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Feeding Hungry Families: Food Banks in Schools in England

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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Feeding Hungry Families: Food Banks in Schools in England

Will Baker, Cathryn Knight and George Leckie

Abstract

This article investigates the number and distribution of food banks in schools in England. Drawing on a novel source of nationally representative data, we show that there are over 4,000 school-based food banks across the country. This important finding shows that there are now more food banks inside schools than outside of them. Our analysis, using responses from representative *Teacher Tapp* data (n= 8,665) also shows that whilst food banks are found in primary and secondary schools across the whole of England, they are disproportionately found in schools with high numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged children. We identify regional differences in the proportion of schools that run a food bank. The large numbers of school-based food banks suggest they are rapidly becoming a commonplace response to how schools support families. Our findings highlight the need for debate about the extent of child food insecurity in England and the development of effective policymaking with regard to charitable food aid in schools.

1. Introduction

After a decade of austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent cost-of-living crisis, schools in the UK are increasingly supplying food to families through their own food banks, pantries and food clubs (Baker 2022 and 2023; Baker and Bakopoulou 2023; Bradbury and Vince 2023, Bradbury et al. 202). The sheer scale of the challenge facing schools and families is hard to overstate. In the UK, 1 million children experienced destitution in 2022, and an estimated 3 million children live in food insecure households (The Food Foundation 2024; Fitzpatrick et al. 2023). Rising food insecurity, ‘deep poverty’, child poverty and the challenges facing working class families – particularly those who use food banks – has generated a huge amount of debate in recent years (The Daily Mail 2022; Chefs in Schools 2022; Goodwin 2023a; Fazackerley 2024; Walker 2023). At the same time, the growth of food banks within schools is beginning to receive attention from social scientists (Baker 2023; Bradbury and Vince 2023). However, key questions remain unanswered and the basic empirical picture is therefore unclear. For example, how many school-based food banks are there? Are they more likely to be in particular types of schools? How are they spread across the country? Having answers to such questions is crucial for researchers in this area. They are also necessary for developing effective policy relating to charitable food aid in schools and child food insecurity.

This article provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date assessment of the number and distribution of food banks in schools across England. In doing so, we provide an empirical finding

of particular social scientific and political significance: there are now *many more food banks located inside schools than outside of them in England*. The Trussell Trust operates 1,646 food banks across the UK, whilst the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) runs 1,172 (Pratt 2023). Using a novel source of nationally representative survey data, we show that approximately 21% of schools now operate a food bank; this equates to well over 4,000 school-based food banks. This shows the sheer scale of charitable food aid provision in England's schools.

Underneath this headline finding, we also reveal significant variation in where school food banks are located and the sorts of schools they are found in. Food banks are disproportionately located in schools with high numbers of students from low-income backgrounds but they are also found in more advantaged schools and regions. Our findings draw attention to three crucial issues. Firstly, they highlight the harsh realities facing food insecure families across the country. Secondly, they provide much needed evidence of just how far charitable food aid is becoming deeply embedded in one country's core social institutions - schools. Finally, they are indicative of the development of a new wave or 'maturation' of the UK's charitable food aid system. Although the focus of this article is on England, it connects to international debates about the development of food banking systems, child poverty, retreating welfare states, and how schools are called upon to support vulnerable families (Long et al. 2020; O'Connell and Brennan 2021; Pollard and Booth 2019; Riches 2018; Rosenthal and Newman 2018).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In this next section, we define what a food bank is, and we also evaluate the core reasons why charitable food aid has become such a widespread response to poverty and hunger and is now spreading into schools. This provides us with the analytical tools to think about the social, geographic, and economic patterning of food banks in schools. We then outline the methods and data underpinning our analysis. In this article, we draw on 2 waves of nationally representative data collected through Teacher Tapp – a survey app that collects data from thousands of teachers every day and is then weighted so that the sample reflects England's teaching workforce. We then present and discuss our findings. In conclusion, we reflect on how they can support more effective policymaking around food insecurity, how schools are increasingly providing 'crisis' services to families, and the demands placed on schools to solve problems not of their own making.

2. What is a food bank?

In the UK, food banks refer to charitable agencies or organisations that provide free food directly to families and individuals in need. In the United States this model of charitable food aid would more commonly be referred to as a food pantry whereas a food bank “...refers to warehouses and or centres that collect, store and redistribute food to charitable organisations which then pass on the food directly to beneficiaries” (Garthwaite: 2017: 12). The most well-known food bank operator in the UK is the Trussell Trust, and their food banks provide 3-day emergency food packages to those in receipt of a referral from a relevant organisation or professional (see www.trusselltrust.org). FareShare - a major UK charity that focuses on tackling both food waste and food insecurity – takes a different approach. FareShare focuses on the redistribution of surplus food to organisations and charities, including schools who then provide food to individuals (see www.fareshare.org.uk).

