

A survey of food banks operating independently of The Trussell Trust food bank network.

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Summary

About the study

Much is already known about Trussell Trust food banks, including their way of operating and usage. This report fills a significant gap in knowledge and understanding by reporting on early findings from a first representative study of independent food banks operating across England.

Between September 2018 and May 2019, we surveyed a simple random sample of 114 independent food banks from a total of 558 identified as distributing food parcels at least once a week across England. We conducted the survey by telephone, covering operational characteristics and challenges, among other topics.

Key findings

- 75% of independent food banks started operating in the past 9 years, with over a third opening over 2012 to 2013.
- 80.1% of food banks reported that picking up parcels from the food bank was the most common way for people to receive their food parcels, but 49% also delivered food parcels to clients.
- Over 60% of independent food banks required new clients to have a referral from a third-party agency but most indicated that exceptions can be made to this rule. Notably, almost 40% did not require clients to have referrals.
- Where referrals were received from third-party agencies, over 75% of food banks reported receiving referrals from local authorities. Jobcentre Plus offices were also very commonly reported referral agencies.
- 44% of independent food banks imposed no restriction on how often people could receive food parcels, and an additional 17.5% allowed access to food parcels 18 or more times in a 12-month period. Over 30%, however, restricted access to food parcels to 6 or fewer times in a 12-month period.
- About 45% of independent food banks gave out food parcels with more than 3 days' worth of food per person, and an additional 10% did not restrict food parcel content.
- Over 60% of food banks offered other services in addition to food parcel distribution.
- Over half of independent food banks were run by a Christian faith group. Most of the remaining (43%) were operated by secular organisations, but one was operated by a Muslim faith group and one was run by a multi-faith group.
- Most food banks reported that people who were unemployed or unable to work due to disability and single parent families were groups often helped in their food banks.

Conclusions

- Food banks generally are a post-2010 phenomenon. There was little independent food bank activity before 2004, and most food banks started after 2010.
- Operation within the independent sector of food banks is varied both in terms of the nature of groups operating them and how they are operated.
- The consistency in the groups of people most in need of help from independent food banks and Trussell Trust food banks underscores how important it is for policy interventions to address the financial vulnerability that leads to food insecurity.
- Food banks are becoming embedded in the UK as a response to food insecurity. Local authorities and other frontline professionals refer to and, provide for, independent food banks despite the fact that their operations predominantly depend on volunteer labour and public donations.

Background

Food banks – charitable projects providing free parcels of food for people in need to take away, prepare and eat - have existed in high-income countries for decades, but their spread in the UK is generally linked to the establishment and growth of The Trussell Trust's member-based food bank network. Since 2011, The Trussell Trust has been publishing data on the volume of food bank use across their network, made available from their standardised data collection system. These data have almost exclusively been the source of information on food bank use for the UK and, in the absence of national food insecurity monitoring before 2016, have typically been used as a barometer for food insecurity.¹ The Trussell Trust's model for food banks is also well-established, involving establishing relationships with third-party local social and health service agencies who provide referrals; requiring that people in need of assistance have a referral for use; collecting data through the referral system; and guiding their member food banks to follow-up with referral agencies if they provide more than three referrals to a single client in a 6-month period.²

There is, however, increasing recognition of a much larger landscape of food parcel distribution through independent food banks not affiliated with The Trussell Trust. Early works³ by researchers in England, Wales and Scotland found that in some places where no Trussell Trust food banks existed, there were well-established independent food banks operating. In other places, both Trussell Trust and independent food banks were operating. More recent work by Sabine Goodwin on behalf of the Independent Food Aid Network has mapped over 800 food parcel distribution projects or food banks (for ease, referred to as food banks going forward) operating outside of The Trussell Trust's food bank network.

Although it is evident that there are a large number of independent organisations and charities distributing food parcels, little is known about when or why they were established, how they operate, and whom they serve. This lack of insight stands in contrast with research produced about, and from, The Trussell Trust, which includes numerous studies on the

¹ Though food bank use is often used as an indicator of food insecurity and its trends, the problem of food insecurity is much more widespread. The number of households estimated to use food banks is up to 2% (see Sosenko et al. State of Hunger. 2019), but up to 10% of households experience moderate and severe food insecurity across the UK.

² There is evidence that some Trussell Trust food banks and food bank referral agencies interpret this guidance differently, only providing food parcels or referrals for food parcels for a maximum of three times in a 6-month period.

³ See research by David Beck mapping the growth of food banks in Wales https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/8192969/2016_Mapping_the_Growth_of_the_Welsh_Food_Bank_Landscape_1998_2015.pdf. From Scotland, see a scoping study commissioned by the Scottish government carried out by Filip Sosenko, Nicola Livingstone, and Suzanne Fitzpatrick, which documented Trussell Trust and non-Trussell Trust food banks in 8 case study areas, <https://www.nls.uk/scotgov/2014/9781784121242.pdf> and subsequent work commissioned by The Scottish Government and carried out by Mary Anne McLeod, documenting provision across Scotland <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Emergency-Food-Aid-Report.pdf>. In 2014, a submission by Jon May, Paul Cloke, and Andrew Williams to the APPG Inquiry into Hunger in the UK documented Trussell Trust and non-Trussell Trust food banks operating in 10 of the largest cities in the UK and 10 smaller cities, and found that Trussell Trust food banks made up only about 50% of food banks in these areas. See <https://foodpovertyinquiry.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/food-poverty-appg-evidence-review-final.pdf>

characteristics of people using their food banks and ways of operating⁴, and qualitative studies of the user experience.⁵

To begin to fill these gaps we undertook a research project to build understanding of independent food parcel distribution projects operating outside of The Trussell Trust in England. We surveyed 114 independent food banks over September 2018 to May 2019. This report summarises some key findings from this survey.

⁴ Examples include Lambie-Mumford, H. (2017) *Hungry Britain: The rise of food charity*, Bristol: Policy Press; and Loopstra, R., Lambie-Mumford, H., Fledgerjohann, J. Food bank operational characteristics and rates of food bank use across Britain. *BMC Public Health*. 2019 May 14;19(1):561.

