

THE FOODBANK IS THE CANARY IN THE COALMINE OF NEOLIBERALISM

STEPHEN MCCLOSKEY

Abstract: The network of foodbanks operated by The Trussell Trust in the UK is providing worrying evidence of a spike in poverty levels following thirteen years of austerity since the 2008 global financial crisis and the economic contraction created by the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a 33 per cent increase recorded by The Trussell Trust in foodbank use between 2019-20 and 2020-21. The article considers the main drivers of this increase and what it tells us about the welfare state in the age of neoliberalism. It considers whether foodbanks represent a sticking plaster in efforts to combat poverty or an important source of research and means of campaigning for an end to foodbank use. The article reports on a visit to a foodbank in west Belfast to determine how the pandemic has impacted on take-up and practice. The article asserts that foodbanks represent evidence of a callous welfare system designed to punish the poor for their own poverty. Development educators should take heed of these warnings of endemic poverty at a local level and probe their root cause.

Key words: Foodbank; Welfare; Social Security; Poverty; Neoliberalism; Universal Credit; Development Education.

Introduction

In 1911, miners introduced the practice of bringing caged canaries into the mines to detect the gathering of toxic gases such as Carbon Monoxide (Eschner, 2016). Should the canary expire in the mine, it was a warning for the miners to quickly exit the tunnels and save themselves. As the Collins online dictionary suggests, the ‘canary in the coalmine acts as an early warning of a problem or danger’ (Collins, 2021). The Trussell Trust’s network of foodbanks in England, Scotland, Wales and the north of Ireland could hardly be described as an early or new signifier of poverty as they have been around

since 1997. However, their continued and widening use by people in distress, unable to provide their weekly food supply for a variety of reasons, is a poverty indicator that is foolish to ignore. The geographical spread of foodbanks and carefully maintained data on their take-up indicates that poverty is accelerating with The Trussell Trust's UK network of 1,471 foodbanks having distributed 2.4 million emergency food parcels to 'people in crisis' from April 2020 to March 2021 (The Trussell Trust, 2021a). That represented an increase of 33 per cent on the previous year and, worryingly, 980,000 were distributed to children. The extraordinary scaling up of foodbank use has seen the number of emergency food parcels increase from 61,000 in 2010-11 to 1.9 million in 2019-20 (The Tussell Trust, 2021c: 10). This timescale coincided with the aftershocks of the 2008 global financial crisis when 'neo-liberal economic orthodoxy that ran the world for 30 years suffered a heart attack of epic proportions' (Mathieson, 2008). The austerity-driven response to the crisis in the UK saw the poverty gap widen, life expectancy stop growing, home ownership decline and household debt accelerate (Toynbee and Walker, 2020).

The foodbank has been a barometer of this acceleration of poverty and, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a spike in foodbank visits by 40 per cent in the middle of 2020, reflecting the number of people catapulted into crisis by the economic contraction caused by the virus (The Trussell Trust, 2021c: 13). I visited the South-West Foodbank which is located in my constituency of west Belfast and serves a cluster of local communities, that includes a Nationalist and Loyalist interface area. I aimed to find out more about how a foodbank works in practice and how usage has changed during the pandemic. The article begins with the wider picture of foodbank use documented by The Trussell Trust and a macro poverty overview of poverty in the north of Ireland.

The Trussell Trust

The Trussell Trust was founded in 1997 by a couple, Carol and Paddy Henderson, using a legacy from Carol's mother, Betty Trussell. It combines the provision of emergency food supplies with a campaign to end hunger and, effectively, remove the need for foodbanks. Through a referral system that includes social services and community organisations, people in distress can

secure a voucher that is exchanged for a minimum of three days' emergency food that is as nutritiously balanced as possible given the need for long-term storage. The network of foodbanks has grown rapidly over the last 25 years, often supported by churches and an army of volunteers. If the Trust aims to campaign for its own dissolution by eradicating the need for emergency food support, then it's unlikely to happen anytime soon. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF, 2021: 2-3) reported 14.5 million people in the UK to be living in poverty *before* the COVID-19 pandemic, of whom 4.2 million were children and 1.9 million pensioners. In identifying causes for these startling statistics, JRF found that falling incomes fall fastest among people on the lowest incomes. This is primarily because of a freeze in benefits rates between 2016 and 2020 (Ibid.: 3) but is also the result of an increase in poverty in the workforce. Low pay and insecure jobs meant that poverty across the whole UK workforce jumped from 9.9 per cent in 1998 to 12.7 per cent in 2018 (Inman, 2020). JRF argues that 'no one should be in poverty for more than two years' and, yet, either 8 or 9 per cent of individuals in poverty have remained so for longer than 24 months (JRF, 2021: 3).

