

Victims of Austerity or Feckless Freeloaders? The Stereotypes of the Deserving and Undeserving Poor in the Debate on Britain's Food Bank Users

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ABSTRACT

Once a rare sight, food banks are fast becoming an established feature of Britain's social security system, their number having increased from around a hundred in 2010 to over two thousand at present. In 2017, as many as 1.2 million emergency food parcels were given out to individuals and families, with demand continuing to grow. The unprecedented dependence of British households on donated food is a disturbing phenomenon raising many questions not only about the government's welfare policies but also about poverty and the poor themselves. Using framing analysis, this paper aims to explore the ways in which food bank users are portrayed in the public sphere, with special emphasis on media coverage and political discourse across the left-right spectrum. The competing depictions of food bank users are shown as a continuation of the age-old debate on the causes of poverty and its understanding as either individual or systemic failure.

KEYWORDS

food banks, austerity, deserving poor, undeserving poor, framing

Introduction

While ranking among the world's seven wealthiest countries, Britain today shows staggering levels of inequality, being the only G7 country more unequal at present than a hundred years ago. The richest 1% of Britons currently own the same amount of wealth as 54% of the country's population; the 1,000 richest people have doubled their wealth in just five years. At the same time, however, millions of British families are living below the breadline, with one in three children growing up in poverty.¹

Following the 2008 crash and subsequent the state bailout of banks, the Conservative-led government launched an austerity drive involving unprecedented social spending cuts. One of the concomitant phenomena of the welfare shake-up has been a marked rise in food poverty, leading to the emergence of charity-run food banks. Until the 2008 crisis, foodbanks were a rare sight in Britain's towns. In 2004, the Trussell Trust, the largest British food charity, operated only 30 food banks across the UK. In 2019, the number is approaching 800 and new ones continue to open as demand for food relief soars. In 2018, 1.6 million food parcels were handed out to people in food crisis, a 19% increase on the previous year. More than half a million of the parcels went to children.²

1 Iain Wilkinson, "Food Poverty: Agony of Hunger the Norm for Many Children in the UK," *The Conversation*, April 30, 2019, accessed May 20, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/food-poverty-agony-of-hunger-the-norm-for-many-children-in-the-uk-116216>.

2 "Record 1.6m Food Bank Parcels Given to People in the Past Year as the Trussell Trust Calls for an End to Universal Credit Five Week Wait," *The Trussell Trust*, March 31, 2019, accessed April, 15, 2019, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>.

The sudden rise in foodbank numbers has caused a stir in the public sphere, with politicians and the media striving to make sense of the troubling phenomenon. The ensuing debate on food banks and their users in particular has seen the re-emergence of the stereotype of the deserving and undeserving poor, an age-old social categorization dating back to the Tudor era. The purpose of the present paper is to examine how food bank users are portrayed in terms of this dichotomy, with special emphasis on media coverage and political discourse across the left-right spectrum.

Food Banks

For those experiencing acute poverty, food banks represent a service of last resort. Run predominantly by charities and other volunteer-based organizations, Britain's food banks distribute food to those referred by local frontline professionals or agencies, such as general practitioners, job centres, schools, housing associations or mental health groups. Having received a voucher, the claimant can approach the nearest food bank to obtain a minimum of three days' food. Generally, food bank clients tend to be people with overlapping forms of destitution. Finding themselves at the far end of the low-income spectrum, they live in extreme financial vulnerability. Although unemployed individuals or those depending on welfare benefits dominate, there has also been a growing number of people in paid work whose income fails to cover the rising costs of living; usually individuals in low-paid, zero-hours or part-time work. In addition to low income, the main reasons for visiting a food bank include indebtedness, the rising costs of housing and utility bills, a sudden decrease in working hours, a reduction in benefit value and, last but not least, delays in benefit payments due to the issues accompanying the government's welfare restructuring. In addition, many people find themselves in acute food poverty as a result of benefit sanctions, a controversial government policy of stopping benefit payments to those who have somehow failed to comply with the administrative complexities of jobseeking.³