⁵ For example, see Garthwaite, K. (2016) *Hunger Pains: Life inside foodbank Britain*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Methods

The sample frame for this study was provided by Sabine Goodwin, who, over summer 2017 to Spring 2018, identified 558 food banks operating in England.⁶ These were defined as venues or distribution points which were distributing emergency food parcels at least once a week. Some of these were part of an umbrella organisation, which operated multiple food banks. The 558 food banks belonged to a total of 454 organisations. Of these, 89% operated only one food bank, 6% operated two food banks, and 4% operated 3 or more, up to a maximum of 14 food banks. Of the 558 food banks, we selected a random target sample of 179, representing 141 organisations. This sample size accommodated a 60% non-response rate to provide a margin of error of +/-8.5%.

Recruitment was carried out at the level of the organisation, since often a single staff member oversaw multiple food banks and could respond on behalf of each site, though all data collected relates to individual sites. Food banks were invited to participate in the study by email or by telephone. Initial approaches were followed up by telephone calls and/or emails if a first approach yielded no response.

Upon inviting the 179 food banks to participate in the study, it was discovered 12 food banks from one organisation were no longer providing a weekly distribution service, rendering them ineligible to participate. A further seven food banks were no longer operating, and one other food bank was discovered to be a part of The Trussell Trust's food bank network. Of the remaining 159 eligible food banks, 114 participated, reflecting a response rate of 71.7%.

Reasons for non-participation included organisations or food banks being too busy (reason given by 5 organisations, covering 10 food banks), recent bereavement of potential respondent (n=2 food banks), or managers being unwilling to complete the survey by telephone (n=4 food banks). Six food banks indicated interest in participating, but did not reply to subsequent emails to arrange a time for the telephone survey. An additional seven organisations (n=8 food banks) declined without providing a reason and 15 food banks failed to respond to invitations to participate.

The survey was conducted over the telephone with persons with sufficient knowledge about the selected food banks' origins and processes of establishment, current operations, and operational challenges. In 64% of cases, the survey respondent was the food bank manager or coordinator, but other respondents included trustees or other food bank staff. The questionnaire covered: the operational characteristics of independent food banks including when their operation commenced, how they are staffed, opening times, how and if data is collected, what food parcels comprise, as well as potential factors influencing these characteristics including funding, space availability, the influence of external organisations; the groups food banks serve and how people access their services; how food banks respond to changes in demand, and opinions about how food bank usage could be reduced; food banks' aims, services offered in addition to food aid, and other activities engaged in both locally and nationally related to food poverty. The results presented in this report focus on aspects of operational characteristics, clients, and challenges food banks face.

⁶ This mapping exercise was carried out for the whole of the UK. Food banks were located by a systematic web search by area, local authority and through telephone consultations with local food banks and other agencies. Food parcel distribution activities run by the national charity, The Salvation Army, were not included. For more details, see <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/independent-food-banks-map>.

Findings

How do independent food banks operate and when did they start operating?

Almost 10% of independent food banks started distributing food parcels before 2004, but the majority (75%) started operating in the past 9 nine years (see Figure 1). Most of the food parcels distributed by independent food banks are picked up by clients during regular operating hours, however, many food banks also deliver food parcels to private residences or distribute food parcels through third-party agents such as social workers or health professionals (Table 1).

Figure 1: Year food bank started distributing food parcels (n=114).

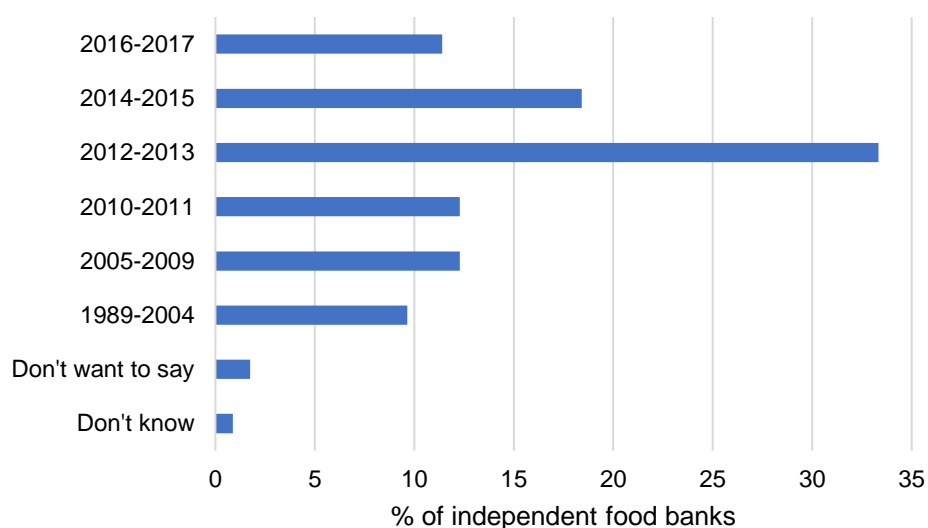


Table 1: Methods of food parcel distribution among food banks.

	Food banks providing food parcel collection/delivery method*		Food banks with most clients using indicated collection/delivery method	
	n	%	n	%
Clients pick up food parcels during regularly set hours/session times	93	81.6	92	80.7
Deliver to agents or agents pick up food parcels and distribute on your behalf	82	71.9	13	11.4
Food bank delivers food parcels to clients	56	49.1	6	5.26
Clients can pick up food parcels any time the main organisation is open	26	22.8	2	1.75
Clients pick up food parcels by appointment only	22	19.3	1	0.88

Notes: * Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Similar to The Trussell Trust food bank model, many independent food banks require potential clients to have a referral from a third-party agency. As shown in Table 2, over 60% indicated that new clients require a referral from a third-party agency, though 45% indicated that exceptions to this rule can be made. Significantly, 39.5% of food banks did not require

referrals from third-party agencies (i.e. accepted self-referrals). The majority of these indicated that referrals were often received from third-party agencies as well, even though formal referrals were not a requirement for service access.

