

Written evidence from Trussell Trust (CPM0045)

The Trussell Trust is an anti-poverty charity supporting a UK-wide network of more than 1,300 food bank centres. Together we provide emergency food and support to people locked in poverty, and campaign for change to end the need for food banks in the UK.

Summary

- **At the Trussell Trust, we see the impact of child poverty every day in the people coming through the doors of food banks in our network.** Need for food banks is fundamentally driven by low levels of income and rates of poverty and destitution.
- As a society we have been going backwards when it comes to the most acute forms of child poverty since 2016, when the Child Poverty Act 2010 was abolished. In the period between 2015/16 and 2019/20 the number of **emergency food parcels distributed to children by food banks in the Trussell Trust network increased from 416,815 to 720,504 (a 73% increase)**.¹ Numbers of children experiencing destitution in this period has increased by a similar level (76%).²
- **The impact on children who experience this level of hardship is likely to be severe.** Qualitative evidence through our State of Hunger research shows the serious effect that hunger can have on children's mental and physical health, as well as their development and life chances.
- **Poverty measurements and targets can play an important role in creating a framework for political consensus and a joined-up approach to tackling child poverty.** These measures and targets should be rooted in income, as well as the deepest kinds of poverty people experience – including destitution. **Efforts to measure and tackle child poverty should situate this within the broader context of poverty in society at large.**

We recommend:

- The government adopts measures that **capture overall poverty and destitution, broken down by sub-group**, including children. The government should re-commit to adopting the Social Metrics Commission measure. Alongside this, they should consult on adopting the Joseph Rowntree Foundation definition of destitution, reporting on this through an annual household survey.
- The government should **develop a cross-government poverty reduction strategy**. This strategy should address the disproportionate poverty risks faced by certain population groups, such as children and people with disabilities. It should also specifically consider policies aimed at tackling destitution, in order to end the need for food banks in the UK. This strategy should provide a clear roadmap for progress over the course of this Parliament, and beyond.

¹ Mid Years Stats, *The Trussell Trust* (2020) <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/11/12/2600-food-parcels-provided-for-children-every-day-in-first-six-months-of-the-pandemic/>

² Destitution in the UK, *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* (2020) <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2020>

Measurement and targets

1. How should child poverty be measured and defined?

Poverty measurement must recognise income

Absolute and relative measures of poverty are useful tools to analyse hardship in the UK, and to some extent capture what the Trussell Trust sees on the frontline. In 2018 the vast majority (94%) of people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network were in relative poverty after housing costs.³ The vast majority of this group are also likely to be living in absolute poverty. Our research shows clearly that the need for food banks is fundamentally driven by low levels of income.⁴

Contrary to the introduction of the four 'life chances indicators', our evidence from the frontline therefore supports the argument that any meaningful core measure of poverty or, more specifically, child poverty, should be rooted in income.

However, there are limitations to both the relative poverty measure and 'life chances indicators', which do not fully capture the nature or depth of hardship people face.

Assessing available income and recognising inescapable costs

Finding ways to better understand the reality of households' *available* resources is vital if we are to end the need for food banks. This is important because the experience of poverty and its consequences are driven not only by the level of income that people have, but the residual income that they have after other essential costs are taken into account. While the existing official relative poverty measure takes into account housing costs, it does not capture the other ongoing costs experienced by people living in poverty, and the gap between that and their income.

There are measures which better reflect the realities of people's experiences of poverty. The Social Metrics Commission's approach to poverty measurement better accounts for 'inescapable costs' and thus includes more children, families, and disabled people – groups who, research shows, are more likely to need to use a food bank. Similarly, we strongly support the Commission's intention to account for debt repayments when assessing a household's available resources. Our Lift the Burden report found that nearly half (47%) of the households our food banks supported in the summer of 2020 were in debt to the DWP, with people with mental health problems being significantly more likely to be having to be in debt.⁵ This highlights the scale of debt burden those on the lowest incomes face, and the impact it can have on individuals.

