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Why are we waiting? The five-week wait for Universal Credit and food insecurity among food sector workers in the UK

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Abstract

The UK's new social security benefit, Universal Credit, is driving up food insecurity. Particularly problematic is the five-week wait for the first payment. Meanwhile, low wages and insecure contracts mean many food sector workers rely on Universal Credit. This qualitative study explores the effects of the five-week wait on food security among these workers. The findings show this is forcing them to depend on family, friends and foodbanks, inducing shame and isolation, and negatively impacting their physical and mental health. Meanwhile, working in the food sector offers little or no protection from these effects and, in some cases, exacerbates them.

Keywords: Universal Credit, food security, welfare, UK

Introduction

> "It is not possible to talk about food insecurity in the UK without talking about benefits" (Baumberg Geiger et al., 2021, p.2)

Despite their critical contribution to the UK economy and vital work during the pandemic to ensure the food supply, in-work poverty and food insecurity is on the rise among food sector workers. In 2021, the largest independent food sector union in Britain conducted a survey of its members which found 40% had not eaten enough due to a lack of money, 1 in 5 had relied on friends or family to provide meals, and 7% had experience of using foodbanks (BFAWU, 2021). A subsequent survey to assess the impact of the cost-of-living crisis found the proportion needing to rely on friends or family had risen to a third, while the percentage using foodbanks had risen to almost 17% (BFAWU, 2023). That those involved in producing, processing and distributing our food are themselves going hungry is a pressing social justice issue.

While research suggests Universal Credit and the five-week wait for the first payment of this are key drivers of food insecurity (Baumberg Geiger et al., 2021; The Trussell Trust, 2019b, 2021), there is little examining the experiences of food sector workers. This research fills this gap. A small-scale qualitative study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by this group in accessing food of sufficient quantity and quality during the wait for their first payment of Universal Credit and beyond, how they navigate these challenges and the wider impacts on their health and relationships.

Findings suggest that the wait is having short- and longer-term negative effects on food security among food sector workers, meanwhile working in the food sector is doing little or nothing to protect them from these effects and, in some cases, is exacerbating them. Contrary to one of its key stated aims (DWP, 2010b), the wait did not reduce participants' dependency but rather shifted this from the state to family, friends and foodbanks. Despite most working for major food manufacturers or chains at the time, low wages and/or insecure contracts, characteristic of the sector, meant they were forced to depend on others to survive in the absence of benefit income. This had broader psychosocial implications, with many experiencing shame and/or isolation as they struggled to feed themselves and their families despite spending their days producing or serving food for others. Furthermore, a lack of choice relating to the quantity and quality of food negatively affected their physical and mental health; if able to access food at work participants often reported this to be low-quality, contributing to these negative health effects.

This article begins with an overview of Universal Credit, the five-week wait and food insecurity in the UK, followed by a discussion of the social justice dimension of food insecurity among food sector workers. It then details the research design, before discussing the findings from the study. It concludes with a consideration of the implications and contribution of the study, as well as avenues for further research.

Background

Universal Credit and the five-week wait

Universal credit was the flagship welfare reform policy of the UK Coalition government (2010-2015), announced in the White Paper *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works* (DWP, 2010b) shortly after the Coalition came to office. Universal Credit is a single means-tested benefit that combines six separate 'legacy' benefits[1] and tax credits into a single monthly payment. Roll out began in 2013 and is currently expected to be completed by 2028/29. The number of people on Universal Credit has risen steeply over the past two years, largely due to the COVID pandemic. In March 2020, the number on Universal Credit stood at 3 million; by January 2024 this stood at 6.4 million (GOV.UK, 2024b).

When introduced, it was claimed that Universal Credit would "tackle the problems of poor work incentives and complexity" within the previous system of benefits and tax credits, as well as smooth the transition as people move in and out of work, or as their incomes increase or decrease (DWP, 2012, p.6). The idea was that it would "make work pay" (DWP, 2010b, p.2; 2012, p.5), promote personal responsibility and, ultimately, tackle the "underlying problem of welfare dependency" (DWP, 2010b, p.1).

In their critique of the term 'dependency' in the US welfare reform debate, Fraser and Gordon suggest it "leaks a profusion of stigmatizing connotations" and represents the problems of poor as individual moral or psychological problems, rather than social or economic problems (1994a, p.4). Moreover, in their genealogy of the term they claim it has long been "deemed antithetical to citizenship" (1994b, p.315). In a similar vein, some have problematized the dependency discourse surrounding the justification of Universal Credit in the UK context. Wiggan has highlighted how such discourse "construct[s] the persistence of poverty and unemployment as originating in the poor choices and behaviour of individuals" (2012, p.400), while Bennett and Millar have pointed out that, under Universal Credit, even

those in work but still reliant on state support (e.g. due to low wages) were labelled 'dependent' (2017, p.176).

