

A life without dignity

Findings of the Poverty Truth Commission on
Food Poverty

February 2016

‘Nothing about us, without us, is for us’

The Poverty Truth Commission

The Poverty Truth Commission brings together people with direct experience of poverty and individuals in important positions of power in Scotland. The commission has created a unique decision-making model, breaking down social and economic barriers, ensuring decisions are taken collectively, with titles and labels left outside the room.

The Poverty Truth Commission believes people with direct experience of poverty are experts on their situation. However, they are often excluded from decision-making processes which can have a major impact on their lives. If we are serious about reducing and eradicating poverty, the Commission believes we must ensure they are seated at the decision making table.

The authors of this report would like to thank all those who told their stories so freely and honestly.



Introduction

Why a report on food poverty?

In recent years the issue of food poverty has received a lot of media and political attention across the United Kingdom. In Scotland, the issue of food justice has featured recently in the work of the Scottish Government-appointed Good Food Commission, and a short life working group on food insecurity was specially convened by the Cabinet Secretary of Social Justice in October 2015, with recommendations due to be sent to him in March 2016.¹ In addition, there have been a substantial number of reports produced by academics, health professionals and food activists amongst others.²

We decided to launch our own investigation into food poverty, however, as this was raised by commissioners as an issue of great importance. It was felt that their voices were generally not being heard on the subject, and wanted to articulate their stories: identifying where change was needed and offering possible solutions. At the heart of this was the feeling that being food insecure is an affront to a person's dignity.

This report does not set out to be a definitive account of food poverty across Scotland, and only touches briefly on statistics to help give an overall context. Instead, we have taken the stories we have heard as our central focus. This is grounded firmly in the belief decision-makers cannot fully understand food insecurity and poverty, and therefore provide effective solutions, until they have stories of the indignity it causes.

This report, therefore, hopes to offer something new to the already busy landscape of food poverty and insecurity work by amplifying the stories we have heard and making recommendations through the lens of respect for human dignity.

¹ The Poverty Truth Commission has been closely involved in the work of both of these groups and is hopeful they can bring progress

² See, for example [The Nature and extent of food poverty/ insecurity in Scotland](#) (May 2015)

Food poverty or food insecurity?

We use the term 'food poverty' throughout this report to refer to the situation as this was used almost exclusively by those we heard to tell their personal experiences of the situation. However, we know from hearing these stories that the inability to access a well-balanced and nutritious diet, is a symptom of a wider poverty, and as such we do not dispute the use of the term food insecurity.

Setting the scene: the problem is bigger than you think

Many people in Scotland now turn to food banks and other emergency food providers at some point to feed themselves and their families. Others turn to family and friends, skip meals or go hungry.

More than 60,000 Scots visited [Trussell Trust](#) food banks (one of the largest providers) between April and September 2015³ – a 17% rise over the same period last year. Around a third receiving help from Trussell Trust food banks are children.

It's hard to know exactly how many food banks there are in the country, but a recent study⁴ thought that Trussell Trust might operate around a third of the overall provision in Scotland. That would mean many more people are relying on food banks than those recorded by the Trust.

Over the same period in 2012, the number was just over 4,000 so the use of food banks has been rising very quickly indeed. Other countries have seen similar increases in the use of food banks. Canada now helps more than 850,000 people annually – a rise of 26% since 2008.

Why do people use food banks?

Trussell Trust again have the best statistical information about why Scots turn to food banks for help. For just under one in three people, the reason for going to the food bank was because of delays in receiving benefits.⁵

A Scottish Parliament Committee report into this issue in June 2014 said that it was “convinced by the volume and strength of the evidence it received that here is a direct correlation between welfare reform and the increase in food banks”.⁶

³ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/>

⁴ [Making The connections: a Study in emergency food aid in Scotland](#) Mary Anne Macleod, The Poverty Alliance, January 2015

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-34849661>

⁶ The Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee, *Food Banks and Welfare Reform*, June 2nd 2014



1 in 3

seek help because of delays in
benefit payments



1 in 5

seek help because of low
income



Many more

need help but avoid food banks
because of sense of stigma and
shame

Around 1 in 5 seek help from food banks because of low income – and that number is growing.⁷ That's often people in low paid work and unstable contracts, who can need help if there's an expected bill or emergency at home, or simply to get by until the pay cheque arrives at the end of the month.

