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Strong link between increased benefit sanctions and higher foodbank use, says Oxford research

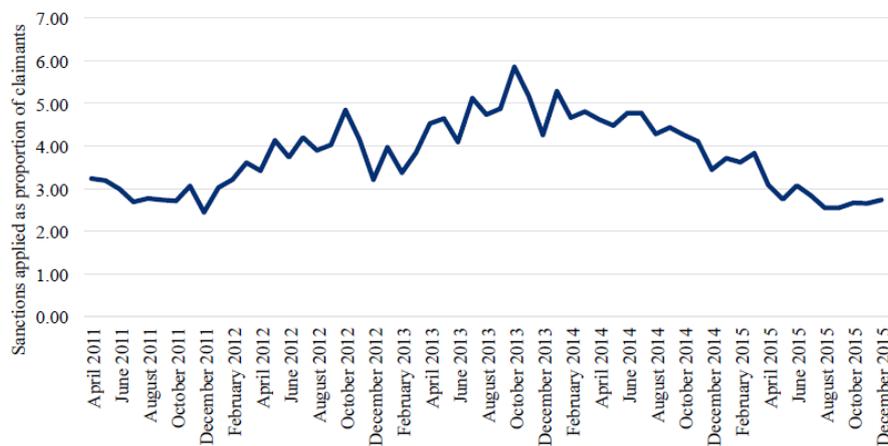
- University of Oxford researchers analysed four years of Trussell Trust foodbank data and found an increase in 10 Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions per 100,000 adults was associated with five more adults needing foodbanks
- In response, The Trussell Trust, which runs a network of over 420 foodbanks, calls for a true 'yellow card' warning system to stop people falling into crisis

Research by the University of Oxford, released today, finds a "strong, dynamic relationship" between sanctioning and food bank usage: there is a link between people having their benefit payments stopped and an increase in referrals to foodbanks.

Researchers analysing Trussell Trust foodbank data from across 259 local authorities between 2012 and 2015 found that as the rate of sanctioning increased within local authorities, the rate of foodbank use also increased.

Even after accounting for differences between local authorities, their modelling showed that for every 10 additional sanctions applied in each quarter of the year, on average five more adults would be referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks in the area. As sanctioning decreased, foodbank use also decreased, which the report suggests is evidence of a strong link between sanctioning and people not having enough money to meet basic needs.

Figure 1 Average monthly rates of sanctioning among Jobseeker's Allowance claimants sanctioned each quarter over 2011 to 2015.



Notes: Graph shows number of original sanction decisions resulting in a sanction as proportion of number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance in England, Scotland, and Wales. Sources: Stat Xplore and Nomis.

The findings are from the first phase of a 16-month study into how trends in foodbank usage over the last four years relate to changes in the economy and welfare system. Looking across local authorities and over time using aggregated quarterly data, researchers examined whether changes in sanctioning rates within local authorities related to changes in foodbank usage.

Researchers built a longitudinal dataset of local authorities containing quarterly adult foodbank usage, data on foodbank operations, and government data on the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, the number of sanctions applied to Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, unemployment and employment rates, and population size. These models control for differences in characteristics between local authorities and time trends, ruling out other potential explanations for the relationship observed.

The report says foodbanks in The Trussell Trust network experienced a spike in numbers after 2013, when over one million sanctions were applied. Changes to the sanction regime and Jobseeker's Allowance at this time included increasing benefit conditionality for claimants, sanctions imposed immediately for failure to meet these conditions, and longer sanctioning penalties, starting from a minimum of four weeks to up to three years*. Foodbanks distributed three times as much over the period – from just under 350,000 three-day emergency food supplies in 2012/13 to around 913,000 in 2013/14. Even after accounting for new foodbanks opening, this spike was evident across the network, says the research.

Report lead author Dr Rachel Loopstra, from the University of Oxford, said:

“These findings show clear evidence of sanctions being linked to economic hardship and hunger, as we see a close relationship between sanctioning rates and rates of foodbank usage across local authorities in the UK.”

In response to this new evidence, The Trussell Trust proposes changes to the current ‘yellow card’ warning being piloted by the Department for Work and Pensions in Scotland, and calls for the recommendations to be extended across the UK. Currently, the system in Scotland gives notice a sanction is pending and 14 days to appeal. The Trussell Trust recommend a warning system with a non-financial ‘yellow card’ penalty to first try and engage the person in a constructive dialogue without the immediate threat of financial penalty.

Adrian Curtis, Foodbank Network Director for The Trussell Trust, said today,

“The findings from this ground-breaking study by the University of Oxford tell us once and for all: the more people sanctioned, the more people need foodbanks. We now need to listen to the stories behind the statistics: families go hungry, debt spiral, and the heating doesn't go on even as temperatures drop.

“There is much to be hopeful about - we're very pleased to see sanctioning rates have decreased and that the new Secretary of State has announced that work capability re-assessments for ESA claimants with incurable or progressive illnesses have been scrapped. However, we still see people being referred to our foodbanks who have been sanctioned unfairly. A true ‘yellow card’ system, which gives people a non-financial warning first, would mean less people thrown into crisis and ultimately, less people needing foodbanks.”

The research is funded by The Trussell Trust and supported by a Wellcome Trust Investigator Award.

The paper can be found [here](#).

ENDS

Notes to editor

*From Department of Work and Pensions. (2013) *Jobseeker's Allowance: overview of revised sanctions regime*, available here:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/238839/jsa-overview-of-revised-sanctions-regime.pdf

University of Oxford research:

Study authors, Rachel Loopstra, Jasmine Fledderjohann, and David Stuckler are from the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford, and Aaron Reeves is from the London School of Economics. This research was supported by a research grant from The Trussell Trust and a Wellcome Trust Investigator Award.

Sanction data are the number of sanctions applied to claimants, summed over the months in each quarter, which were available up to the second quarter of 2015/16. Similar to food bank data, these do not pertain to individuals, so the same claimant could have received more than one sanction in the same quarter. The sample is restricted to local authorities in Scotland, Wales, and England with foodbanks, as sanctioning data was unavailable for Northern Ireland, with 5 local authorities exempted due to low population size and 15 for containing foodbanks which did not report their figures regularly. This yielded a final analytical dataset of 259 local authorities spanning 16 quarters.

The Trussell Trust:

- Every day people in the UK go hungry for reasons ranging from redundancy or bereavement to welfare problems or receiving an unexpected bill on a low income. The Trussell Trust's network of over 420 foodbanks provides three days' emergency food and support to people in crisis across the UK.
- In 2015-16, Trussell Trust foodbanks provided 1,109,309 three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis. Of those helped, 415,866 were for children.
- Everyone who comes to a Trussell Trust foodbank is referred by a frontline professional agency like Citizens Advice, housing associations and children's centres.
- Trussell Trust foodbanks do much more than food: they provide a listening ear and help resolve the underlying cause of the crisis either through signposting onto relevant local charities or providing on-site immediate support, such as holiday clubs or budgeting and cookery courses.
- Find out more at www.trusselltrust.org