Table 2: Food banks requiring new clients to have a referral from a third-party agency.

	n	%
Yes, always	18	15.8
Yes, but exceptions will be made	51	44.7
No third-party referral required	45	39.5

Notes: Responses may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Although many food banks requiring referrals made exceptions and/or allowed clients to self-refer the first time, 40% required a formal referral subsequent to an initial self-referral. Conversely, some food banks requiring a referral for first time use did not require a referral for subsequent visits (though in some cases, a new referral would be required if a new reason for food bank use arose).

In addition to, or instead of, referrals from third-party agencies, food banks also used a variety of other intake procedures when clients presented to their services. These included filling out a registration form, filling out a needs' assessment questionnaire, or showing ID and/or proof of address (Table 3).

In some cases, these types of intake procedures appear to be used instead of a referral system. Of food banks with no referral requirement (n=45), 68.9% required clients to fill out a registration form and 64.4% carried out a food bank-administered assessment of need. However, these procedures were much less common in food banks where referrals were generally or always required.

Table 3 Food banks with other actions required of clients in addition to, or instead of, third-party referral.

	n	%
Completion of a registration form	43	37.7
Questionnaire/interview to assess need(s) conducted by food bank volunteer or staff	37	32.5
Required to present ID	20	17.5
Required to present proof of address	13	11.4
Required to meet with an on-site advice worker	10	8.77
Proof of income or income source	9	7.89
Proof of emergency/crisis (e.g. homelessness, redundancy, benefit delay, contact with other service agency etc)	6	5.26
Other	23	20.2
None of above	35	30.7

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Food banks receiving referrals received them from a range of different agencies. More than 75% of food banks reported receiving referrals from local authority social services/family services, GP or other medical professional, housing associations, Citizen's Advice Bureaux, schools, children's centres, and/or probation officers. Almost 70% also indicated receiving referrals from Jobcentre Plus offices. The agency reported by most food banks as sending

the highest number of referrals was local authority social services or family services. This finding highlights the close relationship that now exists between local government and the local, volunteer-led, food aid sector. As further evidence of this relationship, we found that 72.8% of unitary authority, council, or London borough websites where food banks included in the sample were located included information on their websites guiding people to food parcel provisioning services in their areas. Amongst food banks located in areas with district councils (n=45), 22% of district council websites had information on food banks.

How often and what type of help can people receive from food banks?

Practices related to how often people could receive help, and what they would be provided with, were mixed. Just over half of food banks (56%) imposed a limit on how many times someone could receive a food parcel, but 44% had no restriction on how often people could receive food. The number of times someone could receive a food parcel and time periods over which limits applied also varied, from being very frequent (i.e. once or twice a week), to 2-3 times per 6 months, and to as infrequent as 2-3 times a year. When responses on the number of times a food parcel could be received are standardised over a 12-month period (Table 4), it can be seen that although almost one third of food banks restricted food parcel receipt to six or fewer times per year, over 17.5% allowed food parcels to be received 18 or more times a year. Further, even amongst those imposing a limit on the number of times a person might receive food, discretion was apparent, with almost all food banks indicating that they might relax their restrictions in some situations.

Table 4: Limits placed on frequency of food parcel receipt in food banks, standardised to a 12-month period.

Number of times a food parcel can be received in 12-month period	Food banks	
	n	%
2-4	18	15.8
5-6	18	15.8
10-12	6	5.26
18-20	3	2.63
24-26	2	1.75
30-36	5	4.39
48-52	8	7.02
104	2	1.75
Unlimited	50	43.9
Missing	2	1.75

Notes: Responses may not add to 100% due to rounding.

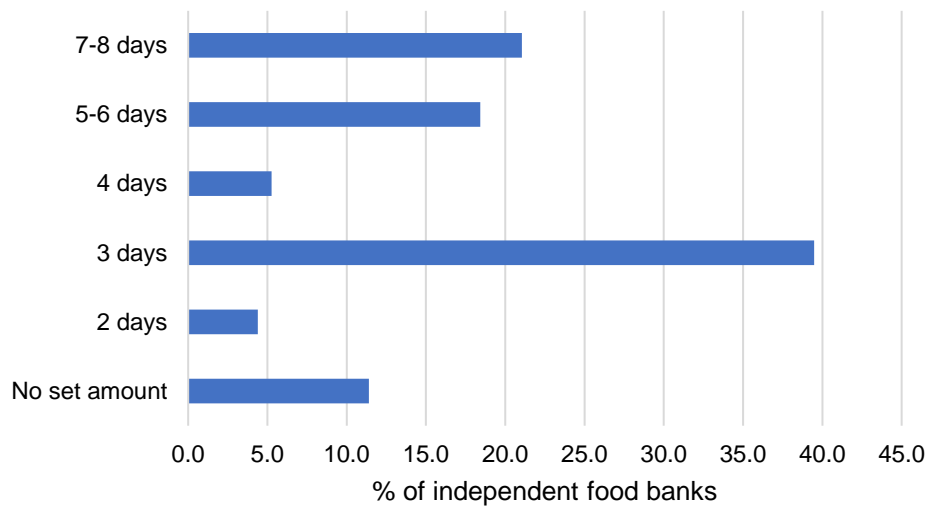
Limitless or limited assistance?

It is clear from our data that independent food banks take very different approaches to the distribution of charitable food parcels, with some running quite strict systems of referral and placing limits on how often people can receive food, and others not using a referral system and/or imposing no limits at all. Interestingly, rules relating to referral and to the number of times a person may receive food appear often to be related. For example, amongst food banks that did not require a third-party referral (n=45 food banks), only 31.1% restricted the number of times that people could receive food parcels. By contrast, amongst food banks where referrals were generally required, 72.5% limited the number of times people could receive help.

Overall, 27% of food banks did not require referrals and put no limits on the number of times someone can receive help. Why some food banks impose limits and require referrals, whilst others do not, was explored in open-ended questions and is the focus of ongoing analyses.