For the purposes of this article, we take food banks in schools to refer to when schools, in a planned and co-ordinated way, obtain and distribute food, free of charge to families. We also take this to refer to cases where the school runs a food bank explicitly for the children who attend the school, and the food is typically prepared and consumed at home. This distinguishes food banks from ‘breakfast clubs’ which provide food on-site (Lambie-Mumford and Sims 2018). This definition makes no reference to the frequency with which food is provided or where it is sourced from – it could be purchased by the school, donated by parents or provided by an organisation such as FareShare. This reflects an emerging body of evidence that suggests charitable food aid in schools, including food banks are quite heterogeneous in how they work (Baker 2023; Bradbury and Vince 2023). For example, Baker (2023) has shown that school-based food banks provide both emergency food provision and more frequent support. The food banks range in size from serving a small number of parents a week to dozens of families. They are stocked through small grants, staff or parental donations of both food and money (Baker, 2023).

3. Food bank Britain

The processes, policies and arguments used to explain the rise of food banks in general are also crucial for understanding the rise of charitable food aid in schools (e.g., Lambie-Mumford 2017; 2019). In the last 15 years the number of food banks in the UK has increased dramatically. Sosenko et al. (2022: 2) note that in 2010 the Trussell Trust operated “35 food bank centres” but by 2019/20 this had risen dramatically 1,400, with even more opening in the last few years. If we look at the geographic spread of food banks, they are now found in every corner of the UK. Increases in food

insecurity and poverty is also reflected in the number of food parcels distributed through the Trussell Trust's food bank network. In 2023, 3 million emergency food parcels were distributed, over a million of which were for children (Trussell Trust 2023). Overall, this is more than double the number of parcels distributed in 2017/18. Given the negative impact of food insecurity on children's educational and social outcomes, these trends are of particular concern (Aurino et al. 2019; Gallegos et al. 2021; Gooseman et al, 2020; Heflin et al. 2019; Heflin et al. 2020; Seabrook and Rutland 2023).

There is a broad consensus that the initial wave of food bank development resulted from the financial hardship created by the 2008 financial crash, the long period of government-imposed austerity that followed, and broader processes of welfare retrenchment introduced by many societies in the global north – which were embraced with particular enthusiasm in the UK (Loopstra et al. 2018a; Loopstra et al. 2016; Reeves and Loopstra 2020; Reeves et al. 2022; Riches 2018). Austerity during this period refers to the severe restrictions on public spending by the UK government which aimed to reduce the country's budget deficit (Farnsworth 2021). Limiting investment in many public services went hand-in-hand with welfare reforms which made the benefits system less generous and more punitive (Beck and Gwilym 2020; Lambie-Mumford 2017; Lambie-Mumford 2019). As Beck and Gwilym (2023: 544) argue, growing food bank use has stemmed from “declining social security and increased conditionality and benefit delay and denial”. By undermining the institutional architecture of the welfare state, food banks have emerged as “the safety net underneath the safety net” in an attempt to support growing numbers of people being pushed into destitution, poverty and food insecurity. Large scale research has demonstrated that this period of austerity in the UK had particularly negative consequences for working class families leading to increased food insecurity (Jenkins et al. 2021).

Reeves and Loopstra (2021) and others point to welfare reforms in general and the introduction of Universal Credit in particular, as central to understanding increasing demand for food banks (see also Loopstra et al. 2018b). Universal Credit was introduced in 2014 as the main benefit that can be accessed by working age adults on low incomes. A core feature of the expansion of Universal Credit is that it “expands welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions to incentivise people to improve their financial situation” (Reeves and Loopstra 2021: 790). Loopstra et al. (2018) have convincingly shown that food bank usage rises as benefit sanctions also increase. This undermines arguments that the growth in food banks usage is driven by the ‘supply’ of food rather than being ‘demand’ or needs led. Instead, it shows how “food banks have now become the safety-net for a residualised welfare state” (Beck and Gwilym 2023: 547).

More recent discussions of emergency food aid, poverty, and child food insecurity have identified the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis as further solidifying the development of the UK's food bank network (Bradbury et al. 2022; Goodwin 2022; Spring et al. 2022). Importantly, it has also been reported that food banks cannot obtain enough food to keep up with soaring demand (Goodwin 2023b). This surge in demand partly reflects a rebound in child poverty levels which have been rising since 2021, with 3 in 10 of all children living in poverty (JRF 2024). During this period there has been the biggest fall in living standards in 70 years and an increase in the number of children living in “deep poverty” (ibid). Perhaps unsurprisingly, charitable food aid work is spatially patterned in ways that reflect the unequal economic geography of the UK – food banks are disproportionately located in areas of high deprivation, unemployment and child poverty (Lambie-Mumford and Green 2017).