Nevertheless, the underpinning principles of Universal Credit were largely welcomed by politicians and stakeholders at the time of its introduction (DWP, 2010a). As more claimants have been moved onto this, however, there has been growing concern over aspects of its design and implementation, namely: the combining of benefits for all those in a household into a single monthly payment; inadequate benefit levels; an increase in conditionality (the payment of benefits on the condition that the claimant fulfils certain job-seeking behaviours); and an increase in sanctions (the removal of benefits for a period if job-seeking requirements are not fulfilled). Of all its features, however, the five-week wait for the first payment has been highlighted as particularly problematic. This wait is a consequence of the monthly assessment and payment period and the seven-day waiting period introduced in 2015. Despite mounting concern about the impact of this on recipients and their families (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2020), and the fact that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions at the time of its implementation has admitted this is unnecessary,[2] the five-week wait remains.

The five-week wait and food insecurity

The concept of food insecurity has evolved; originally focused on the question of sufficiency at national and international level, over time the individual and household perspective was incorporated (FAO, 2006). The focus also expanded from sufficiency to include nutritional adequacy, predictability of supply and the social context in which food is obtained. In line with this, the US Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (cited in Schroeder & Smaldone, 2015).

Recent Food Foundation data suggests one in four UK households with children and 8 million UK adults are food insecure. There is significant evidence to suggest that the design and operation of the social security system is the main driver of food insecurity (The Trussell Trust, 2021). Almost half of households on Universal Credit are food insecure (45.4%), compared to just over one in ten (11.7%) of other households (The Food Foundation, 2024). In particular, the five-week wait has been identified as a key factor (Jenkins et al., 2021; The Trussell Trust, 2019a, 2021). Many of those who need to claim Universal Credit have been on low incomes for a long time and therefore have very little in terms of financial resources to draw on during this period. While, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have put in place a system of advanced payments, these are repayable and so reduce the overall amount of the claimant's benefits for up to two years after payments start (GOV.UK, 2022). Given many recipients find the level of Universal Credit inadequate to meet their needs anyway, this exacerbates their hardship during the repayment period. A survey of the general public and benefit claimants in 2021 for the Welfare at a (Social) Distance project found that those subject to deductions to repay advance payments were particularly likely to experience food insecurity (Baumberg Geiger et al., 2021, p.3).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Universal Credit and the five-week wait have been implicated in pushing up foodbank use. It is very common for referrals to foodbanks to be made for those waiting for their first payment or because of financial hardship caused by claimants' benefits being subject to reductions due to advanced payments (The Trussell Trust, 2017; TUC, 2020). Evidence from 2019 suggested that in areas where Universal Credit had been operating for a year, foodbanks experienced a 30% increase in demand; rising to 48% after two years (The Trussell Trust, 2019b).

There has been quantitative academic research exploring this relationship between Universal Credit roll out and food insecurity, in particular foodbank use (Reeves & Loopstra,

2020), as well as qualitative testimony about the impact of the five-week wait on hardship within specific regions (Gratton et al., 2019; Manchester City Council, 2019). There has also been mixed methods research looking at food consumption and practices among those on low incomes, including those on Universal Credit (Power et al., 2021), and qualitative research into the lived experiences of foodbank users (Garthwaite, 2016b). However, none of these studies have focused specifically on the impact of the five-week wait on food security, nor on the experiences of food sector workers. The next section explains why this is necessary.

Food insecurity, food sector workers and social justice

In-work poverty has been on the rise in the UK and elsewhere for several decades (Bourquin et al., 2019). Indeed, as of December 2023 38% of those on Universal Credit were in employment (GOV.UK, 2024b). As food sector workers are among the lowest paid in the UK (ONS, 2023; Statista, 2022), we can expect them to be over-represented in this group. Meanwhile, given food insecurity is strongly associated with job insecurity (including zero hours contracts) and low income (Beatty et al., 2021; Loopstra et al., 2019) – both common features of food sector work – it is perhaps not surprising that food insecurity is prevalent among food sector workers. Households which include a food sector worker are more likely to be food insecure (25.8%) than households without one (17.9%) (The Food Foundation, 2023), while other data confirms that many working across food production, dissemination, retail and more are struggling to feed themselves and their families (BFAWU, 2021, 2023).

On this basis we might explain – although not justify – the apparent irony that those responsible for feeding us are regularly going hungry themselves. This situation is even more perverse when we consider that the lived realities of these workers sit in stark contrast to the fortunes of the highly profitable food sector in the UK (Unite, 2023). This profitability is fuelled by the availability of a cheap and flexible labour force; meanwhile, "[t]hose living in

poverty are experiencing the real, lived consequences of this concentration of wealth" at the top of the food industry (Crossley, 2023).

In this context, there is a social justice imperative to uncover the lived experiences of those we rely upon to keep us fed, and to understand the challenges they face in feeding themselves while feeding us. There is also an imperative to explore the adequacy of the welfare system in providing a safety net to these workers who make a significant contribution to the UK economy (GOV.UK, 2024a). The latter is especially needed in the context of recent reforms which have been designed to activate claimants out of their "welfare dependency" through cuts and conditionality (Wright, 2016), while structural labour market factors driving in-work poverty have largely been ignored (Beatty & Fothergill, 2018).

