



Researching U.K. Food Insecurity and Foodbank Use Using a Mixed-Methods Approach

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Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: March 8, 2018

Academic Level: Postgraduate

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London

Online ISBN: 9781526437815

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526437815>

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Abstract

This case study reports on the research design and methods used in a recent project exploring food insecurity and foodbank use in the United Kingdom. The project comprised quantitative analyses of social survey data capturing aspects of food insecurity alongside qualitative interviews with people giving and receiving emergency assistance from foodbanks across one city in England. By taking a mixed-methods approach, we sought to triangulate nationally representative and statistically robust survey data with the in-depth experiences reported by people using foodbanks. This case study discusses the benefits and challenges involved in successfully conducting such mixed-methods research. The highly publicized growth of foodbanks in the United Kingdom has reignited long-standing but often neglected debates about food insecurity and its potential consequences for health, nutrition, and social exclusion. The underlying reasons behind the sharp rise in emergency food provision are disputed, and as data are scarce, these debates are generally not informed by evidence. Moreover, the voices of people receiving emergency food are rarely heard. Quantitative analyses of survey data provided a robust (but limited) basis for understanding the nature and prevalence of food insecurity. In parallel, qualitative research offered us direct insights into the experiences and circumstances of people using foodbanks. In this case study, we describe in detail the methods used in this research project, focusing on the strengths while reflecting upon the challenges and lessons learned when taking a mixed-methods approach to conducting research on under-researched topics, and with vulnerable groups.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Recognize the benefits and challenges of taking a mixed-methods approach to sociological research, and on under-researched topics more specifically
 - Be aware of the methodological challenges faced when conducting survey research on experiences that are not widespread
 - Evaluate the uses of proxy variables and resulting challenges in quantitative social research
 - Appraise the challenges of conducting research on sensitive issues with vulnerable groups
 - Consider practical ways of building good relationships with research participants and gatekeepers
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Project Overview and Context

In this research project, we took a mixed-methods approach to understanding food insecurity in the United Kingdom. Food insecurity was defined by Kathy Radimer, Olson, Greene, Campbell,

and Habicht (1992) as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (p. 395). Until recently, research interest in food insecurity has generally been confined to developing countries, although the United States and Canada provide notable exceptions.

Following the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent reforms to the U.K. welfare system, foodbank use has increased dramatically. Foodbanks distribute emergency food, typically in the form of parcels of non-perishable goods, to offer temporary, immediate relief to households in need. The visible and highly publicized growth of foodbanks in the United Kingdom has ignited political debate on food insecurity, alongside research interest across diverse academic disciplines including public health, geography, social policy, and sociology. We took a mixed-methods approach to combine the statistical strengths of quantitative data analyses with the in-depth insights into the experiences of people receiving emergency food offered by a qualitative approach (Bryman, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Despite the high-profile nature of this research topic, there is no agreed U.K. measure of food insecurity, no systematic data are collected, and the voices of people using foodbanks are seldom heard (Knezevic, Hunter, Watt, Williams, & Anderson, 2014). These omissions mean that the scale of the issue, the groups most affected, and the everyday experiences of food insecurity are poorly understood. Concerns have been raised over the potential health consequences, and the growth of malnutrition-related hospital admissions suggests that poor-quality diets are compromising people’s health (Taylor-Robinson et al., 2013). Experiences of food insecurity also risk social exclusion among those who cannot afford to participate in the social aspects of food (Lang, 1997).

When attempting to explain food insecurity, some commentators have emphasized individual shortcomings as contributing to people’s inability to afford suitable, adequate food. For example, Edwina Currie argued that people use foodbanks because they spend irresponsibly (The Sentinel, 2014), whereas Lady Jenkin claimed that “Poor people do not know how to cook” (Butler, Wintour, & Gentleman, 2014). Such explanations have also maintained that growing foodbank use reflects increased supply, not heightened need. Conversely, other commentators, charities, and some academics have highlighted underlying structural and economic determinants (Garratt, 2016). For example, Rachel Loopstra et al. (2015; Loopstra, Fledderjohann, Reeves, & Stuckler, 2016) have reported that more emergency food is distributed in areas with higher rates of benefit sanctions and unemployment, and larger welfare cuts.