4. When food banks come to school

These broader social, political and economic processes also help to explain the development of charitable food aid within England's education system. An emerging body of scholarship is documenting how significant numbers of schools, nurseries and educational settings are now operating their own food banks or something very similar (Baker 2023; Baker and Bakopoulou 2022; Bradbury et al 2022; Bradbury and Vince 2024). These studies suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent cost-of-living crisis are key drivers of school-based charitable food aid work. They also complement a broader body of research on how families with school aged children navigate food insecurity in “hard times” (Lalli 2023; O'Connell and Brannen 2021; O'Connell et al. 2019). Some evidence suggests that up to 20% of schools may now offer a food bank but there is uncertainty about this figure – which we discuss in more detail below (Kelloggs 2021). This represents a crucial development in charitable food aid provision in the UK that has thus far not received sufficient scholarly attention. It is also important to note that there are a range of food aid models developing within schools – not only food banks but also pantries and community shops.

According to Bradbury and Vince (2023), school staff are reporting that the UK's cost-of-living crisis – which saw extremely high levels of food inflation between 2021-2023 – have led them to prioritise their charitable food aid-work because growing numbers of pupils are turning up to school hungry. To give some sense of context, between January 2022 and January 2024 food prices in the UK rose by 25% (ONS 2024). This continues to put particular pressure on the finances of

households with children who spend proportionally more of their income on food compared to middle-class and other wealthier households. In support of the more general food banks literature, the long-term effects of austerity, low wages, and Universal Credit have been identified as key reasons why families are turning to schools for help (Baker 2023; Bradbury and Vince 2023)

What is further emphasised in this nascent scholarship is that school based charitable food aid also offers spill over benefits to parents, children and schools (Baker and Bakopoulou 2022). It is therefore partly a strategic response from schools to support marginalised families despite food banks often being labour intensive and costly for schools to run. Bradbury and Vince (2023: 19) suggest that a reported benefit of school food banks is the “development of closer and more communicative relationships with parents led to better provision for the children...and in turn to better provision for families in need”. Teachers in their study suggested that the food bank had a positive effect on child well-being, their learning and family functioning, because it reduced the acute stress parents experienced by being food insecure. Moreover, they also show how food banks become a pathway through which schools can build supportive relationships with parents and can signpost to other support services. This is consistent with Baker and Bakopoulou (2023) who have shown that charitable food aid helps educational settings engage in “organisational brokerage” where parents can be helped to access a wide range of support services (see Small 2009; Small and Gose 2021).

5. What do we need to know?

We know something about food banks in schools but far from enough. There are a range of issues and questions that this article takes up. In doing so we, expand the existing literature and provide a stronger empirical foundation for future research. Firstly, how many food banks in schools are there in England? A YouGov survey of 1,100 teachers commissioned by Kellogg’s in 2021 suggested that 18% operated a food bank; similarly, the UK’s National Governance Association’s School and Trust Annual Governance Survey estimated 22% of school runs one (Kellogg’s 2021; NGA 2023). However, there is significant uncertainty about the accuracy, reliability and representativeness of these estimates. For example, the NGA survey was a self-selecting sample of 2,695 trustees, governors and academy committee members. It’s therefore unclear if these studies provide an accurate assessment. Moreover, the data and analysis underpinning these studies has not been subject to sufficient scrutiny.

Secondly, there is a need to go beyond the headline figure and to look at the social and geographic variability of food banks in schools in addition to improving estimates of the overall number. Where are food banks in schools located, for example? Child poverty and food insecurity levels differ significantly across the country. For example, it is much higher in the North West of England compared to the east of the country. London is a driving force in the UK's economy but also has the neighbourhoods with some of the highest levels of child poverty in the country (JRF 2024). *If* the presence of food banks reflects the level of economic disadvantage at the school or area level, we would expect to see food banks concentrated in areas or schools that serve high income populations. This is crucial to establish because schools in such situations may have high levels of need but lack the financial means or the organisational capacity to support families access food.

Finally, it's important to know what types of school run food banks. In particular, whether food banks are concentrated in primary or secondary schools and if school size or governance type matters (e.g., local authority or multi-academy trust run schools). This is important because the challenges facing families, and how they can be best supported, differs substantially between primary and secondary school. Developing this more fine-grained picture is essential for developing effective and targeted policies around food insecurity and charitable food in schools. It is also a necessary for social scientific attempts to explain its development.

