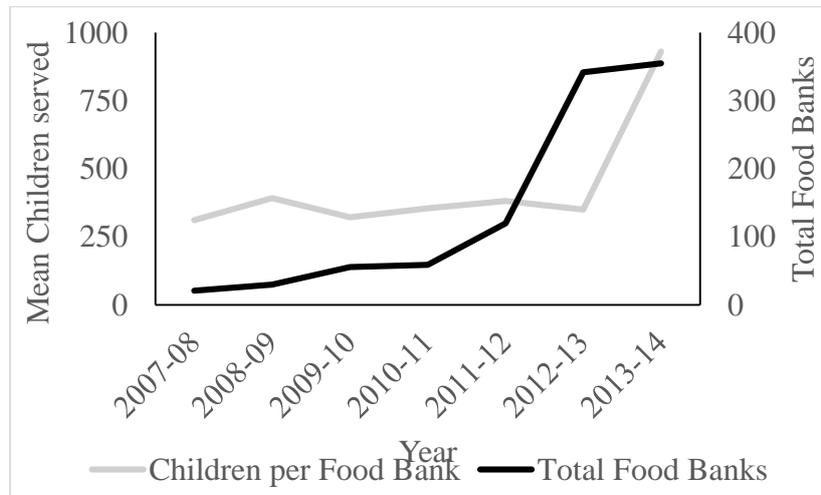
355 food banks contained missing data).² Figure 1 (a) charts the growth of children being served through the Trussell Trust. Between the periods 2007-08 and 2012-13 there was a small increase in the mean children served per foodbank. However, the following period saw an increase of 266% in the average number of children served per foodbank (a 252% increase in absolute numbers).

Figure 1b presents data on the mean number of children served by time period of establishment. There has been growth in the mean number of children served by foodbanks established at each time period, especially in the most recent periods. These results are particularly important for what they tell us about changing provision by older foodbanks (those opened between 2007 and 2010 in particular). They highlight that in mean terms, there has been growth at each time point, but this has been more marked in the most recent years, during the time when the impacts of austerity and cost of living began to be felt.

When these numbers are studied in absolute terms, however, they show that newly established foodbanks (particularly from the year 2012-2013) account for much of the growth in provision to children (results not shown).

² The 2014-2015 statistics were released while this paper was undergoing revisions and therefore is not included in the dataset.

(a)



(b)

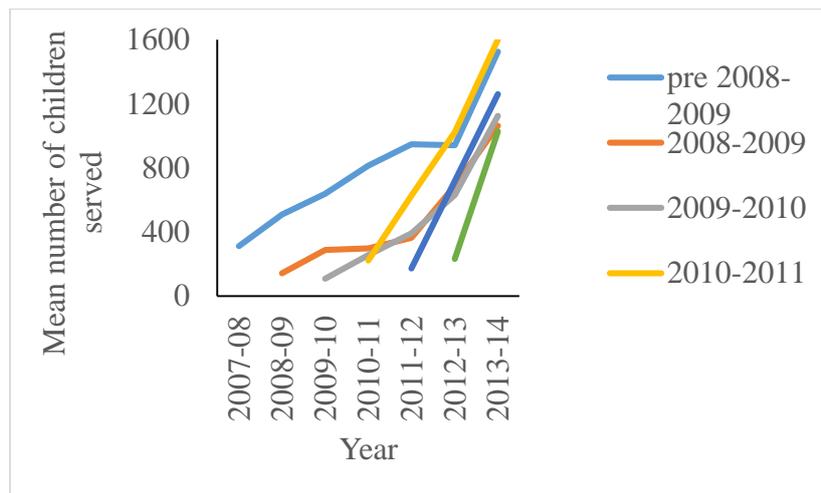


Figure 1: (a) Change in the total number of foodbanks and the mean number of children served per foodbank for England and Wales, 2013-14; and (b) Mean changes in foodbank provision for children, split by time period established.