This project’s quantitative element therefore sought to combine data from several nationally

representative social surveys, to identify the scale of food insecurity (using proxy measures when necessary) and the groups most affected. The qualitative component was designed to collect detailed evidence on the experiences of people using foodbanks. Prior to undertaking this research, personal accounts of foodbank use have been largely absent from the research literature and mainstream media; consequently, negative stereotypes of this group have been largely unchallenged. For example, Rebecca Wells and Martin Caraher (2014) found that people using foodbanks were quoted directly in only 20% of 190 U.K. newspaper articles published on the topic between 2006 and 2014. By taking a mixed-methods approach, we were therefore motivated to triangulate two major forms of insights into food insecurity. The process of triangulation involved comparing the project's quantitative and qualitative components, thereby allowing us to corroborate our results, and offer a more objective, nuanced, and detailed understanding of the issue.

Research Aims and Research Questions

In this project, we examined the nature and extent of food insecurity in the United Kingdom, focusing on three key research questions:

1. What are the estimated levels of food insecurity in the United Kingdom in terms of food poverty and risks of undernutrition?
 2. What are the circumstances and experiences of people using foodbanks?
 3. How sustainable is a local voluntary-led emergency food policy model?
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Research Design

This project was conducted over a period of 12 months and comprised three components, each using different methods. First, to estimate the prevalence of food insecurity and risk of undernutrition, we systematically reviewed and analyzed U.K. social survey data on proxy measures of food insecurity, including questions on food intake and affordability alongside wider aspects of food such as hosting friends, and help shopping and cooking. This approach offered a broader understanding of food insecurity than existing research focusing specifically on emergency food provision (e.g., Garratt, Spencer, & Ogden, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016).

No dedicated measures of food insecurity are included in U.K. surveys so we searched the available survey data to identify the most suitable existing measures. Some of the surveys we reviewed were multidisciplinary (such as Understanding Society), whereas others (such as the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey) had a more specialized focus. Where possible, we drew on data from general social surveys in preference to surveys of specific populations. The number of respondents varied considerably between surveys and ranged from 5,974 in the

2011 Family Resources Survey to 32,023 in the 2012 Adult Social Care Survey.

Second, we assessed the scale of emergency food in one case study city in north-west England using online and network searches, alongside information supplied by foodbank organizers. The case study city was selected because it contains areas with high levels of material deprivation, and according to media accounts had recently seen an increase in the provision of emergency food. This exploratory component sought to capture the scale of formal and informal emergency food available in the case study area compared with other estimates such as those based on data from the United Kingdom's largest foodbank network, the Trussell Trust. As is frequently the case in qualitative research, resource constraints precluded a larger study. Nonetheless, the case study approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of emergency food in a diverse urban setting.

Third, we conducted case studies of four foodbanks operating in the same city in north-west England. The four foodbanks were selected to capture diversity in organization type, size, duration of operation, opening hours, area served (urban or suburban), and funding model. This component included observing each foodbank during opening hours, helping with the operation of the foodbank, talking with foodbank organizers and people using foodbanks, and making fieldwork notes.

In total, we interviewed 34 people using foodbanks, in which we collected basic demographic details alongside information on people's reasons for visiting the foodbank, their household circumstances, food spending and budgeting strategies, and how they used the food. These interviews produced detailed information about different people's circumstances and experiences while allowing common experiences to be identified. We also interviewed 14 foodbank organizers and volunteers, covering topics including the number and profile of people they assist, frequency of visits, other support services provided, and sources of their food supplies. Finally, we drew on anonymous comments that were collected in a comments book in one foodbank and subsequently bought comment books for the other foodbanks, although we were reliant on foodbank organizers to encourage these contributions.

Ethical Considerations Arising While Undertaking Qualitative Interviews

Conducting research with vulnerable people—such as those seeking assistance from foodbanks—can raise a number of ethical issues. The full project required ethical approval through the University's ethics committee, which was sought and received before the project began.

