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SPERI British Political Economy Brief No.32

# Family hunger in times of austerity: families using food banks across Britain.

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This publication arises from activities funded by the University of Oxford's Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account in collaboration, and with funding from, The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network. The analyses and report were conducted by the authors. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the funders.

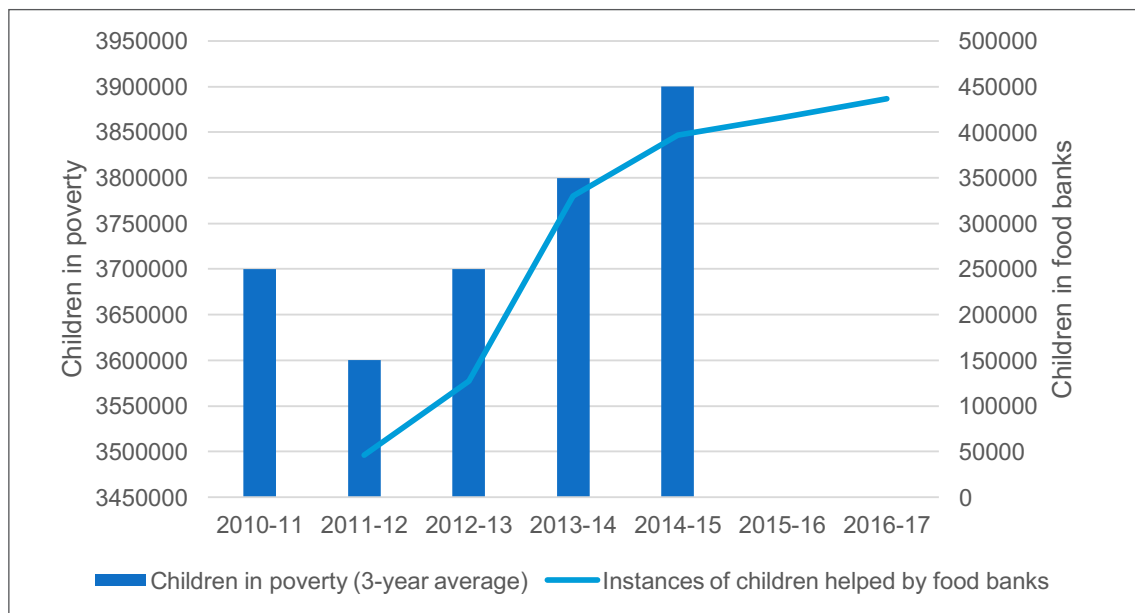
This brief draws on data from a large scale survey of households using Trussell Trust food banks to understand food bank use amongst families with children in 2016/17. It shows the family demographics of food bank users and the particular vulnerability of certain families (single parent families / families with three or more children) to food bank use. Looking forward, the continued emphasis on conditionality and reducing entitlement levels in social security provision means that children in families will be made even more vulnerable in the years to come, likely resulting in more children and their parents needing to use food banks.

## Background

Since 2010, a series of welfare reforms have changed entitlements for low-income people in Britain, reducing eligibility and levels of entitlements and increasing conditionality (1-3). In particular, analyses by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Child Poverty Action Group have shown that the biggest reductions in entitlements have been for low-income families with children, especially single parent families (4, 5). Reforms to come have also been projected to have the biggest impact on low-income families with children.

It is likely not a coincidence that over this period of rapid changes in welfare entitlements for children, the number of children in poverty has risen by 300,000, from 3.6 million in 2010-2012 to 3.9 million in 2013-2015 (6). So too, the number of times children received food from Trussell Trust food banks increased by about 351,000, from 46,000 in 2011/12 to 397,000 in 2014/15 (Figure 1)(7).

**Figure 1** Children in poverty and using food banks over 2010 to 2016.



Source: Department for Work & Pensions (6) and The Trussell Trust (7).

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## Objectives and methodology

This brief looks at the characteristics of families with children who are using food banks. Specifically, it seeks to:

- *describe* the characteristics of households using food banks and identify if households with children are more vulnerable to needing to use food banks.
- *understand* risk factors for food bank use among families with children, including their economic vulnerability, vulnerability to rising costs of living, and prevalence of disability and health conditions.
- *describe* the prevalence of food insecurity among households with children using food banks.

