

Emergency food parcel distribution in the United Kingdom: April – September 2022 methodology note

Introduction

These mid-year statistics cover the period 1 April to 30 September 2022 (inclusive) and are comparable to the same periods between April and September for 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. Data was collected up until 24 October 2022.

Number of individual locations distributing support

Across April and September 2022 food parcels were distributed from 1,499 individual locations across the UK. Individual locations are not counted at a point in time. They are instead counted if they've distributed food parcels at any stage during the specified period. A small number of locations may have opened and closed during this time. Most locations can be classed as food bank centres, but some operate as delivery warehouses.

The Trussell Trust supports a network of over 1,300 food bank centres - A food bank centre is somewhere where people get referred, come in and are greeted with a cup of tea. They are provided with a food parcel alongside wider signposting and practical support/advice.

Data collected for 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22, including on the number of individual locations in operation, has been revised from its original publication to account for additional data processing.

Data collection

Data from food banks in the Trussell Trust network is collected via vouchers that are issued by referral agencies, such as health visitors, schools, social workers, and organisations such as Citizens Advice. These agencies assess people for financial hardship before referring them to a food bank. This means that the overwhelming majority of people receiving support via a food bank in the Trussell Trust network do so because they are experiencing financial hardship.¹

This voucher contains information such as the age of the person being referred to the food bank and how many adults and children are contained within their household, allowing the food bank to package up a number of parcels suitable for the household size. Each voucher therefore supports not only the referred person but all of the people in the household.

For reporting purposes if a single voucher records two adults and two children in a household when the data is uploaded to the system this would be described as the food bank providing four parcels and fulfilling one voucher. If that household were to return to the food bank again that would be recorded as the food bank providing eight parcels to a single household and fulfilling two vouchers.

Most vouchers are digital, ensuring data processing is complete as soon as the voucher is fulfilled. However, a significant minority of vouchers continue to be issued on paper. These vouchers must be manually uploaded by food bank staff. This can often lead to significant lags in the data collection. For the period 1 April – 30 September 2022 80% of vouchers were issued electronically.

Following a period to allow food banks to complete their data entry, the data set out as part of this release acts as a census of the total number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network

¹ State of Hunger (2021), *The Trussell Trust*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf>

during the stated period. Food banks are included regardless of whether they have confirmed their data is up to date, or whether they closed for periods during the previous six months. Food banks that left the network during the year are also included in these statistics.

Due to the significant need many food banks have experienced in the last six months, it has not been possible for all food banks to input their data in time for this statistical release. In some areas, therefore, the number of emergency food parcels distributed is not up to date and if there are significant drops in the number of parcels in a certain area, this needs to be viewed with caution.

Once food banks have inputted this data it will be included in the relevant year's numbers in subsequent releases i.e. if a voucher is fulfilled in September 2022 but not added to the system until December 2022 in a subsequent release that data will be included the number of parcels distributed in September 2022.

Data at regional and local authority level

We would recommend not comparing directly between local authority statistics and note that there are significant issues with looking at differences in percentage changes since previous years, and with calculating a number of parcels distributed per head of population at the local level.

Primarily this is because food banks in the Trussell Trust are just one part of the picture of local delivery of emergency food aid, and this changes over time. This means that – depending on how many additional food aid providers open or close in areas – Trussell Trust food banks could be fulfilling a different proportion of overall need in an area year-on-year.

Beyond this there are other factors that could drive variations in the data such as the local economic climate, the policies of the local government, and the opening or closing of individual locations by food banks in the Trussell Trust network. These factors make comparisons, and the identification of drivers of change and difference between areas, difficult.

Data at the local level has been analysed based on the location from which the parcel was collected or delivered, rather than where the household receiving each parcel is living. This means that there might be some changes to local authority statistics that are heavily influenced by the opening or closing, or other operational changes of the individual locations based in those local authorities.

As an example, the South London Warehouse is a new food bank based in Lambeth. Due to operational efficiencies this food bank now distributes all parcels referred via the pre-existing Vauxhall, Waterloo, Norwood & Brixton, and Clapham Park food banks. The Waterloo food bank was based in Southwark, so this will have the effect of increasing Lambeth's numbers, while decreasing Southwark's.