One key challenge was building trust among both people using foodbanks and foodbank

organizers and volunteers to encourage them to share their experiences openly. As outlined earlier, we achieved this by spending time observing the foodbanks and talking informally with both organizers and people using foodbanks. To strengthen relationships with foodbank organizers, we provided data support to one foodbank that wanted to set up a database of people using the foodbank, and helped another foodbank access recycled laptops from a charity scheme. These activities served to build trust and also helped us gain access to research participants. Interviewees were given a shopping voucher in acknowledgement of their time.

To protect the interview respondents, the voluntary nature of their participation was emphasized and respondents signed a consent form prior to their interview. All information collected was anonymized, and respondents were assured that they would not be identified in any publications arising from the research. In this context, interviewees can be suspicious of researchers and have concerns about being reported to social services or benefit agencies. It is therefore important that participants are informed about the confidential nature of the interview.

Several people were accompanied by their children or grandchildren, and it was important to treat these children with particular care and sensitivity. We did not question any children directly and allowed parents and carers to decide whether they wanted their children to hear or contribute to the interview. In such instances, it was important for the fieldworkers to think on their feet. This might involve finding an activity—such as drawing or writing—that children could do while the interview was taking place.

Researchers need to be conscious of their responsibility to report any vulnerability they observe to relevant support services, in addition to reporting any observations of benefit fraud. This might include observing children who appeared to be absent from school without permission. We needed to be prepared to follow these courses of action, although in practice this was not necessary. One interviewee recounted buying meat from shoplifters but we considered this a minor infraction that did not warrant reporting to the police.

To ensure researchers' physical safety, a risk assessment was conducted and fieldworker safety protocols were followed. This included ensuring that the fieldworker informed another person of their whereabouts at all times during fieldwork. Researchers also needed to be aware of the potential emotional impact of the interviews on themselves, including seeing very vulnerable adults (and children) using foodbanks. We ensured that fieldworkers (the study's first author and two postgraduate research assistants) had the opportunity to discuss any distressing experiences within the fieldwork team. For further discussion of conducting research with vulnerable groups, see Alan Bryman (2015) and Economic and Social Research Council

(ESRC) (2015).

Method in Action

Review of Quantitative Survey Data

We identified survey questions on four themes relating to food insecurity: (a) food sufficiency and affordability, (b) medical indicators of food insecurity, (c) the support aspect of food and eating, and (d) the social aspects of food. We derived simple descriptive statistics of the proportion of survey respondents reporting different experiences, alongside estimates of national prevalence. When undertaking these analyses, we used the Stata “svy” command to adjust for survey design and non-response using survey weights to offer accurate insights into the scale of U.K. food insecurity. The study’s second author took responsibility for this component of the project.

Analyses of quantitative survey data typically employ multivariate analyses, where the outcome of interest is modeled in relation to several predictor variables at once. This strategy serves to help disentangle the predictor variables that are independently associated with an outcome variable. Multivariate analyses are however only possible when a large number of people report the outcome of interest. Unfortunately for this project, during data analyses, we discovered that only a small number of respondents reported experiences of food insecurity. Multivariate analyses were therefore not possible, so we were restricted to presenting descriptive analyses. Specialist surveys of low-income groups would likely identify a higher prevalence of food insecurity and may therefore permit multivariate analyses; at present, however, no such data sources are available for the United Kingdom. We did however use the best possible methods available by presenting bivariate analyses from different surveys to present initial insights into the groups most at risk.

Assessment of the Scale of Emergency Food Provision in the Case Study Area

The United Kingdom’s largest foodbank network, the Trussell Trust, collates an online foodbank directory, making it straightforward to identify the number and location of Trussell Trust foodbanks. We identified seven Trussell Trust foodbanks within the case study area. We also sought to identify smaller scale emergency food operations, including independent foodbanks and ad hoc provision from local community groups. Identifying these sources of emergency food involved online network searches and word-of-mouth information collected from foodbank organizers. These detailed network searches identified 30 additional emergency food providers. We cannot of course be certain that this estimate captured all available support but it was one of the first attempts to capture the scale of emergency food provision beyond

estimates based on Trussell Trust data.