The latest statistics on The Trussell Trust foodbanks reinforce the JRF findings and suggest that it is the most marginalised and vulnerable who are in crisis and need support. Two in three (66 per cent) of the households referred to a foodbank in early 2020 included one or more disabled people and 95 per cent were destitute (The Trussell Trust, 2021c: 11-12). The drivers of hunger include the erosion of the social safety net following the introduction of welfare 'reform' that included a streamlined and supposedly simpler payment system called Universal Credit (UC). The Trussell Trust, however, has found the five week wait for the first payment of UC to be an unnecessary hardship on benefit claimants which often drives them into long-term debt as they wrestle with daily expenses such as rent and utilities that can't be delayed.

Another key driver of food poverty is a sudden adverse life-experience event like ill-health, eviction, job loss, or domestic violence. Many of these problems are mutually reinforcing with, for example, unemployment and eviction often leading to, or exacerbating, health problems. And, of

course, many of these problems have spiked during the pandemic including economic stress caused by sudden unemployment, domestic violence during periods of extended lockdown, child poverty, soaring mental illness and greater economic vulnerability. A report from the British Academy on the multiple impacts of COVID-19 found that ‘We are in a Covid decade: the social, economic and cultural effects of the pandemic will cast a long shadow into the future – perhaps longer than a decade’ (Butler, 2021). Compounding these problems is what The Trussell Trust (2021b: 3) describes as ‘a lack of formal or informal support’ meaning that many who made recourse to one of their foodbanks had ‘either exhausted the support that was available from family and friends, or had resource-poor social networks who weren’t in a position to help’.

Worrying enough as the statistics provided by The Trussell Trust network are, they should not be interpreted as the full extent of food poverty. The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) represents more than 500 independent food banks operating in the UK and additional support is provided by the Salvation Army, school-based foodbanks and many community organisations. Foodbanks are a growth sector, though in the growth-obsessed neoliberal economic order, governments will not be showcasing this kind of evidence of the impact of ‘market-driven reform’. The north of Ireland has not been spared the growth in food poverty.

Poverty in the north of Ireland

A pre-pandemic study of poverty in the north of Ireland by JRF found that 370,000 people were living in poverty, of whom 110,000 were children, 220,000 working-age adults and 40,000 pensioners (Bernard, 2018: 2). More than a quarter of children in the north and west constituencies of Belfast were in relative poverty in 2019 meaning that they were living in a household with an equivalised income below 60 per cent of UK median income (Duncan, Sheehy and Scruton, 2021). 37 of the North’s 50 worst areas in terms of educational deprivation are in Belfast, and in parts of the city most directly impacted by the Irish conflict (1968-98), more than two-thirds of students leave school without five GCSEs or an equivalent qualification (Ibid). The

legacy of conflict and colonialism in the North (McVeigh and Rolston, 2021) has resulted in a weak economy with ‘low levels of capital investment and innovation; limited amounts of homegrown startups; higher levels of public-sector employment and a less well qualified workforce than neighbouring countries’ (Duncan, Sheehy and Scruton, 2021). Table 1 shows the weakness of the economy with 14 per cent or 162,000 of working adults in relative poverty and 11 per cent (126,000) in absolute poverty in 2019-20. An individual is considered to be in absolute poverty if they are living in a household with an equivalised income below 60 per cent of the (inflation adjusted) UK median income.

Table 1: Relative and Absolute Poverty 2019-20 in the north of Ireland (Department of Communities, March 2021).