The content of the parcels which food banks distribute tend to either contain a standard list of items or be pre-packed, although about half of food banks indicated they allow clients to choose between some types of items. As shown in Figure 2, when providing standardised food parcels, almost 40% of food banks reported providing enough food to last three days, consistent with the amount distributed by Trussell Trust food banks. However, about 45% of food banks provided parcels that provided four or more days' worth of food (Figure 2). About 10% of food banks enable clients to choose items themselves, though they might impose limits on the number of items from which choices can be made.

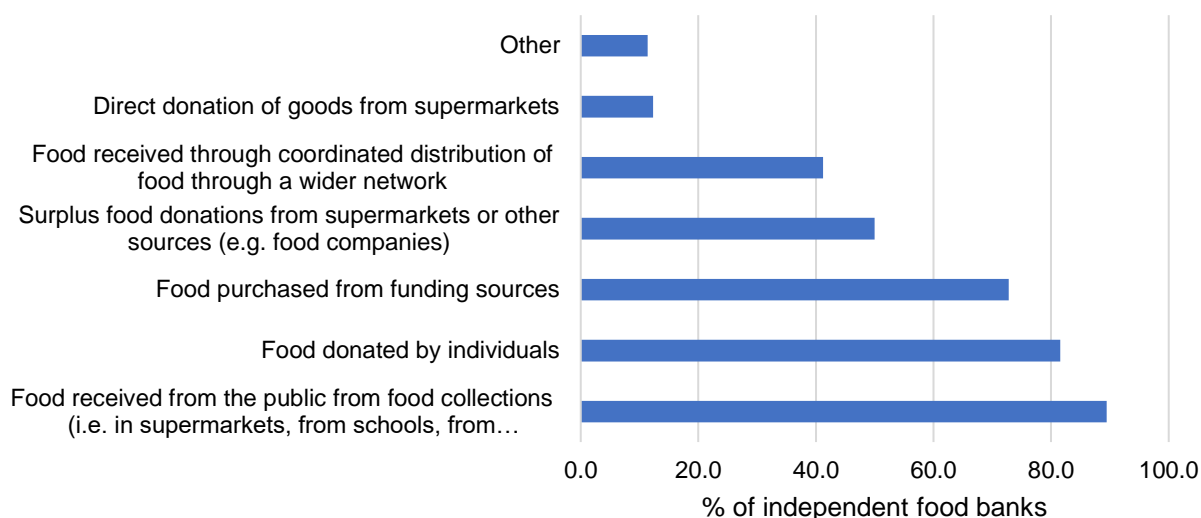
Figure 2: Number of days of food provided in standardised food parcels.



Whilst not always able to provide intended amounts or items (see below section on challenges), almost all food banks aimed to provide a quantity of food that reflected the number of household members and which included tinned vegetables, tinned or dried fruit, a source of carbohydrate, and a source of protein. Almost 60-65% of food banks aim to provide fresh fruit or vegetables and/or meet healthy food guidelines, and 45.6% aim to provide Halal goods (if requested). In addition to food items, most food banks aimed to provide other, non-food items; most commonly, toiletries, hygiene items and pet food.

Most food banks indicated receiving food donations from the public through food collections or from donations from individuals, but 72% of food banks reported purchasing foods from their funding sources. Half of food banks received donations of surplus foods (i.e. foods that could not be sold or nearing expiry dates) from supermarkets or other food enterprises, but some (14%) also received non-surplus foods directly donated from supermarkets.

Figure 3: Sources of food contained in food parcels.



In addition to the provision of food parcels, almost all food banks indicated they provided signposting to other services or assistance, and 60% offered other services, in-house, as well. The most popular additional service offered was advocating on behalf of clients, for example, making telephone calls on behalf of clients to job centres or housing providers and, offering benefits, debt, or housing advice (Table 5).

Table 5: Other types of services or activities offered in food banks.

	Food banks	
	n	%
Signposting only	46	40.4
Advocating on behalf of clients	41	36.0
Benefits advice	36	31.6
Debt advice	35	30.7
Housing advice	33	29.0
Job-seeking advice	29	25.4
Community café	22	19.3
Money management classes	19	16.7
Cooking classes	16	14.0
Counselling	16	14.0
Free meals service/soup kitchen	13	11.4
Addiction support	12	10.5
Other	54	47.4

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Significantly, 47% of food banks indicated they also provided other services beyond those listed above. We asked respondents to indicate what these were and coded the responses into six broad categories. These were additional practical services, education activities, additional social/communal activities, social support, pastoral support, or health and well-being support or services. Figure 4 provides examples of the specific other types of services offered.

Figure 4: Other services or activities offered at food banks.



Organisational structure, staff and funding

About half of food banks operate as part of a wider organisation, with food parcel distribution being one activity or service among others. Of these, 39% were part of a church or faith-based organisation, and 52% were part of a community or social service organisation. Interestingly, though over half of food banks indicated that their food bank was the core or main function of their organisation, whether part of a wider organisation or not, just over 56% of food banks indicated being part of a faith group. In all but two cases this was a Christian faith group, but one identified as a multi-faith group, and the other was run by a Muslim faith group. One food bank did not want to report whether they were affiliated with a faith group or not. These figures stand in contrast to Trussell Trust food banks, many of which started as, or remain, church-based projects.⁷

Most food banks operated in spaces that were not specifically dedicated to their food banks and almost half operated in faith-affiliated buildings or halls.

Just over half of food banks had paid staff working to run their food bank project but 47% had no paid staff. In the large majority of cases, this was paid part-time staff, though 34% of food banks had 2 or more paid part-time staff. The probability of food banks having staff did not differ by whether or not the food bank was the organisation's core function or part of a wider organisation, nor by type of organisation (i.e. churches were equally likely to have part-time staff running their food banks as social service organisations).