Research design

To meet the need for further research into the implications of the five-week wait for the food security of food sector workers, a series of depth interviews was conducted. Depth interviews are useful for exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of research participants; Brinkmann suggests "when one wants to know how an individual experiences some phenomenon, interviewing has a certain primacy among different methods" (2013, p.47). Interviews are also well-suited to collecting qualitative data on sensitive topics (Bryman, 2012); experiences of receiving benefits, managing on low incomes and coping with food insecurity are all issues which participants may find too sensitive to discuss in a group setting, such as a focus group. One-to-one depth interviews may also allow for a rapport with individual interviewees which may, in turn, illicit more in-depth answers and, subsequently, rich qualitative data (Brinkmann, 2013).[3]

Ten depth interviews were conducted between June and November 2023. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union

(BFAWU). This approach inevitably narrowed the potential pool of applicants to union members, with consequent implications for the external validity of the findings. However, as the BFAWU is "largest independent Trade Union in the food sector in the British Isles",[4] advertising the study through them allowed me to reach a high number of potential participants and, importantly, across the sector. Pursuing other methods of recruitment (e.g. via specific employers) could have narrowed the pool to specific sub-sectors – with its own implications for external validity – and may have taken considerably longer. Snowball sampling was discounted for similar reasons, and as this would have undermined the anonymity of participants. Participants were sent an information sheet and consent form which they were asked to read before confirming their willingness to participate and were offered a £20 shopping voucher as a thank you for taking part. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were conducted on Microsoft Teams. A profile of the final sample is provided in Table 1.

To explore the implications of the five-week wait for their food security, participants were asked questions relating to their experiences of accessing food during the wait and beyond, as well as about any effects on the quality and quantity of food they consumed, on their physical and mental health, and on their relationships. They were also asked about any potential protections offered by their status as food sector workers. A semi-structured interview approach was used to allow consistency across the interviews, while also allowing flexibility to adapt to the flow of individual discussions (topic guide available upon request). The interviews were recorded with permission and automatically transcribed in Teams. The transcripts were checked for accuracy before being analysed in Nvivo using thematic analysis. In line with the inductive nature of this qualitative research, codes and sub-codes were developed reflecting emerging themes. Participants were assured of anonymity and where quotes are used names are not.

Table 1: Profile of interview participants

No.	Sex	Role	Employer	Hours	Time/reason on UC*
1	Female	Factory operative	Food manufacturer	Full time	c.3.5 years/New application due to unemployment, now tops up low pay
2	Male	Security guard (unemployed)	Convenience store chain	N/A	c.4-5 years/Transferred from legacy benefits due to change in circumstances, now unemployed
3	Male	Factory operative	Food manufacturer	Full time	c.6 months/New application due to low pay, continues to top up low pay
4	Female	Team member	Bakery chain	Part time	c.2 years/Transferred from legacy benefits due to change in circumstances, tops up low pay
5	Female	Food packer	Food manufacturer	Full time	c.3-4 years/New application due to unemployment, now tops up low pay
6	Female	Factory operative	Food manufacturer	Part time	c.5-6 years/ Transferred from legacy benefits due to change in circumstances, tops up low pay
7	Female	Chef	Restaurant	Part time	c.1 year/New application due to low hours and pay, continues to top up low pay
8	Male	Supervisor	Bakery chain	Part time	c.4 years/Transferred from legacy benefits due to change in circumstances, tops up low pay
9	Male	Mechanical technician (unemployed)	Baked goods manufacturer	N/A	c.4 months/New application due to reduced income while on sick leave, now unemployed
10	Male	Production operative	Cake manufacturer	Full time	c.5 months/New application due to unemployment

Although an independently scoped and managed project, this study feeds into the work of the Food and Work Network (https://www.fawn.org.uk/). This brings together academics, community organizers, politicians and trade union officials to debate issues relating to food insecurity – and to produce evidence to understand and tackle this in the UK. In offering rich qualitative exploration of the relationship between Universal Credit – specifically the five-week wait – and food insecurity among food sector workers, the findings will be of interest to policymakers, civil society organisations and academics working in this area.

Findings

Among those interviewed, low pay and precarious work were key drivers for being on Universal Credit. Participants had been on this between 4 months and 6 years. The majority were in employment when they made their first application or were transferred onto this from legacy benefits due to a change in their circumstances[5] but needed to claim because they were not working enough hours and/or were not earning enough from the hours they worked to meet their outgoings at the time. Of these seven, five were still receiving Universal Credit to top up their wages at the time of the interview and two had subsequently become unemployed. The others originally applied for Universal Credit due to losing their jobs; by the time of the interview all were back in employment with two of the three still on Universal Credit to top up low pay. Three key implications of the five-week wait for food security were highlighted by interviewees. These are discussed below, along with a consideration of how the effects of the wait interacted with their status as food sector workers.

Accessing food during the wait: dependency of a different kind

The spectre of welfare dependency has been increasingly present in UK welfare discourse as this has shifted from an emphasis on rights to responsibilities as a condition of full citizenship (Bochel & Powell, 2016; O'Grady, 2022, p.147; Taylor-Gooby & Larsen, 2004).

Increasingly, over time, the welfare system in the UK and elsewhere has been evolving into a residual welfare state – one based on the assumption that people can and should take care of themselves and their families, with minimal input from the state. Correspondingly, policies which individualize responsibility and increasingly restrict access to welfare benefits and services – not only on the basis of need, but also behaviour – are often justified in the name of tackling welfare dependency (Lister & Bennett, 2010; Wiggan, 2012).