	% of individuals in Relative and Absolute Poverty	% of children in Relative and Absolute Poverty	% of working adults in Relative and Absolute poverty	% of pensioners in Relative and Absolute poverty
Relative Poverty	17% (313,000)	22% (100,000)	14% (162,000)	18% (52,000)
Absolute Poverty	13% (241,000)	17% (75,000)	11% (126,000)	14% (40,000)

A more recent indicator of poverty in the North is available in Table 2 showing the number of food parcels distributed by The Trussell Trust foodbanks from April 2019 to March 2021. The Trust distributed 33,693 more food parcels in 2020-21 compared to the previous year with 47,799 distributed to adults and 31,028 to children. Table 3 shows that there was also a substantial

increase in the number of food parcels distributed in Belfast from 11,634 in 2019-20 to 15,778 in 2020-21. These statistics confirm the spike in foodbank use created by the pandemic which peaked in April 2021 when the volume of food parcels distributed by The Trussell Trust was 84 per cent higher than in February 2020 (The Trussell Trust, 2021c: 28). I visited my local foodbank to find out how these statistics impacted on the ground.

Table 2: Food parcels distributed in north of Ireland 2019-21 (The Trussell Trust, 2021a).

Year	Food parcels to adults	Food parcels to children	Distribution Centres	Total food parcels
2019-20	26,160	18,974	42	45,134
2020-21	47,799	31,028	36	78,827
Difference	+21,639	+12,054		+33,693

Table 3: Food parcels distributed in Belfast 2019-21 (The Trussell Trust, 2021a).

Year	Food parcels to adults	Food parcels to children	Distribution Centres	Total food parcels
2019-20	6,523	5,111	9	11,634
2020-21	9,484	6,294	9	15,778
Difference	+ 2,961	+ 1,183		+ 4,144

The South-West foodbank

Edel Diamond is manager of the South-West foodbank, which is located at an interface between the Nationalist Lenadon and Loyalist Suffolk communities, which have suffered longstanding inter-communal violence and tension, and are still addressing the legacies of conflict. But South-West foodbank has a geographical catchment area that extends to nearby Colin Glen, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Dunmurry Lane and Andersonstown; areas that have high levels of poverty. Edel sits with two mobile phones in front of her that ring constantly as we meet. The calls are alternately from ‘clients’ or food suppliers. ‘I hate that word’, says Edel of the term ‘client’. The cold neoliberal speak that deems a user a ‘client’ is out of step with the ethos of the foodbank. ‘They are human beings’, she says, ‘looking for help’. Edel manages 50 volunteers from the doorman who greets me on arrival to take my details for track and trace purposes to drivers, administrative staff, and those who prepare food parcels for distribution. A huge container at the rear of the building holds food supplies and the shelves inside are neatly labelled with a diversity of foodstuffs. The offices contain four types of pre-prepared food parcels ready to go: families of 2-4 members, 3-4, 5 plus and singles. Edel explains the referral system. A number of ‘agents’ that include social services, community organisations and mental health teams provide people in distress with red food vouchers each with a unique serial number. The vouchers are redeemed for 3-4 days’ food offering three meals a day. The serial numbers are recorded on a database which feeds into The Trussell Trust’s bi-annual reports on food supplies given to people in crisis. A maximum of three vouchers are meant to be offered but if the need for support extends beyond three weeks, then it is provided.

While most of the food distributed is pre-packaged by necessity, the foodbank sometimes receives fresh vegetables from what Edel describes as ‘pop-ups’ which are spontaneous community-based initiatives, mostly organised in response to the surge in poverty that accompanied the pandemic. Donations like these are always welcome but most of the supplies to the

foodbank come from collection points in local Asda and Sainsbury supermarkets. Customers buy a few extra items during their weekly shop and donate them to the foodbank. There are also donations from local businesses both in food stocks and cash. Like many in the foodbank network, Edel got involved through her church and her time is voluntary. She carries a hugely responsibility lightly and suggests that food distribution is just part of her role. She endeavours to find the source of the food insecurity experienced by each user and, if possible, provides other forms of assistance like short-term cash support or advice on benefits.

