

THE INCREASING USE OF FOOD BANKS

The allegation

According to its authors, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) delayed the publication of a study looking at the growing use of emergency food aid for eight months.³¹

Timeline

- Feb - Mar 2013 Defra asked a team of researchers led by the University of Warwick to conduct a Rapid Evidence Assessment of the research literature on emergency food aid. They looked at published literature, and issued a call for evidence that prompted providers of food aid and other agencies to contribute their experience.
- Jun 2013 A steering committee including Defra, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health approved the report.
- Nov 2013 The media reported allegations that the study was being “hidden”³² and “suppressed.”³³ Asked by a *Guardian* journalist to explain the delay, a Defra spokesperson said: “Government funded research projects are required to go through the necessary review and quality assurance process prior to publication. Once this process is complete, the report will be published on the government’s website.”
- Feb 2014 Defra published final report.³⁴
- Mar 2014 A study published in the *BMJ* found that the rise in the use of food banks “is associated with cuts to local authority spending and central welfare spending,” and that the “highest levels of food bank use have occurred where there have been the highest rates of sanctioning, unemployment, and cuts in central welfare spending.”³⁵

How were government policy and public debate affected?

Welfare Minister Lord Freud had argued in July 2013 that more people were using food banks because more of them existed and awareness of them had increased – in other words that increased supply had caused greater use, not increased demand. He rejected a link between the government’s benefit reforms and an increased use of food banks.³⁶ The minister’s claim could not be evaluated in the absence of evidence from the delayed report. The report contradicted the minister: it cited immediate financial crisis, often related to changes to benefits, as an important driver of food bank use.

The UK government does not collect data on food aid. In the absence of systematic evidence on the use of food banks in the UK the researchers relied on studies from the USA, Canada and other countries, and on case studies from providers of food banks. Timely publication would have highlighted the gaps in the evidence base. It would also have allowed better-informed scrutiny of ministers’ claims and have required government to address the data.

³¹ Dugan, E (2014)

³² Oakeshott, I (2013)

³³ Buttlar, P (2013)

³⁴ Lambie-Mumford, H et al (2014)

³⁵ Loopstra, R et al (2015)

³⁶ Morris, N (2013)