

HUNGER TRAUMA

UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY AND EMERGENCY FOOD SUPPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Between September 2020 and February 2021, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that nearly 6 million adults and 1.7 million children were struggling to get enough food in the U.K. – 11.5% of the population. Using that measure, we can therefore estimate that 12,650 people in Worthing alone are in food poverty.

Foodbank users from across the Adur and Worthing Food Network were invited to participate in this research, carried out by academics at the University of Brighton. 18 people, from 4 different foodbanks, took part and each participant was invited to take a photograph that they felt represented their experience of using emergency food support. The photograph was then used as the basis for an in-depth interview with the participant.

The resulting report explores the physical and emotional impact of using emergency food support on individuals, as well as the implications of these experiences for organisations providing food support and for public health more generally.

A unique form of trauma

Much of the previous research into food insecurity has focused on the consequences of hunger in common mental health terms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, as well as feelings of shame and humiliation. We believe, however, that it is not enough to look at it simply in these terms, as it risks undermining the wider nature of the trauma experienced. The research makes clear that hunger trauma is unique as it leads to feelings of emotional distress and guilt while also affecting people's sense of identity and status. Those affected feel stripped of social value and are made to feel useless. They feel shame and humiliation about their situation, guilt about their ability to feed their family and anxiety about whether they deserve to receive support. Also, they suffer the physical pain and fatigue of hunger. Furthermore, the events that have led them to these desperate circumstances are generally outside of their own control.

Many of those interviewed spoke about the constant stress and worry that pushed them into seeking food support. This included not sleeping, regularly breaking down in tears and for some, feeling suicidal. One of the most common experiences for participants was a feeling of guilt and that they

were letting people down. This was especially notable in parents, who felt they had failed by not being able to provide food for their children. Each new challenge they faced triggered feelings of failure and guilt for not being able to give their children the life they deserved and that other children had. This was reported mostly by women, who, the management of food provision disproportionately tends to fall to. Most food support users are women, and they are therefore more likely to experience hunger trauma and the accompanying feelings of guilt and shame.

The importance of dignity

The decision to access food support is often a desperate last measure. The encounters in many foodbanks are then humiliating and trigger further feelings of humiliation and shame. For some, receiving any kind of charitable support, especially food support, makes them feel inferior to those providing that support. Every interaction is therefore crucial in avoiding this and helping foodbank users to have a dignified experience. By exploring different models, we have found that there are steps that food support charities can take to make these encounters as empowering as possible. These include a non-judgemental, normalising approach, making people feel welcome, valued, and treated as equals and encouraging opportunities to give back in some way.

We all gain a sense of identity from the food we eat and where we get it. Our relationship with food is key to how we see ourselves and the ways in which others see us. Foodbank use has become so stigmatised that people will often choose to skip meals and eat food that's out of date, rather than seek food support. People living in poverty are tortured by the fear of shame and not meeting others' expectations. The accompanying real and imagined social rejection can feed into the trauma of hunger. Creating a dignified experience of food support therefore, is vital in providing users with a sense that they matter and that they are able to retain some control over their lives and identity.

Recommendations

We recommend that food support organisations develop a 'Food First' approach. The Food First approach is based on the idea that a hungry individual or household's first and primary need is to obtain food stability. Once they have got this, they can then address other issues, possibly with our help. With the Food First approach, those seeking support do not require any type of referral and there are no preconditions to receive food. The

referral system completely ignores the nature of food trauma and the shame and fear of asking for food. People have many different pathways into food trauma, and they should not need a third party to verify their hunger. In the current climate of reduced public spending, food support organisations and commissioners have a responsibility to proactively demonstrate their awareness of hunger trauma and seek ways to increase the dignity, autonomy and well-being of those who use these services. All those involved in providing funding must prioritise the dignity of the people who seek support and food support services must be held accountable for it. Food support organisations should focus their practice on maintaining dignity and reducing trauma.

We recommend that:

- A dignity analysis tool is developed for food support organisations to compare their practices, with clear recommendations for how organisations can develop.
- Sector-wide training on dignified encounters should also be developed as a matter of urgency.
- Food support organisations should be understood as invaluable community mental health interventions and be funded as such through public health funding streams.
- Central government act immediately to tackle the cost of living crisis by introducing a U.K. wide cost of living emergency strategy to urgently improve the value of support provided to low income households through the social security system.
- Local authorities declare a cost of living emergency and form a strategy that takes a collaborative and evidence-based approach, working more closely with health and further education facilities, trade unions and community groups, focused on supporting those most in need in ways that remove barriers to support and provide food stability.
- The U.K. government adopt a clearly defined legislative solution is adopted to adequately address the relationship between hunger trauma and income inequality and poverty.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



Before the pandemic, 4.7 million people lived in severely food-insecure homes (Fareshare, 2020). According to the Evidence and Network on U.K. Household Food Security (ENUF, 2020), 10% of U.K. adults lived with 'marginal food insecurity' – meaning they were concerned about their ability to access food – while 10% lived with moderate or severe food insecurity.

The situation has become worse since the beginning of the pandemic. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that nearly 6 million adults and 1.7 million children were struggling to get enough food between September 2020 and February 2021. This amounts to 11.5% of the U.K. population.

Research has found that people living in poverty are deeply affected by shame and the fear of not meeting others' expectations. Previous research about the impact of hunger and food insecurity suggests that they are associated with depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. This is particularly resonant when you consider that, during COVID, there has been a drastic national rise in child and adult hunger (Hunt et al., 2021).

Focussing on Worthing and Adur

If we apply EFRA's 11.5% figure to Worthing – a West Sussex seaside town with a population of 110 thousand – we see that in Worthing alone, as many as 12,650 people have been living with the trauma of food insecurity.

In recent years, a network of emergency food suppliers, local authorities and community infrastructure groups have coalesced in Adur and Worthing to better organise emergency food support for people in this area.

