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Lived Experiences and Coping Practices of Those Living in Food Poverty: A Qualitative Study from Greater Manchester, UK

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Abstract For more than a decade, food poverty has become a serious, growing public health problem in the UK. The aim of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences and coping practices of those living in food poverty. Forty-two semi-structured interviews with struggling householders were conducted at food banks, food pantries and community centres in Greater Manchester. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Study participants described severe economic hardship and food poverty experiences. Many reported difficulties in paying for basic essentials such as housing, utilities, and food, as well as spiralling debts, along with fear and anxiety over their financial situation. Whilst, the depth and severity of food poverty experiences varied amongst participants, many reported eating less food than they should, and in some cases, frequent hunger and going entire days without food was described. To lessen the effects of money and food shortfalls, participants relied on multiple food, financial and help seeking strategies such as, resourceful shopping practices, extreme food budgeting, eating fewer meals, juggling bills, borrowing food and money, and going to food banks and pantries. Despite employing multiple, and often concurrent coping practices many participants experienced severe levels of food poverty putting them at high risk of becoming malnourished. By sharing the lived experiences of those living with food poverty and experiencing hunger, this research advances food poverty knowledge and informs policy and practice aimed at alleviating food poverty and modern-day malnutrition.

Keywords: *food poverty, coping practices, welfare benefits, income shortfalls, debt*

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1. Introduction

Maintaining an adequate and nutritious diet is vital for health and wellbeing. Yet, an estimated 8.4 million individuals living in the United Kingdom (UK) struggle to secure enough to eat [1]. Households experiencing food poverty often adopt unique coping strategies to manage their food needs when resources are constrained. These strategies can include modifying eating habits, such as reducing quality and quantity of food consumed [2], delaying payments for household bills, borrowing from family and friends, incurring debt [3,4], and, ultimately, turning to food banks for food aid [5,6]. Beyond the struggle to ensure regular, nutritious meals, economically disadvantaged households often face stress, poorer health, lower educational attainment, and a reduced life expectancy [7].

Since the early 2010s, the demand for emergency food aid has surged, leading to a widespread expansion of food banks across the country [8], accompanied by an increase in food donation collection points in supermarkets and elsewhere. This growing reliance on food banks quickly emerged as a major concern within the UK, attracting considerable media, political and social attention. Before the 21st century, food banks were almost unheard of in the UK; now, their number has exceeded 2,500 nationwide [9]. This increase is frequently linked to extensive reforms in the UK's social security system starting in 2010. These reforms led to reductions in benefits and housing entitlements, the implementation of stricter welfare conditionality and sanctions, a freeze in working-age benefit rates from 2015 to 2020, and the introduction of Universal Credit, a controversial benefit system that combines six working-age benefits into one [10,11].

Food poverty, increasingly a concern in the UK [12,13], is defined as "the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" [14]. This paper seeks to explore the lived experiences and coping practices of households experiencing food poverty in Greater Manchester, an area with limited research on this critical public health issue. Guided by three key questions, this research investigates: How do households living in Greater Manchester experience food poverty? What coping practices are used to manage household food poverty? How does food poverty impact household food provision in particular, food acquisition, choice of food, dietary, and eating practices? The findings aim to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of food poverty, highlighting the challenges that vulnerable households and individuals face in securing adequate nutrition and diet for themselves and their families. These insights will, in turn, inform policy and practice aimed at alleviating food poverty.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

The perspectives and experiences of those with direct lived experience of food poverty were explored through individual semi-structured interviews. Forty-two face-to-face interviews were carried out with individuals visiting food banks, food pantries and community centres across three towns in Greater Manchester. A generic qualitative research approach was adopted for this research.

2.2. Study Setting and Recruitment

The study was conducted in Greater Manchester, a metropolitan county and combined authority area in North West England. The city region has a population of 2.8 million people [15], and comprises ten local authority districts: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan and the cities of Salford and Manchester. While Greater Manchester has a large, diverse, and growing economy, it also has a disproportionate share of impoverished neighbourhoods compared to other parts of the country. According to the 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 23 percent of Greater Manchester's neighbourhoods are in the top 10 percent most deprived in the country, and 38 percent fall within the top 20 percent [16].

Three towns within Greater Manchester were selected as recruitment sites for the study: two in Manchester South and one in Manchester North East. This selection was informed by the high numbers of emergency food parcels distributed and reported by The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network in these areas. Food banks, food pantries and community centres in each selected town were identified through internet searches. Permission to recruit participants was obtained by personally contacting the manager of each food programme during their operational hours through in-person visits. Managers were given a detailed overview of the research before giving their approval for participant recruitment. Following their approval, dates were scheduled for the researcher to visit the food banks, food pantries or community centres to recruit participants.

Adults (> 18 yrs.) experiencing food poverty and residing in either permanent or temporary accommodation, were purposively recruited for the study. Exclusions applied to non-English language speakers, individuals unable to provide informed consent, and those classified as 'rough sleeping' homeless. The research employed a combination of purposive, maximum variation and opportunistic sampling to identify potential participants from food banks, food pantries and community centres. This approach ensured that the sample included individuals experiencing food poverty across various household types, achieved a gender balance and covered a range of ages. Purposive sampling is a commonly employed method in qualitative research to identify and select individuals with expert knowledge related to the phenomenon of interest [17], and maximum variation sampling ensures a wide variety of participants are chosen to obtain a balanced viewpoint of a phenomenon [18]. Purposive and opportunistic sampling from food banks, food pantries and community centres, coupled with screening, were employed to ensure potential participants met the inclusion criteria and were eligible to participate. Eligibility was determined through initial conversations with potential participants.

The interviews were conducted in public buildings such as community centres, churches, and facilities owned by local authorities during their normal operating hours. Managers and other staff were present during both participant recruitment and the interviews. With the support of the manager at each establishment, the researcher approached potential participants to inquire if they would be interested in participating in a research study. Out of forty-nine individuals approached, three did not meet the inclusion criteria, and four declined to be interviewed, resulting in forty-two conducted interviews.

2.3. Interviews

To investigate food poverty experiences and coping practices, an interview guide was developed, outlining key topic areas for exploration. Designed to align with the research questions, the guide covered topics such as participants' current financial and food situations, strategies for stretching resources, the degree of food poverty experienced and the types of help and support received. This guide provided a flexible framework for guiding conversations, enabling participants to share their lived experiences and coping practices related to food poverty, thereby addressing the three research questions. Consistency was maintained by using the same interview guide for all participants, while the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to discuss areas relevant to their personal experiences [19]. The interviews were conducted conversationally, using open-ended questions guided by the participant's responses, with follow-up or probing questions to delve deeper into relevant topics.

Qualitative research interviews are a traditional and commonly used method of data collection [20], offering researchers valuable insights into how individuals experience and perceive events in their lives. However, this method is not without challenges. In this study, while the majority of potential participants were willing to be interviewed, scheduling interviews in advance or extending them beyond thirty minutes proved challenging for many. Given their precarious situations, participants preferred to be interviewed during their visits to the food bank, food pantry or community centre and favoured relatively short interview durations. To capture a broad range of experiences and viewpoints, the researcher remained flexible about the interview length, typically suggesting a timeframe of twenty to thirty minutes. Moreover, since food banks and food pantries are often situated in multi-purpose, public and inherently busy buildings, noise and interruptions occasionally disrupted the interview process. Despite these challenges, the researcher worked with the venue managers to identify relatively private, quiet spaces for conducting the interviews. In cases of interruptions, such as a volunteer asking a question or a participant receiving an urgent phone call potentially related to their housing or benefits, the interviews were briefly paused and then resumed. Ultimately, the length and quality of interviews varied, influenced by participant's time constraints, their willingness to share experiences, interruptions, and background noise, with durations ranging from ten to fifty minutes.

Interviews were digitally audio recorded using Philips DPM-8000 pocket memo, unless a participant specifically requested otherwise (n=5). Field notes were routinely made after the audio-recorded interviews. For the five interviews that were not recorded, notes were taken during and after the interviews. Demographic information, including gender, age, household composition, and income source(s) were collected and recorded at the start of each interview. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently until interviews added no new information to the inquiry, marking a point of data saturation, a concept referred to by Glaser and Strauss [21]. Data saturation was reached after forty-two interviews, as no new patterns or themes were identified.

