

Inquiry into hunger and food poverty Written submission

September 2014

About The Children's Society

The Children's Society has helped change children's stories for over a century. We expose injustice and address hard truths, tackling child poverty and neglect head-on. We fight for change based on the experiences of every child we work with and the solid evidence we gather. Through our campaigning, commitment and care, we are determined to give every child in this country the greatest possible chance in life.

Introduction

Recent increases in the use of food banks across the UK has led to speculation as to the underlying causes of this phenomenon including debt, unemployment and benefit delays and sanctions among the UK's poorest families. For this submission we interviewed our practitioners working in children's centres and projects in the Isle of Wight, Swindon, London, Newcastle and Bradford in order to get their impressions of the patterns and causes of food bank use among the families with children they work with. All our practitioners reported witnessing an increase in food bank use over the past year, with some food banks reportedly increasing the number of visits allowed per year per family due to increasing demand.

'We have issued three times the number of food vouchers in 2014 than we did in 2012'

Project Worker from the Isle of Wight Children's Centre

Children's views on food bank use

As part of our research for the Children's Commission on Poverty¹, we interviewed a number of children whose parents were using food banks in Cornwall. The issue of food banks raised a number of different perspectives from children ranging from shame and embarrassment, to happiness and gratitude:

'its embarrassing because everyone is looking at you'

'it makes me feel a little bit better; it makes me feel happy because someone is actually trying to help us'

'I don't tell friends because I feel like they will hate me if they knew'

'it makes me a bit scared and excited'

'People who have money sometimes spend it on computer games but some people need it to actually feed themselves'

¹ <http://www.childrenscommission.org.uk/>

The Children's Society services and relationship with food banks

Our conversations with practitioners have shown that we interact with and support food banks in a number of different ways:

- Our services act as official referring agencies for food banks. This involves our practitioners assessing the needs of families and distributing food vouchers accordingly for use at an allocated local food bank. These include a range of food banks including the Trussell Trust, Fareshare and smaller independent providers including those specific to particularly vulnerable groups.
- Our services pack and provide their own food bags in some projects based on our assessment of the needs of families in the area, particularly where other food banks are not available or have closed. This is often done in partnership with local community organisations or churches.
- In emergency situations, such as when a family or young person is homeless, our services use unrestricted income to buy people food or emergency non-food items like sanitary ware or to buy shopping vouchers directly from shops.
- We make other occasional one-off donations to food banks in order to ensure their stock is maintained, for example, after the recent theft from a Lewisham foodbank².
- We act as a food collection point for food banks where their volunteers come and collect donated food items given by public.
- Our Children's Centre managers have visited food banks to see the background and work that goes into running them to help them understand and build relationships between volunteers and staff.
- Sometimes regular food bank use alerts our services to a family or young person experiencing problems. Where good working relationships have been formed between our services and food banks, the food bank manager will contact a local Children's Society project if multiple food bank use is being requested (i.e. 3 visits within a short space of time) or if there are children under 5 within a family. This helps to alert our staff to the problem and to ask if other interventions or support can be provided. As a result of these referrals we have then worked successfully to support families out of a crisis situation.

Type of groups using food banks and their reasons

Among our practice base we have found food bank use in children's centres among families with children under 5 years old and in our specific projects, particularly those working with migrant families.

Interviews with our practitioners have raised a number of potential reasons for food bank use:

- Where benefits have been delayed or where benefits have been stopped because of a change of circumstance like a partner has moved in or out.
- Domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse where people are unable to support themselves financially so depend on food banks.
- Individuals not being given the right information to access benefits or where a parent hasn't applied because of a learning disability or they don't know they have to. Also some people experience a lack of confidence and poor financial literacy and numeracy skills to know what they are applying for.

²Thieves steal £700 worth of supplies from Lewisham foodbank

http://www.newssshopper.co.uk/news/11319319.Thieves_steal_700_worth_of_supplies_from_Lewisham_foodbank/?ref=rss

- Household debt because of unexpected financial demands, including fuel bills. Where families can't sustain these payments they are turning to loan sharks.
- Benefits sanctions have been imposed increasingly meaning families have no means of support at all.
- People in work are still experiencing very low incomes which mean they are unable to meet all their needs. Zero hour contracts were also mentioned as a problem because of limited or temporary hours being made available.
- Families that are unable to work or claim benefits because they have no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status. This was seen particularly in our projects among families supported under Section 17 of the Children Act where local authority support is so low that food bank use is continuously needed for the majority of these families.
- Unaccompanied children from abroad use food banks in the gap between when they arrive in the UK and when local authority support starts. Sometimes this can take weeks.