At the University of Brighton, we have used this network to explore the impact of material and psychological impoverishment on families using emergency food support in Adur and Worthing. We have also explored the multiple psychological and social (psychosocial) experiences of using a foodbank, the implications of these experiences for organisations providing community food support and the implications for public health more generally.

The research method

We invited people who use foodbanks in Adur and Worthing to participate in the research. 18 people took part in the research:

- 3 men.
- 15 women.
- The people came from 4 different foodbanks.
- All participants were over 18.

We used a version of 'photo-elicitation' to interview the participants. Photo-elicitation uses visual images (often photographs) during interviews to help people articulate their experiences. People can struggle to convey their emotions during conventional interviews or survey methods that rely on answering specific questions. Photo-elicitation gets over this, providing a robust method ideally suited to describing a range of challenging issues people experience.

We asked our participants to use their camera phones to take photographs that represented:

- their experiences of accessing emergency food support.
- how hunger and using emergency food support affected their physical and mental well-being.

We then used the photographs as the basis for in-depth interviews.

HUNGER AND TRAUMA



Don't call it anxiety and depression

We believe that using terms like 'anxiety' and 'depression', while focussing on the psychological effect of hunger, places too much emphasis on individuals for the trauma they are experiencing because of food insecurity.

Many researchers talk about the psychological consequences of hunger using such terms while adding a social element, like 'shame' or 'humiliation'. We don't deny that people accessing emergency food support may have feelings of anxiety and depression. But people's experience of hunger can't be understood through a simple psychological reading of 'mental health'. It is much more complex, with elements that are political, social and economic. It is reflected in people's physical well-being as well as how they communicate with each other and the relationships they have. In fact, being forced to access food support manifests a set of experiences that are, to some extent, distinct in nature from other experiences of trauma.

This matters because, if we are to understand the most effective ways to help people needing food support, we need to discuss the complexity of hunger trauma as a distinct and complex set of experiences. We found that food trauma was very similar for most participants we interviewed, which gives us the confidence to make early recommendations for food support practices. We believe that it is essential to understand the nature of this complex trauma to be able to effectively respond and provide dignified food support. For an increasing number of citizens, food support has now become a constant in their lives, and they live in a permanent state of emergency. Therefore, this work has significant implications, which we discuss in the analysis below.

National forces become personal trauma

Various larger-scale societal forces can come to be translated into personal distress and trauma (Farmer, 1997). While individual case studies of suffering can tell us what is happening to individual people, it is more difficult to see and explain the way that suffering is embedded in the larger political economy. But if we don't do that, we risk silencing those in need.

For instance, there have been significant changes to U.K. welfare since the 2012 Welfare Reform Act that have included:

- introducing a benefits cap.
- freezing child benefit.
- cutting local housing allowance and housing benefit.

And more recently:

- reversing the £20 Universal Credit increase.
- a furlough scheme with limited access.
- ending the ban on evictions.

All of this has put significant financial pressure on people and driven many to need food support. Cuts to welfare have disproportionately affected families with children, particularly lone-parent families (O'Connell & Brannen, 2021). Despite greater strain on family food budgets during this period, no government department has specific responsibility for food insecurity and 'food as a human right' is absent in many discussions of food poverty. During this time, many families have descended into food insecurity in recent years, both before and during COVID.

We learned through our interviews and the data they gave us that the psychosocial experience, first of hunger, then of accessing and using emergency food support, is complex and multifaceted. This report focuses on the people we spoke to and the experiences they shared with us to discover the impact of these forces on them.

Before the foodbank: the unavoidable desperation of hidden hunger

Our research shows that, before going to a foodbank, people tried to balance having a diminishing income with the increasing prices of food, fuel, housing and other essentials:

"My partner is very unwell, he's, he doesn't walk anymore; I mean, he was still walking last February, but now he's in a wheelchair, and basically, you know, when all this occurred, he was just starting to get ill at the same time the pandemic came so, he was out of work for a number of months.

They chose not to furlough us, which it was their choice whether they did it or not, so obviously, you know, we've had nothing from that, and my son was working part-time for Premier Inn. Well, he ended up giving up his job, so now him and his dad share a job, which means obviously we only get half the income we used to get, so without the foodbank you know, it's something, I look forward to Wednesdays thinking, 'right, I'm going to get this, I'm going to get this.'" Erin

Erin highlights a set of circumstances, including illness, changes in job status, the failure of the furlough scheme and a social security net that didn't cover costs. This meant that her family needed to access a foodbank through no fault of their own. Erin's account and the accounts below from Sally and Paula highlight two important themes from all the interviews.

1. The desperate circumstances people found themselves in weren't caused by their own fecklessness or poor judgement but by life events outside their control.
2. The effects of food insecurity and hunger were disproportionately experienced by, and managed by, women.

"And, you know, I'm highly educated, I've got a degree, I've got an M.A. And nothing is a barrier to erm..., to poverty, in any sense, you know. And I've got three children, so, yeah, it's essentially, it was having my third baby and the circumstances around that, which led to that, which were horrendous. And I ended up losing a really good job because of that. But, yeah, just to having no wage whatsoever, and I'm meant to be starting a new, well, I was supposed to start a new job yesterday, but I'm just waiting for them to sort the I.T. out. But, again, I'm not going to get paid until next month, so..." Sally

*"It was being a single parent, being made redundant, being on the breadline, getting no maintenance from ex-partners, that sort of thing. Everything that's attached to single motherhood, really. It was all when I had my third baby."
Paula*

"Yeah, exactly. That's £75 a week, and I've got bills to pay and everything, so I haven't really got money for, you know, to go shopping, to be honest." Pat

Sam goes on to speak of 'getting used to the hunger'. She describes the gnawing pain of hunger and how she uses work as a distraction from it.