As noted, when introduced, Universal Credit was very much framed in these terms (Pantazis, 2016; Richards-Gray, 2023; Wiggan, 2012). The five-week wait was part of a package of measures justified in the name tackling dependency by 'mirroring' the monthly payment of wages, thus encouraging claimants to better manage their finances. However, the monthly payment of wages is not the reality for many claimants; nearly six in ten were previously paid on a weekly or fortnightly basis (Brewer et al., 2017, p.19) and many have no savings to draw upon (Ibid.). For these, waiting five weeks for their first payment is very difficult. The advance payments available to those findings themselves in "financial hardship" during the wait (GOV.UK, 2022) are repayable once Universal Credit payments begin, and existing research strongly suggests repayment of these puts significant strain on household budgets (TUC, 2020). In effect, these are pushing claimants into debt when they are already in a precarious financial position.

Given this, and counter to the assumption that recipients need to be taught to budget better, most participants who spoke to me were unwilling to apply for an advance payment, precisely because of concerns about the impact on their future ability to budget and cope financially. For some this was a kneejerk aversion to debt; for others this was the product of a careful calculation of their outgoings once their Universal Credit came in and a recognition that the reduced payments would not meet their needs.

> "they do suggest you can have an advancement and stuff, but I didn't wanna get into debt or anything"

> "I was determined not to get a crisis loan [sic] because I knew you've got to pay that back…How do I pay my rent? How do I pay my electric, gas, water? …I'd be in further down in debt"

Instead, the design of the system – aimed at reducing dependency among claimants (DWP, 2010b) – actually forced them into a different type of dependency. Left with the need to feed themselves, and in some cases their families, they resorted to reliance on friends, family and charity. Of those who spoke to me about their experiences, all but two had used a foodbank or soup kitchen during the wait for their first payment and/or subsequently during their time on Universal Credit. Further, the majority had relied on family, friends or even strangers to either borrow money for food or for donations of food during this period. They were clear that, without this support they would have gone hungry.

> "my sister came and gave me a loaf of bread…my neighbour, they put a bag of food outside my front door"

> "my dad literally lived up the road, so I was … going up and getting fed"

For some this was not just a case of avoiding going hungry during the wait, but also of avoiding the knock-on effects this would have had on their lives. One bakery chain worker had previously endured the five-week wait for the first payment of Universal Credit but was also waiting for her carer's allowance payments to start. She described the difficulties she has had with her mental health and the pressures of being a carer on low income. She explained that to make ends meet she regularly borrowed money from her flatmate's father, and reflected on the situation she might have been in without this financial support:

> "I probably might even be homeless or something…I definitely wouldn't be eating, nowhere near. I think I'd be struggling with just day to day living. I don't know if I'd be able to continue my employment because [of] the effects it would have on my condition"

Another participant, who was working for a major food manufacturer, told me how he and his partner, struggling to feed themselves and their newborn during the wait, had no choice but to ask their parents for help, as even their advance payments (which they had opted to receive) took a few days to arrive. He made clear to me, as did others who had needed to rely on family and friends, he did not think they would have coped without this support. For him, and others, Universal Credit had not provided the safety net that he had expected it would; he told me: "if it weren't for my family, we would have…Well, I don't know what would have happened, but yeah…it doesn't do what it says on the tin basically".

Not only did the wait not reduce participants' dependency during this period but for some this had an impact on their financial independence longer-term. Three had taken advance payments to tide them over the wait. Pushed into debt through desperation they were now paying this back out of their already low income. Describing his decision to take an advance, one man explained: "I was absolutely starving on that day. Really hungry and I think even if they would have put interest on, I just needed the money. I was thinking, 'I can't go another night without food'".

Although most avoided depending on advance payments, effects on future income were not avoided completely as friends and family often needed to be repaid once Universal Credit kicked in and/or overdue bills and rent paid. One participant, reflecting on the impact of the wait for her benefits, talked of making plans for once her payments began:

> "Gonna have to pay people, you know, pay them back. Work out a repayment plan…with Council tax and water. People like that. So, a lot of making plans, financial plans, breaking them, drawing them up again. It's going to take probably, you know, as much time trying to smooth things out as it has been waiting"

Meanwhile, several spoke of having used up their savings and/or food reserves during the wait, again eroding their financial resilience and ability to feed themselves going forward.

> "[Before] I could get an extra bag of rice in, extra bag of pasta, things like that. Cheap stuff. And then [during] that five weeks…you're using up that stuff because now you've no money. So then when the five weeks is up…what you've saved is gone"

Despite most working for major food manufacturers or chains, the interviewees' status as food sector workers did little or nothing to protect them from these effects. Some working in food factories reported buying ready meals from the seconds shop or canteen food at a discounted price. Others were able to access a small amount of food for free: one woman was accessing free fruit at work that was left over from her workplace shop; another said she relied on being allowed to cook a meal using ingredients from the restaurant where she works. However, for the most part, the low pay and/or insufficient hours they experienced – and that is characteristic of much of the sector – meant they had very little ability to cope with the wait. This adds further evidence of a significant gap "between the assumptions underlying the design of Universal Credit, on the one hand, and…life on a low income, and in low-waged and often insecure employment, on the other" (Bennett & Millar, 2017, p.170).

