

The experience of people in receipt of fuel and food vouchers from a UK Foodbank: A qualitative study

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Aims: Food and fuel insecurity cause physiological and psychological harms and affect wellbeing. They can also lead to compromises to the quality of food eaten potentially affecting long-term health. The lower your income the more likely you are to be at risk of fuel and food poverty. Foodbanks often provide fuel vouchers to people who use their emergency food provision to top up their energy supplies. The aim of this study was to understand the personal lived experiences of people managing fuel and food poverty who were in receipt of a fuel voucher from a foodbank in the UK.

The lead author conducted an informal interview with a fuel voucher recipient to help us frame the research in a sensitive way. We received ethical approval for this study from X in March 2022 (ETH2122-1275) conducting the study from April to November 2022.

X Foodbank supplied fuel vouchers to approximately 100 people in winter 2021/2022 and we aimed to interview a small sample of key informants who had accessed this service. We applied qualitative methods, using semi-structured interviews encouraging people to share their experiences in an in-depth way within its real-life context. XX and XX interviewed a total of six people - three in person and three by telephone. All were women. The data was analysed thematically. Participants received a £10 shopping voucher and travel expenses as a recompense for their time. Participation and views remain anonymous to X Foodbank.

Four major themes:

1. Experience of being a user of the service - In all our interviews there was a sense of immense uncertainty, including how to access fuel vouchers.
2. Trade-offs between food and fuel - All our interviewees described the emotional toll of constant awareness and vigilance required to plan and make trade-offs between food and fuel on a daily basis
3. Shame - There was shock in needing to use a food bank and to get help with fuel which was interlaced with feelings of guilt as well as hesitancy about approaching the service
4. Missing out - There was much stoicism amongst all our participants but a feeling of missing out, past treats and opportunities for their children.

Conclusions: We give insight into often highly precarious circumstances of people in fuel and food insecurity with little control over their lives. We shed light on the multiple trade-offs made on a daily basis between fuel use and eating behaviours and the impact on wellbeing due to worry and constant planning. Highly uncertain household fuel and food environments have long term implications for health and inequity. The shame and sense of loss from missing out is keenly felt by those needing to access support for emergency fuel and food.

References

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