"Oh well, I think I'm getting used to, you get used to the hunger and I'm working so hard every day that I forget that I should eat or it's a quick glancing thing and I don't allow myself to think about it then so I'll feel hungry and then I'll, you know, you've got work to do and get on with it and that takes away from the need. So, this keeping busy stops me feeling it and then I go home and then there's the pain, what do you do next, what have you got?" Sam

With Sam's testimony, we begin to understand that hunger is not only a physical pain but one that became an everyday feature of Sam's pre-foodbank living.

Jane describes a reality that many of the 12,000 people living in food insecurity in Worthing will experience before using a foodbank. Because of their circumstances, they have to choose between paying for multiple essential household costs, including food. At times, they decide they must go hungry until they can find the money for food.

*"I mean, before we were getting the foodbank, we would literally probably not eat for a couple of days, until we had the money to go out and buy the food."
Jane*

The challenge for Pippa extends beyond her and her partner but also to her children. 'Rock bottom' for Pippa was the realisation that the cupboards were bare, and she had to cope with the desperation of not knowing how to feed her children.

"But it was just literally going to the cupboards and they were just bare and there was just nothing there. And it was just sort of, you know, I mean, it was, yeah, that was it, it was just nothing there. And I used to sit there and think, what the hell am I going to give them tonight?" Pippa

Indignity, shame, worry and suicidal intent: the constant crisis of food trauma

One of the main reasons people experiencing food insecurity end up seeking support is the relentless grinding nature of living in constant crisis.

Sam, below, outlines the constant stress and worry that she lived with and still lives with. For some, it means not sleeping. It means regularly breaking down in tears. As you can see further below, for others, it's much worse. But the thing that links everyone is the enduring feeling that your life is in crisis and you've lost control.

"... it feels like there's no break from any of it. It's just a constant cycle of stress and worry, and it really brings you down... it's bringing me to tears now because I've never really told anybody it's this bad, but it, you know, for me like working here just distracts me so much from all the shit that goes at home." Sam

Sue describes it as being "like the sky falling down on top of you". This sense of perpetual crisis grows very quickly as the various financial pressures build up. Not only do people not have the money to pay their bills, but they are also acutely aware that they can't feed themselves or their families. This sense of desperation and worry, and the cumulative financial stressors, can affect people in hunger trauma in different ways. A key element shared by everyone was the constant strain of living in hunger wore them down, and they couldn't find relief or escape.

"It feels like the sky falling down on top of you when you realise that I can't, I'm in Council Tax arrears, I'm in arrears with my, with my gas and my electricity, you know, when you can't buy your kids' school shoes, you can't buy them, you know, new school clothes, you can't buy them, you know, and everything has gone. And, you know, you just think, oh, God, you know, what do I do?" Sue

Hunger trauma is a social trauma

Economic and social changes, which people have no control over, lead to food insecurity and hunger trauma. Those who are put in this position are faced with a complicated set of experiences and feelings, such as:

- stigma.
- challenges to their relationships.
- a loss of status.
- shame and humiliation.
- guilt.

People routinely experience multiple forms of guilt about whether they are entitled to support – the feeling they did not deserve any support they got – and feeding their families. Our interviews have shown that people are living with the physical pain and fatigue of hunger as well as the constant worry and anxiety of being in crisis.

As Harper (2003) notes, it is important to understand the complex systems that produce poverty and reproduce explanations of poverty and how these

complex systems are often inadvertently concealed by simple terms such as mental health diagnoses. It is useful to understand poverty, and its associated suffering, as part of a collective trauma affecting millions of people around the country (Moreira, 2003).

Kleinman et al. (1997) speak of social suffering resulting from the ways in which political, economic and institutional power can impact people. This is not to make a political point, we are simply noting that hunger trauma has multiple causes and outcomes.

To give some examples, Rose, below, talks about how she was put on antidepressants to address the sleep deprivation she was experiencing because of the inevitable worry that comes with hunger trauma.

"So, the things that happened whilst all this was going on, and I had to go and see the doctor, who put me on an antidepressant to take at night to sleep because I couldn't sleep at all because I was so worried about it." Rose

Jane explains how she and her partner were so worried about having no food and not being able to feed her family they both had times of wanting to kill themselves.

"We were both just getting really bad mentally with our health, to the point that, at one point, September last year, both of us, at separate occasions, wanted to jump off the bridge because we couldn't cope with anything anymore." Jane

Pippa explains how the embarrassment of being unable to feed her children took her to her lowest moments.

"Yeah, I was at my lowest ebb, yeah, yeah, most definitely. You know, losing the job, no money coming in, the embarrassment of it, you know. Because I'm a mature lady, and the embarrassment of not being able to feed my kids, it was er..., yeah, I think it was one of my lowest moments." Pippa

It is the inherent power of this embarrassment and shame that can make hunger trauma so invidious and debilitating.

Pat explains the sense of a constant cycle of stress and worry:

"...that constant crisis that I'm in, that I'm, is it food, is it heat, is it a pair of shoes for my swollen feet, is... you know, it's all sorts of things, and one thing leads to another and then you just, it's a cycle of worrying. It's a cycle of constant stress." Pat

The crisis comes from being repeatedly faced with a range of impossible challenges, the consequences of which they know will hurt them and their families. As Sally describes, there is no let up from the stress, and at the same time, they are being made to feel responsible for their own 'poor choices'.

"When we're all in the bills go up, particularly the last lockdown we had, it was winter, we had to have the heating on, we had to have lights on, the telly on, and everything being on, and obviously you've got to pay the bills and you think to yourself, 'do I pay the bill? Do I eat? Do I buy this? Do I?'" Sally

Hunger, identity and status trauma

Before we discuss the effect of hunger on our identity and how it can lead to shame, it's worth noting how our public discourse, media and politicians can and do exacerbate this phenomenon.

In 'The Politics of Trauma', Gaines (2019) notes a social and economic distribution of dignity, safety and belonging. Those on lower incomes and living in food poverty find themselves subject to a range of stigmatising representations of their lives.