Case Study of Four Foodbanks

We gained access to the case study foodbanks through phone calls and initial meetings in which informal agreements were made between researchers and the foodbank organizers. Instead of conducting interviews immediately, we spent time informally chatting with people using foodbanks and foodbank organizers. We also helped with the foodbank operations, including unloading deliveries and helping prepare food parcels. These activities gave us the opportunity to learn about foodbanks as a location for research, including practical considerations relating to noise levels and the space available for conducting interviews. This also presented the opportunity to build trusting relationships with the foodbank organizers. This trust was important as the foodbank organizers consequently provided reassurance to people using foodbanks about the research and emphasized the value of their participation.

We selected the interviewees by approaching people using foodbanks and asking their consent to participate in a research interview. We quickly learned that interviewees were more focused if they were interviewed after receiving their food parcel as in some instances people were concerned that food parcels would run out. At the end of each interview, we encouraged interviewees to speak to the foodbank organizers if they had any further concerns or support needs.

We used a semi-structured questionnaire, which we initially piloted with a small number of respondents and then revised, primarily to reduce its length and remove overlapping and non-essential questions. For example, a question asking people to rate how embarrassed they felt about visiting the foodbank was replaced with an open-ended question about how they felt coming to the foodbank more generally. This open-ended question provided rich data on people's very personal views and individual experiences. We also reworded some of the more sensitive questions (primarily those relating to budgeting and debt) and moved these toward the end of the questionnaire. This piloting process was essential to learn how our research instruments worked in practice.

To avoid the risk of creating a barrier between the interviewer and interviewees, we decided not to record the interviews. Background noise in the foodbanks would also have made this practically difficult. Instead, we worked through the questionnaire and made verbatim notes of interviewees' answers. Some people using foodbanks were reticent about sharing their experiences, so we endeavored to show empathy and clearly explain the purpose and value of the research. During the fieldwork period, the rise of foodbanks was subject to widespread media coverage and political debate, which may have reduced people's willingness to share

their experiences. Despite this, once the interviews began, we found that people using foodbanks were very willing to talk and share their views and experiences.

We analyzed the questionnaire data thematically to identify key patterns of experiences reported by people using foodbanks, and foodbank organizers and volunteers. We also selected quotations that helped to illustrate these issues. The three major themes identified were as follows:

- 1.The stigma and embarrassment reported by people using foodbanks: “I thought about coming but wasn’t sure and was embarrassed and didn’t want to ask friends ... it was eating away at my pride” (Female, aged 46).
- 2.Experiences of social isolation: “I come here for food as it’s so expensive to buy, but also to meet people ... If I stayed at home I’d go doolally” (Female, aged 65).
- 3.The careful planning, shopping, and budgeting strategies employed: “I buy the cheapest food in the supermarket ... and make it last. I wait by the reduced section in the supermarket. I make the foodbank food last all week” (Female, aged 63).

This approach offered an in-depth understanding of the circumstances and experience of people living in food insecurity to supplement our quantitative assessment of the scale of U.K. food insecurity. Our full research findings are available in the published article.

We held an informal focus group in one foodbank. This was not planned for in advance and instead began spontaneously as the interviews were completed, as some respondents wanted to stay on after their interview and share their views with others. As researchers, we let the discussion develop, asked questions, and made notes. Some participants may have been more forthcoming when discussing experiences they share with others than in interviews with researchers, and we gained detailed insights that added value to the interview results. On reflection, this approach might also have been valuable in the other foodbanks; however, in practice, the end of fieldwork was too close for this to be practically possible. This experience nonetheless illustrates the importance and value of maintaining a flexible approach when undertaking qualitative research.

Dissemination and Impact

This research project generated considerable political and media interest, which presented an opportunity to disseminate the research, alongside some challenges. We were interviewed on BBC and ITV News, the research was cited in a House of Lords debate on financial vulnerability, and we made an impact film.

These activities can make a real difference to the impact of a research project. However, it is important to be prepared for the different ways of working and styles of communication needed for these impact and engagement activities. For example, the media might want to highlight something in your research that you do not believe to be a key finding, or a film-maker may try to focus on a particular issue which does not clearly relate to your research project.

