**Church Action on Poverty briefing
April 2021**

**New Government research reveals benefits
fail to protect households from food insecurity**

**The Family Resources Survey, released at the end of March, shows that 43% of households on Universal Credit experience food insecurity, and other working age benefits are not far behind.**

For the first time, Government research provides incontrovertible evidence that the benefit system currently fails to protect working age households from food insecurity. The data shows that the single biggest factor as to whether a household is likely to experience food insecurity is the fact that they are in receipt of working age benefits.

The Government’s flagship Universal Credit is revealed as the worst performer of all: Over four in ten households on Universal Credit experience food insecurity. But across the board the message is clear: working age benefits do not provide protection against the fear of going hungry, or actually having to cut back on food, skip meals or go hungry. That's simply not acceptable in a civilised society.

**Household food insecurity: Going without the very basics of life**

On March 25, the Department for Work and Pensions released its latest annual Family Resources Survey, based on in-depth interviews with over 19,000 households in 2019/20 (in the pre-pandemic world). For the first time, and as a result of several years’ lobbying by the End Hunger UK campaign and a cross-party group of MPs led by Emma Lewell-Buck, the survey included a selection of questions on household food insecurity. While some countries, including the US and Canada, have routinely collected this data for years, this is the first time that we have access to reliable Government data on levels of household food insecurity in the UK.

Household food insecurity is not some dry and dusty academic concept: For a household to be classed as being in ‘food insecurity’ means answering yes to some very specific and uncomfortable questions (standardised by the UN to ensure figures are internationally comparable): “We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more”, “the food that we bought just didn't last” or “we didn't have money to get more, and we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.” (See notes at end of briefing for a fuller explanation).

For a household to be regarded as having ‘very low’ food insecurity, the threshold is higher, typically meaning someone has actually “skipped or cut meals for three days or more in the past month because there wasn't enough money for food”, has “eaten less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food,” or has direct experience of going “hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food.”

The very fact that one in twelve of all households in the UK experience food insecurity on a regular basis is troubling in itself. The fact that one in 25 households (think of that as at least one on every street) skip meals or go hungry because there wasn’t enough money for food, is a wake-up call to any society wanting to think of itself as civilised.

**Working age benefits are the biggest risk factor for household food insecurity**

As the new data shows, the picture of household food insecurity is not evenly spread. In relation to food security, we’re not all in the same boat. Sadly, certain groups of people are at higher risk of household food insecurity, as is the case with many social issues. Black households, and households with at least one disabled adult are almost two and a half times more likely to experience food insecurity than the general population.  For households with at least one unemployed adult or with a person requiring care, this rises to a factor of three.  For single parent households the risk factor rises to over 3.5. Communities in Northern England are particularly affected, with the highest rate being 11% in the North East.

However, the starkest take away from the new research is the simple fact that being on any of the main working age benefits puts you at substantially higher risk of household food insecurity, than any other single factor:

* **Employment Support Allowance:** Households in receipt of this are almost four times as likely as the general population to experience food insecurity.
* **Income Support or Jobseeker’s Allowance:** Households in receipt of either of these are four and a half as likely as the general population to experience food insecurity.
* **Universal Credit:** Households on Universal Credit are nearly five and a half times as likely as the general population to experience food insecurity.

That final figure, showing the impact of Universal Credit, is the starkest figure. 43% of households receiving Universal Credit reported food insecurity in the preceding month. If that wasn’t bad enough, the risk of having ‘very low’ food insecurity whilst on Universal Credit is even greater - at almost six and a half times the general population.

On the positive side, increases in the State Pension over recent years mean that household food insecurity in later life is significantly lower than for the general population. Only two percent of households with one or more adults over state pension age are in food insecurity. This demonstrates that where there is political will to protect household incomes, it is possible to tackle food insecurity.

**Why this matters**

With over 4 in 10 households on Universal Credit now shown to be struggling to afford food on a regular basis, the argument that benefits are currently set at an adequate and socially acceptable level is dead in the water.

***As the Department for Work and Pension’s data now demonstrates, cutting Universal Credit by £20 a week in September would sweep even larger numbers of households into severe food insecurity.  That is not a price any decent society should be willing to inflict on its poorest members.***

Beyond this, however, this new data conclusively shows that successive Governments have cut working age benefits to a level at which they are now failing to protect significant numbers of people from food insecurity. This includes not just Universal Credit and other ‘out of work’ benefits, but also benefits for people who are judged unfit for work, and therefore who have no theoretical ‘escape route’ of seeking work to bolster their incomes.