A framework which includes destitution

³ The official relative poverty AHC threshold in 2017/18 was £262 per week and the median household income AHC was £437 per week. This means that almost all (94%) of respondents to the State of Hunger survey who provided information about income and housing costs were in relative poverty AHC; State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (2019) <https://www.stateofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital.pdf>

⁴ State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (2019) <https://www.stateofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital.pdf>

⁵ Lift the Burden. *The Trussell Trust* (2020), <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/Lift-the-burden-Dec-20.pdf>

Around 370,000 unique households used a food bank in the Trussell Trust network in 2019/20, representing 1.35% of all UK households. These households comprised an estimated 840,000 unique individuals, including 520,000 adults and 320,000 children.

Being unable to afford the essentials in this way is a kind of poverty which neither existing nor previous legal child poverty measures adequately capture. People arriving at food banks are often in a particularly extreme form of poverty, which can be more accurately categorised as 'destitution'. Destitution does not only capture the intensity of this hardship, it also characterises the impact of paying for essentials which other measures ignore (see Fig. 1).

A singular focus on relative poverty therefore can have negative consequences for tackling poverty. It would fail to capture how certain policies may have a limited impact on levels of relative poverty, but would have a significant impact on the depth of poverty experienced. For example, removing the benefit cap is a policy which would have a small effect on lifting families out of poverty completely, but a large effect on the depth of poverty that is experienced by families affected by the cap. Measuring destitution would therefore be an effective complement to any core poverty measures and help improve the government's understanding of the range of policy changes required to tackle poverty.

Fig. 1 Destitution – what does it mean?

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines people as destitute if they lacked two or more of the following six essentials over the past month because they could not afford them (the 'destitution on essentials' criterion), or their income was so low (less than £10 per day for a single person AHC) that they were unable to purchase these essentials for themselves (the 'destitution on income' criterion):

- *Shelter (have slept rough for one or more nights),*
- *Food (have had fewer than two meals a day for two or more days),*
- *Heating their home (have been unable to do this for five or more days),*
- *Lighting their home (have been unable to do this for five or more days),*
- *Appropriate clothing and footwear,*
- *Basic toiletries (soap, shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush).*

The level of destitution – lacking the essentials that we need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean – among people referred to a food bank was very high. Trussell Trust's State of Hunger (2019) research found that only 7% did not lack any essentials in the month before using the food bank and 82% lacked two or more essentials. Seven in ten (69%) had income AHC that was too low to purchase the essentials for themselves.

Overall, more than nine in ten (94%) were destitute, i.e. they met the 'destitution on essentials' criterion, the 'destitution on income' criterion, or both.

Finally, child poverty needs to be understood within context of broader poverty, and there must be recognition that it will only be effectively tackled in the long-term by addressing the wider poverty experienced by parents and households. The approach taken to measurement should reflect this.

We therefore recommend that the government:

- **Adopts measures that capture overall poverty and destitution, broken by subgroup, and therefore not restricted to children alone. The government should re-commit to adopting the Social Metrics Commission measure. Alongside this, they should consult on adopting the Joseph Rowntree Foundation definition of destitution, reporting on this through an annual household survey.**
2. **The measures of child poverty changed in 2016. What has the impact of those changes been?**
 3. **What were the advantages and disadvantages of having a set of targets for reducing child poverty?**
 4. **What has been the effect of removing from law the targets in place between 2010 and 2016?**

The picture since 2016 – reduced oversight and rising hardship

Since the abolition of the Child Poverty Act 2010 in 2016, there has been a dramatic rise in levels of destitution.

Between 2015/16 and 2019/20:

- In the Trussell Trust network of food banks, the number of **emergency food parcels distributed to children** increased from 416,815 to 720,504 (a 73% increase).
- The number of **parcels distributed to adults** increased from 695,580 to 1,179,618 (a 70% increase).⁶
- According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation the number of **children that experienced destitution** increased from 312,000 to 550,000 (a 76% increase).
- The number of **adults experiencing destitution** increased from 940,000 to 1,850,000 (a 97% increase).⁷

There is a limited extent to which these increases in destitution can be associated with changes to legally defined child poverty measures and targets. However, it is clear that the removal of scrutiny and legal enforcement has reduced the incentives incumbent on governments since 2016 to prioritise poverty reduction when designing social policy.