The nature of the recent growth in provision to children

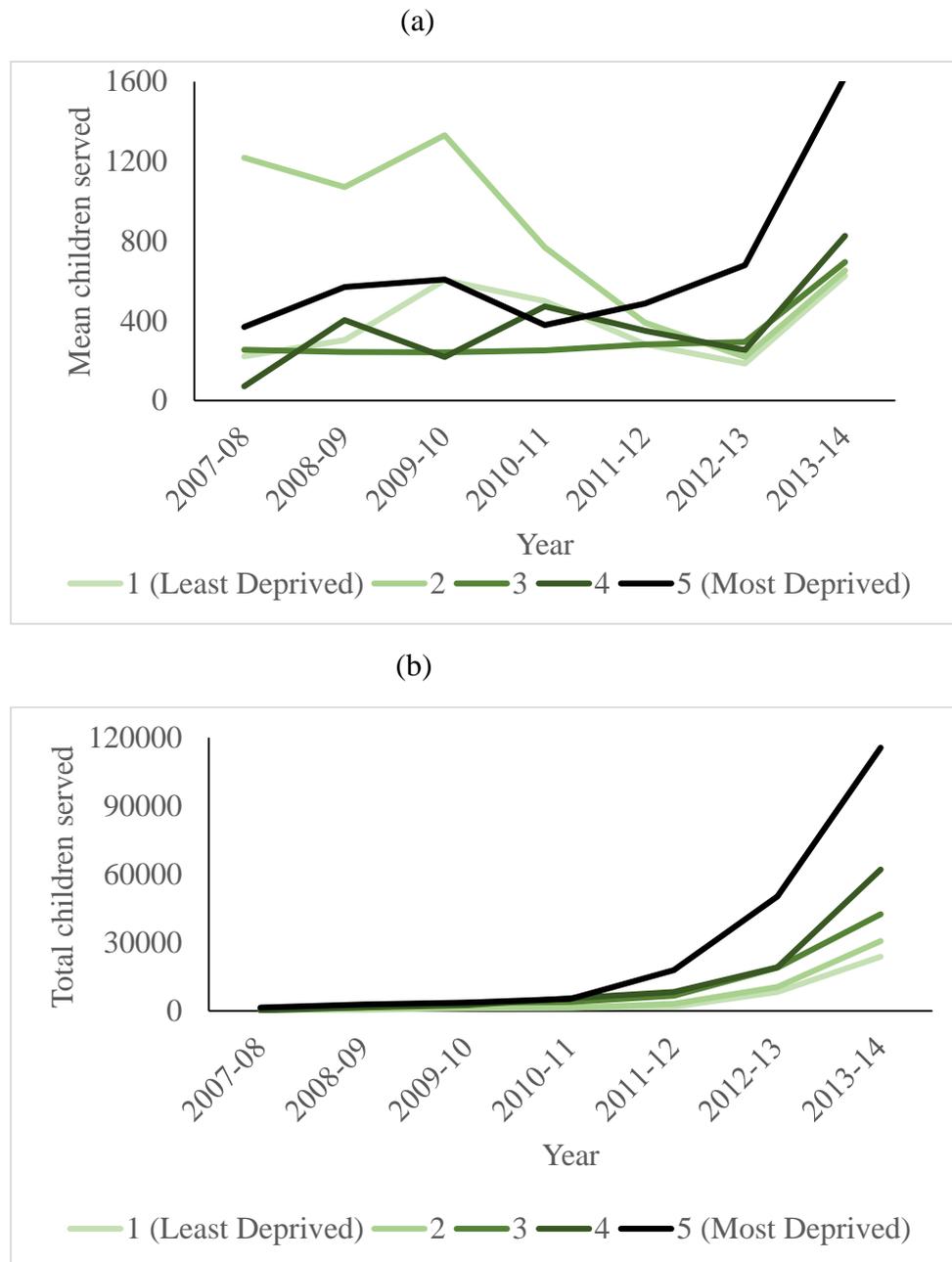


Figure 2: Changes in foodbank provision for children split by the quintile of deprivation level: (a) Mean children served. (b) Total number of children served.