Many people who come to food banks have complex needs, and can be socially isolated. Many suffer from mental health problems, addictions or don't speak English as a first language.⁸

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-34849661>

⁸ As above



Below the radar

As outlined above, it is difficult to pin down the numbers of people currently experiencing food poverty. The figures supplied by Trussel Trust may be only the tip of the iceberg as many organisations, churches and other groups give food aid, but would not consider themselves as food banks. In light of this, we spoke to two church based organisations to better understand the situation.

One group provides meals at nominal cost and is now receiving 80-115 people per day. The most common reasons we heard for people seeking help were benefit sanctions and destitution, including some who are seeking asylum. Professional workers were busy helping individuals with assistance in either claiming their full benefit entitlement or appealing against sanctions. There was a clear concern that matters will be much worse for the future with the introduction of Universal Credit at the same time as funding for the work of organisations like themselves is severely cut.

The second organisation provides a meal and a place to be for a few hours every evening. Previously, it tended to be frequented by older, homeless men with alcohol addiction problems. Now it finds itself offering around 70 meals a night and 40 food parcels to a much younger group and, through food parcels, engages with families. If these two organisations are indicative of the level of 'below the radar' food poverty, the problem is probably significantly higher than the official figures indicate.

Life without dignity: experiences of food poverty

Examining food bank use, and other forms of emergency food aid, gives an insight into 21st century food poverty in Scotland. However, we know many people experiencing food poverty do not seek these forms of help for a multitude of reasons. Instead they either turn to family and friends or go hungry. These do not register in the statistics.

We have tried to capture the key points of the stories we have heard. In essence, we believe, living with food insecurity amounts to a life without dignity. It leaves you with little or no control; you face unfair choices; you feel worthless.

Food Poverty can be impossible to escape

Food poverty is often defined as having two types: chronic and acute. With the rapid rise of food banks and other forms of emergency food provision, the latter has received a lot of media attention recently. As noted in this report and in other publications, a sudden income loss such as through sanctions, or the loss of employment, has often precipitated a crisis situation, requiring emergency food aid.

However, we have also heard of individuals and families living with chronic food poverty for years, sometimes falling in and out of the acute stage. Many have never visited food banks, and some do not consider themselves to be in food poverty, yet are often skipping meals and surviving on a sub-standard diet with severe health and wellbeing implications.

“I cook from whatever’s in the [supermarket’s] reduced cabinet...sometimes they get a better manager in and they’re tighter on their surplus and you think oh no, what am I going to do?... Sometimes don’t make good choices as you’re buying whatever’s there as doesn’t always slot in well as a meal...you end up buying rubbish because it’s there.”

Many people we have listened to have said they are unable to buy nutritious and well-balanced food due to low incomes and the hidden costs of being poor. These extra costs, known as the poverty premium, include increased transport costs, inability to bulk buy, 'food deserts' and not being near discount supermarkets, higher energy tariffs and harsher credit rates.

“You’d rather buy fresh fruit and vegetables and start from scratch, but that’s an impossibility as you’re looking for something within your budget, so you’re not picking up and choosing what you really want to cook.”

The poverty premium is not a new phenomenon, but for many this has been aggravated in recent years due to benefit cuts, unstable employment, low wages and sanctions. These are leaving many people feeling powerless and isolated and prove for them that it’s not possible to work your way out of poverty.

Going hungry is a symptom of wider poverty

Commissioners tell us time and gain that we cannot talk about food poverty without discussing fuel poverty and wider inequalities. We know from listening to people with direct experience that poverty is far more than just lack of money, it is a feeling of worthlessness and inferiority, causing and being reinforced by inequalities across many areas of life, from health and education to the ability to participate in society.