2.4. Analysis

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke [22] was used to analyse the interview transcripts for patterns of meaning. This involved a multistep iterative and reflective process that included data immersion; coding; sorting codes into preliminary themes; reviewing and refining themes, naming and defining themes; and creating a written narrative to describe and connect the themes in answering the research questions. Braun and Clarke, describe it as a recursive process, a constant moving back and forth between steps in the analytical process, coded extracts, and the analysis of the data. In this study to facilitate thematic analysis of the interview data, the initial coding and analysis were conducted manually on transcript printouts. Later, the coded transcripts were imported into NVivo (QSR International Pty. Ltd. Version 12, 2018) to aid data management, and further analysis.

To become familiar with the depth and breadth of the dataset the researcher immersed herself in the data by listening to the audio recordings, reading and rereading the interview transcripts, and jotting down any emerging ideas, patterns, or themes within the dataset. Using an inductive or data driven approach to analyse the data [23], relevant or interesting words, or phrases within the transcripts were coded, using descriptive, process, and in vivo labels [24]. Initially, this process involved highlighting key or interesting words, phrases or sentences on the printed interview transcripts and assigning initial codes or labels to describe the highlighted excerpts. Recognising that coding is a cyclical act requiring multiple passes over the data set [24], these initial codes were subsequently relabelled, with some being combined or omitted during the iterative process. Coded excerpts assigned the same code were collated together and defined. Guided by the research questions, codes that shared similarities or commonalities were grouped together into preliminary themes alongside their corresponding coded excerpts. These preliminary themes were then reviewed and revised by the researchers to ensure they depicted the data accurately. Some became more refined or developed, while others were combined, or excluded for being overly broad, repetitive or not having enough data to support them. Following these final revisions, the overarching themes and sub-themes were named and defined, ensuring a comprehensive and accurate representation of the dataset.

To enhance data trustworthiness and authenticity, a coding comparison exercise was conducted between the researchers. A sample of the interview transcripts were independently read, coded and analysed. Any discrepancies in data coding were discussed and revised until coding agreement was reached. The overarching themes and interpretation were finalised through discussion and exploration between the researchers.

2.5. Ethics Approval

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Life Sciences, University of Chester (reference number 1383/18/AB/CSN). Permissions to recruit participants from various community centres, food banks and food pantries were obtained from individual managers of each establishment.

3. Findings

3.1. Description of Participants

Table 1. Summary characteristics of study participants

Characteristic	Male (n=17)	Female (n= 5)	Total (n=42)
Age			
20 - 29	2	5	7
30 - 39	0	9	9
40 - 49	8	5	13
50 - 59	3	6	9
60 – 69	4	0	4
Household type			
Single	13	6	19
Couple	3	1	4
Lone parent family	0	14	14
Couple family	1	4	5
Income source			
Salary & benefits	2	1	3
Sick pay & benefits	0	2	2
Welfare benefits	12	21	33
Waiting decision/payment*	3	1	4

Note. * Waiting for benefit determination or first payment

Forty-two participants took part in the study, comprising 25 women and 17 men aged between 23 to 64 years. While the majority of men interviewed were middle-aged, most women were of child bearing age. Although the sample reflected a variety of household types, lone female families (14, 33%) and single men (13, 31%) were the most common households interviewed. All participants were found to be food insecure and either fully or partially dependent on welfare benefits, with four either waiting for benefit claim decisions or their first benefit payment to be made. Table 1 shows a summary of the characteristics and circumstances of the participants.

3.2. Themes

Based on the inductive analysis of the data, four overarching themes and fourteen sub-themes were developed representing the lived experiences and coping practices of those in food poverty. An overview of the themes and sub-themes is shown in Figure 1. These themes and sub-themes are now described and supported with relevant excerpts from the interviews.

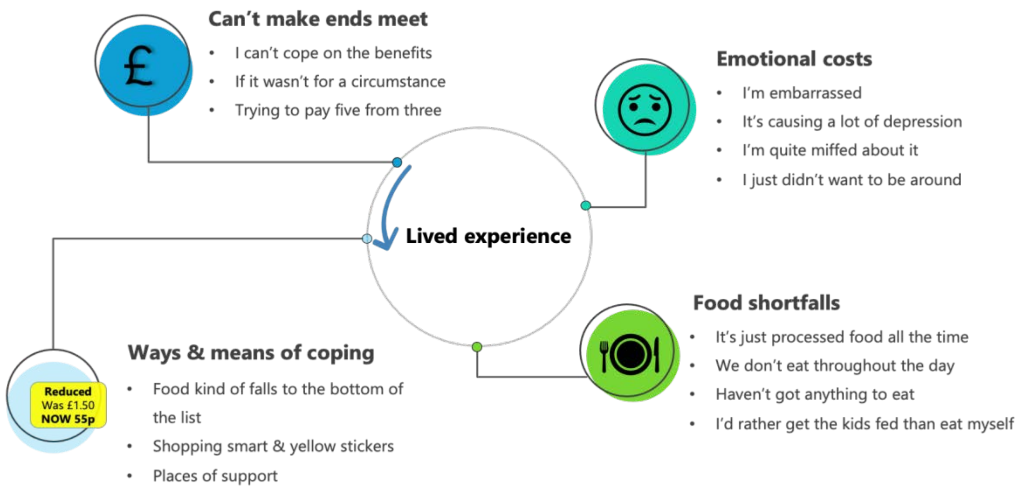

Figure 1. Schematic overview of the themes (in bold) and sub-themes (bulleted) of food poverty lived experiences

3.3. Interpretation of the Meaning of Themes

Theme 1: Can't make ends meet

The first theme 'Can't make ends meet' describes the everyday struggles of those trying to manage on limited or precarious incomes associated with claiming welfare benefits. Constrained incomes or sudden income loss often related to changes to welfare entitlement or sanctions led to difficulties in paying for basic necessities such as food, utilities and housing. Although the extent to which participants were struggling varied, many simply described not having enough money to live off. Despite their best efforts to manage expenditure, multiple material-need insecurities such as food, energy, housing and debt were common experiences among participants.

I can't cope on the benefits

All participants interviewed either received welfare assistance or had recently applied for it. For most, this assistance was their only form of income, making them entirely financially dependent on welfare. A few who were working or receiving statutory sick pay had their low incomes supplemented by benefits. Since 2010, the British welfare system has undergone significant policy shifts and reforms. The impact of some of these policy changes, introduced in recent years, has left many participants struggling financially. The excerpts that follow illustrate how specific benefit-related changes such as benefit freezes, the two-child cap and the five-week processing period for the first benefit payment have made it difficult for participants to meet their everyday basic needs. The first excerpt from a single unemployed man receiving Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), an unemployment benefit for those actively looking for work, underscores the financial challenges resulting from the benefit freeze (since April 2016 working age benefit rates have been frozen) and the rising cost of living.

I'm on JSA, and it's just ridiculous you know, I can't, can't get by on it, it's as simple as that! Prices are going up all the time and JSA isn't, you know, no benefits are going up, they are all going down if anything. So-so, it's, just eating away, chipping away bit by bit. Everything-everything is going up; rents have gone up, council tax has gone up, gas, electric has gone up, water has gone up, you know everything has gone up! Food is going up. You know.

(64-year-old unemployed single male, food pantry member)

Changes to the social security policy for families, limiting financial support to just two children, from April 2017, impacts families with three or more children. A single mother with three young children, who has been consistently relying on the food bank since her baby daughter was born (her 3rd child) several months ago, describes her situation. Unable to return to work due to the high costs of childcare or get child support from her ex-partner she struggles to manage on the welfare she receives that only supports two of her children.

Umm, money can be a bit tight sometimes, I think since Abigail was born. I'm not entitled to any money for her, cos, I already have two children in the house. I find it a struggle! So, I get help with two children but of course when you've got nappies and baby food, baby wipes, baby milk and all that, to get! That's a big chunk out of my money!

(37-year-old single mother of three, food bank client)

Some participants were waiting for their first Universal Credit (UC) payment after making a claim. There is a standard 5-week processing period, although this can be longer. A number of newly released prisoners, who sought food support from food banks were waiting to receive their first benefit payment. Waiting weeks to receive any form of financial support can be particularly problematic for anyone but more so for newly released prisoners, especially those without strong personal social networks who face immediate financial, food and housing hardships following their release. A 44-year-old single male, recently released from prison and interviewed in a food bank explains his situation.