Numerous politicians have characterised people who use foodbanks as unable to manage their personal finances or as freeloaders abusing the system (Garthwaite, 2010). Indeed, myths about poverty and welfare are rampant. They're often spread using popular media depictions of 'poverty porn', that is, the intentionally divisive and vindictive misrepresentation of the lives of those on low incomes for popular entertainment.

Walker & Chase (2014) note that people in poverty were often pained by their condemnation in the popular press, a factor which contributed to the widespread experience of entitlement guilt (the feeling they did not deserve the help that they were getting). Public messages about poverty tend to be delivered through an individualised lens where people are held to be responsible for their own failure to be self-sufficient.

The way we talk about poverty causes shame for people in poverty in everyday social relations. It helps form the views of welfare officials, professionals, the media, the legal system and policy-makers. Within popular social beliefs, there can be several ways through which representations of people living in poverty are skewed and distorted to feed media and publicly held stereotypes. One example is through language that seeks to create a social distance (Jo, 2012) between 'them' and 'us'. We apply stigmatising social labels to people in poverty, which differentiate them from the general public. This process of 'othering' creates an image of poverty so that it becomes what Jo (2012) refers to as a 'spectre – a socially constituted object of wholesome horror'.

Shame and stigma

Shame is a family of emotions that includes embarrassment, guilt and humiliation. They are all evoked by the stigma of using emergency food support. This powerful stigma leads people to skip meals and eat food that's out of date rather than seek food support. Shame is always co-constructed, combining an internal judgement of one's own inabilities, an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others and the actual verbal or symbolic gestures of others considered morally superior to the shamed person (Chase & Walker, 2012)

Poverty is often dismissed as self-inflicted. The shame of poverty happens when we feel a failure in the eyes of others. People living in poverty are tortured by the fear of shame and not meeting others' expectations. The accompanying real and imagined social rejection can feed into the trauma of hunger (Hudson 2015).

Rose gives us a clear example of stigma that shows the extent to which shame can be driven by those closest to the recipient. Here Rose, a foodbank user, feels that she has lost personal control. She and her friend understand this as a personal failure that is entirely self-inflicted.

"I think because I have these, I've been having these mini-breakdowns this year, and I was, there was a friend who [sighs] said to me that she felt ashamed of me because of the, because I couldn't control my own life, and that what I, my illness or whatever is wrong with me, because I had breast cancer, when I had all that I had a breakdown, that I should be able to look after myself, and I can't." Rose

Sally describes that need to hide her poverty from the neighbours, understanding full well the devalued status and blame that will compound her own suffering.

"Erm... yeah. That's really tough because, you know, [sighs], it's like I don't want the neighbours to see and, you know, and of course, it has my name and my address on the bags and, you know, sometimes if I've been out, they're left outside. So that, you know, that's what I struggle with, yeah." Sally

Sam discusses how the sense of shame was so strong that it stopped her from seeing her family when she couldn't offer them anything other than cereal. Sam was aware that family and friends could spot her food insecurity and chose to isolate herself rather than expose her poverty.

"So, you end up with loads of cereal and sometimes that's all you've got. I actually took that photo (of cereal) to show my grandchildren, if I had nothing else, I had plenty of cereal and it made me cry. But that was all I was able to offer them, and it made me embarrassed because I was tending to say you can't come because, you know, I didn't want them to know that's all I've got." Sam

Some can go to the most extreme lengths to avoid the shame and stigma of hunger. Here, Helen's daughter is prepared to go hungry rather than expose that she needs free school meals, let alone food support.

"You know, she literally went all day without any food, didn't tell me, and it's only the fact I got an email saying, 'your daughter did not come and collect her lunch', because she's embarrassed by it, you know, the thought of having to go to a foodbank is even worse. She said you know, "I'm glad mummy, that they come here," she said, "because people probably think we're just getting shopping delivered," because she is so embarrassed by it. I mean I haven't admitted it to a lot of people, I've told my vicar but that is about it because I'm embarrassed you know, I don't want to be in this situation." Helen

Food and our identity

The social practices around food are fundamental components of the way we see ourselves and how others see us. Social identity is how we orient ourselves to the social world, and many of us have different identities depending on where we are and who we are with. Being able to express ourselves through a particular identity helps us often navigate very different social settings and social pressures. Therefore, identity choice is an essential part of well-being. When people are forced, through destitution, to expose their hunger, they are less able to present themselves favourably in public.

As we have seen, where identity is fixed and enforced through hunger, people will often make extreme choices not to let people know. Not least because identity loss or enforced identities can be experienced as catastrophic (Haslam et al. 2012). Being excluded from acceptable cultural food practices means not being able to meet social expectations. These social aspects of food are recognised as important, not least because food provides a sense of normality and routine for people (O'Connell & Brannen, 2021). When these routines become shameful, it can have long-term impacts on identity.

The research literature describes adversities around poverty but does not always define poverty as a traumatic situation or as the result of traumatic events (Shamai, 2018).

This research has exposed hunger as a specific type of trauma. It relates to emotional distress, guilt, destitution, identity and low status. Tara outlines the dehumanising effect of hunger. Those in need feel stripped of social value and made to feel useless following a sustained attack on their sense of who they are.

"So it's hard, it makes you cry, don't get me wrong, you do cry because you feel you're useless sometimes, especially with anxiety. And I think it hurt me because my husband died, and I had nothing, and he did everything, and I had to learn it all again." Tara

Derek outlines the impact of not being able to provide for his partner, something that had been central to his identity throughout his life.

"I felt like I was inadequate, I suppose, is the word, I couldn't provide for my partner and myself, I've worked all my life from, since leaving school I've been working." Derek

Sally describes how getting food support is itself a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it provides much-needed sustenance, but on the other, it acts as a regular reminder to herself that she has lost control of her own food supply and needs to rely on the kindness of others.