Broader impacts of the wait: food, shame and isolation

Some have reflected on the possibility for those in poverty to internalize negative ideas about themselves, especially when interacting with others and seeing themselves through others' eyes (Cassiman, 2008; Chase & Walker, 2013; Seccombe et al., 1998; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Policies can compound this issue, having subjectification effects (Bacchi, 2009). The concept of subjectification relates to "how we feel about ourselves and others" and the idea that "we become subjects of a particular kind partly through the ways in which policies set up social relationships and our place (position) within them" (Bacchi, 2009,

p.16). Not only did the five-week wait not reduce dependency among participants, but it had knock-on psychosocial effects related to the activation of stigma and shame, as well as related effects on their relationships. Furthermore, just as their status as food sector workers did little to protect them from dependency upon foodbanks, friends and family during the wait, neither did it protect them from these associated emotional and interpersonal effects. Indeed, for food sector workers, these effects are compounded by spending their days producing, packing or selling food for others to consume.

Jo (2013) highlights the damaging effects that institutionalising shame through policy can have on elevating poverty and enhancing social exclusion. Yet, stigma and shame have long been a method of discouraging dependence on state welfare (Golding & Middleton, 1982; Tyler, 2020). From the stigmatising effects of the Poor Law (Spicker, 1984; Tyler, 2020) to increased conditionality and shaming of welfare claimants against the backdrop of the austerity agenda post 2010, stigmatisation has played a key role in welfare policy making in the UK. Post 2010 welfare reform – with Universal Credit as its main plank – represents a retreat from the ideal of the post-war welfare state that benefits are a "legitimate source of income" during hard times and revives the principle of 'less eligibility', enforced through "depersonalization" and "stigmatization" (O'Grady, 2022, p.12-13). In this vein, the five-week wait can be seen as a manifestation of institutionalizing and weaponizing shame in order to induce behaviour change, with claimants forced to "display" or make public their poverty and need through their dependence on friends, family and/or charities in the absence of financial assistance from the state during the period of their wait for their first payment.

As explored above, most participants had used a foodbank and/or soup kitchen during this time or later. Others have written about the stigma and shame of accessing food in this way – talking about these as "hidden costs" (Garthwaite, 2016b, p. 208; Purdam et al., 2016).

Several, including those working for major food manufacturers and food chains, spoke to me about their experience of this:

> "When I first went on it…when we was waiting for that, I was directed to a foodbank…I found it quite hard…it was quite upsetting"

> "I did use it once and I don't really like to. Bit proud for that sort of thing"

One man became emotional when describing his experience of visiting a soup kitchen during the wait for his advance payment. He told me: "I felt ashamed…very embarrassed about going down and very upset. You just feel like a failure, you know...I walked away from there twice in tears". His shame was compounded by concern over what his parents would have thought if they were still alive: "I didn't feel comfortable, but again, I have to eat…I felt ashamed, you know, if my mum and dad had seen me going down there…". Talking to those who had resorted to borrowing money from friends or family, or relying on them to feed them when they had no income, it was clear that they too often found this to be a source of shame and embarrassment. Many participants spoke to me of their discomfort in having to do this, and in some cases of the effects on their self-esteem:

> "One of my neighbours helped me out which I feel a bit ashamed of…They said 'if you are ever struggling…' but I didn't want to ask. And then they actually said, 'I can see you in your face, you've lost weight'. [They] invited me round for tea and then, as I left, they said 'we've got you a bit of shopping there'"

> "If you're 37 and you've got kids and you still have to go to your mother's house to get food it's very easy to think bad of yourself…you feel like you can't provide, question whether you're a good dad, you know, and stuff like that"

Aside from the shame manufactured by these forced public dependencies, others experienced more private shame. It has been pointed out that the Coalition's welfare discourse around the time that Universal Credit was introduced marginalized structural causes of poverty and

welfare reliance (Wiggan, 2012), instead resurrecting discourse of a "moral underclass" and portraying "poverty and unemployment as being caused by individual behaviour" (Daguerre & Etherington, 2014, p.45). Indeed, Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions at the time, repeatedly painted a picture of welfare recipients as a group cut adrift from the rest of society and not playing by the same rules (Richards-Gray, 2022).