My circumstances are that recently came out of custody after serving a short sentence. I was, currently before that, receiving benefits, I was on Universal Credit, but now I had to make a fresh claim due to the custody period. And now the food bank, I've come here because they help me; otherwise, I wouldn't survive, you know with no food. I'm staying at a friend's. It's not permanent, but it's somewhere to stay for now…

(44-year-old single male, food bank client)

Many of the participants, were experiencing multiple, concurrent material-need insecurities, notably in food, energy and housing but also in clothing, shoes, essential household items and baby equipment. The majority were living in social housing, and although payment prioritisation was often given to rent, housing arrears appeared to be common. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a social security benefit designed for working-age adults who face challenges securing employment due to long-term medical conditions or disabilities. One participant, a 55-year-old single mother facing eviction due to rent arrears describes her financial struggles with living on such benefits:

I'm basically on ESA, and I'm having umm… £60 to pay for rent, back rent and paying for me daughter, so, that makes it nothing, so by the end of the first week my money has gone, and I'm struggling for electricity, food… I just can't cope on the benefits!

(55-year-old female, food bank client)

A number of participants talked about having prepayment gas and electric meters installed in their homes, which operate on a 'pay as you go' basis, necessitating upfront payment for energy use. These meters, which incur higher energy tariffs compared to standard meters, require users to purchase credit either through a smart card or a key provided by the energy supplier. This can be done at local shops with PayPoint outlets or via a smartphone app; the credit is then loaded onto the meters. Additionally, if users run out of credit, they can access £5 of emergency gas or electric credit. Due to financial constraints, participants found themselves rationing their gas and electric usage. When the meter ran out of credit, they faced temporary disconnection of power until they could afford to purchase more credit.

We are on a two-meter system… we just top it up. It's basically pay as you go. Sometimes it can run over. So, you know when it runs over, you get into a state of mind, and then you go "Oh crap! what am I going to do now? …how much have we got left now? - how long that's going to last?" You've then got to work it out when you go onto emergency credit system… you've got to space it out, and you've got to use it as little as you can up until your next payday.

(24-year-old male with partner, food bank client)

If it wasn't for a circumstance

Although, a few participants were experiencing a short-term finance shortfall, which left them without money to buy food, many had been struggling financially for months or years. While their current financial predicament was often linked to issues related to welfare benefits, the initial trigger could often be traced back to adverse or significant life events such as job losses, relationship breakdowns, accidents, family births or deaths and coming out of prison.

I split up with my ex-husband when he was about a year old [referring to her young son], and he was working at the time, he doesn't work now. He doesn't contribute anything towards him um, yeah, so it's difficult.

(34-year-old married female, one disabled child, food bank client)

Umm, it's basically ever since I had my second born, I've had to come out of full-time work.

(30-year-old single mother, food bank client)

Umm, well, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for a circumstance. I was arrested on the 29th of May! Umm, breach of bail conditions and placed in Forest Bank prison for four weeks.

(49-year-old single male, waiting for benefits, food bank client)

Umm, it all started, really, umm, after my divorce and my mum and dad died. Umm, so, since 2007… I got a bit of a kick-in! That's life!

(61-year-old single male, food bank client)

We look after two of our grandchildren; one's seven, one eleven. We've had both children on and off for quite a long time... since they were born. The mother has got difficulties, so we take them in. Up to last year we had, we've had no money for them because the mum couldn't make up her mind if she wanted them back or not! She took it, as leaving them with us for a few short weeks, to sort herself out, it carried on for years. Umm, our income, me and my husband is very, very low.

(56-year-old married female raising grandchildren, food bank client)

However, for some, adverse or significant life events often combined with mental health issues and substance misuse problems triggered a downstream of negative events that ultimately left them homeless and living in precarious conditions. A 47-year-old single male and frequent food bank client, describes the cascading effect of losing his job following an accident at work several years ago:

Yeah, lost my job. Umm, couldn't pay my rent. Umm, couldn't pay my council tax and by five, six months got kicked out. I was on the streets for about four months, and then they offered me a place at a hostel.

(47-year-old single male, food bank client living in a hostel)

Another single male in his late 40's, and regular food bank client, describes the chain of events that left him with no permanent home and living in a van, for the last nine months. Although it has a bed in it, there are no wash facilities or kitchen, and so, he uses a small camping stove to heat food and goes to petrol station bathrooms to use the toilet and to wash.

It's been a struggle. Umm, basically, last three years, since my dad died, split up with my girlfriend... I moved out of my father's house, when he died, my brother put me in his flat and me and my girlfriend had problems, we got asked to leave and… So, it just been a continual series of events, and on top, I do have anxiety and depression anyway.

(49-year-old single male, food bank client living in an off-road van)

Trying to pay five from three

Over-indebtedness was common among study participants across all households. Although varying levels of debt were reported, many talked of multiple, accumulating debts alongside repayment difficulties. The majority of debts described were related to household bills such as housing costs and utility payments. Trying to 'make ends meet' on a limited income, led many to fall into arrears, especially with household bills as there was not enough money to pay all the bills and other essentials, leading to difficult choices on which bills or expenses to pay over others. Participants often used the phrase 'rob Peter to pay Paul' to describe bill juggling or skipping payments on some bills to make payments on others. However, this often backfired and many fell too far behind to catch up, leading to a build-up of arrears and debt in priority household bills. The following participant excerpts illustrate the difficulties in trying to pay bills and how arrears and debt builds up:

I'm begging Peter to pay Paul. It depends what's a priority at that moment. I understand that everything should be a priority, but when you've only got limited funds, it's a case of well, I need to get them sorted before I get in the red and the next time it'll be them before I go in the red! So, I'm constantly chasing my tail at the minute.

(37-year-old single mother of three, food bank client)

I'll be fine, um, but as the time has gone, there's really a lot of pressure on my partner. Um, and I'm kind of thinking I need to cut down what we do – on what goes out, lots of things need paying and everything has just gone into arrears now – I haven't been able to keep on top of it, it's taken me longer to get back into work than I anticipated.

(Mid 30s married female, food pantry member)

You can't always pay things it's like trying to pay five from three kind of thing. You know what I mean? What you're going to pay, you got to pay your rent obviously, or you get thrown out… You got to pay your gas and electric obviously. You know what I mean? Then the other things, you think right hang on a sec, I can't afford the water this week, or I can't afford council tax, you know its food comes before them. You know what I mean?

(64-year-old, single male, unemployed, food pantry member)

Um, you just get into debt because there is never enough money to buy food, clothes and everything else.

(34-year-old married mother of one, food bank client)

I'm only on £421 that's including my rent and my council tax. My rent is £380 and my council tax, don't even cover it! So, at the moment these support workers are trying to get me on a payment plan, I'm in £2000 worth of debt with my council tax.

(Mid 40s single female, food bank client)

Unable to keep on top of their current and past-due bills, which soon became debts, and or impeded by mental health issues, debts often snowballed. As penalties, late fees and interest charges were added on; participants ended up owing more money than the original debt. Furthermore, unpaid debts led creditors and suppliers to take action, either by applying for third party deductions or going through the courts. This resulted in debt enforcement collections, to clear the debts, either by bailiffs or through, automatic deductions taken from benefits. By going through the court system, utility companies are given the authority to fit and charge for prepayment gas or electric meters. To clear energy arrears, utility companies set the meter payment rates to cover both back-arrears and current usage. Also, automatic deductions taken from benefits for utility debt such as water covered payment towards the outstanding debt but also for current-usage. As repayment and prevention enforcements of multiple debts accumulated, some were left with little or hardly anything to live off, exacerbating their financial, food and other material hardships. The following participant excerpts describe debt collection and prevention enforcement actions through benefit deductions.

So, I've got debts from last year, water debts from last year and umm-- and umm, council tax debts from last year, that I'm paying still now this year out of me benefits, it's being taken out of me benefit.

(64-year-old single male, unemployed, food pantry member)

Um, I have CCJs I think, coming out of my benefit for the past year, from benefit overpayments on housing benefit, overpayment on tax credits um, council tax bills. ...Well, if you take out everything I have to pay…I don't get anything I'm minus, I still owe, so it's always picking which person to pay, 'rob Peter to pay Paul'.