"You're going to think I'm saying exactly the opposite, probably, to what other people are going to say. It makes me feel quite, really down, actually, when I get a foodbank delivery, it doesn't lift my mood. Because it's a realisation that I'm having to ask for it." Sally

The social and cultural importance of food

Research suggests that eating is an intensely personal act because what we eat communicates to others our beliefs, cultural and social backgrounds and experiences (Culture Decanted, 2014).

Food allows us to engage in important cultural food rituals. When we are going through a sustained loss of status, these rituals can be profoundly supportive and enabling.

"Yeah, it was a real, yeah, it just really, really helped. It came to the point, I think, that it was normal again, you know, because instead of having tinned veg or frozen veg, we were all prepping it together, which we always do at Christmas, you know, so it was nice." Pippa

Food practices, such as cooking fresh food, are related to personal histories, culture, ethnicity, and social class. Our food identities are a central component in understanding who we are. Food support organisations that support people's food rituals every week and at significant times of the year are more likely to mitigate the trauma of hunger.

"Yeah, it's a complete balancing act. And one of the things that I do find is that it's such an amazing, amazing service, but there are a lot of preconceptions. So, for example, I've had people say to me, "Oh, you've picked things that the majority of people don't pick", because, you know, my family don't eat instant mash potato or Spam in tins or, you know, I've always cooked everything fresh. So, even if I've got nothing, I would rather have from the foodbank stock cubes and chickpeas and staples. And what I find is that I have to, I have to give three-quarters of it back. Because foodbanks always try to cater to what they, lowest common denominator is the wrong thing to say, because I'm working class." Sally

One of the difficult elements of food support is the dehumanising aspect of losing control of what you chose to eat. Below, Pat notes the impact of others controlling what you eat.

"I mean I do try to make things like from scratch using these tinned tomatoes so yeah, I suppose it does. I mean the tins of soup, we're not really big soup-eaters apart from tomato soup. So, I think if you just rely on it it's, you know, it does kind of control what you eat." Pat

Guilt

One of the ways that food support affects our identity is through pervasive experiences of guilt. Participants spoke of experiencing multiple forms of concurrent guilt about the people they felt they were letting down. Research suggests that mothers of pre-school and school children reporting severe hunger are more likely to have a lifetime diagnosis of PTSD (Weinrab et al 2002). School-aged children with severe hunger scores have parents who have double the anxiety scores of other parents. Sally describes the challenges of being a visible user of a foodbank.

"Yeah, so my youngest is 6 and I've got a 12-year-old daughter, nearly 13, and I've got a 14-year-old son. And the oldest two, they're like, you know, they don't, they don't want to be having foodbanks. They erm..., you know, they don't want that, because they're aware of it. So everything's, everything's highly visible and when you're trying to hide things and crack through it, it's a, you feel a bit too visible." Sally

Parents experienced a particular type of shame. They reported feeling that they had failed as a parent since they were unable to access one of the central hallmarks of being able to understand themselves as a 'good parent' – that of being able to provide for their children.

"I felt very anxious, and I really felt like I'd failed as a parent, to provide for my son, to have to look for external support, it really did feel like I was a total let-down as a mother." Louise

Some spoke of the pervasive feeling of guilt being a constant presence in their lives. Each new financial challenge sparked more shame and guilt. Many parents had financial circumstances that meant they needed emergency food support immediately and in the longer term. Each new challenge triggered feelings of failure and guilt for not being able to give their children the life that they deserved and that other children had.

"I mean, everything is so expensive, you know, and for me, it's constant guilt with my children, you know, not giving them that lifestyle that they deserve." Sally

The persistent shaming of people living in poverty by the media, politicians and for many, the stigmatising treatment of the institutions that support them, increases their sense of marginalising and their feeling that they are not entitled to support.

"Yeah, because we'd been accepted for Universal Credit, so, you know, we had a bit more money. So, I was thinking, well, you know, is it right that we should get foodbank when we're getting a bit more money and there's definitely people who are worse off than us, you know?" Paula

"I knew someone who ran a local foodbank, who said you know, "I think you ought to get some help," and then she put me in touch with one of you, and that's where I got the help from. But I am embarrassed about it you know, and a couple of weeks ago, I actually got a week of COVID testing so I thought, 'right, I don't need it this week; I'd rather it went to people that needed it' because I just feel awful you know, I don't want to take things, it's just not me." Helen

Undignified food support

Those living in poverty can feel dehumanised by being constantly treated as 'spongers' (Chase & Walker, 2012). Many people avoid situations where they might be outed or otherwise shamed. Foodbanks can fall within this category (Walker & Chase, 2014).

Research suggests that different experiences of care and support can shape people's feelings about themselves. When people come to a foodbank, they enter the unknown. They open themselves up to a type of scrutiny from others that they may never have experienced before (Crook and Evans, 2007). This can induce anxiety and uncertainty. They may also have reasonable concerns about whether revealing their lack of food will have implications for their ability to look after their loved ones. Food banks can act as a 'liminal space' – a place where people transition from one way of understanding themselves to another. A foodbank can become a place where people stop being independent, autonomous, self-supporting individuals and become 'clients' or, worse, 'scroungers' depending on the messages they receive during their first encounters.

For some people, receiving any kind of charitable support, especially food support, reinforces the social and moral authority of the caregiver over the care receiver (Parsell & Clarke, 2020). Charity brings with it shame and the implication of blame for those who are not 'economically successful'. It comes with an in-built power imbalance which can be humiliating. In the U.K., where the welfare state is shrinking, and the cost of living is increasing exponentially, more and more people are experiencing this power imbalance through no fault of their own.

Sam's example shows how, when receiving food support, even brief

encounters can make people feel ashamed and humiliated.