Main identified underlying causes of food bank use

1. Debt

Our research shows that almost 1.4 million UK families with dependent children are currently in problem debt, whilst an additional 2.9 million families with dependent children have struggled to pay their bills and credit commitments over the previous 12 months, putting them on the edge of falling into problem debt. Families with children are often trapped in a situation where they have little alternative but to take out credit to pay for necessities including food. We know debt tends to result from either long-term structural problems (insufficient earnings over an extended period), temporary personal economic disturbances, such as job loss, or a combination of the two. These drivers can either lead to (1) families taking on credit to pay essential household bills or falling into arrears, or (2) repayments on credit, which had been affordable when it was taken out, becoming problematic.

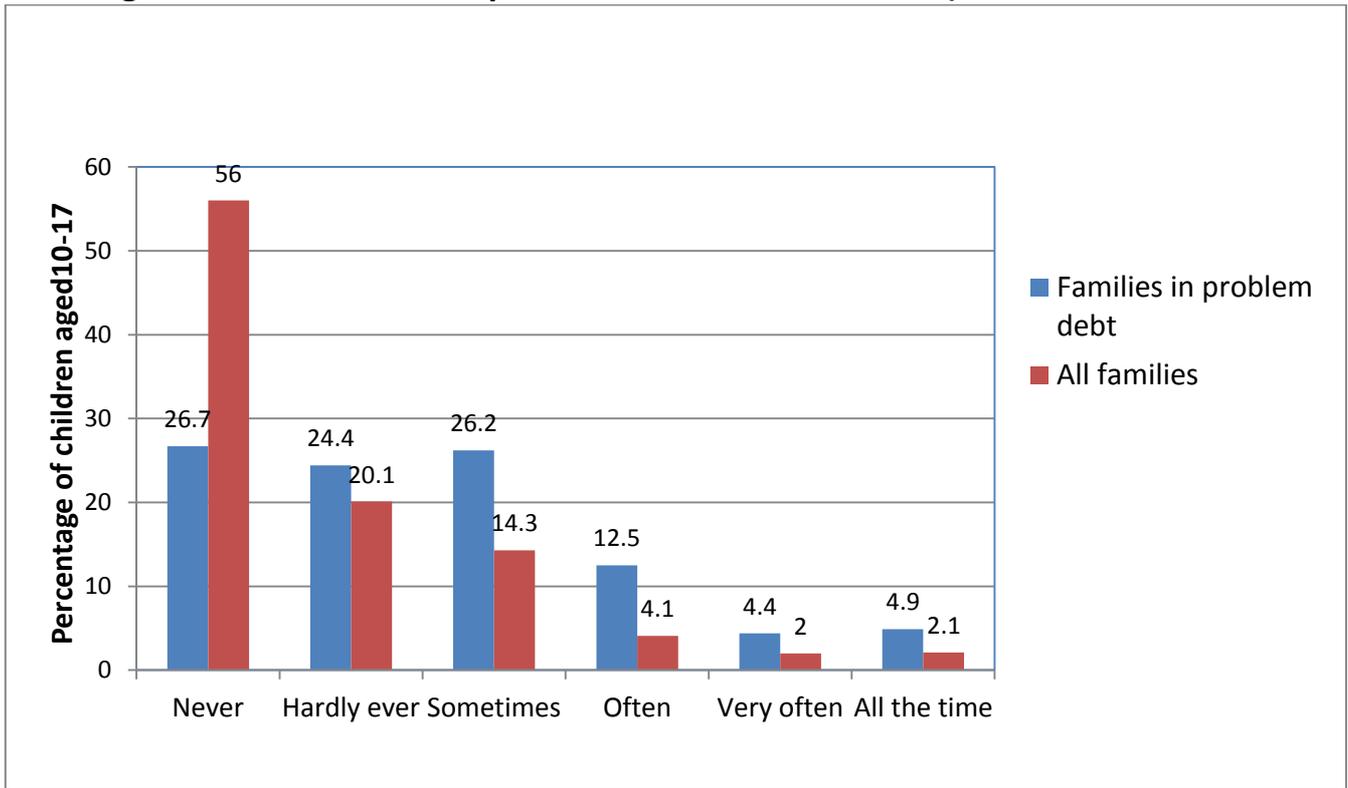
Our research³ indicates parents are more at the mercy of these drivers than other groups. The need to support children puts additional pressure on household income, and when unexpected financial hardship strikes, having children makes it more difficult to either respond using available resource or adjust to cope. Previous research has shown that for these families, credit may seem like a rational short term fix, but its long term consequences can be bleak. Our research too found that often families with problem debts are treated badly by their creditors and are not getting the support that they need to address their problems. Our research (see table 1) has shown that families in problem debt find it harder to pay for food, with around half of children in families in problem debt saying their family find it hard to pay for food at least sometimes. This is likely to be a driver for families to seek support from a food bank.