These challenges can be complex, but it is important to make the most of any media interest. The key is to be prepared. For example, a press release prepared with the help of your institution's press office will allow you to highlight the key issues you want to communicate to journalists and the public. During interviews, it is crucial to be concise and focus on your most important findings. Having a list of the points you want to make—as succinctly as possible—might be helpful. Media work also moves fast: you might be asked to appear on the news or give an interview at short notice (often on the same day) so you need to be responsive to requests and ready to appear without delay.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

We undertook a mixed-methods project to address some of the evidence gaps relating to food insecurity and foodbank use in the United Kingdom. The quantitative component demonstrated that a small proportion of people reported experiences of food insecurity. Our exploration of emergency food provision revealed a large number of food providers in our case study city, most of whom were not affiliated with the prominent Trussell Trust network. Finally, our interviews revealed a diverse range of people using foodbanks. Many were highly attuned to the costs of food and their spending choices, and reported innovative strategies aimed at meeting their households' food needs.

Using a mixed-methods approach enabled the triangulation of robust quantitative evidence from national social surveys against detailed qualitative evidence. Such an approach was valuable when exploring a research topic such as food insecurity that has recently gained prominence, but where considerable evidence gaps remain. In the following paragraphs, we reflect on what we learned from taking a mixed-methods approach to this project.

The quantitative assessment of proxy measures of food insecurity using nationally representative surveys revealed that experiences of food insecurity are not widespread but nevertheless affect substantial numbers of people. The small number of survey respondents reporting experiences of food insecurity meant we were unable to undertake multivariate analyses and were therefore restricted to descriptive analyses, which was frustrating to us as researchers. We advise researchers who are seeking to understand experiences that may not

be widespread to consider the prevalence of these experiences when planning their projects and to be realistic about the statistical analyses and substantive conclusions possible. We did however make the most of the available data by collating evidence from different surveys and undertaking bivariate analyses.

Much of the success of our foodbank case studies can be attributed to researchers demonstrating respect and building trusting relationships first with foodbank organizers and volunteers, and subsequently with people using foodbanks. Without realizing or intending to, researchers can be seen as intimidating figures of authority or officialdom. This can be avoided using simple measures such as engaging in informal conversations and dressing appropriately to avoid creating barriers between researchers and participants. Such considerations will depend on the research context and deserve attention before the formal research process begins.

Taking a flexible approach also allowed us to conduct an informal focus group in one foodbank, which offered insights that complemented those gleaned from interviews. Nonetheless, conducting interviews in foodbanks presented some challenges, reflecting both the sensitive nature of the issue of food insecurity, and practical issues including the limited space available, background noise, and time constraints.

Overall, the mixed-methods approach taken in this project allowed us to supplement nationally representative quantitative data on food insecurity with detailed firsthand accounts of the experiences of people using foodbanks. We were therefore able to combine the strengths of both approaches to gain comprehensive insights into a topic for which scant data are available and individuals' personal accounts are often absent. A mixed-methods approach is ideal when exploring such research questions.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative methods when conducting sociological research?
2. What methodological challenges might you encounter when conducting quantitative research on experiences that are only reported by a small proportion of people, even if the actual numbers of people are considerable? How can these challenges be overcome?
3. What ethical issues might you face when conducting research with potentially vulnerable groups?
4. How can you build confidence and trust with research participants and gatekeepers?
5. If an interviewee disclosed a behavior that worried you, how would you approach this? How

might this affect the confidentiality agreement with the interviewee?

6. Under what circumstances would you use proxy variables when undertaking social research, and what challenges might you face?

Further Reading

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Web Resources

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger in the United Kingdom: <https://feeding-britain.org/>

End Hunger U.K. campaign: <http://endhungeruk.org/>

Journal of Mixed Methods Research: <http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/mmra/11/1>

The Trussell Trust: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/>

U.K. Data Archive: <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>

Why food insecurity and foodbanks have become commonplace (blog post): <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/posts/2015/02/why-food-insecurity-and-food-banks-have-become-commonplace/>

The importance of measuring hunger (blog post): <http://endhungeruk.org/importance-measuring-hunger/>

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