This paper uses data from a survey of families using 24 Trussell Trust food banks conducted over October 2016 to April 2017 (8). Briefly, 598 households completed the survey on tablet devices using Open Data Kit<sup>1</sup>. Food bank clients were approached by volunteers and research students while they were waiting to receive their food parcels. Participation was tracked, and the overall recruitment rate among eligible clients was about 70%. The questionnaire gathered information on household composition, income and employment, housing, household food insecurity, destitution, and health. Full details on the survey methodology can be found in the Technical Report (9).

For this analysis, we quantify the number and characteristics of households living with children less than 16 years of age. Single parent households were identified as participants who did not report being married or living with a partner and who did not list a partner as currently living as part of their household, and who identified currently living with one or more children under 16 years of age. This excludes from our analysis 13 single parent families which had only non-dependent children. More detail on ages of children and relationships were not sought. Where possible, characteristics of households and families in food banks are compared to Office of National Statistics data on UK households and families (10), to examine if particular household/family types are over-represented among food bank users.

We also compare employment, incidences of unexpected expenses, and health conditions between different types of households using food banks, namely between households with and without children, and between couple and single parent families with children.

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1 <https://opendatakit.org/>

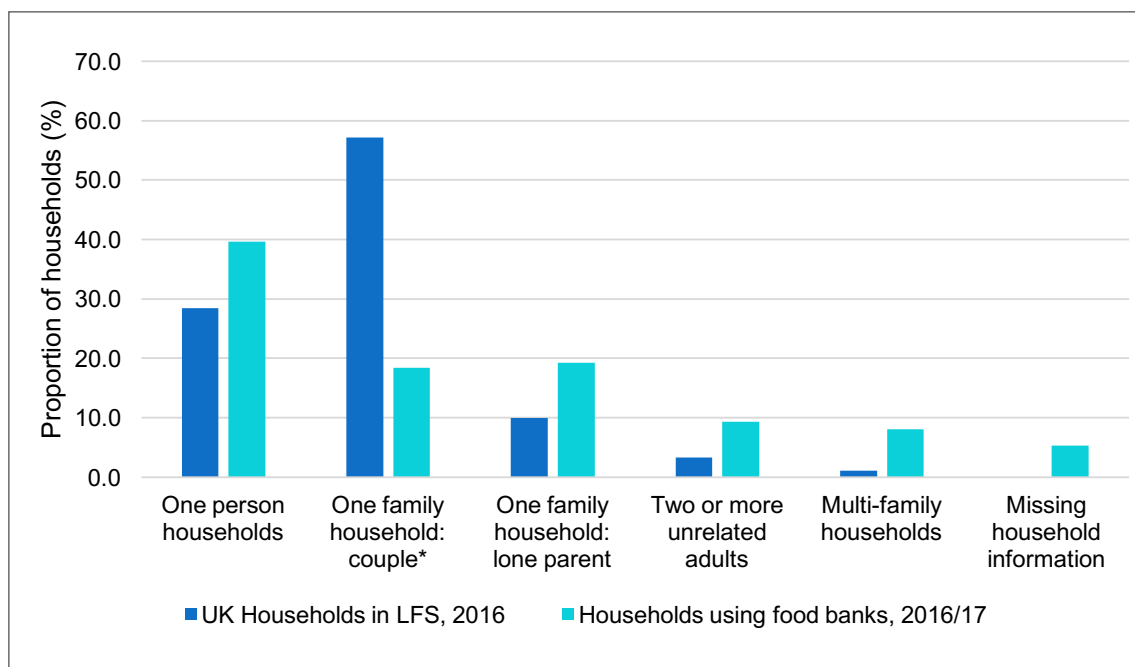
## Findings

- 1. Families with dependent children – especially single parent families - are more likely than other family types to use food banks. This is likely to worsen into the future as the economic situations of low-income families are projected to further decline in the next three years.**

The structure of households using food banks is very different to the general population (Figure 2). In particular, single parent households are almost two times more prevalent among households using food banks compared to their prevalence among households in the general population. This is consistent with national data showing how single parents are at greater risk of poverty than other household types (11).