When the pandemic started, she began receiving calls from workers in hospitality suddenly made unemployed, taxi drivers unable to work, and workers in the gig economy which ground to a halt. Her foodbank also supports Syrian refugees re-settled by the government, single parents, the bereaved and people suffering from long-term illness. Many of the foodbank users are caught in a crisis created by the five week wait for Universal Credit. To prevent users from falling into long-term debt, the foodbank sometimes provides short-term payments to help bridge the five-week gap to UC. She encourages users to avoid, if at all possible, from applying for bridge or crisis loans from government as they will be deducted from future welfare payments and could ultimate create another crisis. When we discuss the impact of the pandemic, I'm told it not only sharply increased food emergencies but the way the foodbank operated as users could no longer access the building and food had to be sanitised. This meant increases in deliveries, particularly as family food parcels included several bags of groceries that could not be carried by users.

Sometimes crises beget crises. Losing a loved one to COVID-19 can result in lost income and reduced circumstances that compound grief with increased poverty. A woman forced to leave the family home due to domestic violence will have to make a fresh claim for welfare support. A benefit sanction or an error in the intrusive and challenging application process can mean re-setting to the start of the five week wait for UC. For those trapped in the terrifying prospect of poverty and hunger, the foodbank is more than a

temporary supply of food but a source of comfort, advice and signposting to support.

Artificial scarcity

If social security benefits are designed to help people in distress, then evidence from The Trussell Trust (2021c) suggests that UC is compounding the causes and effects of poverty and appears to punish the poor for their own poverty (Fraser, 2017). It is resonant of the same impulse that informed the cruelty witnessed by Jack London in Edwardian England while researching his book, *The People of the Abyss* (1903). The poor had to earn their charity by picking oakum or breaking stones. Discharging charity on the basis of need without conditions attached was ideologically inconsistent with the political ethos of the day. The thousands of people who use foodbanks in my constituency are not going hungry from a scarcity of food which is available to anyone who can afford it. They are in most cases struggling to make ends meet as a result of wage freezes and an unfair benefits system.

Margaret Kelly, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, has recently reported that the introduction of Personal Independence Payment (PIP), a benefit for people aged between 16 and 64 with a long-term health condition or impairment, has resulted in repeated failings that have led to ‘many claims being unfairly rejected’ (Kelly, 2021). Capita, a private consultancy, carries out PIP assessments on behalf of the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and was found by the Ombudsman to focus assessments more on entitlement to PIP rather than the ‘complainant’s medical condition’ (Ibid.). This appears to be more evidence of a system designed to reduce the welfare budget than assist those in need.

Bartholomew (2020) asks if foodbanks ‘are like putting a plaster over a gaping wound’. If the primary reason for food shortages isn’t food scarcity but low pay, benefits cuts, insecure employment and debt then foodbanks are unable to address these structural causes of poverty. Beck (2019), for example, argues that ‘Food banks are becoming embedded within welfare provision, fuelled by corporate involvement and ultimately creating an industry of

poverty’. The Trussell Trust argues that it provides a research base on which to campaign for welfare reform and carries out advocacy work to end the need for foodbanks. There is no desire, suggests the chief executive of The Trussell Trust, Emma Revie, for foodbanks to ‘become the new normal’ (Ibid.) as a permanent part of the welfare architecture. Whether you see the network of foodbanks as an unofficial, corporate-backed appendage to the welfare system or an independent voice of tireless volunteers providing emergency support to those who need it most, there is no brooking the argument that their use is rapidly escalating. And, by monitoring that usage, The Trussell Trust and other networks provide invaluable evidence of the extent of government failings in meeting the welfare needs of the poor or addressing the structural causes of poverty.

When asked why he decided to probe the impact of austerity in the UK in 2018, Philip Alston, the former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, said it was “Primarily because it was a laboratory for neoliberal economic approaches to welfare”, adding that “The food bank is the perfect indicator of failed government policies’ (Bartholomew, 2020). For development educators and international development personnel, monitoring the use of foodbanks and tracking the needs of users should be part of their practice. Poverty is local as well as global, and tackling it means drilling down to its root causes. The foodbank is the current canary in the coalmine of neoliberalism and the foodbank network is sending out worrying evidence of a widening local contagion of poverty. We would be foolish to ignore it.

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Stephen McCloskey is Director of the Centre for Global Education and Editor of *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*. His latest book is *Global Learning and International Development in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Routledge, 2022).