The Deserving/Undeserving Poor Stereotype

The perception of the poor as either deserving or undeserving of assistance can be traced to the Tudor era, which saw the implementation of the Poor Laws aimed at tackling the issue of mounting poverty in the absence of the traditional poor relief institutions, the monasteries. To determine who was eligible for relief, the legislation distinguished between two types of poor on the basis of moral judgment. The deserving poor comprised those who could not be blamed for their poverty, their predicament arising from unfortunate circumstances rather than individual moral flaws. These included orphaned children, the sick and the disabled as well as those unable to work due to old age. On the other hand, the undeserving poor comprised able-bodied unemployed of all kinds (referred to as rogues, vagrants or sturdy beggars in the language of the times). The cause of their poverty was believed to stem from idleness and various other forms of moral degradation, such

³ see Alice Tihelková, "Going Backwards? The Welfare Agenda of David Cameron's Government from a Historical Perspective," *From Theory to Practice. Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Anglophone Studies* (Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, 2016).

as improvidence, prodigality and tendency to breed irresponsibly.⁴ While the former group was found deserving of state relief, the members of the latter were subjected to a series of punitive or corrective policies reflecting their position as an anti-social element which needs to be contained or eliminated.

The stereotype of the deserving and undeserving poor has shown considerable resilience in the course of British history, re-emerging periodically at times when poor relief expenditure came to be regarded as too costly and cuts to the welfare budget were deemed necessary. The culmination of the judgmentalist approach to poverty came with the 1832 Amendment Act, which introduced a strongly punitive system making indoor relief (confinement of destitute individuals in workhouses) the only form of state assistance. In line with the principle of less eligibility, based on the idea that social assistance should always be a less attractive option than productive labour, workhouses offered deliberately harsh conditions to deter the poor from turning to the state for help.

Informed by the pioneering social research by Seebohm Rowntree and Charles Booth as well as the advancing labour movement, 20th century social policies towards the poor underwent a major change, with the phenomenon increasingly perceived as a structural problem, not individual moral failure. This change manifested in the creation of the welfare state and the concept of social provision from the cradle to the grave. The post-war decades of near-full employment rendered the concept of the undeserving poor largely redundant, as the overwhelming majority of able-bodied men were in paid work. However, this situation was only temporary, and the stereotyping re-emerged in the mid-1970s. Under the impact of the oil shocks and the financial crisis, which resulted in the acceptance of an IMF loan with the conditions of draconic public spending cuts, a new surge of suspicion and resentment emerged towards welfare benefit claimants.⁵

When the Conservative-led government launched its austerity-driven Welfare Reform Act in 2012, the anti-scrounger rhetoric reached a new high. To reconcile the public with the controversial policy of sweeping welfare cuts, David Cameron and his team revived the age-old dichotomy between the deserving poor (represented by hard-working low-income individuals and families) and the undeserving poor (represented by economically inactive benefit claimants). The government strove to create the impression that it was on the side of the former, emphasizing their moral eligibility for assistance. On the other hand, those deemed to be leading irresponsible lives at the expense of the state were identified as the principal target of the cuts. Their moral deficiency was underscored by the choice of language, such as “the hard-to-reach”, the “problem families” or those “having no stake in society” and emphasis was placed on the parasitic aspects of their existence:

Those within it grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own, the state will support you whatever decisions you make, you will always be able to take out no matter what you put in. This has sent out some incredibly damaging signals. That it pays not to work. That you are owed something for nothing. It gave us millions of working-age people sitting at home on benefits even before the recession hit. It created a culture of entitlement. And it has led to huge resentment

4 Michael Katz, “The Biological Inferiority of the Undeserving Poor,” *Social Work and Society. International Online Journal*, Vol. 11, No.1 (2013), accessed on 13 April, 2019, <http://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/359/709>.

5 Serena Romano, “Idle Paupers, Scroungers and Shirkers: Past and New Social Stereotypes of the Undeserving Welfare Claimant in the UK,” *In Defence of Welfare 2* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019), 63.

amongst those who pay into the system, because they feel that what they're having to work hard for, others are getting without having to put in the effort.⁶

However, the moral judgments against benefit claimants were not limited to the Conservative Party; some Labour members also concluded that embracing the cause of the “strivers” as opposed to the “skivers” was necessary to improve the party’s election prospects. In his Labour Party Conference speech, the shadow work and pensions secretary Liam Byrne urged, “Let’s face the tough truth – that many people on the doorstep at the last election, felt that too often we were for shirkers not workers. We’ve got to deal with that if we want to get re-elected.”⁷ In addition to politics, the anti-scrounger mood became prominent in the media, whether in newspaper coverage⁸ or in television production (e.g. Channel 4’s series *Benefits Street*). Moreover, surveys revealed a public hardening of attitudes towards benefits claimants; according to a 2013 survey by Ipsos Mori, people believed that £24 out of every £100 spent on benefits was fraudulently claimed. The real amount, however, was £1.10 in every £100.⁹