⁷ See forthcoming book, Williams A, May J, Cloke P, Cherry L (2020) *Feeding Austerity? Ethical Ambiguities and Political Possibilities in UK Food Banks*. Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford; and Lambie-Mumford, H. (2017) *Hungry Britain: The rise of food charity*, Bristol: Policy Press

Food banks rely heavily on volunteer labour. Only 3 food banks had no regular volunteers. Almost 75% of food banks relied on five or more volunteers each week, and 21% relied on 20 or more volunteers each week (Table 6).

Table 6: Food banks with indicated number of volunteers in a given week.

	Food banks with indicated number of volunteers	
	n	%
None	3	2.63
1-4 volunteers	27	23.7
5-9 volunteers	33	29.0
10-14 volunteers	20	17.5
15-19 volunteers	7	6.14
20-24 volunteers	8	7.02
25-34 volunteers	8	7.02
35-44 volunteers	4	3.51
45-80 volunteers	4	3.51

Notes: Responses may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Food banks received funding from a variety of sources, with most reporting financial support from fundraising appeals and donations from the public (Table 7). Over 60% also received funding from a faith group. About 42% of food banks received core funding from either an affiliated organisation or charitable trust. Local authority social services were also a source of financial support for over a third of food banks and provided in-kind support for 22.8% of food banks. Five food banks had no funding at the time they were surveyed.

Table 7: Food banks' indicated funding sources

	Food banks receiving funding from indicated sources	
	n	%
Fundraising appeals/general public donations	100	87.7
Gifts and donations from faith group	70	61.4
Core funding from affiliated/umbrella organisation	18	15.8
Core funding from charitable trust	43	37.7
Local Government funding (including parish councils, district councils, unitary authorities, etc.)	42	36.8
In-kind support from Local Government (e.g. reduced rates, free premises)	26	22.8
In-kind support from other charities/community organisations (e.g. storage space, delivery van)	26	22.8
Other:	19	16.7
Local businesses	5	4.39
Corporate sponsorship	4	3.51
Local community groups (e.g. Rotary, Brownies)	5	4.39
Schools	2	1.75
Housing associations	2	1.75
In-kind from businesses	2	1.75
Profits from local charity shop	2	1.75
No funding	5	4.39

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Challenges food banks face

As food banks rely heavily on financial and food donations from the public, donated space, and volunteer labour, we were interested in the potential challenges these vulnerabilities could pose to food bank operations. In addition, with evidence that food banks have become the *de facto* response to food insecurity in their communities, we were interested in food banks' assessments of their operational capacity and ability to cope with potential increased demand in the future.

On the operational side, though heavily reliant on volunteers, this did not appear to be a problem for most food banks, with 69% indicating they had the right number of volunteers each week. However, about 20% of food banks indicated that they had fewer than the ideal number of volunteers each week. Approximately 10% of food banks indicated they had more volunteers than needed to run their food bank each week.

Funding was a source of vulnerability for some food banks, with 28% indicating they were somewhat uncertain of their funding from year to year, and an additional 12% indicating they were very uncertain of their funding or were currently without funding.

Few food banks (n=14) used a space that was solely for the purpose of operating their food bank, and this also posed challenges for some (Table 8). Over half of food banks indicated having one or more problems with their premises. The most frequently cited problem related to insufficient or inappropriate space for storing food, but also being unable to offer privacy to clients, an inability to store fresh food, and having space which was too small for the number of clients they were seeing. A small number of food banks indicated that they were only able to run a delivery service, because they did not have a space that allowed clients to pick up food. Other problems included: not having enough space for running additional activities, the location of premises being inaccessible by public transport, premises unsuitable for, or inaccessible to, people with disabilities, and/or problems relating to sharing the space with other groups.

Table 8: Problems with food bank premises.

	Food banks reporting indicated problem with premises	
	n	%
None	53	46.5
Insufficient or inappropriate space for the storage of food.	34	29.8
Inadequate space to guarantee privacy for clients.	24	21.1
Inadequate facilities to enable safe storage of fresh food.	22	19.3
Insufficient space to accommodate the number of clients who come to pick up food.	19	16.7
Can only deliver/have agents distribute food due to lack of space	4	3.51
Other problems with premises.	24	21.1

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Possibly related to a lack of storage space for perishable foods, only about 60% of food banks aimed to provide fresh fruit and/or vegetables in their food parcels. Further, amongst those aiming to provide fresh fruit and vegetables, 43% reported difficulties in doing so on a regular basis. Though most food banks did not struggle to include a quantity of food to match

the number of household members or contents meeting the healthy plate guidelines, many struggled to regularly include a protein source (19.5%) and milk or other sources of dairy (21.2%).

Providing enough food for clients was occasionally a problem for food banks due to insufficient food supplies, though most indicated never having to give someone less than the usual amount or having to turn people away (Table 9). However, even though insufficient food supplies rarely impacted on what clients received, worry about having insufficient food supplies – and actions to boost supplies – were quite common, with over two-thirds of food banks doing so in the past 12 months.

Table 9: Experiences of insufficient food supplies in food banks in the past 12 months.

	Food banks indicating food supply issues	
	n	%
Gave someone less food than the usual amount contained in a food parcel because short on food supplies*		
No	75	65.8
Yes, but rarely	20	17.5
Yes, some months, but not every month	16	14.0
Yes, almost every month or every month	2	1.75
Don't know	1	0.88
Turned someone away without food due to not having enough food to distribute*		
No	111	97.4
Yes, but rarely	2	1.75
Yes, some months, but not every month	1	0.88
Yes, almost every month or every month	0	0
Looked for ways to boost food supplies because worried would not have enough food to distribute*		
No	36	31.6
Yes, but rarely	34	29.8
Yes, some months, but not every month	33	29.0
Yes, almost every month or every month	11	9.65

Notes: * Responses may not add to 100% due to rounding.

We also asked whether food banks felt the number of people they helped in an average week matched their capacity. Just over half felt that the number of people served was matched to their capacity with respect to both having enough volunteers and sufficient food supplies; 17% of food banks reported experiencing fluctuating demand, such that some weeks they felt there were more people than they had the capacity to help, and in other weeks they saw only very few people. Almost an equal number, 16%, indicated that the number they helped each week was actually less than they had the capacity to help. Lastly, 14% of food banks felt that the number they tended to serve each week was more than they had capacity to help.