This pattern was also evident when we looked in more detail at family types<sup>2</sup>. First, almost 70% of families using food banks had dependent children, whereas among families in the general population, only about 42% have dependent children (Figure 3). This highlights how families with dependent children are more likely to be using food banks than other family types. When we break down family types further, we see that this difference is particularly driven by single parent families with dependent children, while couple families with dependent children are a bit less common among families using food banks. (Figure 4).

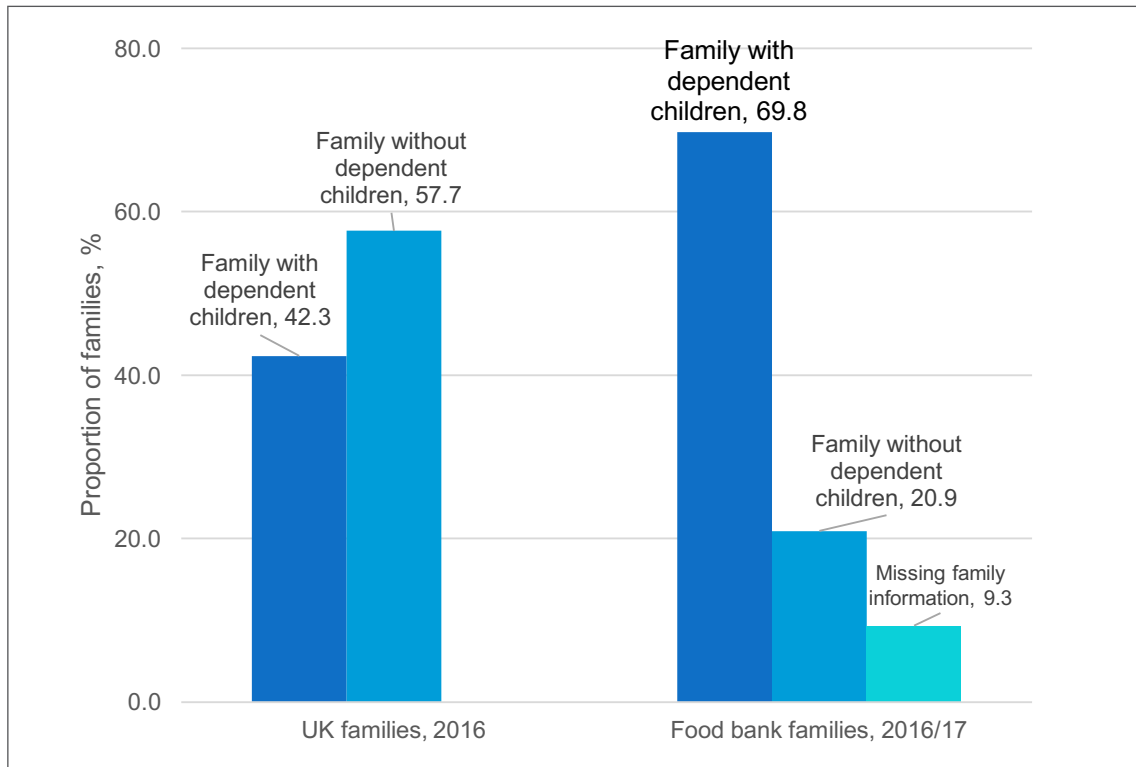
**Figure 2** Household types using food banks in England, Scotland and Wales in comparison to the Labour Force Survey, 2016.



Notes: One family households are couples with or without dependent children. Single parents are households with dependent or non-dependent children. Source: Office for National Statistics (10) and survey of households using food banks (9).