"Oh, it's just crucifying, I stuck it out and I went through all the things and then she, they had some frozen stuff there and they had it all out on the table and she said, pick what you want. So, I went to pick up a pack of four burgers or something like that and she said, oh no, that's for families and took it back off my hand. Well, I nearly bloody died, I was mortified, and she literally snapped it out of my hand. And I remember thinking okay, I'm never doing this again and I cried all the way home from Victoria Road to here." Sam

The increase in faith-based food providers can also have specific effects on how people experience food support. Helen describes the religious moralising and judgement she encountered in a foodbank that was run by a religious institution.

"It's the stigma and it's the where do you get the voucher from and then it's, there's a certain element to them of trying to convert you and pull you into their way of thinking and praying and I bloody pray and it's none of your business. You know, I'm not here to pray I'm, you know, I'm here to get the basic of basic food so I stopped going." Helen

The foodbank sector is largely unregulated, and this can contribute to a deeply problematic overlap between supporting those in need and the desire to indulge in religious evangelism. Sam highlights how the way a foodbank works can expose those using it to shame and anxiety.

"I think the whole idea that you have to queue up to get something so personal to you that, you know, it's not easy to ask for help, it's not easy to put your hand up and then when you do you're always worrying in the queue is somebody going to drive past that you know from the work that, from your previous job or, you know, how do you explain that? Is somebody going to phone my daughter and say, I've seen your mum at the foodbank queue? It's just constant, argh. And I don't know if it's just me, it might be just me, but I just wasn't comfortable with the whole experience at all and I would avoid it." Sam

Queuing systems at foodbanks are exposing and can feel humiliating. They act as a barrier that is so severe that people chose hunger over shame.

The things people worry about can reach beyond humiliation and shame, they create another barrier to seeking support by parents, the fear of them losing their child because they need a foodbank.

"I felt very worried going in, I thought do I need to give false details in case they actually report me and say this woman can't afford pasta, can you take her son away. I was terrified, actually, I was, yeah."

When people seek support in the community, they are in complex, challenging and distressing situations. Asking them many questions at this time of crisis, especially when those questions are personal, is inappropriate.

Our testimonies have clearly shown that foodbanks support people who, mostly through no fault of their own, are going through extremely challenging times. We need to ensure that how we provide that support alleviates rather than adds to their trauma.

Providing dignified support

When people seek food support, the way that interaction plays out is crucial. It can mitigate the sense of shame, helplessness or even humiliation. It can also make those feelings worse. It is, therefore, the duty of food-support charities to ensure that these encounters are as empowering as possible.

Our identity is tied up with not just what we eat but where and how we get the food. Food from a farmer's market, supermarket, corner shop or a relative's house has different psychological and social dimensions for those giving or receiving the food. This is severely affected when people can no longer get food in the ways they are used to.

Our research has shown how people get to the point of seeking food support in very different ways. By the time they reach this point, they can feel complex and varied emotions such as anger, frustration, shame and confusion. They can feel vulnerable and desperate and unable to focus on a variety of goals because of the immediate need to feed themselves and their families.

This desperation adds to their concerns about what others will make of their need for food support and means we must be very careful about how to approach those encounters. There is an imbalance of power between those giving and those receiving food support, and we have witnessed how those giving food have overlooked the health, emotional and social needs of hungry people.

One suggested reason for this insensitivity is social class bias; most patrons at foodbanks can be visibly poor and homeless while those serving them

tend to be middle class. Being unaware of the user's lived experiences, it is not uncommon for support organisations to intentionally or inadvertently engage in interactions that do not dignify those who are asking for help (Vissing & Gu, 2017).

Good intentions do not necessarily result in good communication. How food support users feel treated influences their self-esteem and their desire to return or use future services. When people visit food pantries, often they seek both food and solace, but Vissing & Gu (2017) suggest that, too often, they receive too little of both.

If it is nuanced and carefully protected, food support can provide a level of stability. It can show those seeking support that they matter. It can humanise them, build trust and alleviate some of the trauma. It can provide the basis for good relationships and further possibilities for support, like signposting.

Allowing those using food support to retain control and status, such as when they can give back, volunteer for or donate food to the foodbank; or by allowing parents to be the parent who brings happiness again, can have a profound effect on their status and identity.

"It's obviously freed me up some finances which I would have had to have spent on especially on the toiletries and her Tampax and things like that, and it's freed up things so obviously she needs things for school and that so it gives me that, just gives me that little extra not, without having to worry about things, you know, her things, so she needs to go out with her friends at the weekend. Rather than me saying oh, I haven't got the money, you know, I've got that odd few quid now where I can give her a couple of quid so she can get herself some lunch if she's out with her chums and that on a Saturday or something, you know, don't have to be embarrassing opening up a sandwich in a bag or something, you know, things like that. So it is, the impact's all positive and when it does come she loves having a look to see what we've got as well. It's almost like, you know, not knowing what you're going to get is almost as exciting as getting it, if you know what I mean, you just don't, you know." Dani

The idea of reciprocation in the relationship between those seeking and giving food support is important. Accepting a gift, without reciprocating, is to face subordination, to become client and subservient rather than autonomous and empowered (Parsell & Clarke, 2020).

Foodbanks are liminal spaces, but, if we can stop denying a person the

status of 'full partner' in the social interaction – by providing an opportunity to reciprocate – we can create a space which decreases any sense of humiliation and increases the dignity and sense of autonomy of the person seeking support.

"So I donated all my kids' clothes to other people who are struggling, I found out who's really struggling, and I said, "Would you like a bag of girls' clothes", because I've had to ask. Sorry, you can't ask for something if you can't give something back if you know what I mean, and that's what I try and do. I try to help somebody else, then I feel, I don't feel bad when I've had to ask." Tara

"No, well often I give him a big bag back and say, "Can you just say I'm very grateful but I don't want them to waste," so like before I knew it I had like 40 tins of soup, you know, which I make my own soup and we all have it with some crunchy bread or something, so I said, "Can I send this and give it to somebody else?" so yeah, that's what I've done, I've just given it back rather than waste it, but then it kind of looks like you're going, oh you know, I don't want that [laughs]." Don

Enabling people to reciprocate not only helps improve their well-being, it also balances the relationship. It allows us to see beyond a person's vulnerabilities and misrecognised 'position'. It helps us build a relationship of mutual care that fosters social solidarity.