'People who use food banks have been affected by debt issues with loan sharks arriving on the doorstep! The use of loan sharks and debt is definitely linked to the use of food banks because families can't sustain payments'.

Practitioner, Swindon Children's Centre

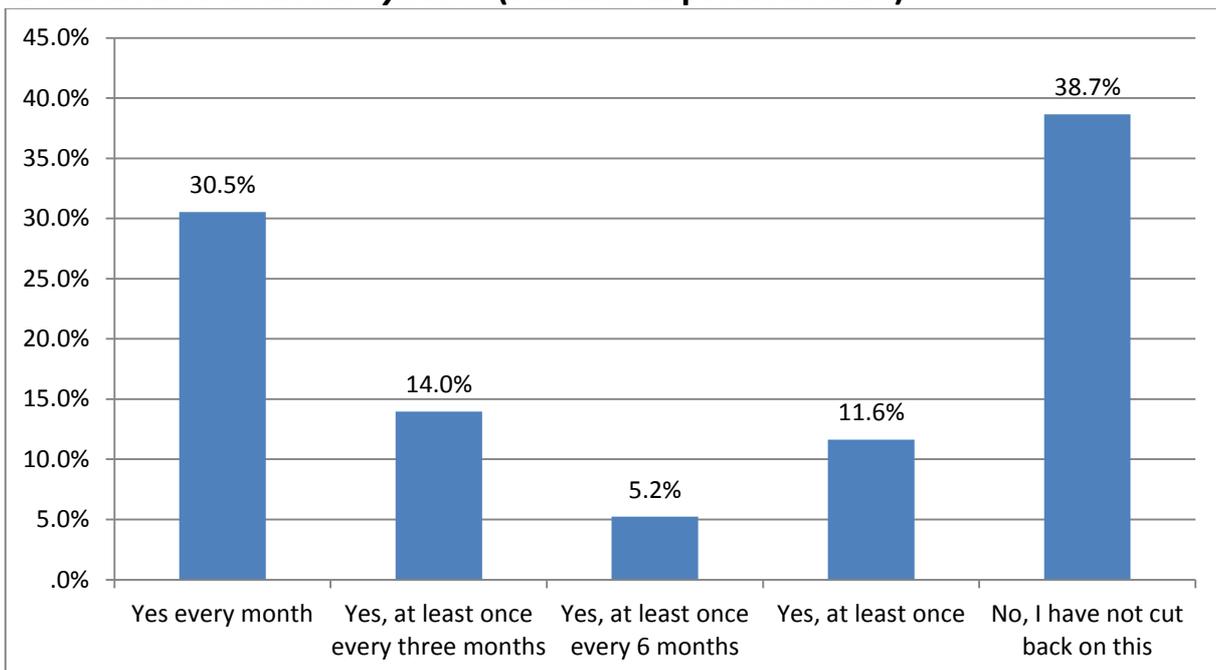
³ The Debt Trap: http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/debt_trap_report_may_2014.pdf

Table 1: "How often does your family find it hard to pay for food?" (Responses from children aged 10-17 in families in problem debt and all children)



A survey commissioned for The Children's Society also shows that 45% of families in problem debt are cutting back on food for their children in order to keep up with debt repayments at least once every three months (see table 2).

Table 2: "Has keeping up payments on any debts resulted in you cutting back on food for your children over the last year?" (Families in problem debt)



Recommendation:

- **The government should work with creditors and the free debt advice sector to develop a ‘Breathing Space’ scheme. This would give struggling families an extended period of protection from default charges, mounting interest, collections and enforcement action.**
- **The government needs to develop a strategy for improving access to affordable credit for families. The government should work to bring together local welfare assistance schemes, credit unions and high street banks, to improve access to affordable credit for low income families.**

2. Benefits sanctions

If a benefit claimant fails to comply with a mandatory requirement like missing an appointment, a sanction is sometimes issued. The claimant will be sent a letter to inform them of the decision. This can result in the complete removal of certain benefits for a given period of time and our projects have identified this as a reason for food bank use.