Stereotype Analysis: Methodology

With the stereotype of the deserving and undeserving poor having made a powerful comeback in recent debate on poverty in Britain, investigating if and how it has found its way into the discourse on food banks and their clients presented itself as a task worth undertaking. In order to examine the use of such stereotyping, the websites of leading British online newspapers and magazines were searched for references to food banks and their users, namely *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Mirror*, *Mail Online*, *The Telegraph*, *The Express*, *The New Statesman* and *The Spectator*. The choice of the websites reflected the intention to include both right- and left-leaning sources and to ensure the representation of both quality and tabloid press. In addition, the archive of British political speeches UKPOL was searched. The search phrases *food banks* and its spelling variant *foodbanks* were used for this purpose. The search period was from March 2012, when the Conservative-led government launched its welfare reform, to March 2019. Since the total number of articles and speeches exceeded 700, the corpus selection was narrowed down to a maximum 15 articles per each media source plus 15 political speeches, resulting in 145 texts in total. The texts singled out for analysis were those that explicitly commented on the people seeking food bank assistance.

The text corpus was content-analysed using framing analysis. Akin to critical discourse analysis, this method is concerned with examining how particular issues are defined and problematized, along with the effect this framing has on the broader debate on the issue in question. In the book *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, communication studies scholar Jim A. Kuypers

6 “David Cameron’s Welfare Speech in Full,” *The Telegraph*, June 25, 2012, accessed May 2, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9354163/David-Camerons-welfare-speech-in-full.html>.

7 Macer Hall, “Party is over for Benefit Skivers,” *The Express*, January 9, 2013, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/369554/Party-is-over-for-benefit-skivers>.

8 See Alice Tihelková, “Framing the ‘Scroungers’: the Re-emergence of the Stereotype of the Undeserving Poor and Its Reflection in the British Press,” *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 41, No. 2 (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 2015).

9 Michael Buchanan, “How Much Benefit Money is Lost to Fraud?” *BBC News*, June 5, 2017, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2017-39980793>.

defines framing as a “process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner. Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies.”¹⁰

In line with Kuypers’ approach, this paper adopts a qualitative approach to framing analysis. The themes persisting across the corpus have been identified inductively, with the aim of eliciting frames applied to food bank users and of determining whether they reflect the traditional deserving/undeserving poor stereotype. A stereotype is understood here as a mental representation of a certain group and its members. Unlike many other framing analysis studies, the present paper does not primarily purport to demonstrate newspaper bias; instead, it seeks to identify the different views of food bank users that have found their way into the discussion on the food bank phenomenon, whether in newspaper and magazine coverage or in the speeches of Britain’s leading politicians.

Results of the Analysis

As might have been expected, the analysis revealed the significant presence of the deserving/undeserving stereotyping in the source texts studied, with the deserving poor category viewed in two distinct ways depending on the interpretation of the causes of the food emergency. In all, three main frames were identified, which can be summarized as follows:

1. Deserving poor and primarily victims of government austerity
2. Deserving poor but primarily victims of other causes than government austerity
3. Undeserving poor

Each of the frames is discussed in detail below.

Frame No. 1: Deserving Poor and Primarily Victims of Government Austerity

As previously demonstrated by Tihelková¹¹ and Romano¹², negative stereotyping of welfare recipients is relatively widespread in current media and political discourse, especially on the right-leaning side of the spectrum. However, the existence of people actually going *hungry* appears to engender a considerably more sympathetic response. The corpus reveals that in the vast majority of cases, food bank clients are perceived as the deserving poor; as victims of circumstances bigger than themselves and, at the same time, as a phenomenon raising painful questions about the current state of Britain. The acknowledgement of food bank use as an expression of genuine need, as opposed to the various forms of welfare fraud (traditionally portrayed as enabling an easy life on benefits), is in all probability aided by the fact that the process of food bank referral is fairly rigorous and supervised by trusted public institutions.

10 Jim A. Kuypers, “Framing Analysis from a Rhetorical Perspective,” *Doing News Framing Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 301.