6. Methods and data

Our approach is descriptive – we believe that such descriptive work is of foundational importance for studying food banks in schools and for social scientific enquiry more generally (Savage 2024; Power 2023). We study the number and distribution of food banks in schools across England, using nationally representative data obtained from *Teacher Tap*' (<https://teachertapp.co.uk>). *Teacher Tapp* is a recently developed survey app that asks schoolteachers three questions a day with the goal of providing better information about teacher's views on issues connected to education, teaching, and their profession. The target population is all teachers in England, including those who work in private schools. *Teacher Tapp* state that around 9,000 teachers typically respond each day.

We focus on teacher responses to the survey question “Does your school currently run a food bank?”. This question was asked in May 2023 and again in November 2023. There are five response categories: (1) “Yes, we've had one since before the pandemic”, (2) “Yes, we started one during the pandemic”, (3) “Yes, we've started one in the past year or so”, (4) “No”, (5) “Not relevant /

cannot answer”. As our focus is the current prevalence of food banks, we combine the first three response categories into a single “Yes” category.

School characteristics

The data includes information on the characteristics of teachers’ schools. These include region, phase of schooling (primary or secondary), school type (e.g., local authority community school, multi-academy trust (MAT)), school size quartiles (which are phase specific), most recent Ofsted rating (‘Requires Improvement or Inadequate’, ‘Good’, ‘Outstanding’) and deprivation of school intake (quartiles of the percentage of free school meal (FSM) pupils). FSM quartiles are generated using a series of cut points. The three cut points for primary schools are 9.8%, 17.6% 29.9% of FSM pupils. The 3 cut points for secondary schools are 11.6%, 18.6%, 28.2% of FSM pupils.

Teacher characteristics

The data also includes information on the nature of teachers’ teaching as well as their personal characteristics. These include teaching role (classroom teacher, middle leader, senior leadership team, head teacher), subject specialism (e.g., KS1, or KS2 teacher, or secondary English, maths, science or teacher), length of time in profession (< 5 years, 5-10 years, 10-20 years, 20+ years), age (20s, 30s, 40s, 50+), gender (male, female), and age of their youngest child (no children at home, <5, 5-11, 11-16, 16+).

Survey weights

A major advantage of the *Teacher Tapp* data is that survey weights are provided which, when applied to the analyses, make the results nationally representative of all teachers in England. Specifically, the survey weights ensure that the sample matches the teacher workforce in England with respect to the distribution of teachers by region, phase of schooling, role, teacher age, and gender.

Sample selection

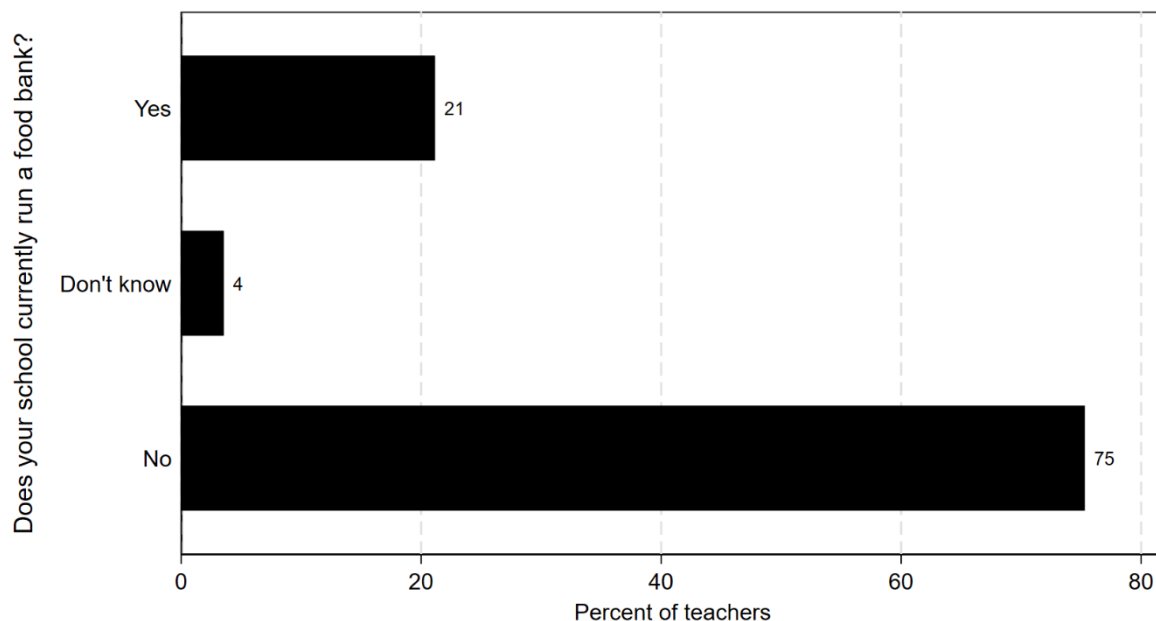
The initial sample consists of $N = 18,338$ responses across the two occasions, provided by 12,688 teachers, representing 6,428 schools. Only 45% of teachers responded to the question on both occasions: 33% only responded at occasion 1, 22% only responded at occasion 2. We therefore pool the data from both occasions, rather than analyse only the most recent one. We then make three selections to the initial sample. As with official *Teacher Tapp* analyses, we restrict the sample to those teachers for whom survey weights can be calculated. Essentially, those teachers who provide information on the five variables used to derive the survey weights ($N = 16,885$). We then