‘Sometimes people visit the food banks because they have been sanctioned. We often see parents going without to feed their children because of this’.

Project Worker, Bradford Children’s Centre

The Coalition Government has strengthened the conditions and sanctions that apply to those claiming Job Seekers Allowance. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced changes to the sanctions regime with more severe sanctions and a wider group of claimants to whom sanctions may be applied.

Research by the Citizens Advice Bureau⁴ has shown that two-thirds of respondents receiving a sanction had been left with no income after the sanction was imposed. Those with children reported they only had child benefit and child tax credits to live on and the research showed serious effects on the wider family, particularly children, because of the loss of income.

The CAB found that almost a quarter of those sanctioned lived in households with children and more than 10% of respondents were single parents. The research found that children were aware of the threat of eviction and of the stress on their parent(s). And although parents did their best to shield their children from the effects of the sanction (for example by going without food themselves so that their children could eat), children were affected. There was no evidence that DWP had sought to monitor these effects or that there was adequate access to appropriate hardship arrangements. A number of respondents said they had not been told about the possibility of applying for a hardship payment until it was too late to do so.

Recommendations:

- **The government should put into place effective arrangements to monitor sanctions and the impacts on claimants and their families.**
- **Sanctions should be fair and proportional. Clients should not be sanctioned for things that are not their fault or that are beyond their control.**

⁴ http://www.socialpublishingproject.com/uploads/9/6/1/1/9611868/punishing_poverty_-_sanctions_and_their_impacts.pdf

- **The government should ensure adequate access to appropriate hardship arrangements for families.**

3. Cuts in advice services

Our practitioners have said that an increasing lack of welfare advice has led to problems with delayed benefits or where the right information is not available to ensure the right benefits are accessed. Cuts under the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) in 2012 removed legal aid for most social welfare law, including housing, immigration, welfare benefits, and employment. Approximately 46% of funding for law centres came from legal aid⁵. As a result at least 6 law centres have closed since the introduction of LASPO including Birmingham Law Centre, the only community law centre in the city which helped more than 2,000 people a year. This is an area our practitioners have also highlighted when talking about food banks:

'People try to speak to a benefits advisor before resorting to going to a food bank but there is a lack of advice now and there is always a long queue every time the advisor is in. By and large people are trying hard, but they are struggling'.

Children's Centre Coordinator, Bradford

Recommendation: Legal aid for social welfare law should be brought back into the scope of legal aid.

4. Undocumented migrants and no recourse to public funds

No recourse to public funds (NRPF) refers to destitute people from abroad who are subject to immigration control and have no entitlement to welfare benefits, home office support for asylum seekers or public housing. This group includes a range of people including those with outstanding immigration claims, those who have overstayed visas as well as those who have been refused status and are putting in fresh claims. These families often experience the most extreme poverty and disadvantage⁶. This restriction is can also be placed on people with legal status in the country.

Our services find people in this group often need access to food banks. Families with no recourse to public funds sometimes have an entitlement to work but the work they can access is frequently very low paid which only covers rent and bills often leaving no money for food. This is particularly the case for single mothers who have restricted working hours because of childcare so can only earn a certain amount. Other times these families are supported under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 because their children have been assessed as 'in need' by the local authority where they are located. All families on Section 17 support or those waiting for the local authority to make a decision on their case being supported by our projects were recorded as needing food banks in order to feed their families. Levels of Section 17 support are very low and vary across the country, with no national guidance or standards. For example, support in the London Borough of Newham was recently being offered at just £50 per week for a family with three children⁷. Despite the government's announcement that all children in reception years 1 and 2 will be entitled to a free school meal, children older than year 2 who are in a family subject to no recourse to public funds are not eligible for Free School Meals.

⁵ http://www.cilex.org.uk/cilex_journal/journal_home/issue_content/march_2014/march_14-news_pg_5.aspx

⁶ http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/thechildrenssociety_idontfeelhuman_final.pdf

⁷ <http://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/PO-v-London-Borough-of-Newham-2014-EWHC-2561-Admin.pdf>

Families with no recourse to public funds not only need access to food banks but our practitioners reported that some families find it hard to access the food they need because their status presents an anomaly which food banks sometimes aren't able to effectively process, as illustrated by the case study below.