(30-year-old single mother of three, food pantry member)

The following excerpt is from a 61-year-old single male, struggling with mental health difficulties, interviewed at a food bank. He relies solely on food banks to provide his food because once he has paid his debts from his fortnightly Employment Support Allowance benefit, there is no money left for food. Here, he describes his debt situation, including how he ignored his bills due to illness and the fitting and charging of prepayment energy meters to his house to pay for current usage and outstanding arrears:

I get £116 umm, obviously, um, I was going to say, 90-odd of that is already accounted for, umm, before I get it! Goes on bloody, umm… debts. I've got payments to umm, Jason's, and what's the other bailiff, umm, I've got some debts, I've got debts with Utilities Warehouse, as well and, umm…they fitted meters to my house and charged me 700 quid for the privilege! Going through court and what have you… cos, I was ill…I didn't--, mail just piled up, and I wasn't dealing with my affairs, umm, I'd not been paying my bills…

(61-year-old male, food bank client)

Theme 2: Ways and means of coping

The second theme 'ways and means of coping' describes how participants try to cope and make do. Although food is a basic human need, its expenditure became a flexible household expense. Unlike other fixed expenses like rent or debts, food expenditure could be adjusted and readjusted as finances became more constrained, or when a large bill arose or when their debts caught up to them such as when multiple debt repayments were directly taken out of their benefits. To cope, participants employed various cost cutting and shopping strategies to try to maintain food supplies such as looking for bargains or discounted food in shops and buying cheaper and more filling foods. However, when money became more constrained food was rationed and help was sought from the people they knew or from food banks and food pantries.

Food kind of falls to the bottom of the list

To manage income shortfalls, non-essential spending was cut and essential expenditure was reduced as much as possible. Most participants, had stringent food budgets, owned only basic 'pay as you go' mobile phones, while some used public transport, many simply walked, and clothes and household goods were sought and bought from charity shops. Living payday to payday meant a broken large household appliance such as a cooker went unrepaired or unreplaced and they simply made do.

My cooker broke just before Christmas and still haven't got a cooker, I now use my microwave for cooking everything I get. You can't just go out and buy a new cooker or even clothes. If your shoes wear out… you can't just go out and buy a new pair of shoes. It's just not possible! I just troll the charity shops. As simple as that, you know. When I see something, I buy it…

(64-year-old single male, food pantry member)

After paying the rent and other priority bills and debts, spending was prioritised and pared down to the most essential basic needs such as gas and electric power and food for the children.

I always make sure I've got some gas and electric on to last through obviously you need the gas and electric and then just get what I need to see me over the week really, I look for the bargains in the shops to feed the kids.

(38-year-old single mother of four, food bank client)

First comes the baby, then um, heating, water and then food for the rest of us, as long as the baby is ok. Everyone else can wait.

(55-year-old female, ESA, food bank client)

Although food was considered a high priority need, food expenditure was a flexible expense that could be adjusted unlike other living expenses that were fixed such as rent, council tax and utilities.

Food was the one thing I had a bit of control of, everything else just needed paying.

(30s, married female, food pantry member)

Just had to cut down on stuff I used to buy when I was working. Like back to basics, when you are working you can afford to eat decent stuff, when you are on benefits you can't buy, live healthy no-one can live healthy on benefits to tell you the truth.

(61-year-old unemployed single male, community centre volunteer)

Um, obviously, you know you've got your priority bills that need paying and um, food kind of falls at the bottom of the list.

(39-year-old single mother of two, food pantry member)

After paying priority bills and debts many were left with little money for food. Some had very stringent food budgets and a few had no money to spend on food, either because of over indebtedness or they were waiting for their first benefit payment to be made which takes at least 5 weeks to process from application.

I normally spend about 50-60 quid [for two adults] in there [Aldi] when I go- once a month, yeah. When I get my money.

(55-year-old male with a partner, working part-time, food bank client)

By the time I've paid the bills, just enough left to get some shopping in, a little bit of shopping. About £30 [£15 per week]. I have to judge, see what I can get for that.

(Mid 50s, single female, food pantry member)

I've not shopped for ages, lovely. I, I go, one way or another I go to one of these facilities once a week (referring to a food bank).

(61-year-old male, food bank client)

A more extreme way to acquire food was to skip dive for it from grocery or convenience store garbage containers. This involved going out late at night and searching through rubbish skips or bins for edible food to eat, once the store has closed. Potentially putting themselves at risk not just nutritionally, but also in conflict of the law and consuming unsafe foods. The following excerpt is from a 44-year-old single male, recently released from prison and with no money until his benefits come through, he has resorted to skip diving.

Down near where I'm staying there's a place it's like a seven eleven late shop. And if you go around the back at the night time, they throw stuff out, you know, what's expired that day. And there's so much food they throw away so… I've been doing that… It's a bit embarrassing but… It has been a bit of a god send actually coz it does help.

(44-year-old single male, food bank client)

Shopping smart and yellow stickers

To stretch their money as far as possible, participants employed several different money-saving shopping strategies. They looked for value deals, went from store to store looking for the best prices, switched from branded to unbranded, bought frozen or tinned instead of fresh, shifted to cheaper foods like pasta and beans and purchased discounted food from the yellow sticker or reduced sections of the supermarket. These reduced sections were often visited first to see what's been discounted before going to the main grocery aisles.

Um, the, the Aldi's and Asda's, you know. I go to, the cheaper aisles, their own brands and then reduction aisles, you know.

(49-year-old single male, food bank client)

The big Tesco around the corner they have reduced sections in there, they have 1,2,3,4,5 - 5 reduced sections. [laughter] I know them everybody does. Um, they've got two in the chilled sections, one in the bread section and two umm, like tinned food and stuff- two there. So, the first thing I do, I do, like in any supermarkets, I go straight to the reduced section and look there first, and then if there is nothing there, that's when I go shopping in the store.

(64-year-old single unemployed male, food pantry member)

Worsening hardship left some unable to do a proper food shop. Some could only afford to buy a few essentials, such as bread and milk and shopped fitfully. Others subsisted on cheap 'heat and eat' food from convenience stores such as Poundland, or shopped exclusively from supermarket reduced sections visiting them daily or going at certain times of the day because the food was further discounted.

You know what, I just buy a loaf of bread, and some margarine! Just buy some of the essentials. Yeah, and that's it! It won't last two seconds! But sometimes I don't even do that to be honest. You know, cos my bills too high!

(39-year-old single female, food bank client)

I just pop out to get bits, you know what you need. Um, um, no routine, just what I need at the time. You know not like in a routine thing. It changes, you know every day you don't know what's coming around the corner.

(28-year-old single mother of two, food bank client)

Around Poundland- for food, cheap and cheerful! Sainsbury's, go to the reductions, the reduction sections. I can't afford their prices! It all depends on what I've got left!

(Early 40s single male, food bank client)

It's difficult trying to shop. Where's we find the local Co-op um… anything that's in the reduce aisle after half-past 7 - 8 o'clock, they reduce it to 20p! So, yeah, I always go to the shop around 8 o'clock at night to see whether there's anything… you can get your bread 20p and stuff like that.

(39-year-old single mother of three, food bank and pantry client)

Places of support

After exhausting all their available resources many participants turned to others for support, albeit reluctantly. Many were heavily dependent on outside support, either within their own network of friends, family and neighbours or from outside agencies such as food banks, but often a combination of support was sought.

Neighbours, friends and family: "Without them I'd be pretty under"

Many received help and support from family, friends and neighbours. They helped supplement food shortfalls or completely stepped in when the cupboards were empty, topped up gas and electric meters and paid for children's school uniforms.

The kid's nanna come down the other week she got an allotment she brought us some fresh eggs from her chickens and a few veggies off the allotment. …might help put a bit of electric on or things if I need it.

(38-year-old single mother of four, food bank client)

Throughout the summer holidays, I didn't have any money! So, I'm still in the process of paying my mum back for the kids' school uniforms. Um, had to lend money off people to keep the gas and electric running. …My mum was helping out with um, food deliveries from Iceland and if it wasn't for her, I don't know what I'd have done, to be quite honest! So, um…yeah. It was fortunate she was able to do that.

(45-year-old single mother of three, food bank client)

Well weeks ago, like I say I'm waiting to hear back about my ESA, and they stopped it, and I had no money for eight weeks. So, my sisters were helping me out then.