Food poverty is not a lifestyle choice

“When the boys are at school I don’t eat through the day ... make sure we’re gonna have a decent meal at night so I’ll be without.”

People in poverty have been described as lazy, poor budgeters, who make irresponsible decisions. However, from the stories we have heard, we are clear that people do not choose to live in poverty and the choices they can make are unfair and unjust: between eating or heating, feeding yourself or feeding your children, buying healthy food or buying enough to stop feeling hungry, going to a food bank or going hungry.

“I suppose it’s [food poverty] trying to juggle paying bills and providing a decent meal...especially when your fuel is pay as you go ... sometimes you can’t have three meals a day, you have just one main one.”

Food Poverty can make you feel worthless

The rapid response of food banks and other providers of emergency food throughout the UK have highlighted how many people, staff and volunteers, have refused to stand aside whilst their neighbours go hungry. In that sense, it is a great example of people looking out for each other. Volunteers and staff often go out of their way to try to make people feel welcome. However, despite this, we have heard stories of people in food poverty refusing to go due to the stigma of receiving a handout. People have said they would rather go hungry and some people who have gone have said this was their only option of getting food for their children.

“Food banks were not an option for me, as ... if I don’t have money to buy food how would I find the money to travel to them. There is also the stigma attached to them. I would be ashamed if my family found out I was using them.”

We have heard stories of people keeping food bank visits quiet from family, friends, neighbours, even from people they live and eat with.

Poverty can have severe physical and mental health impacts

Our commissioners have highlighted numerous alarming effects of food poverty on the health and well-being of themselves and family members. These include increased anxiety and stress, inability to keep their home warm or access a proper balanced diet, frequently skipping meals, feeling of isolation and of not being in control.

Commissioners also spoke of the sense of stigma and feeling of worthlessness due to hearing certain politicians and reading in newspapers use phrases such as 'strivers and skivers'.

Restoring dignity: recommendations from the experts

We listened to people with experience of food poverty as we understood they would be the best articulators of their experiences. We also listened to people with experience as we understood they would be the experts on solutions for addressing food poverty and insecurity. This is what they said.

We need empowering and sustainable solutions to chronic and acute food poverty

It's clear that income, not food, is the answer to food poverty. Many in our society are appalled by the food poverty we have and have done what they can to mitigate the situation. This is fantastic community spirit and has stopped people from going hungry in the immediate short term, as well as putting people into contact with invaluable advice to help resolve ongoing financial issues.

However, we know from listening to commissioners that food banks are not the sustainable solution as some people don't go to them as they are either too far away or feel stigma visiting them. In addition, they are often unable to provide people a balanced diet. Fundamentally relying on a food bank is incompatible with the human right to food and we believe we must not allow food banks to become normalised.

We need a food justice movement led by people with direct experience of food poverty

Decision makers have created food poverty because they have not properly understood poverty: the causes and the effects of it. We need to hear the real experiences of people to truly understand what poverty means: what causes it, the choices you have to make and the consequences.

We need to recognise the social value of food We have heard many fantastic solutions from commissioners on how we could improve and secure local access to healthy and affordable fresh food, and recognise the social value of food. In Glasgow, Edinburgh and many other places in Scotland we have some great community-led food justice projects, coming in various forms such as food

cooperatives, community shops, healthy eating groups and projects, growing projects and community gardens. We must encourage and support more of these projects, ensuring in the process that decision making power and drive remains in the communities, and does not travel upwards.

Through listening to the stories we have begun to realise more and more the truth of:

The community makes the food and the food makes the community

Through the success of [Bridging the Gap's](#) Big Thursday drop in meal, we have heard how people have gone for the food but stayed for the stories, opportunities to volunteer and contribute and the sense of building community. This is not a quick-fix solution. Instead it requires the development of personal relationships and decision-making power residing in the community.