11 Tihelková, “Framing the ‘Scroungers,’” 129-134.

12 Romano, “Idle Paupers, Scroungers and Shirkers,” 66.

Nevertheless, the views on the contributing causes of food poverty differ across the corpus, with the dividing line corresponding roughly to the left-leaning/ right-leaning orientation of the sources. On the left side of the spectrum, the prevalent view is that the rise in the foodbank phenomenon is a direct consequence of the Tory welfare reforms; therefore, people turning to food banks are primarily victims of the austerity policies pursued since 2012. Quoted in *The Independent*, the chief executive of the Oxfam charity Mark Goldring makes a clear link between austerity and hunger: “The shocking reality is that hundreds of thousands of people in the UK are turning to food aid. Cuts to social safety nets have gone too far, leading to destitution, hardship and hunger on a large scale. It is unacceptable that this is happening in the seventh wealthiest nation on the planet.”¹³ While Goldring’s statement is somewhat diplomatic, leaving out explicit reference to the authors of the cuts, Ian Blackwood, MP for the Scottish National Party, is direct in assigning the blame to the Conservatives in his impassioned speech: “Worse still, draconian Tory welfare cuts are driving those on low incomes into poverty, debt and destitution – forcing families to rely on food banks and emergency aid just to get by. It is absolutely shameful.”¹⁴

The specific austerity policies identified as the key drivers of food bank use by those subscribing to this frame include changes of the benefit system (benefit reductions, the bedroom tax, sickness benefit reassessments and changes to the rules of crisis loan eligibility) as well as delays in benefit payment caused by administrative mismanagement. Special criticism is reserved for the policy benefit sanctions, perceived as a highly controversial, victim-punishing measure. In a 2015 *Guardian* article, the veteran director and social activist Ken Loach denounces the government’s conduct as a downright war on the poor: “The present system is one of conscious cruelty. It bears down on those least able to bear it. The bureaucratic inefficiency is vindictive and hunger is being used as a weapon.”¹⁵

The case for food bank dependence as being caused by government austerity is reinforced by the widespread use of episodic framing. According to Shanto Iyengar, episodic frames utilize a particular individual’s experience or a particular event to illustrate an issue, as opposed to thematic frames, which emphasize broader, more general trends.¹⁶ As a case in point, we can refer to an article published in the *Independent* in 2018, titled “Universal Credit has left Children so Undernourished that Schools are Offering Free Breakfasts”¹⁷. It covers the story of Siobhan Collingwood, a primary school teacher from the declining seaside town of Morecambe, which saw the rate of food bank

13 Michael Morris and Charlie Cooper, “Hungry Britain: Welfare Cuts Leave More than 500,000 People Forced to Use Food Banks, Warns Oxfam,” *The Independent*, May 30, 2013, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/hungry-britain-welfare-cuts-leave-more-than-500000-people-forced-to-use-food-banks-warns-oxfam-8636743.html>.

14 Ian Blackford, “2017 Speech to the SNP Conference,” *UKPOL*, October 15, 2017, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/ian-blackford-2017-speech-to-snp-conference/>.

15 Diane Taylor, “Conscious Cruelty: Ken Loach’s Shock at Benefit Sanctions and Food Banks,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/23/ken-loach-benefit-sanctions-jeremy-corbyn-food-banks>.

16 Shanto Iyengar, “Speaking of Values: The Framing of American Politics,” *The Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Article 7, 2005, accessed on December 2014, <https://pcl.stanford.edu/common/docs/research/iyengar/2005/speaking.pdf>.

17 Patrick Kingsley, “Universal Credit Has Left Children so Undernourished that Schools are Offering Free Breakfasts,” *The Independent*, October 1, 2018, accessed March 23, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/children-undernourished-universal-credit-austerity-welfare-reforms-poverty-hunger-food-bank-a8557276.html.

parcels handed out to children double in the past year. As she strove to make sense of the sharp increase in pupils suffering from hunger, Collingwood detected a link the rollout of the Universal Credit, a much-criticized new system combining six benefits into one:

During Collingwood's 13 years as headteacher at Morecambe Bay Primary, there have always been a few hungry children. But two years ago, the staff noticed an increasing number of youngsters returning undernourished after spending school breaks at home. Initially, Collingwood and her staff were puzzled. Many parents held jobs, even if they struggled to cover the bills. Then it dawned on them that the rising number of hungry children at Morecambe Bay coincided with sharp reductions in welfare benefits associated with the clumsy introduction of a new welfare programme. "As we spoke to parents," Collingwood says, "it became clear that for many of them, it was caused by changes to the benefit system rolled out in recent years, which were forcing families into crisis."¹⁸

The episodic frame is centred around the testimony of a schoolteacher – a respected member of a community, whose observations can be considered as reliable. Her account emphasizes the fact that many of the parents of the hungry children were in work, thus highlighting their "deservingness" and ruling out the possibility that the children's destitution was due to neglect or fecklessness.