**Voices of experience: what people tell us**

Church Action on Poverty works at all times with people who are living, or have lived, in poverty. Their insights should be heard.

Penny Walters, community campaigner in Byker, Newcastle:

*So many people are going to food banks or to pantries because they need help. People are struggling now, let alone with taking extra money off them. What are people supposed to do if that happens? Starve?*

*That £20 a week is the difference between having enough food and some fresh fruit and veg, or not. You can buy quite a lot of stuff for £20 and losing that would hurt people.*

*Now that the stats have come out and are there in black and white, it’s hopefully harder for the Government to say one person says x, another says y. Hopefully they can use the stats to do something.*

Tony Carson, Universal Credit claimant in York:

*In York, there are a lot of people on Universal Credit now and using food banks, who were previously working. Rent here is very high, so people have to make decisions on whether to pay the bills or feed themselves.*

*There has been so much argument about getting rid of the £20 a week uplift on Universal Credit. It would make people struggle even more than now if it is cut back.*

*A month of statistics is still quite a narrow dataset, and I think problems are even worse. There ought to be a minister appointed so there’s someone specifically addressing poverty and accountable for tackling it. The scattergun approach between departments does not work.*

**Ending food insecurity: Building back well, as we have done before**

There has been a lot of talk, including from the Prime Minister, about the idea of building back better. On the basis of this research, I’m setting my sights more simply: I want us to build back at least as well as William Beveridge’s 20th-century aspiration of a social security system to end the evil of ‘want’. As the Government’s own research now reveals, successive Governments have failed to invest in a basic safety net that enables working age households in this country to live free from the fear of hunger.

The argument is not now whether there should be a cut in Universal Credit in 6 months time, that is surely dead in the water. The argument now is about how we can restore working age benefits across the board to the point where they provide families with the most basic level of social security: The security of knowing that you can afford to eat adequate food, you don’t have to cut down on meals or meal sizes, and of not having go to bed worrying about where and when the next meal will come from.

This is the very bedrock of a decent society. We cannot invest in ‘building back better’ as a society by cutting back on benefits, for families who are already going hungry. If we want to build back at least as our forbearers we did in the mid-20th century, we have to ensure that every household in this country can live free from the insecurity of not knowing where their next meal is going to come from. Anything less would be a betrayal of the basic standards of decency that we subscribe to as a nation.

**Author:** Niall Cooper is Director of Church Action on Poverty and was chair of the End Hunger UK campaign until 2019.

**Church Action on Poverty**28 Sandpiper Court, Modwen Road, Salford M5 3EZ
[www.church-poverty.org.uk](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk) @churchpoverty

**Notes:**The full Family Resources Survey data is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020>

Note that the data was all gathered pre-pandemic, and interviewees were asked only about their experiences in the preceding 30 days. Analysis over the course of a year would probably show much higher levels of food insecurity.

**Household food insecurity explained**Low and very low levels of Household food insecurity relate to answers to the following standardised questions, and the percentage giving a positive answer for each category is shown below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Question | Low food security | Very low food security |
| We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. | 91 | 97 |
| The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more. | 80 | 92 |
| We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals. | 81 | 92 |
| Did you or other adults in your household ever skip or cut meals because there wasn't enough money for food? | 35 | 96 |
| Was that for three days or more? | 21 | 86 |
| Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? | 35 | 97 |
| Were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food? | 13 | 86 |
| Did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food? | 6 | 55 |
| Did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food? | 3 | 44 |
| Was that for three days or more? | - | 32 |

 **Key stats at a glance**All the data is here**:** <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020>

* 8% of UK households reported food insecurity in the 30 days before interview. [Table 9.1]
* Over 4 in 10 households in receipt of Universal Credit (43%) experience low or very low food security – over five times the national average of 8% across all households. [Table 9.7]
* Over a quarter of households on Universal Credit (26%) are ranked as having ‘very low’ food security – more than six times the national average of 4% for all households.
* One in four households on income-related benefit experience low food security, including: Income Support (36%); Jobseekers Allowance (37%); Employment Support Allowance (31%). [Table 9.7]
* One in four households in receipt of carers allowance and more than one in five households in receipt of Personal Independence Payments are food insecure. [Table 9.7]
* Specific groups experiencing particularly high levels of household food insecurity:
	+ 31% of working age households in social housing versus just 3% of owner occupiers [Table 9.8]
	+ 29% of single parent households [Table 9.2]
	+ 25% of households with one or more unemployed adults under state pension age [Table 9.2]
	+ 19% of households with one or more disabled adults under state pension age. [Table 9.4]
	+ 19% of black households, compared to 8% for the general population [Table 9.6]