(Mid 50s, single female, food pantry member)

My mother has really helped me out a lot. Umm, and she has been giving me money, umm, "when you're out at least get some McDonald's or something like that".

(52-year-old single male, food pantry member)

When the food cupboards were empty, some sent children to family members to be fed or borrowed from neighbours.

If I've completely ran out of food, the children will go to Grandad's or I'll go to neighbours, sent the little boy over the road like last night for a tin of tuna so, things like that.

(30-year-old, single mother, food bank client)

Others spoke of kindness from friends who help without asking and the continual support they receive from them without which they would be in a worse situation than they are now.

I've got a few friends who umm…umm, if I turn up at the house, randomly they'll mysteriously have some spare food, or they'll make something to eat.

(28-year-old single male, food bank client)

I rely on friends all the time, bailing me out. My friends, they're my support workers, without them I'd be pretty under! You know, otherwise… I don't think I'd be in a very good place! I'm still not in a very good place.

(49-year-old single male, food bank client)

Food banks: "I come here for survival"

Following a crisis or when their financial situation became worse, or they had little social support or they felt a burden to others, participants sought help from food banks. Accessing a food bank requires a referral voucher from an approved frontline organisation or professional like Citizens Advice, a local housing group, a Health Visitor, or a Probation Officer. The referral agency or agent assesses if there is an immediate food need before issuing a serialised voucher for the individual or family. Completed and signed vouchers are then presented to a local food bank, where they are checked for legitimacy and eligibility before three-days' worth of non-perishable food are handed out.

Participants were often grateful for the food assistance they received from food banks as well as the offer of a sympathetic ear if they needed to talk. It was often described as a lifeline by mothers who, on the whole were more pragmatic at seeking help but a means of survival by male participants who were more reluctant to accept help due to embarrassment but also because they felt others were more in need than themselves.

Here, this food bank has been amazing! They know our situation, they've been really, really good to us. They're a lifeline. We've been using them for four years now! On and off for four years! We come when we really are at our desperate times, we don't abuse it. We would never do that! … I find here, I can have a chat, a cup of tea and toast. …So, it's nice I have to say the support and the service for people like me.

(56-year-old female, raising two grandchildren, food bank client)

I should actually be more self-sufficient being 28 years old! I shouldn't be relying on or going around to ask people for food! Umm, it's quite- I mean it's one thing coming to a food bank that's set up, but at the same time you feel like it should be going to people who are more needing than me, but then you've got to have a mindset 'I need to survive', so I come here for survival!

(28-year-old single male, waiting for benefit to be processed, food bank client)

However, food banks were not just accessed for crisis or short-term support, as they were intended, but also intermittently as well as on a regularly basis, with a few participants solely relying on them for all their food. The following participants explain their reasons for accessing food banks.

When, when I first split up with my husband, I was twelve weeks without any money cos, he had the benefits, and he still used them, and I had no money. So, this is why I had to come to the food bank. So that's when I had to use it, you know I had to use for probably about 3 or 4 weeks.

(Early 50s, single mother of two, one disabled, food bank client)

I woke up this morning in agony with my tooth. I phone the walk-in centre - got seen about 9 o'clock, walked out of there, gone to the Job Centre, my appointment is half past nine. Said "I'm sorry I'm late, I'm 10 minutes late." They said "You've got to go to a decision maker about stopping your claim until Tuesday." I said "What do I do about food then, how do I last over the weekend?". "That's not our problem" they said "you should make sure you're not late, make sure you're on time." I showed them my face, told them, I'd been to emergency (the right side of his face was markedly swollen and red). …I would have got paid today.

(42-year-old male, food bank client)

Right now, we are coming towards our last few days before our next pay day. We have to come to the food bank because of the fact that we've barely got any money, so without any money to our name, but we've barely got no food as well. The staff here, they are very friendly and approachable. If you are feeling down the day you come in like, they come around and speak to you. You can have a bit of a giggle and a bit of a laugh. You know, if you ask them for a cup tea or a cup of coffee, they'll make them, no trouble at all.

(24-year-old male living with partner, on UC, & food bank client)

I'm just barely making ends meet! And that's where the food bank comes in; they are helpful… this is the second time I've used this week! Has been a lifeline at times for us! Cos, we are really struggling! I don't have money to do shops… To be fair, I don't really have spare money, once my money comes in, its due to go there, there, and there and that's it! Especially since they changed all my money around and that. Since the cap! It's really affected us.

(37-year-old single mother of three, food bank client)

As a rule, food support is limited to three visits in a 6-month period. Although, food bank managers can make discretionary exceptions if they felt an individual or family needed more extended support. However, this depended on the food bank's food reserves and current demand for their services. Many participants were simply limited to three standard visits even though they needed much more extended support. Some male participants expressed unfairness about this, as they recognised others, especially families with young children were in need of regular food support.

Umm, I think there shouldn't be just three vouchers a year, maybe a single man like me fair enough I can understand three a year, but when it's a family, and you've got young kiddies it shouldn't be allowed at least 5, 6 a year at least that's what I think. A lot of women, I've seen women pull up in BMWs and all sorts, big four by four Audis and still come in and get the food. It's not just all lads or women on the lower end of the scale on benefits it tends to be people working as well.

(47-year-old single male, food bank client)

Despite these rules, some participants managed to skirt around them and were consistently accessing food banks once a week, sometimes more often. Left with no other choice or option unless he wanted to starve, one gentleman, went to different referral agents to get vouchers. He alternated between two different food banks, one week he went to a Trussell Trust operated one and the following week went to an independent one. He made each 3-day food parcel last the entire week. Researcher: Who does the vouchers for you?

Community Drug team. And, um, um, Citizens Advice and um, Prevention Alliance. So, people like that! You're *only allowed three from each one! According to them you're only allowed three ever! But I just can't do that! That's why I come. I don't want to take them! But I finally came around to - I've got to… Usually, every week. There's two of these food banks, there's pink slips, one for one food bank and there's the red one for another. And, if you do it right, you get enough to survive!*

(61-year-old male, food bank client)

Food pantries: "I'm just eating better now!"

Although not as widespread, food pantries were found to be a more acceptable, longer-term alternative to food banks as they could be accessed weekly. Pantries are membership food clubs, run by local volunteers, who sell surplus discounted food. Membership fees vary, but for around £3.50 per week, £15 worth of food can be selected, including fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and store cupboard food items. Participants reported eating better since joining as they could select a variety of fresh food that was normally too cost prohibitive for them to buy. Other benefits mentioned included the chance to socialise and chat with others and the offer of help and support on a range of issues including housing and money.

I'm just eating better now! Yeah, yeah, because I get fresh fruit and vegetables here. Umm, and a lot of other stuff that would normally be too expensive for me to buy. I like cooking! So, I-I like to use fresh ingredients, you know. So, that's what I get here, mainly fresh ingredients.

(64-year-old single male, food pantry member)

Here at the food pantry, you're getting fresh stuff; you can get meat and stuff, sometimes they have chickens. Um, I got a chicken last week for me, diced chicken breast, you get lamb chops, they get steaks…

(39-year-old single mother of two, food pantry member)

I'm a member of the local food pantry which is really good, so we pay them £3:50 on a Thursday and basically its underneath where we live so we go there for it, a lot of help and support as well, so.

(39-year-old, single mother, Food bank and pantry client)

Coming here really helps. Yeah, I come here, I think--I just come here to see everyone, I think. It does help; it does help - you get some good stuff!

(Mid 20s, married mother of three, food pantry member)

It's nice to have something like this food pantry cos; otherwise, I wouldn't cope. It's nice to come here and have a little natter with one another.

(Mid 50s, single female, food pantry member)

Theme 3: Food shortfalls

The third theme describes the disruption of normal eating patterns and the variation and extent of food shortages experienced by those in food poverty due to a lack of money. With less or little money to shop for food, usual food choices shifted to less healthier diets. More than half the people interviewed were severely food insecure and certainly most participants could recall current or past experiences of not eating for entire day/s due to money running out or sudden benefit stoppages. Generally, most ate less food than they should, a common strategy was to eat once a day or eat every other day. Some habitually went without food in the last few days before their next benefit payment was due. All mothers interviewed spoke about reducing or going without food in order to save it for their children.