I spoke to two participants who were suffering from mental health problems and who, faced with a limit on the number of times they could visit a foodbank in certain period and a lack of support networks, had resorted to criminality in order to cope. Another participant was considering doing similar. Contrary to the political framing above and popular portrayals of welfare recipients as morally lax, criminal and shameless (Allen et al., 2014; Garthwaite, 2016b; Jensen, 2014) neither were proud of this; they displayed embarrassment and shame, and were clear that they felt they had been forced into this (or to consider this) by the design of Universal Credit. One woman explained to me that, despite preparing food for others all day, she had needed to steal food, as with no savings and an unreliable source of income it was the only way she could eat:

> "Umm, a little confession: I do have to steal things sometimes to eat… and sometimes if I have not been paid one week as well…you know, then obviously that affects things". [Asked if this was something that was happening more often] "Um, yeah, it is ashamedly…I'm trying to be as good as I can. I'm buying economical sort of brands, but even those brands have just gotten ridiculously expensive"

It has been suggested that "[s]hame and humiliation can result in isolation - thereby corroding social relations and breaking down social capital" (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative report cited in Jo, 2013, p.515). Those who told me about their experiences of isolation explained that these stemmed from the shame they felt about the hardship they found themselves in during the wait. One – who was working for a major food manufacturer at the time – told me about her efforts to hide her situation from others; despite having to

confide in family and ask for help, she told very few other people because she was ashamed:

> "I didn't want to put on other people at the time because they had their own stuff going on. My mum kind of knew and one friend, but it was quite embarrassing…I didn't really want people to know because I'm quite a private person, so I probably wouldn't have said a lot to people at that time, only my family"

For some the wait had had long-term negative effects on their relationships. One woman who lives alone became very isolated during the wait. With no money to pay her broadband, she describes standing outside venues with free wifi in order to get online and connect with people on social media. Although she works in a busy food factory, she continues to feel isolated because of the shame resulting from the effects that a lack of food had on her:

> "You know when you don't eat properly, you don't sleep properly, you can't think straight. You start getting angry. You bite everybody. Not literally but verbally. Anybody said anything to you, you don't want to talk to them because you know how it's making you feel…People used to look at me and think, gosh, you look a mess…They used to tell me that and it made me feel worse…I'd lock myself away in the house. I still do. I come home from work, put the key in the door, lock it. This is my sanctuary. The only place I go here is in the garden. I don't associate. I don't talk to people. I do nothing"

This long-term effect on relationships was a recurring theme. Another participant told me: "I lost contact with a lot of friends…You can't go out socialising. People move on". Meanwhile, another explained that the wait had contributed to the breakdown of his relationship with his partner as he became "snappy" as a result of the stress of juggling the lack of income with providing food for his family. He ultimately moved out of the family home and in with his mother who has terminal cancer. Again, this induced feelings of shame; he told me: "feeling I have to have her worry about me when she has that going on as well makes me feel horrible".

"I know beggars can't be choosers" / "I can't eat toilet roll": Food choice and health

The ability to decide how much and what type of food you consume is central to our sense of

autonomy and identity. Connell & Hamilton have observed that "[e]xercising choice in the marketplace, including what food to buy and eat, is…one means of enacting agency in a consumer society" (2017, p.97). Meanwhile, poverty has been widely acknowledged to constrain food choice (Chen, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016a); faced with meeting other essential outgoings, reducing the quantity or quality of food consumed is often the only option for those on low incomes (Dowler, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016a; O'Connell & Hamilton, 2017).

For those food sector workers I spoke to, the five-week wait and the subsequent low level of Universal Credit had negatively affected the quantity and quality of the food they were consuming. In some cases, this was adversely impacting their physical health and in all but one case this was reported as having significant negative effects on their mental health. In the absence of Universal Credit meeting their basic needs, they had developed strategies to cope with the lack of food. These strategies varied. Some spoke of having to "starve" themselves, skip meals or reduce portion sizes. One participant working for a major bakery chain told me she is hungry a lot of the time and relies on free coffee at work to give her energy to prepare food for customers. She talked about having to cut down on the size of meals and sometimes skip meals all together, especially in the winter with the cost of heating bills being higher; she explained that with a low income from her part time job, and the need to pay bills and her rent, expenditure on food is the only outgoing she could reduce without risking homelessness or debt. She was not alone, another woman also explained how she prioritized other essential outgoings before food, meaning that she often went hungry.

> "I'm eating less in a meal than what I was eating…and rather less nutritional meals…Sometimes I'm not eating. I'm having to skip meals"…"you won't get into trouble with any sort of like companies or anything. That's the only thing you can sort of really regulate without getting into trouble with anybody"

> "I'd like have a little bit in the morning and…I'd starve myself for the day and have something like about 4 o'clock and not eat again until the following day"

Another participant spoke to me in detail about how he had learnt to cope with hunger, employing intermittent fasting and timing his meals when he does eat to manage his blood sugar so as not to get too hungry. He explained: “I'm currently actually in ketosis by complete…virtue of the fact that I can't even afford a meal a day”. He joked about taking the “opportunity to stop being fat” but also spoke of his concerns over his health as his next-door neighbour had recently died and lay undiscovered for six weeks.

Most relying on foodbanks during this period reported that the amount of food they received was insufficient to properly feed themselves and their family. One lone mother working for a major food manufacturer struggled to feed herself and her daughter with the food she got from the foodbank during the wait. Another told me about the consequences of being restricted to three visits, with the lack of alternative income meaning she went hungry.

> “No, [it wasn’t sufficient] not at all”…“we'd get like 2 bags of just random stuff, and then I'd have to try and figure out what I was doing with them”

> “I had to depend on foodbanks, and you're only allowed three times to go. What am I supposed to do the rest of the week? The rest of the month, you know, I literally got to a point where I starved myself”

Although, an important lifeline for many, leaving people to rely on foodbanks in place of benefits during the wait undermines their autonomy and, in some cases, their health. Instead of receiving money to purchase the food of their choice for themselves and their families, they are offered a limited selection of food and other goods (such as toiletries and other household consumables), or no choice at all. This led to some frustration as, desperate for food, they were given items they deemed unnecessary in comparison or which they were too poor to prepare, such as items that need to be heated (Butler, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016a).