Although most food banks felt they had the capacity to respond to their current level of demand, we asked how an increase of 20% (about the same rise in volume of use experienced by Trussell Trust food banks over 2017-18 to 2018-19) would affect their

services. About 55% felt that an increase in demand of 20% would have some impact on their services, stretching their ability to meet demand. An additional 21% of food banks indicated that this increase would have a lot of impact and that they might not be able to meet demand.

Who do independent food banks serve?

Because most independent food banks do not harmonise data collection with other food banks operating across the UK, very little is known about whom these food banks serve. Whilst data may be compiled in reports produced at the food bank level⁸, these data have not before been compared across different sites in England (though this has recently been done in Scotland⁹). As they are under no obligation to collect or maintain data on volume of use or user characteristics, it has also not been known how many independent food banks collect these types of information.

In our survey, we asked about methods of data collection and about whom food banks serve. We found that most food banks collect some type of data (Table 10). Most track the number of food parcels they distribute, which gives some indication of how demand for food assistance has changed over time. Importantly, 85% of food banks also indicated maintaining a database of unique individuals who pick up food parcels and 73% collected these data at the household level. These data can be used to track whether more or fewer people have been receiving help from food banks and the length of time that they receive help. Because these types of data are not collected by all food banks, however, it remains difficult to calculate the overall volume of use nationally.¹⁰

Table 10: Data collected by independent food banks.

	Food banks reporting data collection method	
	n	%
Record number of food parcels given out	101	88.6
Maintain database of unique individuals who pick up food parcels	97	85.1
Record numbers fed by food parcels given out	92	80.7
Maintain database of unique households who pick up food parcels	83	72.8
Maintain database of unique total number of people helped by food parcels (i.e. household members)	76	66.7
Record total volume of food given out	30	26.3
Do not track food bank use	2	1.8
Don't know	1	0.9

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

⁸ For examples of organisations providing data on the number of food parcels they distribute, of varying scales, see <https://www.thewelcomecentre.org/> and <https://holmevalleyfoodbank.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/newsletter-august-2019.pdf>

⁹ See project by IFAN and A Menu for Change: <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/food-bank-data-in-scotland>

¹⁰ It is of note that The Trussell Trust's yearly and mid-year figures are based on volume of food parcel distribution, as they count the numbers helped by their food parcels and do not report number of repeat users. However, in their State of Hunger report, published in November 2019, the number of unique households using their member food banks was reported and will be tracked over time. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/>

We asked respondents which socio-demographic groups made up a significant proportion of their client base, whilst acknowledging that these are not mutually exclusive groups (see table 10).¹¹ As shown in Table 10, almost all food banks indicated that people with benefit issues and people who were unemployed made up a significant proportion of their clients. Single parent families and people unable to work due to illness or disability also made up a large proportion of clients in most food banks (93%). Almost 90% of food banks also indicated that many of the people they help also have mental health disorders. These groups have been found to make up a significant proportion of people using Trussell Trust food banks as well.¹²

Of note is that a quite a few food banks reported that groups less often observed in Trussell Trust food banks made up a large proportion of their clients. For example, 71% of food banks reported people in part-time work made up a large proportion of their clients; 62% reported people on zero-hour contracts made up a large proportion of their clients; and 36% even reported having a large proportion of people in full-time work. Among Trussell Trust food banks, only 14% of households using food banks include someone with employment, and this is very rarely full-time employment¹³, so it is significant that some food banks reported seeing people in work so often. This warrants more exploration, as it could be that intake procedures, such as requiring referral from frontline agencies might be a barrier to food bank use for people in employment.

For the same reasons, it is important to highlight that 36.7% of food banks reported that people with no recourse to public funds made up a significant proportion of their clients. In Trussell Trust food banks, only 5% of households referred had no recourse to public funds. Again, this might suggest that some independent food banks are more likely to see these groups.

Of course, because this question did not ask food bank managers to report *what proportion* of their clients came from these groups, it is not possible to know with certainty how the profile of food bank users differ between independent and Trussell Trust food banks. Further, it is important to highlight that people with disabilities, people who are unemployed, single parent families, and people with benefit issues are common service users in all food banks, regardless of whether food banks are part of The Trussell Trust's network or independent.

About 74% of food banks in our sample collected data on the reasons clients gave for needing to use the food bank. Of these food banks, 82.7% indicated waiting on a benefit payment or decision as one of the three most common reasons for food bank use, and 73.8% of food banks indicated interruption or reduction in benefit payments as one of the three most common reasons for food bank use. Many food banks also reported debt, benefit sanctions, and insufficient incomes to meet living costs as among the three most common reasons for food bank use among their clients (see Table 12).¹⁴

¹¹ The specific question that was asked here was: "From the following list, please indicate the groups that make up a significant proportion of your food bank clients. These categories overlap so please indicate all that you think capture your main client base."

¹² See recent report by Sosenko et al. which reports on the characteristics of over 1,100 people using Trussell Trust food banks. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Food banks were asked "Among the reasons why your clients use your food bank, which were the most common in the past 6 months? Please select up to three from the following list or provide your own."

Table 11: Food banks reporting group comprising a significant proportion of their clients.

