
Food poverty is becoming increasingly prevalent in the UK. It has increased both in its occurrence in people’s everyday lives and as a research focus across the social sciences and beyond from the understanding of food to social inequalities. In 2000 the first Trussell Trust foodbank was established in Salisbury and there are now over 440 foodbanks in their network (Trussell Trust 2016a, 2016b). In the introduction to *Hunger Pains* Kayleigh Garthwaite notes that the number of food parcels given at Trussell Trust foodbanks across the UK topped one million for the first time in 2014/15.\(^1\) The latest Trussell Trust statistics for 2015/16 show an increase in foodbank use in the UK by 2% (Trussell Trust 2016c). This may seem a small rise, but it shows the continued and importantly the increasing use of foodbanks in UK public life. Yet fuelled by misrepresentation in mainstream media discourses, in parts of society there is a distinct lack of understanding around who uses foodbanks, why, and how. Jack Monroe’s foreword to *Hunger Pains* highlights the difference between the stereotype of people exploiting “free food” and the real need and poverty of foodbank users. These stereotypes have not been helped by what Garthwaite calls “poverty porn” (p.13) in which the media gives a narrow and often sensationalised view of food poverty. A clear example of this was seen in 2014 in a *Daily Mail* article titled “No ID, no checks … and vouchers for sob stories: The truth behind those shock food bank claims” (Murphy and Manning 2014). Whilst much of the newspaper article was subsequently discredited by the Trussell Trust (2014) and other national newspapers, the negative impact of the claims of this “truth” remain in mainstream media discourses which filter into their readership. When people have no other contact with foodbanks, they are relying on the media to gain an impression about them. It is therefore problematic when such an impression is inaccurate and condemning of foodbank users.

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\(^1\) The Trussell Trust is a charity, “founded on Christian principles” to “develop, run, and enable community projects that combat poverty and exclusion”. See [https://www.trusselltrust.org](https://www.trusselltrust.org)
Published in June 2016, Garthwaite’s book is timely in its aim of giving a voice to foodbank users. In the three months since its publication the book has already attracted attention both within and outside academia having been sold in mainstream bookshops beyond an “academic” classification. It therefore has the potential to reach a wider audience beyond academia and contribute to efforts to turn the tide on public understanding of foodbanks and their users. Garthwaite approached researching food poverty through a two-year ethnography, volunteering at the Stockton-on-Tees Trussell Trust foodbank. As well as participant observation, she interviewed clients at the foodbank and then visited some of them in their homes. Garthwaite rightly argues that the statistics of over a million foodbank parcels can only go so far in portraying the present reality which is perhaps why there has not been great public outrage at the existence of food poverty in the UK. Garthwaite’s aim to give foodbank users a voice looks to combat this problem. It does, however, raise a question around who is given a voice in this book; there remains a necessary choice of who is represented, and who Garthwaite met and interviewed but did not give a voice to. Indeed, in the first chapter Garthwaite writes: “… there was no such thing as typical foodbank use” (p.31). Can summaries of foodbank users be made at all? How could more people be given a voice? The second aim of the book is to challenge thinking around the factors causing an increase in foodbank use. This looks to the first aim as Garthwaite seeks particularly to challenge the view that using a foodbank is a “lifestyle choice”. This highlights the important issue of people in need not using foodbanks because of the associated stigma. As we will see, through each chapter of Hunger Pains Garthwaite shows the complexity of issues around needing and using foodbanks, calling for greater conversation and solutions.

Each chapter in the book takes on and challenges a different idea around foodbank use. Chapter One begins by placing Garthwaite as a researcher at the foodbank. A strong feature of Garthwaite’s work which starts here and continues throughout the book is the engaging writing style which makes it accessible to a wider audience beyond academia. The integration of relatively long field diary extracts into the main text provides a sense of integrity and allows the reader to share in Garthwaite’s experiences in volunteering at the
foodbank—an important dimension of the work in combatting inaccurate stereotypes of foodbanks and their users. The fact that Garthwaite includes negative as well as positive experiences (for example, her nervousness at first going into the foodbank) helps to give the reader assurance in the honesty and reality of her accounts from the start of the book.

Chapter Two provides an overview of what a foodbank does. This is easily recognisable to those already volunteering and/or researching at foodbanks, but is an important foundation for the rest of the book to readers not yet familiar with how they function, and to those whose opinion is clouded by media representations. Two key characteristics highlighted are that a referral is needed to use a foodbank (these can come from a variety of organisations, including doctors surgeries, job centres, and children’s services), and foodbanks often go beyond food, for example, to signpost people to debt services or Citizens Advice.