> “…you go to these foodbanks... They've put your stuff [in a bag]. You can't [choose]. I'd rather do without toothpaste, toothbrushes, bog roll…It might sound bad to you, but I had

> to have a cloth and when I went to the toilet I wet the cloth, washed it and I had to use that to wipe myself then wash it again…because I can't eat toilet roll. I can't eat a toothbrush…These bags, they put stuff in you can't eat. You've got a bag with a bit of food in, tinned stuff. I've got no electric. I didn't have a tin opener either...They give you cornflakes. How do I get milk? They give you bread. I've got no butter"

Another told me of a similar lack of choice he experienced through a community larder scheme which provides members (membership is £1) with 10 items for £3.50. Although he praised the scheme and spoke of being "grateful" for this, he also spoke of his frustration over the lack of choice available:

> "So, last week I got 8 bottles of alcohol hand wash and a bag of rice for £3.50. I can't eat hand wash…They started getting just weird food selections like I've got a kilo bag of pickles, of the KFC Pickles. How the hell have they got those? No idea, but they're in my freezer. What am I going to do with the kilo bag of frozen, sliced Pickles?"

Aside from affecting the quantity of food participants ate, the five-week wait and low income from Universal Credit also affected the quality of this and, in some cases, this was exacerbated by working in the food sector. Those relying on foodbanks or similar were clear that this was pushing them into an unhealthy diet that was affecting their health as they were often offered biscuits and other processed food, instead of fresh produce.

> "It was the food I was eating from the foodbank. It was making me so sick that I actually couldn't think. I had brain fog. I had joint pain. I mean…I should be able to lift things and I honestly couldn't get out of bed…it sounds ridiculous"

Others also spoke of eating an unhealthier diet than they would like. Contradicting previous research which has highlighted the lack of nutritional knowledge among food insecure households in the US (Lombe et al., 2016), those I spoke to were keenly aware of the importance of eating healthily and the effect of not doing so on their health. For some, this was a case of buying supermarket own brand goods which they felt were of inferior quality;

for others this was relying on ready meals or processed baked goods at discounted prices from their workplace. One told me about access to food through her workplace: “I don't really like to eat their food, to be honest. For health reasons, you get a 50% discount on the pasties and cakes...I'd rather eat good fats and stuff like…whole grain pasta”. She, like others, was frustrated at having to cut down on the amount of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and fish she was eating due to the cost of these items and their perishability.

> “they're expensive. I really don't wanna have to eat junk food. I don't see why I should have to eat junk food. It's the preserve of like, you know, richer people, fruit and vegetables…I want to eat chicken, protein and I’m having to cut that down as well”

Another man spoke to me of the lengths he was going to to protect his health, talking of having done extensive research to ensure he was getting enough protein in his diet; while another described his desperation at the unhealthy diet he and his family were forced into because of his lack of income.

> “I've looked up online and I'm following academic research…I've got bio counter sardines that are £0.50…And that is the same protein portion as you would get in a steak, as you would get in tuna. And so, I literally swapped my life out like that”

> “I hate how I eat, I hate the lack of access to good food”…“I was so concerned, like, honestly, I would sit there and think ‘I can’t keep giving my kids these foods’”

Nevertheless, with limited autonomy over the quantity and quality of the foods they were eating, some noticed physical health effects such as muscle weakness, lethargy, sleep problems and concentration loss, while one participant who has diabetes was unable to manage this properly during the wait because he was not eating a healthy balanced diet. These are food sector workers working long shifts on their feet for much of the day and these physical effects made it difficult to do their jobs.

> "you need to get nutrition, you need to eat well…[it's] is a physically demanding job, you know, you come home exhausted. You don't feel…like you've had a proper meal"

Existing research has highlighted the connection between Universal Credit and poor mental health (Pybus et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2018) and all but one of those who spoke to me reported an impact on their mental health. For some this was anxiety about how they were going to feed themselves during the wait and the fact that they needed to rely on foodbanks to cope; for others it was the ongoing stress of coping once Universal Credit did kick in.

> "So, one month where we worked out we didn't have enough, I do the overtime to make it up, so I've been working a lot to the point – think it was my last shift in this week – I had worked myself…into the ground and I completely broke down because I knew that Universal Credit wasn't gonna cover…between my wages and…what we had to pay out"

Two spoke of suicide. One woman, faced with the panic of coping during the wait for her first payment considered taking her life. Saying she was at rock bottom, isolated from friends and family she told me: "I got to a point I didn't wanna live anymore". She also told me how, even after the wait and increasing her hours enough to rely on Universal Credit only as a top up on her wages, she still feels the long-term effects on her mental health, saying: "I'm a different character". She told me of the ongoing stress and anxiety she suffers as a result of the experience, with her continuing to feel she needs to restrict her budget on food, skip meals and not eat as regularly as she would like.