It's just processed food all the time

Chronic reliance on cheap, low nutrition foods and a lack of fresh produce and meat were prevalent among participants. A common complaint by participants was they could not afford to buy healthy food, and so many shifted to buying more filling and low-priced foods. However, for some, this meant relying on the cheapest of foods available such as instant noodles and cheap microwavable food.

I'm in to eating, eating healthy! It's not like I don't want to, it's just that, I can't afford it! So, it's just like processed food all the time. You know, it's as simple as that, just processed food. Cans and stuff like that, you know what I mean?

(64-year-old unemployed single male, food pantry member)

Like beans on toast, simple stuff most people could afford, like student food, beans on toast, pot noodle coz by the time you paid the water, electric, TV there is hardly anything left out of £73.

(61-year-old unemployed single male, community centre volunteer)

I don't have a cooker. I've a microwave. I buy--I buy pound microwave meals. You can get them at Tesco's. And B&M.

(52-year-old single male, food pantry member)

It's just getting harder, in it? Harder to eat healthy, as well. You just buy the cheapest thing off the shelf, don't you? I just have to eat noodles all the time. I do… I have to…

(30-year-old single mother of one, food bank client)

Yeah, like a packet of noodles, tin of beans or I don't know- like a microwaveable burger, maybe. Just something…

(28-year-old single male, food bank client)

We don't eat throughout the day

As money became more constrained, regular portion sizes and meal-eating patterns shifted. Many participants could no longer afford to eat the traditional three meals a day that is customary in Britain. While some skipped meals or reduced portion sizes, others habitually limited the number of daily meals eaten, usually eating only once a day.

Having now come to the food pantry, I suddenly realise I've really skimmed, you know. So, um, I didn't realise that I made the portions really small. I just really noticed a difference since I came here (food pantry), about, just in terms of like enjoying food, you know, it was like "Ooh we can have this for lunch now" it's almost like we can eat this because there is enough food in the house, yeah… I must have psychologically just made everything last, and I'd normally only eat in the evening, but now, it's "we can eat this now" um, and food tastes better.

(Mid 30s, married female, recently joined a food pantry)

Um, well, normally what I've been doing is, eating one meal a day so um, that one meal consists of like one packet of noodles or maybe one tin of beans or just generally one meal a day, as long as I get one meal a day, then I'm happy with that. Um, sometimes, I might not eat on a certain day because I know I'll be hungry the day after if I've got work or something, so, I save it for then. Fortunately, I don't think humans have evolved to eat every day anyway. So, um, I'm pretty sure it'll be alright in the long term as long as… I get sorted out eventually!

(28-year-old single male, food bank client)

Some days we don't eat throughout the day, and then we just have tea (dinner). So, we basically go throughout the whole day without eating, and we will feel really, really crappy and really, really down. But then when it comes to tea time (dinner time) we'll make a big tea, and then we'll feel better, and a couple of hours later we'll go to bed, and then wake up the next morning.

(24-year-old male, with partner, food bank client)

Haven't got anything to eat

Several participants experienced regular periods of hunger or cyclical food deprivation as food and money ran out before their next benefit pay day. A few described going days without food following benefit sanctions. While others spoke about the side effects of not eating for extended periods of time like reduced energy, dizziness and fainting.

For the first couple of days, umm, say for five days, I can manage in the cupboard. You know, I'm ok. I didn't eat yesterday.

(52-year-old single male, food pantry client)

It seems to be you run out on a Sunday before you get paid on the Tuesday, so you haven't got anything to eat, so you are starving yourself Monday, Tuesday until you get your money, well like, starve yourself Sunday, Monday, I mean, like I've got like tea and coffee but not food, so I have to wait to Tuesday until your benefit comes through.

(61-year-old unemployed single male, community centre volunteer)

The other morning, I woke up and I'd no energy what's so ever um, that's because I hadn't eaten. So, I had a burger (microwaveable burger) and felt a lot better after I'd gone back to sleep. Cos, after you hadn't eaten in a while, then you eat your body just shuts off dun-it? You, you sleep and recover.

(28-year-old single male, food bank client)

I just didn't have nothing to eat. I didn't eat nothing, just drank water, drank water…5 days I was in a bit of a mess! I was shaking. My body was shaking cos, I have to have depression tablets, obviously, you've got to have food.

(Early 50s, single female, community centre visitor)

As a consequence of not being able to eat enough food, a couple of participants spoke of their weight loss. One gentleman, who had been coming to the food bank once a week for several months, made each three-day food parcel last the entire week. This had resulted in significant weight loss for him *"…well, I use to be fit, but I lost four stone in weight."* He demonstrated this, by unbuckling his belt and showing me the indented crease where he once notched it, which was several inches further out from his current belt position. One female participant, released from prison several weeks previously, spoke of her weight loss and struggles to secure enough to eat whilst waiting for her welfare benefits to start. Although initially given a small amount of money and a food bank voucher from her probation officer, she hasn't been able to secure enough food to eat.

Umm, got no food in, any money and I'm waiting for me benefits to be sorted out. It takes ages it's been about four weeks now… I've lost loads of weight since I got out…. Some days I ate nothing, like a couple of days, and then maybe I get one meal, something like that.

(41-year-old female, food bank client)

I'd rather get the kids fed than eat myself

All mothers interviewed in the study shielded their children from hunger by giving them more and better food than themselves. At times this meant severely restricting their own nutrition and intake to feed their children. To stave off hunger pangs, mothers described picking [small bits of food] off their children's plates, drinking hot tea and filling up on noodles or plain pasta. One mother described not eating for five days and as a result, fainted in front of her child. Below are examples of single mothers, going without or not eating properly in order to feed the children.

Um, I'm not really a fussy eater. So, I'll just eat whatever's sort of um, not getting eaten at the time or whatever at home, so! Um… occasionally--- say it's the day before my money is due and there's nothing in, I'd rather get the kids fed than eat myself. Cos, I know that I can hang on until the morning! There are times I'll just boil up um, you know, like a bowl full of… just pasta, um, what you call them tubes or swirls and just eat that, with butter on. You know, just to put something in my tummy! The kids are eating better than that! But I'm not really bothered what I eat! So, um..., yeah!

(45-year-old single mother of three, food bank client)

I'm thrifty me. I do--I do most of it- I do home things, from Asda's own. I won't pay the big prices. No- no big brands, none of that lot! Just meals the kids like. And I'll pick off what they're having.

(30-year-old, single mother of three, food bank client)

I'd got food in for the kids but… I didn't realise I wasn't eating! And um, and went upstairs, I didn't feel right, and I started being sick – it was just bile, and I just turned around and looked at me son, he's only 12 years old, and I said I don't feel right and I just hit the floor because I'd not eaten for five days.

(39-year-old single mother, of three, food bank client)

Theme 4: Emotional costs

Chronic, ongoing financial stress and hardship adversely impacted the emotional wellbeing of many participants. Feelings of embarrassment, humiliation and frustration along with anxiety and depression over their current dire financial situation and hardship were frequently described. For some, it had led to or had worsened existing mental health issues, however, and more seriously, for a couple of female participants faced with the prospect of eviction it had resulted in suicide ideation.

I'm embarrassed

The need to rely on others or outside agencies for help led to a deep sense of shame or embarrassment about receiving such support. For some, this was compounded by feelings of failure along with a belief they had let their families down.

Um, you feel a bit embarrassed really, you know, because it's not something you want to do, but you have to. Have to do it, and to me, I felt a little bit degraded you know, as well as I've let me, family, down.

(Mid 50s, single mother of two, food bank client)

This is the bottom line for me when I come to the food bank; I'm embarrassed by it… I'm embarrassed, yeah.

(49-year-old single male, food bank client)

I was grateful, um… but I did feel a bit embarrassed! You know it come to this, that I can't even buy food.

(39-year-old single mother of two, food pantry member)

I've been relying on me children basically. Um, I think it's pretty degrading, parents who rely on their children. Um, and I've been doing that for the last four years!

(52-year-old single male, food pantry member)

It's causing a lot of depression

Most participants described feeling stressed and worried about paying bills and debts and openly talked about suffering from anxiety and depression. Some had pre-existing mental health conditions; for others, the strain of their difficult financial circumstances had led to mental health problems. Several participants described their emotional state:

You get insomnia, you can't sleep, you worry about things, you make lists, and everything is planned out to the last detail. I'm on the middle dose of anti-depressants that I can be on; my doctor doesn't want to increase it.