Every gesture and conversation between those providing and seeking support is crucial as is the framework and structure of the food support – such as whether there is a queueing system or a potential invasive referral process.

"Well no, I mean the fact it's delivered is absolutely wonderful because you know, I've seen neighbours look and they just you know, "oh your shopping's being delivered," and I just say, "yes," and you know that's been in, because if you have to go and stand there, because you see it on the news don't you, particularly in London, which is where I come from originally, and there's maybe 100 people queueing and it's an embarrassment and you know." Erin

"But erm..., no, not really, there were no real drawbacks, really, no. It was, you know, they were really nice people and, like I say, they weren't judgemental, they were just really keen to help, you know." Pippa

Subtle practices that protect people's dignity make a difference to those receiving food-support:

"I think they're quite erm... I think they know that it's a little bit erm..., I don't know if stigma's the right word, but they know, they don't advertise it, you know. They just, you know, say who's there and they say it's the community hub. And then when I get down, they're already halfway to the car and just giving you a wave, you know, that kind of thing. They don't make a big fuss about it, like, which is really, I don't think I'd mind, you know. I'm a bit thick-skinned, anyway, when it comes to some things, so I don't think I'd mind if they stayed and had a chat, you know." Paula

Paula has just shown how important human encounters in foodbanks can be. They help determine whether people feel they can ask for support at all and also how they come to understand themselves and the trauma of living lives marred by persistent hunger. Helen outlines the impact of humanising support that recognises special events, milestones and individual needs.

"I really don't you know, it's been amazing, particularly little extra presents on Mother's Day and putting things sometimes, you put in a bag of things to make a pizza and you know, my daughter's so thrilled with things like that, admittedly she doesn't want to have the delivery at all, and I'd rather we didn't have to have the delivery but you know, things like that mean the world, and you know, Easter eggs, and at Christmas, sending a voucher for the meat, because I'd already said, "we're not having a turkey this year because we can't afford one, we literally cannot afford one," because the only, you know I bought a few presents for my daughter and son, that was it, nobody else had presents, I just couldn't do it last year but you know, to get the voucher, that meant the world, it really did." Helen

She goes on to tell us how gifts for a person signify their value and significance, an experience that is too often lost when people are denied access to an autonomous food supply.

"You know, because it was a real struggle then. But they had, you know, my daughter had some make-up boxes, she's into make-up, but she had some make-up and some lip gloss. And my son had a puzzle and something else. And it was just, it was just something nice for them to open, you know, it was just another present for them to open. And they sat there and sort of played around with the puzzles and everything else while I got a Christmas dinner ready, you know." Paula

Gendered hunger trauma

The majority of people who took part in this research were women. This shouldn't come as a surprise. Research consistently shows that women are at particular risk of food insecurity and that households that contain children and are headed by single women are more likely to be food insecure (Alaimo et al., 1998). Research also shows that women are likely to make choices regarding their own food consumption that disproportionately adversely affect them, as they seek to protect children and privilege men in the household (Power, Small., Doherty & Pickett, 2018).

In our own research, we heard women talk about the guilt they felt as a mother about not being able to provide 'what they deserve'. We also saw how the transition into single parenthood could become the catalyst for also transitioning into food insecurity.

Women often need to juggle multiple caring responsibilities. To do so, they will often work in non-standard employment, particularly low-income, part-time work (Aassve, Burgess, Propper & Dickson, 2006). Changes to the labour market and, in particular, the growth of the 'gig economy' have made a lot of this work less secure and with fewer prospects. Much of women's contribution to society goes socially unrecognised, since it is unpaid. The gender-based division of labour between unpaid and paid labour renders women economically and socially more insecure. They are vulnerable not only to chronic poverty but also to transient poverty that can result from familial, personal, or social and economic crises. All these factors mean that women are using more local food support and experiencing disproportionate hunger trauma.

Women do not only use foodbanks to provide food for themselves and their children. Foodbanks are also important sources of other items such as nappies and menstrual products. Research suggests that it is not as widely known that foodbanks provide these items (Boyers, Garikipati, Biggane, Douglas, Hawkes, et al., 2022). Food organisations, therefore, need to work specifically to reach women who are experiencing period poverty and need baby products as well as hunger.

The level of hunger trauma and poverty among women can have a much broader impact on their well-being and safety. Laura Seebohm of the Changing Lives charity told the Guardian in 2019: "One woman we took to a food bank in Doncaster said: 'I don't have to sell sex now'" (Butler, 2019).

The English Collection of Prostitutes states that: “As poverty increases, more women, particularly single mothers, turn to sex-work to survive and feed their families” (ECP, 2018) For women entering sex work to support families and children, the traditional foodbank referral system can be a barrier to accessing access, due to fear of recrimination. This further demonstrates the importance of a system that places dignity and choice at its core, allowing those in precarious or vulnerable positions to take control and not be at the will of others to decide whether they deserve support.

What is clear from our research and the wider literature is that hunger trauma among women is a fundamental feminist issue. Women are subject to discrimination in labour, credit, and a variety of other markets and own less property compared to men. Without sufficient intervention to address these issues, there will always be a limited capability for women to enter political spaces and contribute to broader society. This, of course, is also true of many marginalised groups.

Food security is key in defending their interests against all forms of structural oppression (Kendall, 2020).

CONCLUSION



Our work, along with existing research, has laid out how food insecurity and hunger are traumatic for those experiencing them. Hunger trauma is complex, multifaceted and in some ways unique in its causes and symptoms. It is also debilitating. When someone is struggling to feed themselves or their family, it will be the first thing they think of in the morning and the last thing they think of at night. There is no room within that to reach for other goals.