Family with no recourse to public funds restriction unable to access food bank

Eve from Nigeria arrived in the UK in February 2003. Eve was granted Limited Leave to Remain and has a child who is British. Her leave had a no recourse to public funds restriction placed on it. Eve rents a one bedroom flat. Eve has been working but part-time and has had to do nights due to childcare requirements during the day. She has to leave the children over night with a friend's daughter. Her earnings are not enough to pay rent, buy food and other essentials and she is in rent arrears and the landlord has given her an eviction notice. Eve tried to access a food bank from an organisation specifically working with migrants but she could not access it because her status states she is able to work which makes her ineligible for the food bank's help. She called the Trussell Trust food bank who said she needed a referral from an agency and that she wouldn't be able to access it as she was not on benefits. However, she is unable to access benefits due to the NRPF condition on her status.

Recommendations:

- **Free School lunches regulations should be amended so that children living on Section 17 support are consistently able to access free school meals.**
- **All local authorities should publish their policies on Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 stating the rates of support available to these families and an explanation of how they have calculated these rates.**
- **National guidance should be issued by central government setting minimum standards for the amount of support provided under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Levels should be set in order to ensure they meet children's essential living needs as well as promote their welfare and development.**
- **The Home Office should stop issuing a no recourse to public funds restriction on individuals with legal status in the UK.**

5. Fuel bills

Through our services we see, first-hand, the crisis facing families who struggle to heat their homes and paying for fuel bills is one reason our practitioners told us that families were turning to food banks. Our practitioners have noted a direct link between fuel bills and the use of food banks.

'People we see who use food banks have primarily experienced a change to benefits or delays in payments and as a result have unexpected financial demands, including fuel bills'.

Practitioner, Swindon Children's Centre

Our recent research on the impact of fuel poverty on some of the most vulnerable families⁸ found that:

- More than three million families were likely to cut back on food so they can pay their energy bills last winter.
- Two-thirds of parents living in the UK – five million families – were likely to turn their heating down last winter because they couldn't afford to pay their energy bills. Of these, more than half were worried about their children becoming ill as a result.
- Turning the heating on is driving many families into debt. Around 500,000 families consider taking out a loan to help them with the costs of heating their home.

⁸ http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/behind_cold_doors_-_final.pdf

- Too many children lived in cold or damp homes this winter. Based on our recent survey of 2000 children in the UK, we found that around 10% of children (1.3 million) said that their home suffers from damp or mould and around 28% of children (3.6 million) thought that their home was too cold. In extreme cases, health conditions associated with the cold may contribute to children's deaths. Statistics show that there were 110 more deaths among children in winter 2011-12 than at other points of that year.
- A typical couple with two children would now need to spend £1400 per year in order to heat their home adequately.
- Almost two million children in poverty are in families that are missing out on the Warm Home Discount. Many are excluded because their parents are in low paid work.

Recommendation: The government should make sure all children living in families in poverty automatically get the Warm Home Discount. In the coming months we are expecting the government to consult on the operation of Warm Home Discount from 2015/16 and have an opportunity to look again at the way the scheme operates.

6. Free School Meals

The Children's Society is very concerned that prior to September 2014 more than half of school children living in poverty in England were not getting free school meals (FSM). In England, about a third of school aged children living in poverty were not entitled to receive FSM – around 700,000. Although entitled, a further 500,000 did not take up their meals⁹.

Last year, the government announced that from Autumn 2014 all children in reception, years 1 and 2 will be entitled to a free school meal. This means an extra 160,000 more poor children will be given the chance to get a free, nutritious meal at school and marks an historic step forward in the fight against child poverty. However, this will still mean around 500,000 children in poverty will not be eligible for a Free School Meal.

Recommendation: The government should ensure all children in poverty, including those in poor working families, can get a free school meal. The government should use the opportunity provided by the introduction of Universal Credit to provide a Free School Meal to all children in families in receipt of the new benefit.

Conclusion

Our practitioners have highlighted a recent increase in the use of food banks during crises among the families they work with and our research has shown the impact of debt on food poverty. In this response we have identified a number of underlying causes of food bank use including debts, benefits delays and sanctions, a lack of advice and unexpected financial pressures such as fuel bills.

We have also identified undocumented migrants as a particularly vulnerable group whose use of food banks is more regular because of long-term problems which prevent their access to the labour market or to the welfare system.

We have highlighted a number of recommendations to help address the underlying causes of food bank use and we urge the inquiry to take these on board in its analysis.

⁹ http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/fair_and_square_policy_report_final.pdf p5