Overall, episodic framing plays a major role in the coverage of food bank users as deserving victims of government welfare cuts. The stories highlighted frequently involve people who either claim in-work benefits, thus are in productive work that does not pay enough to cover living expenses, or people unable to work due to health or age issues, or who are involved in caring for another family member. The historic stereotype of the "blameless poor" also re-emerges in the stories of individuals who tried to do the right thing but fell victims to circumstances which the ill-designed welfare reform only served to exacerbate. Such is the case, for instance, of caring volunteer Shirley Ilfield, reported in *Mirror Online*, who lost both her job and her home due to sickness, with the "chaotic" benefit system driving her to the local food bank: "I'd worked hard all my life and paid my taxes and never dreamed that I'd have to rely on a foodbank ... But I ended up sick, jobless and homeless in the space of a month. Then moving on to UC [Universal Credit] left me in debt and pushed me to the brink."¹⁹

In an article called "'I'm at Rock Bottom': Food Bank Offers Respite from Universal Credit," *The Guardian* highlights the plight of low-income self-employed Britons (mostly mothers unable to perform regular jobs due to lacking childcare provision), who find themselves non-eligible for Universal Credit after the first year of their enterprise if they fail to generate a certain minimum income, resulting in debt, rent arrears, evictions and food bank use. Opting for episodic framing, the paper presents stories of several women driven to the food bank because of the harsh conditions of the Universal Credit for self-employed individuals. "Universal credit can discourage you when you are trying to better yourself," reports Livia, a self-employed fitness trainer struggling to feed herself and her daughters under the existing benefit system. The newspaper is concerned that the growing number of self-employed Britons – currently fifteen per cent of the population, many driven to self-employment due to lack of other options – may mean widespread future food bank

¹⁸ Kingsley, Universal Credit Has Left Children so Undernourished that Schools are Offering Free Breakfasts.

¹⁹ "Food Banks Hand Out 1.2 Million Emergency Supplies in a Year," *The Express*, April 25, 2017, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/796243/Food-banks-crisis-children-welfare-system-record-numbers-Trussell-Trust>.

dependence unless the austerity-driven welfare reform is re-assessed. Despite dominating on the left side of the spectrum, the perception of food bank users as victims of the welfare reform is not limited to left-leaning sources; it can also be found in some right-leaning media, mainly the popular press such as *The Express* and the *Daily Mail*. In an article titled “Food Banks Hand Out 1.2 Million Emergency Supplies in a Year”, the former uses episodic framing to present the stories of several “deserving” individuals driven to the food bank by welfare mismanagement. Among them is an engineer made redundant after 37 years of full-time employment, forced to seek food bank assistance following a failed job search combined with a delay in benefit payment:

At the age of 52, I’ve struggled to get a new job. I applied for Universal Credit and was told I would have to wait for at least six to eight weeks before I received any money. Who can live on nothing for two months? Without the food bank, I honestly don’t know where I’d be. I was living on nothing during that period. It’s hard, especially when you’ve been working for so long, and I did get very depressed and distressed. The people at the food bank pulled me out of the mire.²⁰

The preponderance of episodic frames involving people affected by the vagaries of the welfare reform who are simultaneously in paid work or have worked most of their lives can be explained by the intent to emphasize the deservingness of those for whom food banks are the last resort. The stories of individuals trying to do exactly what the current austerity-driven government wants them to do, i.e. support themselves by paid work, yet ending in food poverty, create a particularly powerful framing effect.

Frame No. 2: Deserving Poor but Not Primarily Victims of Government Austerity

Like the previous frame, this frame presents food bank users as deserving individuals who have found themselves reliant on food relief through no fault of their own. However, the government’s welfare shake-up is de-emphasized as the contributing cause here; instead, larger economic forces are identified, some of them global rather than home-grown. This frame is predominantly found in right-leaning quality papers or magazines such as *The Telegraph* or *The Spectator*, which are generally more likely to support the government’s effort to reduce public spending, and in the speeches of right-leaning pro-government politicians. While some sources subscribing to this frame mention the welfare reform only as one of the multiple factors, others omit any reference to welfare altogether or criticize the link made between changes to welfare and the surge in food bank use as erroneous and lending itself to exploitation for easy political points.