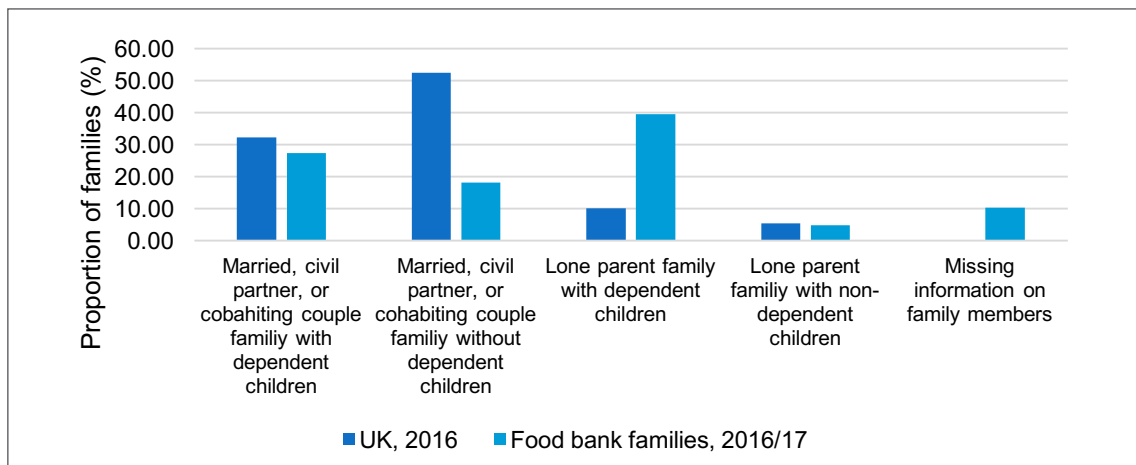
<sup>2</sup> Families are defined by ONS as "a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a single parent, with at least one child, who live at the same address. Children may be dependent or non-dependent." This excludes households with only one adult or living with unrelated adults.

**Figure 3** Families in UK (2016) and in food banks (2016/17) by presence of dependent children.



Notes: Source: Office for National Statistics (10) and survey of households using food banks (9).

**Figure 4** Families using food banks in England, Scotland, and Wales in comparison to families in the Labour Force Survey, 2016.



Notes: Source: Office for National Statistics (10) and survey of households using food banks (9).

The over-representation of children and single parents in food banks is, sadly, not surprising, given these are groups who have been hardest hit by welfare reforms in the past eight years. Low-income families with children have seen the greatest reductions in their welfare entitlements, as they've been impacted by multiple reforms: the benefit cap, changes to income support, and changes to child benefit and child tax credits (5, 11). The fact that children were already over-represented in food banks in 2016/17 is worrying given that the economic situations of low-income families are projected to further decline in the next three years. Levels of absolute child poverty are set to rise from 27.5% to 30.3% between 2014–15 and 2021–22 (3).

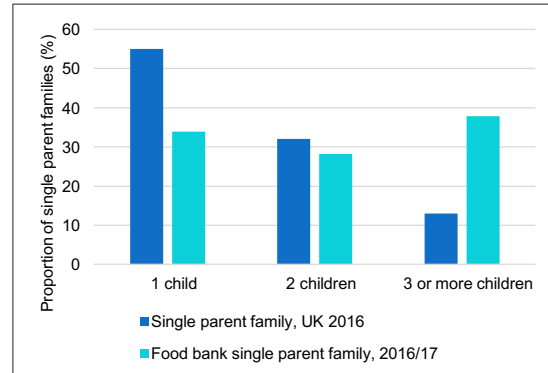
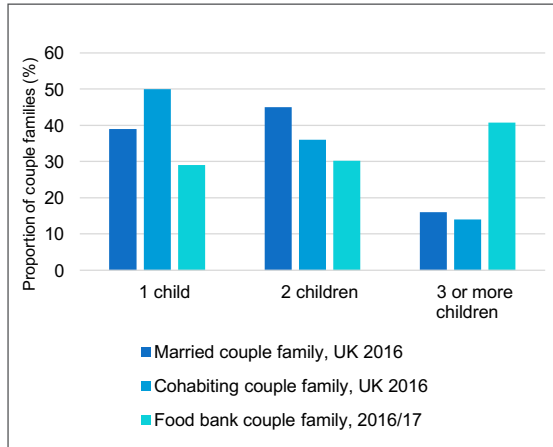
**2. Families with three or more children are particularly vulnerable to needing help from food banks. This is a serious concern, given that from April 2017, new claims for the child element of tax credit and universal credit for a third and subsequent child in a family will not be awarded, unless certain exemptions are met.**