	Food banks indicating group as a significant proportion of their clients	
	n	%
Unemployed	110	96.5
People with benefit issues (delay, waiting on payment)	110	96.5
People unable to work due to illness or disability	106	93.0
Single parent families	106	93.0
People with mental health disorders	102	89.5
People who have had their benefits sanctioned	97	85.1
Singles 35-50 years of age	94	82.5
Couple-parent families	92	80.7
People living in temporary housing	92	80.7
Singles <35 years of age	91	79.8
People with drug/alcohol addictions	90	79.0
People in part-time work	81	71.1
Singles aged 50+	77	67.5
People on zero-hour contracts	71	62.3
Victims of domestic violence	63	55.3
People with temporary/seasonal work	61	53.5
People who are sleeping rough	51	44.7
People in full-time work	41	36.0
People with no recourse to public funds	41	36.0
Refugees/asylum seekers	35	30.7
Pensioners	27	23.7
Other	27	23.7

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Here, it is worth comparing our survey data to data collected through referral vouchers in The Trussell Trust network.¹⁵ When providing a client with a referral to a Trussell Trust food bank, referral agents are asked to indicate the primary reason for doing so. In 2018-19, over 38% of referrals were due to benefit delays or benefit changes. An additional 33% were attributed to insufficient incomes to meet basic needs. Although we did not ask food banks what proportion of their clients required food parcels for these reasons, and, therefore, are unable to make direct comparisons with The Trussell Trust data, most food banks appear to provide food parcels for the same types of reasons.

¹⁵ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>

Table 12: Food banks' indications of top three most common reasons for food banks use among their clients where information collected (n=84).

	Food banks indicating reason	
	n	%
Awaiting outcome of a benefit application (i.e payment or decision)	69	82.1
Benefit payment interrupted or reduced due to re-assessment, loan repayment, or other reason	62	73.8
High rates of debt meaning income insufficient to cover basic needs	51	60.7
Benefits currently stopped due to a sanction	51	60.7
Regular income insufficient to meet basic needs (e.g. food, housing, utilities)	48	57.1
Inability to manage money due to issues such as gambling, addiction, or other problems	25	29.8
Unexpected outgoings (e.g. repairs, accident, funeral, relocation, help for family member)	18	21.4
No recourse to public funds	8	9.52
Other reasons	8	9.52
Missing	1	1.19
Didn't know	1	1.19

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option, thus, responses do not add to 100%.

Reflections on the survey findings

Food banks are a post-2010 phenomenon in the UK.

In the UK, food banks entered public and policy debate when The Trussell Trust started publishing their data and the media started paying attention, with media analyses documenting how there was little coverage of food banks prior to 2012.¹⁶ But whilst the first Trussell Trust food bank opened in 2000, and they started their social franchise in 2004, it has been unclear whether their model, or other food bank models, existed in the UK before it was popularised by The Trussell Trust. Based on data from this survey there was indeed very little food bank activity before 2004. Whilst some independent food banks could be found before 2010, over 75% of independent food banks started operating after this time. These numbers also match the rise of food banks within The Trussell Trust network.

Why have food banks spread across Britain in the past decade? Why food aid in particular? These questions will be explored in further analyses of our survey respondents' answers to a question exploring their motivations for starting to provide a food parcel distribution service. But at a high level, this rise aligns with austerity. Across high-income countries, charitable food aid responses have multiplied as governments cut back their funding for social services and welfare.¹⁷ It appears that this has also been the case in the post-recession climate of austerity in Britain.

There is significant variation in the food bank sector.

The organisations included in our analysis were, by definition, those providing food parcels at least weekly; however, beyond this common activity, there was significant variation in this sector. The distribution of food parcels is being carried out by a variety of groups. Some of these are what is typical of food banks run by The Trussell Trust; churches which have opted to run a food bank as part of their social outreach. Just under half of independent food banks are not operated by a faith group, however. In other cases, food parcel distribution has been adopted by organisations already operating other frontline social or community services. Indeed, anecdotally, many survey participants volunteered that they did not identify their service as a food bank at all, seeing their food parcel distribution service as only one of many activities being offered by their organisation. The extent to which food banks provide other services also differentiates organisations from one another across this sector. Some only provide food and signposting, but others are clearly multi-service hubs, offering a variety of frontline services and support.

Another major source of variation is how food banks operate. Some food banks operated quite similarly to Trussell Trust food banks, with regularly scheduled times when clients can pick up food, receiving referrals from local third-sector agencies, and limiting how often food parcels can be received. However, a number of food banks did not resemble the typical Trussell Trust food bank model at all; allowing self-referral or using other intake procedures, not placing any restrictions on the number of times someone could receive food parcels, and/or offering delivery services alongside regular pick-up times. These characteristics might

¹⁶ Wells, R. and Caraher, M. (2014). UK print media coverage of the food bank phenomenon: From food welfare to food charity? *British Food Journal*, 116(9), pp. 1426-1445. Link to open-access version: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/8666/1/Wells%20print%20media.pdf>

¹⁷ For more discussion on these cross-country comparisons and trends, see "[First World Hunger Revisited Food Charity or the Right to Food?](#)", edited by Graham Riches and Tiina Silvasti, and the forthcoming book "[The Rise of Food Charity in Europe](#)", edited by Hannah Lambie-Mumford and Tiina Silvasti.

increase accessibility for people who are not connected to referral-type agencies and also amongst people experiencing chronic food insecurity. This may explain why some food banks reported having a large number of clients with characteristics rarely seen in Trussell Trust food banks (e.g. people in work, people with no recourse to public funds). Of note, however, was that even amongst food banks with stricter usage policies, survey respondents indicated that exceptions would be made to rules, suggesting flexibility and discretion in the systems they use.

We also found that about half of the food banks in our sample provided more than 3 days' worth of food in their food parcels. Across North America and in the Trussell Trust network, providing three days' worth of food tends to be the standard amount provided by food banks, although how this provision quota was arrived at is not clear. Some evidence from the UK suggests this amount was intended to support someone until the 'short term crisis' was resolved or until an emergency loan kicked in.¹⁸ However, there has been little scrutiny about the quantity of food provided in relation to the actual needs of the households receiving food. Recent studies have shown some people need more than a 3-day supply,¹⁹ and certainly studies²⁰ documenting the severity and persistence of food insecurity amongst food bank clients suggest more may be needed. Though a significant number of food banks in this study offer more than 3-days' worth, very few food banks allowed clients full autonomy over either the amount, or types, of food they put in their parcels. Analyses of the nutritional quality of food provided from food banks in different countries have also consistently shown food parcels do not provide sufficient amounts of fruit, vegetables, milk and related micronutrients²¹, and some food banks in this study also reported being unable to provide the protein and/or dairy products they would like to offer, or fresh fruit and vegetables, as regularly as they aim to.