Conclusions

As noted, the architect of Universal Credit, Iain Duncan Smith, has admitted that the five-week wait for Universal Credit is unnecessary and a Work and Pensions Committee saw "no reason" why, in most cases, claimants should "have to endure the five week wait" (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2020, p.5). Furthermore, none of those who participated in this study knew why this was needed (this was not communicated to them at

the time of their application). Nevertheless, the wait remains and is a key contributor to food insecurity in the UK today. Little is known, however, about food sector workers' experiences of food insecurity on Universal Credit; this study addresses this gap – highlighting several implications of the five-week wait for this group, as well as contributing to the broader literature on the topic.

Bennett and Millar have pointed out a key contradiction between the "commitment to independence" and "the increased control inherent in the Universal Credit design" (2017, p.176). However, this study suggests this contradiction extends beyond its design; there is also a fundamental contradiction between its stated aim and its effects. Far from reducing dependency and promoting independence, the wait did the opposite, forcing those interviewed to depend upon friends, family and/or charity – and suffer the broader impacts of this on their relationships and health. A key assumption underpinning this policy – that claimants need to be taught financial independence and resilience – is not only misguided but is having corrosive effects on people's lives. While, the Government has claimed that "[n]o one has to wait five weeks for a payment" due to the availability of advances (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2021, p.1), concern about debt and ability to repay these once their Universal Credit payments begun discouraged most from applying for these. Furthermore, and again in direct contradiction to a stated aim of Universal Credit, whether they applied for these, borrowed money from friends and family, and/or drew on their savings and any food reserves they had, the wait fundamentally eroded their financial resilience and ability to feed themselves and their families going forward.

In re-siting dependency in this way, the five-week wait was also implicated in the activation of forms of stigma and shame when participants were forced to display their poverty to others or, in some cases, when they resorted to criminality to cope. Jo has observed the social dimensions of poverty include "humiliation and reduced dignity and self-

esteem" (2013, p. 516) and these were induced and/or exacerbated for participants as a result of this avoidable aspect of Universal Credit's design. O'Connell and Hamilton have highlighted, in particular, the shame induced by "being unable to feed oneself and one's family in a society in which this is constructed as an individual responsibility" (2017, p.97-98). The food sector workers I spoke to reported that this shame, in turn affected their feelings about themselves and their relationships with others.

In addition, left to depend on friends, family and charity during the wait, participants experienced a lack of autonomy and choice over the amount and type of food they consumed. With little or no income, and with spending on food being the main outgoing people feel they can control during the wait, they reported reducing the amount they were eating at mealtimes or skipping meals altogether. Those relying on foodbanks often found this failed to meet their needs in terms of quantity and quality. Despite demonstrating significant resilience in the face of such food insecurity, for most this was having significant negative effects on their mental and physical health.

These findings highlight the perverse irony that those producing our food are themselves experiencing crippling food insecurity and damaging associated effects. Alongside increasingly meagre benefit levels and increases in welfare conditionality, the five-week wait exposes individuals to food insecurity, welfare stigma and health effects in the name of forcing them into paid work. However, the majority of participants in this study were already in employment and still suffered during the wait as a result of low wages and/or insecure employment characteristic of the sector. Indeed, working in the food sector offered little or no protection from food insecurity in the face of the wait for Universal Credit. While some were able to purchase meals or food items at a reduced cost through their workplace, this was often characteristic of most low-quality processed food options that many have

shown those in poverty are forced to consume (Chen, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016a) – with implications for their mental and physical health.

The five-week wait can be considered a form of structural violence, defined as the "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs" (Galtung, 1993 cited in Ho, 2007, p.3). Food insecurity and the associated effects described here result from this and other "punitive forms of neoliberalism that seek to reshape the welfare state in the service of capital" (Bolton et al., 2022, p.633). In the context of the experiences of food sector workers, the social justice implications of this are stark. When out of employment, the state – in keeping them hungry – provides for a ready supply of cheap labour for the food industry, allowing ripe conditions for it to extract maximum profit from workers' labour. When in employment, the low pay and insecure conditions associated with the food sector result in its workers still being exposed to the hunger, shame and health effects resulting from the five-week wait and subsequent low levels of Universal Credit.

This study indicates that conditions associated with food sector work are implicated in claims for Universal Credit. Although the focus here was on the experiences of food insecurity among food sector workers, further research with a larger sample would help to explore different drivers of this among this group, including variations across different sectors of the food industry and different employment types. This study also highlights the injustice of food sector workers going hungry but further research is required to fully explore the social justice implications of this, particularly in light of the growing profitability of many large food corporations and the increasing contribution of these workers to the UK economy.

Notes

1. Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit.
2. See Iain Duncan Smith's oral evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee on 14th June 2023: https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13309/html/.

3. An ethical review was undertaken before the interviews were conducted and this research was granted ethical approval by Birkbeck, University of London (Ethics approval code: BBKPOL2022/23-20).
4. https://www.bfawu.org/
5. Claimants can be moved onto Universal Credit via managed migration, natural migration (generally triggered by a change in circumstances such as moving council area or changes in their entitlements) or voluntary migration.

Declaration of interest statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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