



# The Relationship between Austerity and Food Insecurity in the UK: A Systematic Review

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## About the research

This research is the first to systematically review quantitative studies of austerity policies, food insecurity, and foodbank use in the UK.

Food insecurity is defined as having limited access to food due to lack of money or other resources. It ranges from worrying about being able to obtain food, compromising quality and variety of food, reducing quantity of food, and skipping meals. Foodbank use can be used as a proxy for food insecurity, although it underestimates food insecurity as not everyone who is food insecure accesses a food bank.

Food insecurity can have considerable impacts on long-term health. Previous studies have linked food insecurity to poor physical health, higher body weight and obesity, and chronic disease.

All eight papers included in this systematic review found a clear relationship between austerity policies and food insecurity. In particular, changes to the welfare system were associated with increased food insecurity and foodbank use.

## Policy implications

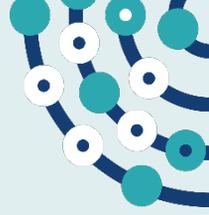
- Welfare reform as part of UK austerity policies since 2010 - particularly policies relating to benefit caps, delays, and sanctions - has considerably reduced individuals' resources and ability to afford food.
- This dismantling of the safety net has led to increased foodbank use and may have long term health impacts.
- Welfare policy makers should consider potential impacts on food insecurity and foodbank use.
- As the UK government tries to reduce budget deficits caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential impacts of austerity measures on food insecurity should be considered.
- Analysis for policy decisions could better predict potential impacts on the health and wellbeing of the population if there was a routine measure of food insecurity in the UK.

## Association between increasing austerity measures and food insecurity and foodbank use



This diagram shows the findings of the eight individual papers included in the systematic review. Each bar represents a single study, with the height of the bar representing study quality (using the Newcastle Ottawa Scale). The x axis indicates effect direction, for food insecurity and foodbank use separately.

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## Key findings

All eight papers on this topic found a clear and consistent relationship between austerity policies and food insecurity and foodbank use.

Six studies found that the welfare reform aspect of UK austerity policies led to increased food insecurity and food bank use.

In particular, sanctions – delays to benefits as a response to a claimant not actively seeking work – were found to increase foodbank use. Increases of 100 sanctions per 100,000 people led to increases of between 2 and 36 food parcels per 100,000 people.

Cuts in welfare spending, Personal Independence Payment reassessments, the removal of the spare room subsidy (known as the “bedroom tax”) and Universal Credit were also associated with increased foodbank use. One study found that being impacted by welfare reform (compared to not being impacted) was associated with doubled odds of using foodbanks.

The other two studies found that austerity policies were associated with increased food insecurity in European countries including the UK. These studies did not specifically investigate different aspects of welfare reform, but rather whether a country introduced austerity policies in general. Further research is needed on other aspects of austerity policies such as changes in public sector spending.

## Further information

This work forms part of the NIHR School for Public Health Research’s work on [impacts of changes to public sector spending on nutritional intakes and health outcomes in the UK](#)

The journal article detailing this work can be found here: [The relationship between austerity and food insecurity in the UK: A systematic review](#)

## Contact the researchers

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## About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial College London; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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