Compared to national data on families, both single parent and couple families with three or more children were over-represented in food banks (Figure 5). This points to the greater incidence in poverty among larger families (12), and also hints at the direct impact that successive reductions in social security support are having on the living standards of low-income families. Families with more than two children are particularly likely to be hit by the Benefits Cap (13), which is significant in ending the link between need and entitlement. Research by The Children's Society (14) (see Figure 6) models the extent of the income shortfall between the benefits families receive and the poverty line, and the ways in which this shortfall is biggest for larger families (and has grown significantly in recent years). The greater vulnerability of larger families to needing to use food banks has further significance, given the roll out of the two child limit for receiving certain benefits, which came into force in April 2017 (i.e. subsequent to this analysis). In exploring the rise in child poverty in coming years, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed to the two child limit policy as a key driver (5). The predicted rising child poverty for larger families will require close monitoring, and – based on this analysis – it is likely that their over-representation among food bank users will only increase further in coming years.

**Figure 5** Families with dependent children in food bank sample and in national population and number of dependent children by single parent status.

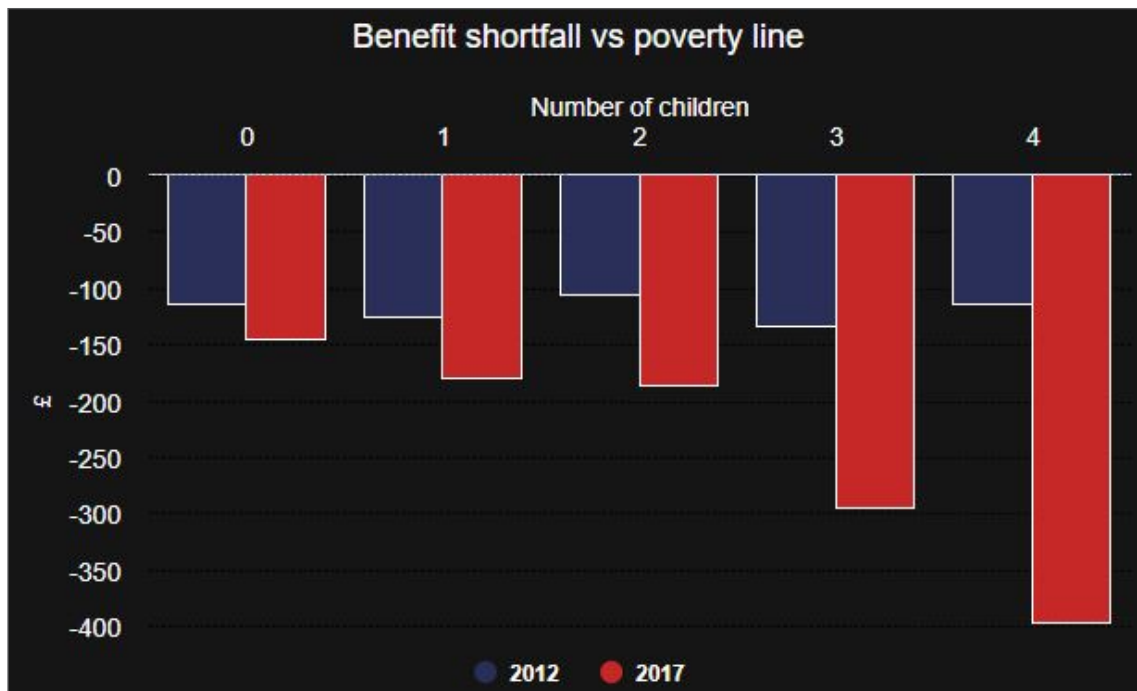
A) Comparison of number of dependent children in married or co-habiting couple families in UK population and among families using food banks.

B) Comparison of number of dependent children in single parent families in UK population and among families using food banks.



Notes: Source: Office for National Statistics (10) and survey of households using food banks (9). Married couples were not distinguished from co-habiting couples in food bank survey, but the pattern is the same if couple families in the food bank group are compared to married and cohabitating couples in general population – food bank couple families are more likely to have more children.

**Figure 6** Estimated budget shortfall by family size\* for 2012 and 2017.



Source: The Children’s Society (14). \*Couple in private rented accommodation with maximum number of bedrooms for each family type under Local Housing Authority rules. Assumes family claims average LHA rate outside of London for property of relevant size and that LHA covers rent in full.