Individual locations are matched to local authorities using postcodes provided by the food bank which are cross-referenced to the national statistic postal lookup file (NSPL).

Note that some food banks provide emergency food boxes. These are pre-prepared food parcels that are given to frontline organisations such as firefighters, or police to give immediately to people in need. These parcels are not tagged to any distribution centre. Where a food bank distributed emergency food boxes these have been proportionally distributed across the local authorities in which the distribution centres of that food bank operate.

Stock data

This year we have released data on the amount of stock that food banks are having to purchase and on how much money food banks are having to spend on purchasing this stock.

As part of the Trussell Trust's network wide Data Collection System food banks input monthly the total amount of supplies (stock) that they have received and note the source of those supplies. This includes tagging whether the supplies were donated (i.e. by members of the public or from corporate partners) and whether the supplies have been purchased. These figures have allowed us to closely monitor both the total amount of donated supplies over the last six months and the amount that food banks are reporting that they are having to purchase.

To understand the financial cost of purchasing this food we surveyed food banks across the network in our September Survey. We asked food banks how much on average they have had to spend monthly on purchasing food to meet the level of need in their local area so far this year. We also included a question asking them to compare that to the average for the same time period last year.

In total 171 food banks completed this online survey across the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken from the 8th September – 14th October 2022 and the survey was distributed through multiple methods across the Trussell Trust food bank network.

Parcel size statistics

The Trussell Trust has previously reported parcels as “three-day emergency food parcels”. In response to the operational challenges that many food banks were facing, particularly over the pandemic, some took the decision to distribute larger seven-day parcels. These were more practical to deliver, and it was felt that they may reduce the incidence of repeat support being needed. Around 9% of parcels distributed between April 2021 – March 2022 contained seven days of food. For this release the Trussell Trust has simply combined both three-day and seven-day parcels together to report the total number of emergency food parcels that were distributed.

Number of individuals supported by food banks for the first time

As part of this release of data the Trussell Trust have reported on the number of people supported by food banks in the Trussell Trust network. Because of its data collection system the Trussell Trust are able to record when a particular individual first needs support from a food bank in the network. This is because every person using a food bank in the network is provided with a unique identification code. This code allows the food bank to understand how many times that person is referred to their food bank so they can offer further support if needed.

This unique identifier can be tracked to the first use of a food bank in the network. The total number of people first supported over the last six months is calculated by selecting all of the unique identifiers that first appeared over the mid-year period – and looking at how many people the voucher associated with that first appearance supported. If for example the first time someone was referred to a food bank, they reported that there were four adults and four children in the household we would report that as eight people used a food bank in the Trussell Trust network for the first time, including four adults and four children.

Working households

The data detailing that one in five people referred to food banks in mid-2022 were living in working households is the first release of a new research programme from the Trussell Trust called Hunger in the UK. This research is delivered in partnership with Ipsos and aims to understand the scale, drivers and solutions to hunger across the UK.

Central to this project is a large-scale survey of people referred to food banks across the Trussell Trust network – the technical details for this survey include:

Ipsos surveyed 2,364 UK adults aged 18+ who had been referred to food banks within the Trussell Trust network between 01 April and 15 July 2022. Food banks were sampled across the UK, with questionnaires randomly distributed within food parcels. In total, 99 food banks participated in the study. Data are weighted to match the profile of UK adults referred to Trussell Trust food banks. Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of “don’t know” categories.

People referred to food banks are defined as doing so if:

- They describe their main activity as being in work (answers either full-time employee; part time employee; self-employed or freelance; or on maternity or paternity leave) AND/OR;
- They say they have any paid work (answers either yes, one paid job; or yes, more than one paid job) AND/OR;
- They say someone in their household is working (: answers that someone apart from themselves in their household is either working full-time as an employee; working part-time as an employee; or self-employed or freelance.)

Contact details

If you want support in using these data please contact: Research@TrussellTrust.org