(34-year-old single mother, of one disabled child, food bank client)

I was getting really anxious with um, cos, housing benefit had also screeched to a halt as well, you know when um when the tax credits had screeched to a halt. So, I had the housing benefit people sort of um, what's going on here, and started eviction proceedings and… yeah, it's not been a great deal of fun!

(45-year-old single mother of three, food bank client)

I do struggle, but I keep, try to keep my head above, but it's causing a lot of depression.

(49-year-old single male, food bank client)

It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul… you know, missing this to pay this, and all through the struggling, it brought on deep depression. I try to cope to keep the house going, but men are a bit weaker than women, aren't they? And he's, and he's bottled it up, bottled it up, bottled it up, and now he's exploded! Now he's on the sick with severe depression and anxiety.

(Mid 20s, married mother of three, food pantry member)

The constant stress and anxiety over their financial situation led one participant to cope by drinking alcohol to forget his problems. A 52-year-old single male visiting a food pantry explained:

The stress it's been given me a drink problem and really bad anxiety where I've been drinking a bottle of cider instead of having a meal. Its… you don't know how it makes me feel, it doesn't make me feel any better. So, I mean I'm trying to get out of it because I don't want a drink problem.

(52-year-old single male, food pantry member)

One female participant described the constant fear and worry of losing her disability benefit again after it was reinstated following a sanction, and how she dreads brown envelopes coming in the post in case she is called to attend a meeting at the benefit office.

I'm worried every day, every day, every time a brown envelope comes through my door…. I'm worried that, you know if… I'm worried about going to the meetings and stuff like that you know and appointments, stuff like that, in case they might do it again cos, who knows! So, you never really, never really relaxed about anything!

(Early 50s, single female, community centre visitor)

I'm quite miffed about it

Struggling and unable to make ends meet on the benefits they received some male participants expressed frustration and anger towards the Government.

The Government need a kick up the arses! That's what I think. I know there is only so much they can do, but to me, it just seems like they are bleeding every opportunity out every crack that they can bleed it from. Every stone, you've heard that expression 'can't get blood out of a stone', but they are they really are, so…

(52-year-old single male on ESA, food pantry member)

I'm on JSA, and it's just ridiculous you know I can't-can't get by on it, it's as simple as that!... I'm-I'm on a pittance!

(64-year-old unemployed single male, food pantry member)

I'm quite miffed about it or angry… It's definitely a social thing; it's definite problems with this Government. You know, I'm not like, I'm not being political one way or another, it's bad! It is bad! And I am-- you know, I don't want to get started on it but you know for your studies you need to know, this Government, this country as it is, is a disgrace!

(49-year-old single male, living in off-road van, food bank client)

I just didn't want to be around

For a couple of female participants, feelings of distress and helplessness over their dire financial situation resulted in suicidal thoughts and intent. A struggling single mother, with adult children living at home, explains how everything became too much for her to bear a few months back and tried to commit suicide after being threatened with eviction from her social landlord. Another participant, a single female, in her 50s, explains how she contemplated suicide after her benefits were stopped, a few months back. The worry of not being able to pay the bills and the possibility of eviction were compounded with the grief of losing her brother a few years ago.

Yeah. I got to the stage [whispers] I shouldn't say, but I took an overdose. I got behind on the rent, they were threatening to chuck me out - evict me, and I just didn't want to be around.

(55-year-old single mother, food bank client)

I felt like killing myself! Cos, I felt that down, what's gone on with my brother and then, them stopping me money and then all that and it just all got to me… and I just thought it's not worth carrying on.

(Mid 50s, single female, food pantry member)

4. Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences and coping practices of households and individuals experiencing food poverty in Greater Manchester, UK. The study found vulnerability to food poverty along with other material hardships was linked to inadequate levels of welfare support and benefit-related issues, on top of growing debt problems. Financially constrained participants described various coping strategies such as; juggling bills, employing resourceful shopping practices, purchasing discounted and cheaper food, eating fewer meals, seeking help from people they know and going to food banks and pantries. However, many simply ran out of food or money and regularly endured the discomfort and stress of hunger. Participants described eating less food than they should, and a common food rationing strategy was to eat one meal a day or in some instances one meal every two days. However, for some, it meant days without food between benefit payments, or following a sanction or waiting for benefits to be processed. Single mothers with young children, newly released prisoners and single middle-aged men, who were in poor mental health and struggling with dependency issues were disproportionately impacted and accessing food banks to survive.

Welfare reforms introduced in the 2010s led to changes in benefit entitlement levels, increased conditionality, penalties and changes to the application and processing of benefits [25]. These changes have resulted in reduced benefit and housing entitlements, imposed sanctions for those failing to adhere to Jobcentre rules, and extended benefit application processing times, which can often take several weeks [25,26]. Certain demographic groups have been identified as particularly vulnerable to the effects of these changes [27,28,29]. Notably, single mother families have been particularly affected by the benefit freezes and caps on welfare and housing entitlements. Data released by the Department for Work and Pensions and analysed by the Labour Party revealed that 85 percent of all households impacted by the benefit caps were single mother families [29]. Concurrently, stricter benefit conditionality and sanctions have disproportionately affected vulnerable individuals, primarily men with complex needs, as the requirements were often set beyond an individual's capabilities and skillset [28,30]. These reports may partly explain the disproportionate reliance on food banks observed among single mothers and single men with complex needs in this research.

Participants in this study described being suddenly thrown into financial crisis and hardship due to changes in their welfare entitlements, abrupt benefit sanctions, or delays in receiving their benefits. Others recounted ongoing struggles in trying to manage on the benefits they received given that it just didn't cover all their living costs. As a result, participants accrued debts, primarily from household bills and faced multiple material hardships, including challenges related to food, energy and housing. These findings raise questions about the processing and adequacy of welfare benefits as a modern-day social safety net intended to support and protect financially vulnerable populations. Furthermore, these findings underscore the escalating hardships that accumulate due to inadequate and insecure income, aligning with findings from other UK studies [31,32,33,34].

An important finding from this study is that multiple debts automatically deducted from benefits, often related to rent arrears and utilities such as water, exacerbated experiences of hardship and food poverty. These deductions were frequently made without the claimant's consent, leaving individuals highly vulnerable and often with insufficient funds to purchase food. As a result, participants were compelled to habitually use food banks for survival. This finding prompts a re-evaluation of policies governing automatic debt deductions from benefits, especially without assessing the claimant's financial capacity to bear these deductions. It may also help explain, in part, why the vast majority of individuals accessing food banks are severely food insecure and facing destitution [11]. Furthermore, these findings contribute to the body of UK research indicating that benefit-related problems, inadequate support levels and debt are primary factors driving food bank utilisation [32,35,36,37,38,39]. Food bank usage has been observed to increase significantly in areas with higher instances of sanctions [37]. Additionally, evidence from The Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank network, indicates that food bank use surged by over 30 percent in areas following the rollout of Universal Credit, attributed to the lengthy waiting period to receive it [40].

A common finding from this study was that constant financial worries and stress adversely impacted the mental and emotional wellbeing of participants. This finding aligns with previous North American studies that have found associations between insufficient financial resources, food poverty, and poor mental health, such as anxiety and depression [41,42,43,44]. For instance, in Knowles et al.'s [42] qualitative study in the United States, overdue bills, shut-off notices and rent arrears were associated with depression, anxiety and fear in food-insecure mothers. This pattern resonates with the experiences of the majority of participants in this study. However, for some individuals, the mere possibility of not meeting the stringent conditionality requirements for their benefits was a significant source of stress and anxiety. The fear of potential sanctions, reassessment, and mandatory meetings at the benefit office caused some claimants to live in constant dread of receiving the 'brown envelope,' as observed by Garthwaite [45] in her qualitative interviews with long-term sickness benefit recipients in North East England. More gravely, one female participant in this study contemplated suicide following the sanctioning of her benefits. Barr et al. [46] found that changes to welfare entitlement in the UK, particularly the reassessment of disability benefits, are linked to an increase in suicides and mental health problems.