This has most directly manifested in changes to the social security system and wider support services landscape upon which people experiencing poverty disproportionately rely. Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that a large majority (over 70%) of households experiencing destitution rely on the benefits system⁸, and the figures for households needing to use food banks are even higher (over 80%).⁹

Policy changes in this period include the ‘benefits freeze’ which took effect for four years (2016/17-2019/20), with benefits kept at April 2015 rates. This has led to an effective 6.5%

⁶ Mid Years Stats, The Trussell Trust (2020) <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/11/12/2600-food-parcels-provided-for-children-every-day-in-first-six-months-of-the-pandemic/>

⁷ Destitution in the UK, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020), <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2020>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (2019) <https://www.stateofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital.pdf>

real terms cut in the value of working age benefits over the period.¹⁰ The reduction and freeze in Local Housing Allowance has led to significant shortfalls between people's entitlement and the real cost of renting.¹¹ This occurred alongside the roll-out of Universal Credit, with the five week wait (originally six weeks) for the first payment and the debt this can generate (either privately or through an advance payment), leading to further hardship. Policies which have disproportionately affected children include the two-child limit and the reduction in value of the benefit cap, with a significant hit to the incomes of larger families in particular.

It should be noted that many of the changes which occurred since 2015 have their roots in the 2010-2015 Parliament, including the original benefit cap, various caps and reductions in housing benefit, conditionality and the sanctions regime. These measures were introduced despite the legal framework set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and the measurements which existed through to 2016.

This shows that no approach to tackling poverty can rely solely or primarily on legal targets and effective measurement. However, it does illustrate the importance of establishing poverty measures through political consensus. This recent history suggests that robust and academically rigorous measures, with buy-in across the political spectrum, is critical. By agreeing a shared definition of the problem, we can foster a collective resolve and effective cross-government strategy to address it.

5. What is the impact of child poverty and how can it best be measured?

At the Trussell Trust, we see the impact of child poverty in terms of the hunger that drives people to need to use food banks.

To give a sense of scale, around 370,000 unique households used a food bank in the Trussell Trust network in 2019/20, representing 1.35% of all UK households. These households comprised an estimated 840,000 unique individuals, including 520,000 adults and 320,000 children.¹² Many more people will have sought support from other emergency food aid providers.

Qualitative findings through our State of Hunger research shows the serious impacts that hunger can have on children's mental and physical health, as well as their development and life chances.¹³

'It [hunger] makes me feel rubbish because if I can't feed myself, it doesn't really bother me, I don't care, but when the kids are hungry and I haven't got anything in the cupboards, it's awful. I can go with being hungry, I'm an adult, but they can't, it's not fair to expect them to.' (Female respondent)

¹⁰ End the benefit freeze to stop people being swept into poverty, *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* (2019), <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/end-benefit-freeze-stop-people-being-swept-poverty>

¹¹ Cover the Cost: Restoring Local Housing Allowance rates to prevent homelessness, *Crisis* (2019) <https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/240986/crisis-cover-the-cost-solutions-report.pdf>

¹² Data from the Trussell Trust referral database. (a) These figures have been slightly adjusted downwards to account for the possibility that some records on the Trussell Trust client base system are duplicates due to administrative errors. They represent 95% of unadjusted figures. (b) The number of unique households using Trussell Trust food banks reported in the first State of Hunger report was too conservative, i.e. underestimated by about 10-15% relative to the actual figure. The way that the frequency of food bank visits is calculated was improved in the second year of the State of Hunger research.

¹³ State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (2019) <https://www.stateofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital.pdf>

Most parents will do anything they can to avoid their children going hungry. This can compound the impact of child poverty on parents – who are forced to skip meals as a result.