### 3. Households with children using food banks were more likely to be working than households without children. This suggests in-work poverty is one driver of food bank use for households with children.

In the total sample of households using food banks (n=598), there was a relatively low proportion of households who included a working adult (15%). However, households with children were more likely than households without children to include a working adult (Table 1). Among couple families with dependent children, 31% indicated adults with employment or receiving employment income in the past month, and among single parent families, 21% indicated work. For both family types, part-time work was most common (16% and 14% of families, respectively), but 14% of couple families indicated full-time work. Among single parent families, only 4% (n=5) indicated full-time employment.

**Table 1** Presence of adults in work or employment income among households using food banks, by presence of dependent children (n=570).

	No dependent children in household		Dependent children in household	
	N	%	n	%
No adults working in household	326	90.6	154	73.3
Adults working/employment income in household	32	8.9	53	25.2*

Notes: households missing information on household composition or information on employment excluded from analysis (n=33). \* p value for chi square <0.0001.

About 48% of couple families indicated an adult was home taking care of children, but as indicated in Table 2, this was unlikely to be the status of all adults in the household (only 5.8%). About 42% of couple families had adults who were home caregiving and unable to work due to illness. Among single parent families, 19% indicated caregiving full-time, 12% indicate being unable to work due to illness, and 15.3% indicated both. Almost 18% of single parents did not report their economic status, which may mean these figures are underestimates and may be biased toward particular responses.

**Table 2** Economic status of households with children using food banks (n=210).

	Couples (n=86)	Single parents (n=124)
	%	%
Adults only in work	10.5	12.9
Adults only unemployed and looking for work	9.30	13.7
Only in education	2.33	2.42
Only caregiving	5.81	19.4
Only unable to work due to illness	3.49	12.1
Only unable to work for other reasons	1.16	1.61
Unable to work due to illness and caregiving	41.9	15.3
Mixed working, economically inactive or unemployed	19.8	4.84
Missing information on employment status	5.81	17.7

Notes: Respondents were asked to list how many adults were in each category of economic activity (i.e. full-time, part-time, self-employed, education, caregiving, unable to work, looking for work, or other). Households with a single adult could choose more than one if they identified as having more than one status. These variables were combined to make the above summary categories.

Both couple families and single parent families received income from a range of sources, including employment, Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseeker's Allowance, and Income Support. In general, the prevalence receiving income from these sources was about the same. Only 35% of families indicated receiving Child Tax Credit and about the same indicated receiving Child Benefit.<sup>3</sup> Almost none of the single parent families indicated receiving child maintenance payments when queried if they had any other sources of income.

These findings importantly highlight that a significant number of families with children using food banks had employment. This challenges the notion that work is a guaranteed route out of poverty. For these families, it was not. This could be due to underemployment, low wages, and insecure employment. The average equivalised household income for families with an adult in work was £419 for the month preceding their completion of the survey. While significantly higher than the figure for families without work, which was £277, this amount is well-below the low-income threshold for the UK (60% of median income, which is about £1050 per month after housing costs) (15).

To be able to compare households' incomes in the sample with Minimum Income Standards (MIS) set for the UK in April 2017 (16), we examined the MIS needed to meet basic living costs, excluding rent and childcare, and a basic level of social participation for two family types: couples with two children and a single parent with one child. The MIS monthly thresholds for these household types were £2056 for couple families with two children and £1338 for single parents with one child (16).

<sup>3</sup> It was unclear whether this low response was because families didn't know they were receiving it, were not receiving it, or because of fatigue when responding to questions about income sources.

For the same household types in our sample, the income levels were as follows:

- For couple families with two children (n=26), 65% received less than £500 in the past month; 96% received less than £1000.
- For single parent families with one child (n=40), 76% received less than £500 in the past month; 97.5% received less than £1000.

This analysis highlights that families using food banks received very little income in the month preceding the survey, an amount well-below what is needed to meet basic living costs.

#### **4. Couple families with children were more likely to be facing a double-burden of childcare and ill-health in their households.**

When we examined the prevalence of health conditions and disability in the sample, we observed that couple families were more likely to have one or more family members with a health condition or disability in comparison to single parent families. For 80% of couple families with children, the respondent had a health condition, a family member had a health condition, or both. Single parent households were less likely to have one or more health conditions (55%).