This research identified various coping and food acquisition practices employed to secure an adequate supply of food which is aligned with other international studies examining how households navigate food poverty [47,48,49,50,51]. Strategies in this study encompassed cutting back on food expenditure, looking for bargains in the shops, buying discounted and cheaper foods, juggling bills, seeking help from family, friends or neighbours and going to food banks or pantries. While participants demonstrated resourcefulness in maximising monitory resources and leveraging social networks it is important to note that many faced ongoing challenges in obtaining sufficient and adequate food. Although food banks were heavily relied upon, their limited access rules left individuals facing food shortfalls between visits. Additionally, while food pantries were considered a better fit, there were challenges in accessing them due to their limited availability in the community or lengthy waiting lists to join.

This study revealed that participants adopt a spectrum of financial and food-based coping strategies, that become more extreme as food and financial security worsens which is consistent with the work of Maxwell [49] and Bartfeld and Collins [47] from North America. While some coping strategies, like buying discounted food marked with yellow stickers from supermarkets or going to food banks, were found to be protective against food and nutrition shortfalls as they extended food supplies, others were found to be less beneficial and potentially harmful. For instance, during periods of significant financial and food shortages such as waiting for benefits to be paid, coping strategies became less effective. This led to a reliance on the cheapest available foods, such as instant noodles, or engaging in extreme food rationing, including eating very little, going days without eating or resorting to skip diving for food from grocery store bins. Mothers would severely restrict their own food intake in order to save enough food for their children to eat. Eating less food than the body requires led participants to experience physical effects of hunger such as low energy levels and fainting, it also exposed them to increased risk of malnutrition and for a couple of participants unhealthy weight loss. While extending food supplies by skip diving prevented hunger it was a risky coping strategy that may have led to consuming unsafe food and illness. Extreme coping strategies that could potentially cause nutritional or food safety risks have also been reported by those who are severely food insecure in the US [48,50,52]. For example, Kempson et al. [48] identified a number of concerning food management practices utilised by families receiving food stamps in the US. These included eating spoiled or rancid food, diluting baby milk formula, gathering road kill to eat, consuming pet food and eating paper.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that the current social security benefit rates are inadequate in meeting basic living needs. Sudden and unanticipated benefit sanctions, long processing wait times to receive welfare assistance and multiple debt deductions taken directly out of benefits, are pushing vulnerable people into states of extreme poverty and food deprivation. While food banks serve as a temporary buffer against the worst effects of hunger and food poverty, they are designed for short term use and do not address ongoing food shortfalls caused by inadequate social security benefits.

4.1. Strengths and Limitations

This study has a number of strengths and potential limitations. A key strength of the study is that it captured a broad range of perspectives and experiences from food insecure householders in Greater Manchester. One limitation of the study, inherent to all qualitative studies because of the small, purposive sample sizes is that the findings are not considered generalisable to the wider, target population under study. However, qualitative studies are not designed "to generalise but rather to provide rich, contextualised understanding of some aspect of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases" [53]. In this study the coping and management strategies utilised by vulnerable households are described in detail alongside related issues and needs of those living in food poverty. However, the richness of the dataset may have been somewhat impacted by the short duration of some participant interviews, background noise in the venue and occasional interruptions, although the researcher made efforts to keep this to a minimum.

It is important to note that the data presented here were collected before the Covid-19 pandemic, potentially impacting the immediate relevance of some findings. Nonetheless, this data serves as a valuable benchmark for understanding shifts in UK household food security, before and after recent global events like the pandemic and the Ukraine war. While food security challenges may have intensified since the 2018 data collection, the findings from this research continue to be pertinent, offering essential insights on the lived experiences of food poverty.

Interviews were conducted at food banks, food pantries and community centres in three towns within the Greater Manchester area and participants were selected using purposeful sampling technique. Therefore, the findings from this study may not entirely reflect or be representative of household food poverty experiences across the UK, potentially further limiting the generalisability or transferability of the findings. Care was taken to ensure the study sample reflected as many different household types and groups as possible within the time constraints and resources of the research. However, not everyone who experiences food poverty seeks assistance and therefore some groups may not have been represented in the study sample, particularly the elderly, or those of ethnic minorities and various (non-Christian) religious groups. Many food banks are based out of Churches which may deter other religious (non-Christians) groups from seeking assistance in this way. Although, the perspectives from different population groups and other locales such as rural and city centre areas might have added additional insights to the research, the different backgrounds and accumulated perspectives and experiences of participants provided a rich source of information about the challenges and practices of those living in food poverty and experiencing hunger.

Qualitative interviews are "designed to have the informant produce statements which are both real or natural in relation to his or her life world, and useful or relevant in terms of the current research project" [54]. However, qualitative interview studies may be subject to social desirability bias, where the participant answers questions in a way they think you want them to respond rather than give an open, and truthful answer. It is often defined as "the tendency to give positive self-descriptions" [55] in order to make a good impression and avoid embarrassment or repercussions from revealing sensitive information [56,57]. To minimise social desirability bias and enhance the relevance and quality of data collected in this study, several strategies were employed. First, care was paid to how the researcher introduced herself and presented the study; second, participants were assured of confidentially and anonymity; third, before beginning the interview participants were told there were no right or wrong answers and encouraged to share their personal views and experiences; and fourth, the interview was conducted in an open conversational style. As most participants were forthcoming and candid in recounting their circumstances and behaviours and there was a spectrum of responses ranging from unfavourable to favourable behaviours, social desirability bias appeared to be minimal. However, it is possible that the food bank setting, along with rules limiting food bank usage to three visits in a six-month period, inhibited some participants to not always disclose truthfully how often they accessed the food bank out of fear of being refused a food parcel. Despite these limitations, the study generated new knowledge and insights into household food poverty experiences which informed future quantitative research using secondary data from a UK population survey.

5. Conclusions

Food poverty doesn't exist in isolation of other hardships, but is part of a continuum of daily hardships that are experienced by those in deep financial insecurity resulting in a precarious hand to mouth existence. Benefit-related issues, shortfalls in income and capacity to meet financial obligations resulted in multiple material hardships, growing household debts, and high levels of financial stress and anxiety. Many participants were smart shoppers, adept at cooking and had good awareness about healthy eating, they simply were unable to manage or make ends meet on the social security benefit payments they received. Food became a flexible expense, that was continually adjusted and readjusted as money became ever tighter. Consequentially many relied on low cost, nutritionally inadequate foods, ate less food than needed, and for some experienced regular or sporadic hunger by going days without food, putting them at high risk of malnourishment. Moreover, for many this was a long-term experience, that worsened over time especially when debt caught up and debt collections were enforced.

Policy recommendations: This study adds to the growing evidence and concern about the inadequacy of Britain's social security benefits for those living on them following reform of the welfare system after 2010. Uprating welfare benefits to reflect the actual cost of living, reducing new claimant wait times, abolishing the two-child cap and reviewing conditionality and sanction policies would help strengthen financial security and reduce hardship among those on benefits and struggling to get by.

Practice: Many participants struggled to obtain sufficient and adequate food even though different food acquisition practices were often piecemealed together, including smart shopping, and seeking help within their own social networks and going to food banks. Although, the number of food banks in the country continues to grow, food banks limited accessibility and standard limit of three food parcels per household in a six-month period helps but it nowhere near fills the food gap many householders face every day. Furthermore, regardless of the welcoming smiles and non-judgemental attitude of food bank volunteers, many felt humiliated by the experience which was only further intensified by the inability to choose their own food. While, food support offered by food pantries were found to be a better longer-term solution, as they offered weekly access, food choice and larger diversity of foods they were not as widespread as food banks. Increasing the number of local food pantries to support financial and food vulnerable householders has the potential to improve food access, and dietary intake and should be considered.

Further research recommendations: Further research may consider how to improve the capacity and delivery of food support in a more dignified way for those facing hardship. Findings from this study show debt collection and prevention practices worsened financial and food hardships. Further research on the impacts of debt collection and prevention practices on financial vulnerable groups is warranted to inform debt recovery policy and good practices and support.

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Statement of Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests.

List of Abbreviations

CCJs: County Court Judgements are court orders enforcing debt repayments.

ESA: Employment and Support Allowance is a social security benefit in the UK for working age adults who are having difficulty finding work because of a long-term medical condition or a disability.

JSA: Job seekers allowance is an unemployment benefit in the UK that can be claimed while looking for work.

UC: Universal Credit is a social security benefit in the UK, designed to support individuals of working age who are on a low income or out of work.

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