‘Myself and my partner [get physical impacts of hunger]. I get shaky, dizziness, feeling sick, over tired. I’ve got a vitamin deficiency so I need to eat, and then when I don’t eat, I faint. Have dizzy turns. Suffer really bad, and then anxiety’s got a lot to do with that as well. So, but you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do for the sake of the kids... Now, if it wasn’t for the food banks, everybody’s going to result in shoplifting to feed the kids. Then that’s not something that I’m willing to do, but if it came to feeding my kids, of course I’m going to do it, but I suppose every parent in that situation would be like that anyway as well. So, oh, it’s terrible.’ (Female respondent)

This reflects insights from voluntary organisations. They also identified that the burden of hunger is felt by parents, with the impact on children’s mental health being more pronounced than physical health problems.

‘They’re buffered by their parents more. So the physical aspects are probably not as prevalent as amongst adults, because mums, in particular, go without, but the stress levels are probably more harmful, because, as a child, you shouldn’t be carrying that amount of stress.’ (Voluntary organisation)

The impacts of growing up with these levels of stress can also result in hunger.

‘Parents are definitely trying to buffer children, but the kids that I talk to are fully aware of the situation, and do what they can to protect their parents, and their siblings. So the kids might pretend that they’re full, or they’re not hungry, but they are.’ (Voluntary organisation)

The detrimental impact of hunger on child health outcomes is also supported by broader literature, including a higher risk of depression and chronic conditions like asthma, and developmental risks.¹⁴

Particular household types are at risk of these impacts

The household profile of people needing to use food banks was mostly unchanged between late 2018 and early 2020, according to State of Hunger surveys (Fig. 2). Slightly over half of respondents were single, typically living alone, with single males more prevalent than single females. Couples with children and lone parents were the next two most common categories, each containing one in five households using food banks. Couples without children were uncommon, at about one in twenty households using food banks.

Fig. 2 Household composition profile of State of Hunger food bank survey respondents and UK population (%)

	Late 2018	Early 2020	Mid-2020	UK population
Single male living alone	35	37	28	13
Single female living alone	13	12	14	9
Single person not living alone, no children under 16	8	8	8	9

¹⁴ ‘Food insecurity and hunger: A review of the effects on children’s health and behaviour’, *Paediatrics & Child Health* (2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4373582/>

Lone parent of child(ren) under 16	20	19	18	8
Couple, no children under 16, may be other people	6	6	8	32
Couple with child(ren) under 16	18	19	24	29
Total	100	100	100	100

Note: Source for 'UK population': LFS Q4 2019, households without any pensioners.
Source: State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (2019 and forthcoming)

However, there is evidence of a slight increase in the proportion of children and families arriving at food banks, with larger families particularly at risk. Households with children, as a proportion of all households referred to a food bank in the Trussell Trust network, increased from 38% in 2018/19 to 40% in 2019/20.¹⁵

Furthermore, households with three or more dependent children increased as a proportion of all households with children referred to a food bank in the Trussell Trust network: from 30% in late 2018 to 33% in early 2020. This may in part reflect the fact that, as time passes, gradually more families are affected by the 'two-child limit' on UC Child Element/Child Tax Credit (HMRC and DWP, 2020).

Furthermore, while one in seven (14%) families with children has three or more children in the general population, the figure was one in three (33%, see above) among people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network.¹⁶ These groups were at highest risk of living in poverty pre-pandemic and have the highest rates of child poverty across the UK (Treanor, 2020).¹⁷

6. What links can be established for children between financial hardship, educational under-achievement, family breakdown and worklessness?

There are clear links between destitution and adverse life experiences (such as homelessness or relationship breakdown). These provide further context for understanding the experiences of many people who need to use a food bank. These kinds of adverse life experiences are generally less common for households with children than households without children.

However, there are still some relatively common adverse life experiences affecting households with children. According to State of Hunger, the most common of these experiences among people referred to a food bank include homelessness, domestic violence and household breakdown.

Fig.3 Adverse life experiences in the past 12 months reported by State of Hunger survey respondents (%)

¹⁵ State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (forthcoming)

¹⁶ Analysis of Labour Force Survey Q4 2019 household dataset.

¹⁷ Treanor, M. C. (2020) *Child poverty: aspiring to survive*. Bristol: Policy Press.