Chapter Three broadens the discussion to consider the politics of foodbank use, highlighting the lack of a national measure of emergency food aid and the state’s failure to engage with the problem of food poverty. Indeed, Garthwaite goes further than this lack of engagement to show how some powerful politicians have misrepresented foodbank use and users, wilfully or not, which feeds into public misunderstanding (cf. Slater 2014). In contrast, Garthwaite argues against the central myths around foodbank use which some politicians have promulgated, for example the misplaced view that “poor people can’t cook” (p.65). We could extend the discussion of the relationship between foodbanks and the state further than Garthwaite does in Hunger Pains, as for example Andrew Williams and colleagues (2012) do in their discussion of foodbanks and neoliberalism. Of further consideration in addressing misunderstanding around foodbank use is why people use a foodbank. This is the focus of Chapter Four which shows how going to a foodbank is often a person’s last resort rather than an easy option. Garthwaite’s use of detailed case studies in this and the remaining chapters brings the text to life and allows the reader a greater appreciation of the reality of using a foodbank.
Chapters Five, Six and Seven then take in turn different problems people using foodbanks face. Chapter Five shows that it is not just unemployed people who need foodbanks; people in work can also find themselves in need of aid, particularly those on casual and low-paid contracts. Here amongst several case studies of foodbank users we meet Glen. His story is used to highlight the precarity of employment: he has moved between multiple short-term casual contracts, and struggled with a lack of job security meaning he has needed to use the foodbank. Chapter Six moves to show the problems for people addressing food and health problems with a low income. The title of this chapter captures the attitudes of foodbank users represented: “Doing the best I can with what I’ve got”. Building upon Chapter Two, Garthwaite shows how GP surgeries are one place from which a person can be referred to a foodbank. The case studies of foodbank users Garthwaite met in Stockton-on-Tees show people’s strategies for managing situations around not having enough food. Examples include the need to shop across multiple outlets for the cheapest food and best deals, and the issue that the cheapest food is too often the least healthy. This partly contributes to a view in parts of the mainstream media that people using foodbanks are choosing the wrong types of food to eat. The fact of the matter is these “wrong types” are the cheapest. This combined with the choice many are faced with between money for food or for fuel (and therefore cooking food) shows that life on a low income is hardly the glamorous existence some media outlets portray it as.

In the final thematic chapter, Garthwaite brings to our attention the stigma and shame people can experience in using a foodbank. This can extend so far as a person not using a foodbank, despite being in need, because they do not want to experience that stigma. Conversely, people can also experience shame due to a fear of not being in need enough to use a foodbank. For example, if they arrive by car they may fear questioning of why they have not sold their car; people outside of their situation forget that people had lives before needing the foodbank and they hope to return to/continue this in time. If we continue Garthwaite’s example of the car, selling the family car would not necessarily be the most suitable scenario to resolve a family’s problems, for example if it is relied upon to travel to
work. However, foodbanks are not only a negative experience: “When people did overcome this fear, the actual experience of using the foodbank was often not so negative” (p.148). For example, Trussell Trust foodbanks are café-like in style, aiming to put people at ease. I too found this in my work at North Bristol Foodbank in 2013, where volunteers called the environment at the foodbank caring, compassionate, and non-judgemental (see Denning 2014). The volunteers themselves are crucial in the purposeful creation of this environment. Elements of this are reflected in recent work by Paul Cloke and colleagues: “we argue the need to conceptualize food banks as ambivalent spaces, often characterized by complex interconnectivities between shame and gratitude, stigma and acceptance, moral judgement and emotional support” (p.12). There are complex dynamics at play in the foodbank environment and we must be careful at making generalisations about the nature of that environment.

In the conclusion to Hunger Pains, Garthwaite raises as many questions as are addressed, which I see as positive for future discussion and research. In particular, Garthwaite asks: “what does the future look like for foodbank Britain?” (p.149). She makes three recommendations to address this question. First, Garthwaite calls for government intervention to address why people are using foodbanks. I would suggest this needs to be more explicit in addressing the issues beyond food, for example the debate around people having money for food or fuel; food poverty is not an isolated problem solely involving food. There is, however, a lack of detail as to what exactly this would entail. Second, Garthwaite argues that we need to “stop stigmatising people living in poverty” (p.157), which is crucial if there is to be any form of resolution around the issue of poverty. Building upon this, Garthwaite’s third recommendation is to “listen to people using foodbanks” (p.158) in order to recognise the complexity of the situations people are in and how they have come to need a foodbank. What form might this take? How can we avoid sensationalising food poverty through the media and more accurately portray people’s lives? This book has certainly been a step in the right direction. Finally, it is important to recognise that although Hunger Pains makes use of ethnography in Stockton-on-Tees, this is not a localised phenomenon. Indeed, I
recognised much of Garthwaite’s observations from my time volunteering in Bristol. The 2014 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty also shows the scale of the problem across the UK (APPG 2014), as does work by Hannah Lambie-Mumford (2015). Garthwaite’s work could be critiqued for focusing only on one area and not presenting a national picture of UK foodbanks, but this is not the case. What Garthwaite has presented is an accessible account of food poverty and foodbanks in the UK which should be taken forward to address UK food poverty.

References


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