Probably the most emphatic rejection of the role of the government’s welfare policies comes from Conservative MP Dominic Raab in an article written for *The Telegraph*, titled “Food Banks Are a Problem – but the Solution is the Free Market”. The article is a response to a letter by senior Anglican bishops in which concerns are expressed that “over half of people using food banks have been put in that situation by the Coalition’s welfare reforms, precipitating a national crisis.”²¹ Raab counters the bishops’ claim by insisting that the key factor driving food bank use is

20 “Food Banks Hand Out 1.2 Million Emergency Supplies in a Year.”

21 Dominic Raab, “Food Banks Are a Problem – But the Solution is Free Market,” *The Telegraph*, February 22, 2014, accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10655054/Food-banks-are-a-problem-but-the-solution-is-the-free-market.html>.

rising food and energy prices, a global problem brought about by trade barriers that stop poorer nations exporting to richer ones. Protectionism and lack of energy independence, argues Raab, is to blame for the cost of living crisis. The remedy is less regulation and more free market, a view thoroughly consistent with the government's neoliberal economic course. That the Church should oppose the government on this issue is clearly a source of frustration to Raab:

Welfare reform isn't easy. The Government is inspired by a moral mission to lift as many people as possible out of the welfare trap and into work. Turbulent priests have a noble tradition in this country, and the Churches have an important voice in this debate. They risk squandering it if they lazily lean on Left-wing crutches.²²

Another prominent voice rejecting the correlation between hunger and the welfare reform is the right-leaning journalist Robert Aitken, founder of the Oxford food bank, an undertaking for which he was awarded an MBE. Sharing his views on the *BBC*, *The Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*, Aitken questions the widespread belief that there has been a significant upsurge in food poverty in recent years. Instead, he argues that there have *always* been poor people in the country unable to obtain enough food: "Whatever the Left say about the Conservative-led Coalition's cuts 'fuelling' the rise in food banks, the poorest people in any decade have always gone hungry, regardless of which party was in power."²³ Going against the claims of most charities, including the Trussell Trust, Aitken's essential position is that increasing numbers of people are using food banks not because there is more poverty, but because there are more food banks now available; in other words, where there is supply, demand will follow, especially considering the publicity given to food banks by the media.

An attempt at grasping the food bank phenomenon in greater complexity is made by *The Telegraph* in an article called "Food Banks Surge: Who are the New Clientele in Need of Help?" Acknowledging, in contrast to Aitken, the genuine rise in food poverty in recent years, the article lists the types of people most likely to turn to food banks for help. In addition to mothers and older employees, they are shown as including "People who have lost their jobs and been made redundant. People who have been doing training in jobs like security guard work, and they can't get the jobs. People who just aren't getting paid."²⁴ While delivered in a sympathetic tone, with food bank clients clearly portrayed as the deserving poor, the article fails to make a single mention of the potential impact of the government's welfare reform. At one point, admittedly, Daphne Aikens, manager of the Hammersmith and Fulham food bank, is quoted referring to a group of people, whether on benefits or income, who "were managing but are not managing now,"²⁵ yet no specific reason for their inability to manage is provided. As to the underlying cause of the current food crisis, "repercussions of the UK's struggling economy" are mentioned, as well as "a rise in gas and

²² Raab, "Food Banks Are a Problem".

²³ Robin Aitken, "Don't Let the Left Ruin Our Crusade ... Writes Food Bank Pioneer Robin Aitken," *Mail Online*, December 8, 2014, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2864820/Don-t-let-Left-ruin-crusade-writes-food-bank-pioneer-ROBIN-AITKEN.html>.

²⁴ Radhika Sanghani, "Food Bank Surge: Who Are the Clientele In Need of Help?" *The Telegraph*, April 16, 2014, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10770457/Food-banks-surge-Who-are-the-new-clientele-in-need-of-help.html>.

²⁵ Sanghani, "Food Bank Surge."

electricity bill prices, and high food costs”.²⁶ However, no stories of people turning to food banks because of benefit payment delays, cuts or sanctions are included.