	Early 2020	
	All with children under 16	All
Homelessness	17	29
Becoming sick or disabled	13	20
Breakdown of relationship with family	8	15
Substance misuse	7	18
Eviction	10	12
Bereavement	15	16
Divorce or household breakdown	17	15
Domestic violence	17	12
Offending	2	9
Any other adverse life experience	8	12
None of these	38	28

Source: State of Hunger, *The Trussell Trust* (forthcoming). Data comes from a multiple-response question. Three categories regarded the respondent or the partner: 'becoming sick or disabled', 'substance misuse' and 'offending'.

Adverse work-related experiences are also common among households with children referred to food banks. 40% of households with children early 2020 indicated an adverse work-related experience, an identical proportion to that in late 2018.

Among households with children, loss of a job was the most common adverse work-related experience, effecting 23% of all households with children under 16.

This supports research from the Social Metrics Commission which shows that families in poverty who work less than full time are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty.¹⁸ Half of people (50%) in poverty in workless families are in either deep and persistent poverty (29%) or deep poverty (non-persistent) (21%). This contrasts with families in full-time work and in poverty, where 9% are in deep and persistent poverty and 10% are in deep poverty (non-persistent).

Caution should be applied to how these levels of adverse life experiences are interpreted. These experiences do not equate with poverty itself, and are therefore not themselves measures of poverty – though their interaction does require further enquiry and consideration when designing policy. Adverse life experiences also point to how the overall household level experience affects that of children. Any efforts to tackle child poverty should therefore look at households in the round, focusing primarily on low incomes, and tackle the structural drivers of disadvantage in adults and children alike.

Joint working

7. How effectively does the Department for Work and Pensions work with other Government departments, particularly the Department for Education and the Treasury, to reduce child poverty?

¹⁸ Measuring Poverty 2020, *Legatum Institute* (2020), <https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Measuring-Poverty-2020-Web.pdf>

8. **How effectively does the Department for Work and Pensions work with local authorities and with support organisations to reduce the numbers of children living in poverty and to mitigate the impact of poverty on children?**
9. **What would be the merits of having a cross-government child poverty strategy? How well has this worked in the past?**

Responsibility for tackling poverty is split across numerous government departments – including the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department for Education (DfE), the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Treasury (HMT). Many further Departmental activities will have significant impacts on levels of poverty, including the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Cabinet Office. Almost all government departments will have a vital contribution to make in any concerted effort to tackle poverty.

At present, there is a lack of initiative to join up approaches across these departments, and crucially to integrate this with an approach to working with local authorities. There have been signs of positive collaboration since the pandemic– the collaboration between the DWP and the DEFRA has been vital in identifying the distinct challenges between people struggling to access food during the pandemic and those struggling to afford food.

The Food and Other Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force – led by DEFRA – played a key role in developing the £63 million Emergency Assistance Grant. This Grant increased the provision of local welfare assistance and supported the ability of local authorities to alleviate financial crises in their communities. It was in bringing together cross-government voices, local government, and the charity sector that that this was able to develop an effective programme of emergency support. This gave way to the COVID Winter Grant Scheme – administered by the DWP – which provided further support particularly targeted at children between December 2020 and March 2021.

The Task Force was discontinued in summer 2020, and ambiguity remains over the respective responsibilities over local welfare assistance in particular between the DWP, DEFRA and MHCLG. The inclusion of free school meals in the COVID Winter Grant Scheme has further created overlapping responsibilities between the DWP and DfE.

While this collaboration has helped deliver an effective emergency response, it is important that an ongoing approach to collaboration and cross-government working is put in place – to recognise the overlapping responsibilities interdependent actions needed by different levels of government in the mission to tackle poverty.

- **The government should develop a cross-government poverty reduction strategy. This strategy should address the disproportionate poverty risks faced by certain population groups, such as children and people with disabilities. It should also explicitly consider policies aimed at tackling destitution, in order to end the need for food banks in the UK. This strategy should provide a clear roadmap for progress over the course of this Parliament, and beyond.**