Common mental health disorders, most often depression and anxiety, were especially common. About 40% of couple families and 27% of single parent families reported one or more types of common mental health disorders in their households.

#### **5. Families with children particularly suffer when costs of living rise – this is worrying given rising food inflation and ongoing caps on benefits.**

Families with children, especially families with more children, are more likely to feel the costs of rising food prices, energy prices, and housing because they have higher requirements to meet family needs.

Both couple families and single parents among households using food banks reported experiencing rising or unexpected expenditures in the past three months (Table 3). Likely reflecting the higher rates of disability among couple families, these families were more likely to indicate rises in health-related expenses. Single parents were more likely to report rising costs of food and housing. Among families that indicated other types of rises in expenditures, many volunteered that they had experienced rising costs of raising children, such as needing to pay for school uniforms and bigger appetites among growing adolescents.

**Table 3** Reported experiences of rising and unexpected expenses.

	Couples (n=86)	Single parents (n=124)
	%	%
Unexpected expenses related to an accident, injury, or medical emergency.	15.1	7.26
Unexpected expenses due to a necessary housing repair.	14.0	9.68
Unexpected expenses related to transportation, such as car repair or increased transit costs.	16.3	20.2
A rise in expenses related to your housing, such as utilities or rent.	26.7	41.1
A rise in food expenses.	33.7	41.9
A rise in living expenses due to a new baby.	8.14	11.3
A rise in living expenses due to a new health condition.	18.6	8.87
Other changes that have increased your household expenses.	18.6	16.1

**6. Parents who use food banks are experiencing high levels of both acute and chronic food insecurity. This is likely to impact their own health and well-being, as well as that of their children.**

Based on their responses to the Adult Food Security module (17), more than 80% of families with children using food banks were classed as severely food insecure, that is, going with less food or without food because of a lack of money. Among both couples and single parent households, about 60% reported these experiences happened almost every month in the past 12 months.

Severe food insecurity can have a damaging effect on the health and well-being of adults and children (18). Even if parents prioritise their children's food intake and try to ensure they always have enough (19), food insecurity has been associated with poorer diets among children, especially older children (20). Food insecurity also can result in stress, frustration, and depression among caregivers, all of which can impact the health of their children (21).

## Conclusion

Households using food banks experience high levels of food insecurity and other forms of destitution (8). They represent a population that are not having their needs met by either state provision or work, and concerningly, it is families with children, and particularly larger families and single parents, who are more likely to be in need of food banks compared to families in the general population.

The over-representation of households with children among food bank users is consistent with national data that show households with children have higher risk of food insecurity in the UK (22). As studies show that children living in food insecure households are impacted emotionally and nutritionally by food insecurity, these data are a serious cause for concern.

As discussed, at the time of this food bank research, some of the most significant changes to welfare entitlements for children had not yet been completed. These include the roll-out of universal credit to families with children, the loss of the child element of tax credits and universal credit for third and subsequent child born into families, and the new reduced thresholds for the Benefit Cap. These changes, alongside the ongoing benefit freeze, mean that families with children are going to be even less supported by the benefit system in the years to come. This will most likely mean many more families with children in food banks.

The findings of this research draw urgent attention to the destitution faced by the low income families with children that are visiting food banks. The analysis highlights the important role played by both in-work poverty and inadequate financial state assistance in driving need for food banks amongst families with children. Importantly, this analysis comes at a time when government policy continues to emphasise conditionality and on-going reductions in social security entitlements for families with children. Critically, recent changes – most notably the Benefits Cap and the two-child limit – mark a significant divorcing of need and entitlement, and represent a retrenchment in welfare state support (23). This retrenchment disproportionately impacts on families with children, with its negative impact on child poverty and inequality only likely to deepen in the coming years. These political decisions and policy choices will directly affect levels of food insecurity and food bank usage, and – as this analysis suggests – are already starting to do so. This research illustrates the importance of household income levels and family type for predicting food insecurity, and further suggests that adequate income for all families is critical if we are to overcome food insecurity and the need for food assistance.

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March 2018

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