Frame No. 3: Undeserving Poor

Compared to the previous two frames, this frame is relatively rare but highly visible due to its controversial nature, iterations of and responses to which attract considerable media attention. Informed by the ancient suppositions about the moral inferiority of the poorest, it generally tends to emerge wherever there is a belief that the state is too generous in its benefits provision and should rein in welfare expenditures, especially when it comes to the able-bodied poor.

In his book *Pauperland: Poverty and the Poor in Britain*, Jeremy Seabrook identifies the most common “vices” historically associated with the undeserving poor. These include improvidence, tendency to squander livelihood, idleness, addiction to substance and irresponsible breeding.²⁷ Perceptions of these stereotypical weaknesses can also be found in some of the rhetoric involving food bank users. In 2013, Michael Gove, a minister in David Cameron’s government, caused public controversy by maintaining that people finding themselves unable to buy essential food have themselves to blame for not being able to “manage their finances” and making wrong choices regarding money.²⁸ Far from acknowledging a role played in the food crisis by a government of which he himself is a member, Gove conveniently resorts to the age-old stereotype of the feckless and profligate poor, thus absolving the government – and thus, himself – from any responsibility for the crisis. A similar controversy was caused some time later by Conservative work and pensions minister Esther McVey, known for her pro-austerity views, who declared that it was good that people went to food banks as “we are all trying to live within our means.”²⁹

The historic stereotype of the undeserving poor being “idle”, i.e. economically inactive and leading a parasitic life on benefits, is also proving remarkably resilient. In 2015, the outspoken right-wing columnist and presenter Katie Hopkins sparked controversy by declaring that the Trussell Trust was “not helping huge numbers of needy people. They are giving free food to dependents who have honed their blagging skills from years on the take.”³⁰ For Hopkins, benefit claimants and, for that matter, people in food crisis, are not individuals in genuine need struggling under the current poverty-producing system, but morally flawed individuals who have mastered the art of living off the state; a view strongly resembling the anti-pauper rhetoric of the Dickensian era.

26 Sanghani, “Food Bank Surge.”

27 Jeremy Seabrook, *Pauperland: Poverty and the Poor in Britain* (London: Hurst and Company, 2013), 58.

28 Matt Chorley, “Poor Forced to Use Food Banks? They’ve Got Only Themselves to Blame for Making Bad Decisions, says Michael Gove,” Mail Online, September 10, 2013, accessed 25 March, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2416737/Michael-Gove-food-banks-Poor-got-blame.html>.

29 May Bulman, “Esther McVey: the New DWP Minister’s Statements about People on Benefits and the Policies She Voted For,” *The Independent*, January 8, 2018, accessed on May 25, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/esther-mcvey-dwp-benefits-welfare-stance-comments-controversial-a8149811.html>.

30 Harriet Agerholm, “Spoof Fundraising Page ‘for Katie Hopkins’ Legal Fees’ Raises Thousands for Food Banks,” *The Independent*, March 12, 2017, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/spoof-fundraising-page-katie-hopkins-legal-fees-food-banks-trussel-trust-a7625171.html>.

Probably the most contentious picture of food bank users as the undeserving poor, however, has been painted by the former Conservative MP Edwina Currie. Speaking on Radio Stoke in 2014, the unapologetically right-wing ex-politician confessed she could not see the point of providing food assistance to people suffering from mental health issues or people with debt problems, as this is unlikely to solve their issues in the long term. In addition, she questioned the genuineness of the need of food bank clients by claiming that “I get very, very troubled at the number of people who are using food banks who think that it is fine to pay to feed their dog, their dog is in good nick and beautiful but they never learn to cook, they never learn to manage and the moment they have got a bit of spare cash they are off getting another tattoo.”³¹ Her comments echo the old stereotypical view that the undeserving poor are incapable of managing their affairs, lack basic life skills and are prone to squandering their resources on luxuries rather than providing their families with necessities. Rejecting any possible systemic causes of the food poverty phenomenon, a victim-blaming tactic is used by Currie, with the food bank users, again, depicted as individually deficient.

Despite being widely publicized due to their controversial nature, statements on food bank users as the undeserving poor remain isolated occurrences, mostly concentrated on the very right of the political spectrum. Moreover, following the much-reported statement in early 2019 by the Conservative work and pensions secretary Amber Rudd,³² who, after years of repeated governmental denials, finally admitted to the link between the Universal Credit rollout and the growing food poverty, the voices assigning individual blame to “feckless” food bank users who have failed to make the right choices in life can be expected to grow somewhat quieter as the systemic character of food bank dependency becomes more difficult to deny.

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