We have seen how eating and where we get our food is a profound part of our identity. How it contributes to our social standing and status, and how isolating it can be when a person's agency in choosing and even preparing their food is taken away.

Our respondents have described how, before they sought food support, their lives felt out of control. We've also heard about the sense of shame and indignity they can feel when taking that step.

With this evidence, we can see how important the behaviour, process and framework of food support organisations are. The first encounter is profoundly important. It can exacerbate those feelings of shame or humiliation, or it can begin to rebuild a sense of control, dignity and social identity, which is an essential step to recovering from trauma.

Food support organisations vary significantly. They have different structures, processes, budgets and provide different types of food. They also differ widely in their eligibility criteria, policies, and philosophy. The amount of training they receive tends to vary. Many concentrate on filling bags with food. They focus less on the intricacies of how they interact with people during the exchange. Good intentions do not necessarily result in good communication.

How people feel treated influences their self-esteem and their desire to return or use future services. We found that when people visit food banks, they often seek both food and solace but often receive too little of both. Treating people with dignity and helping to empower individuals is part of how we get humanity back into our society. If nuanced and carefully protected, food support can provide stability, a sense of mattering and a humanising impulse. It can alleviate some of the trauma, builds trust and provide the basis for relationships, further possibilities, support and signposting.

This report found that referral processes and inappropriate questioning are dehumanising and should be removed. Foodbanks should seek opportunities for people using foodbanks to be able to reciprocate and promote a more equal relationship between those seeking support and those providing it.

Food partnerships and networks need to recognise the scale and nature of hunger trauma and review their processes to ensure that they are dignified and reduce rather than exacerbate stigma.

We need to understand well-being and trauma, not just as internalised qualities of individuals but instead as a set of effects produced in specific times and places (Atkinson, 2013). We should understand poverty as a violation of human dignity and therefore of people's rights. When well-being and trauma become the responsibility of individuals, we depoliticise people's lives (Gilles, 2021). So, we should be clear, that societal, economic, and social forces are all too often translated into personal distress and disease. Case studies tell us what is happening to individual people. But, to really explain the scope of hunger trauma that we have found in this report, we need to understand personal experiences within the larger context of culture, recent history, persistent inequalities, stagnating wages and reduced benefits in a time of rising prices.

Our recommendations focus on specific steps that national and local government as well as food networks and food support organisations should take. However, we should not ignore the fact that broad economic factors have driven and are continuing to drive the rise in food insecurity and hunger trauma. If, as a society, our economic choices continue to maintain wealth inequalities while failing to equip more and more people with wages and benefits that match their living costs, hunger trauma will keep spreading through our communities.

Our recommendations:

For central government:

- Tackle the cost of living crisis. Immediately declare a U.K. wide cost of living emergency with a strategy that includes urgently improving the support to low-income households through social security and tackling persistent problems of poverty, homelessness, health inequalities and climate change.
- Meaningfully address growing income inequality by ensuring that those with the broadest shoulders contribute more.

- Understand that, because of the debilitating nature of hunger trauma, food support organisations now provide invaluable mental health interventions. As such these services should be funded through public health funding streams.

For local authorities:

- Declare a cost of living emergency.
- Develop a strategy that takes a collaborative and evidence-based approach. Work more closely with health, trade unions, further education facilities and community groups.
- Provide dignified support to those who need it. Remove barriers to support and provide food stability.
- Those who need food support should have meaningful involvement in the provision of food support. This should be addressed as a priority.

For food support commissioners, networks and organisations:

- Develop a Food First approach to food support in the community. This means developing food support services that promote dignity and alleviate hunger trauma, this includes:
 - removing all shaming practices including queuing and personal questioning.
 - removing top-down bureaucratic approaches to food support.
 - prioritising compassion in food encounters and food support.
 - avoiding 'othering' language that refers to those seeking support as service users. They are not 'service users', they are our neighbours.
 - promoting practices that offer choice. We must, of course, offer healthy choices. We must not decide for others what they or their family should eat.

The Food First approach

Food First is based on the 'Housing First' model used to combat homelessness which offers permanent housing as quickly as possible to homeless people, and other supportive services afterwards.

The Food First approach is based on the truth that, for someone who is hungry or whose family is hungry, getting food is their primary and overwhelming concern. They can only address other issues affecting them when they get a stable source of food.

Those seeking food support are experiencing hunger trauma. Any gatekeeping at the point of asking for food is a disproportionate response which can add to the shame and fear of those seeking support and ultimately stop them from getting the help they need. Therefore, people seeking support should not need to apply to a third party to verify their hunger. They should not be subject to inappropriate questioning and should not need to be referred for support.

Food First offers food support with no preconditions. It is based on the following premises:

- Food is a basic human right.
- All encounters must promote dignity and reduce shame.
- Food support practices must reflect warmth, kindness and solidarity.
- Food support values humans over bureaucracy, systems and rules.
- Food support is an opportunity to build relationships.
- Food support is one step to healing food trauma.
- Parties, processes, and organisations that don't have the support of those using food support are barriers, they must be removed.

For activists:

The relationship between hunger trauma, income inequality and poverty is so compelling, that we now need a clearly defined legislative solution. Following the example of Right to Food London, we must:

- call for changes to legislation that will ensure food, nutrition and health are recognised as social rights.
- promote change in our communities that removes stigma and discrimination and is replaced by narratives and action for social rights, justice and equality.

- organise nationally to encourage cities, city, towns and boroughs to become 'Right to Food' spaces.
- advocate for social justice, equal rights and local democracy.
- elevate the voice of low-income, marginalised and stigmatised groups so as to advance their food and nutrition rights.
- use public events, policy briefings and activism to raise awareness of food and nutrition justice.
- raise awareness that hunger and malnutrition are public health and welfare concerns, not charitable goods.

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