Although the operational characteristics of independent food banks differed from those of Trussell Trust food banks, people tend to use them for the same reasons, with almost all food banks identifying the main groups being helped as people who were unemployed, or with disabilities, and unable to work and, likely overlapping these categories, people affected by benefit problems.²² Single parents were also identified as a key group of clients by most food banks. These groups are also those at highest risk of food insecurity in national data sets.²³ The consistency of this picture across multiple data sets but also now from a diverse range of organisations distributing food parcels underscores how important it is for policy

¹⁸ See Thompson M (2013) Meet Trussell Trust founders Paddy and Carol Henderson whose Foodbanks have fed 900,000 hungry Brits. *Mirror*. 14th August. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/trussell-trust-founders-paddy-carol-2163135>. Also see Williams A, May J, Cloke P, Cherry L (2020) *Feeding Austerity? Ethical Ambiguities and Political Possibilities in UK Food Banks*. Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford.

¹⁹ For example, see May, J, Williams, A, Cloke, P, Cherry, L. Food banks and the production of scarcity. *Trans Inst Br Geogr*. 2019; 00: 1– 15.

²⁰ For example, see https://trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/OU_Report_final_01_08_online.pdf

²¹ For a review of academic papers, see Simmet, Anja et al. (2017) The Nutritional Quality of Food Provided from Food Pantries: A Systematic Review of Existing Literature. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 117(4): 577 – 588.

²² See <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/> for November 2019 report and the 2017 precursor to this study, https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/OU_Report_final_01_08_online2.pdf

²³ Loopstra R, Reeves A, Tarasuk V. The rise of hunger among low-income households: an analysis of the risks of food insecurity between 2004 and 2016 in a population-based study of UK adults. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2019;73:668-673.

interventions to address the financial vulnerability that leads to food insecurity for these groups.

Challenges in food banks

Our data newly document some of the challenges food banks face. These include being unable to provide fresh foods in food parcels and/or meet other dietary targets, having too little space or inappropriate space for both clients and the storage of food, feeling stretched and, in some cases, having an insufficient, voluntary workforce. Some food banks experienced times when they were unable to provide the usual quantity of food. In some cases, these challenges may also be masked by limits placed on how often people can receive food parcels; in other words, limits on the help provided might artificially reduce demand, even if need remains unchanged. Given evidence of chronic food insecurity among food bank clients, restrictions on the number of times someone can use a food bank likely need to be lifted.

At their heart, both challenges and limits on the number of times people can receive food raise questions about whether people facing food insecurity are able to have their nutritional needs met by food parcel distribution. Relying on donated food, labour and space mean that the help that is provided through food parcel distribution is inherently limited. This likely means needs go unmet and indeed, despite evidence of a burgeoning of food aid activity over the past decade, the numbers of people experiencing severe food insecurity over 2016 to 2018 have not declined.²⁴

Other notable findings and future research

The delivery of food parcels to residences or through third-party agents is another notable difference from how Trussell Trust food banks operate. Food banks operating exclusively through these channels often did so because they lacked space to run a frontline food bank service, or because the rural nature of their catchment area made a lack of transportation a potential barrier to service use. Food banks operating this way, as too, those running pick-up services from third-party agencies, might do so to address concerns about inaccessibility for people with disabilities or children or to overcome the barrier of stigma for clients not willing to consider visiting a food bank. Because many studies have focused on client experiences within food banks, it would be of interest to explore whether food parcel distribution through third parties or delivery, address some of the concerns of the accessibility, visibility and stigma of food bank use.

Furthermore, one of the principle fault lines appearing to structure food bank provision in the UK, is the degree to which food banks adhere to time-limited referral-only systems or, offer less conditional approaches to food aid. The moral and practical questions of whether or not to restrict eligibility, or ration the content of the food parcels or the number of times someone can visit a food bank, need to be examined in greater depth given emerging evidence that such rationing systems are an impediment to dignity and exacerbate food insecurity for some households.²⁵ While referral-only and rationing systems might have entered the common sense of food bank operations, some evidence presented here suggests many independent food banks are seeking to do things differently in terms of the type of food offered and the rules about eligibility, direct access, and unlimited use. It is worth unpacking

²⁴ See Food and You 2016 and Food and You 2018 reports, available from the Food Standards Agency: <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/food-and-you>

²⁵ For example, see May, J, Williams, A, Cloke, P, Cherry, L. Food banks and the production of scarcity. *Trans Inst Br Geogr.* 2019; 00: 1– 15.

the different theological and political justifications given for referral and voucher systems, and the extent to which self-referral may change the experience of using a food bank.

We documented that most food banks are tracking the volume of food parcel distribution, and in many cases the numbers of people being helped by their services, including the number of unique users. As noted previously, data consolidated from the majority of food parcel distribution projects across Scotland have been published and further used to extrapolate and estimate the volume of food parcel distribution in non-Trussell Trust food banks across the whole of the UK. Our data suggest the work in Scotland could be extended to independent food banks in England, and this is work that the Independent Food Aid Network is planning to commence in early 2020.

Conclusions

This representative survey of 114 independent food banks providing food parcel distribution outside of the Trussell Trust's network across England is the first to document when these sites began distributing food parcels, how they operate, and who they serve. The survey highlights the extensive efforts that communities across the country are making in attempt to meet local needs. It characterises some of the challenges this sector faces, but also the extensive volunteer, financial, and donated food resources these organisations rely on. As many others have suggested, the sustainability of these efforts in the long term is questionable, especially given the concerns food bank staff themselves raise over being able to meet increased demand. The findings highlight the particular groups in need of support (namely, people who are unemployed, who have disabilities, and/or single parents) are especially significant, as they are consistent with many other existing pieces of research identifying the urgent need for effective policy responses to secure the adequate incomes for these groups. This study points to several areas for further research and opportunities for discussion over the current and future role of food banks and charitable food aid provision in general, as well as the efficacy of existing and possible future policy interventions.

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