Figure 2 shows that there has been recent growth in provision in areas of high childhood deprivation. In 2013-14, 42% of all children provided with emergency food from the Trussell Trust

were in the most deprived quintile, despite the quintile only containing 26% of the foodbanks. These and the results presented above, demonstrate that there has been increased provision of food parcels to children overall, but particularly in deprived areas in more recent years (since 2012-2013). This partly reflects a growth in food banks opening in the most deprived quintile, growing 84% between 2011-12 and 2012-13.

We further tested the association between deprivation and foodbank provision using a regression model and the 2013-14 cross-sectional data to understand whether the relationship persisted after controlling for known factors that may explain foodbank provision (Table 1).

Table 1: Results from a linear regression of the number of children served by food banks (2013-14).

Variable	Coefficient	p-value	95% Confidence Intervals
Population aged under 16 (%)	43.49	0.016	8.26, 78.73
Ethnic minorities (%)	-1.84	0.729	-12.29, 8.61
Christian (%)	2.58	0.748	-13.22, 18.38
Lone parent households (%)	-82.05	0.004	-137.10, -27.00
Deprivation	24.67	<0.001	13.44, 35.90
Population density	3.82	0.046	0.06, 7.57
Year opened	-137.02	<0.001	-205.65, -68.38
Intercept	275528	<0.001	137641, 413414
R ²	0.18		
n	300		

Deprivation score was positively related suggesting that more children were being provided food by foodbanks in areas that had greater proportions of children deprived. The effect size

was fairly large, with a one percentage point increase in the percentage of children living in deprived households associated with an increase in 24.67 of provision to children by foodbanks.

Discussion

Our results show that both in mean and absolute terms, provision of food parcels to children by charitable food banks has grown considerably since the impacts of austerity, welfare reform and rising costs of living kicked in (2012-2013). The results indicate that foodbanks are playing a bigger role in the provision of care to children generally in this context, but particularly where childhood deprivation is high.

The rise of food banks provides a good case study for charting shifts in the changing welfare landscape, particularly the move from universal public care based on collective risk towards policy agendas focussing on individual risk and responsibility and ad hoc privatised charitable responses. The case study also, however, provides a lens through which to problematise it. In the case of foodbank provision to children specifically, the shift away from universal social security and public care services presents a number of challenges.

Children (like adults) do not have any rights to access this provision, nor do they have any rights when they are within food banking systems (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005). Instead, they

have to rely on the generosity of providers and adhere to rules around access and maximum amounts of parcels they can receive. Furthermore, generally speaking the provision is accessed through parents gaining referrals and accessing the foodbanks, leaving children and young people themselves with little autonomy.

Food banks are not population wide responses and whilst the foodbank franchise model does protect consistency in provision within this particular Network, when looking across independent food banks and other food initiatives there is significant variability (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014).

This means that not all children have access to a food bank and where there may be a project present, they will not necessarily be able to know (or rely on) what particular kind (or extent) of provision they are able to receive.

There is also significant stigma and exclusion associated with foodbank use. Existing evidence on food bank uptake highlights that it is most often a last resort which people turn to when they have exhausted other strategies and are likely to be drawing on as much help as possible (Ahluwalia et al 1998; Bhattarai et al 2005). This is particularly concerning in light of research on children's experiences of poverty highlighting how children are extremely affected by experiences of stigma (Ridge 2013).

Finally, food banks work to relieve symptoms of food insecurity; they do not (and cannot given their capacity) address the root causes (Tarasuk 2001; Riches 2002). This means that whilst charities may be working hard to help meet children's immediate needs, however large scale the coverage of these initiatives, they will not be moving children out of poverty.

Conclusion

Families with children have been one of the groups hit hardest by austerity and welfare reform. Within this context, children are also increasingly invisible in policy as a result of a shift towards emphasising the family unit and parental behaviour.

The rise of food banks provides a case study of the rise of privatised charitable care and highlights the problems with this as a response to these wider shifts. What is needed is for children to be put back at the forefront of policy and a focus placed on upstream structural determinants of poverty and food insecurity in the pursuit of social justice and equality.

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