further restrict attention to those teachers working in mainstream, state schools in England and so exclude teachers working in special and independent schools (N = 14,666). Lastly, we use listwise deletion for the sample with respect to all remaining variables. The final sample consists of 12,262 responses across the two occasions, provided by 8,665 teachers and representing 4,833 schools.

7. Results

Figure 1 presents the distribution of teacher responses to the question ‘Does your school currently run a food bank?’ Twenty-one percent of teachers responded ‘Yes’ (N= 2, 548). 4 percent ‘Don’t know’ (N= 385) and 75 percent ‘No’ (N= 9, 328). This figure is broadly consistent with what existing evidence there is (Kelloggs 2021; NGA 2023). Disaggregating by occasion, the distribution of teacher responses increased by 0.6 percentage points from 20.5% to 21.1% over the six-month period (see Figure S1 in the Supplemental Materials).

Figure 1. Distribution of teacher responses to the question ‘Does your school currently run a food bank?’



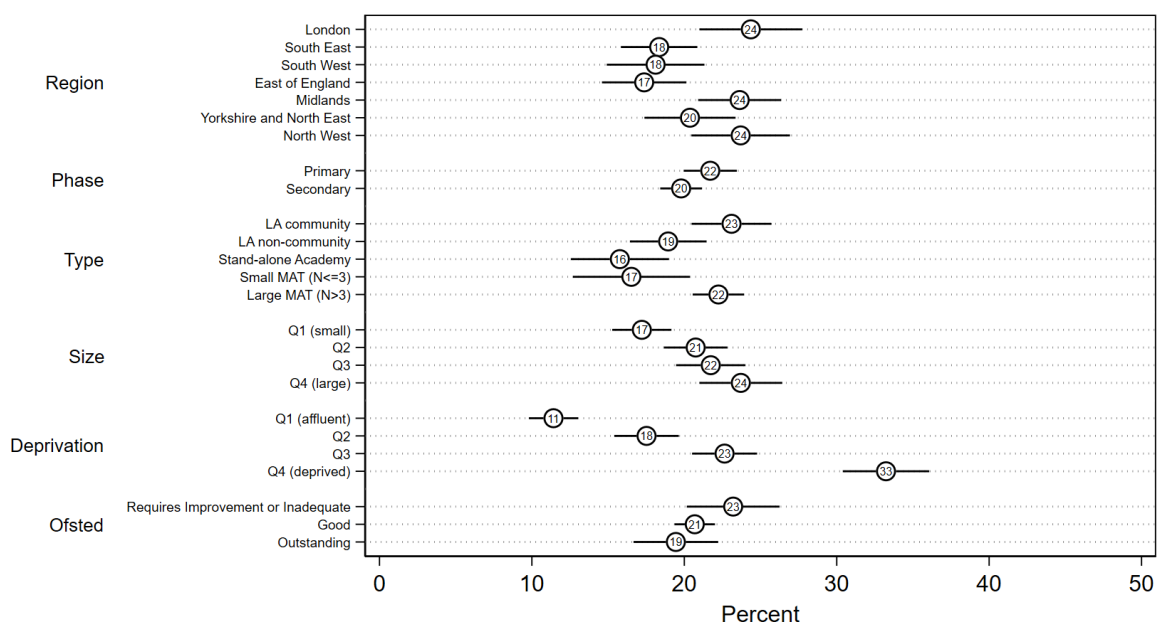
According to the Department for Education, there are 3,444 state funded secondary schools and 16,783 primary secondary schools (DfE 2023). This gives us a total of 20,227 schools in England. As the weighted calculation shows that 21% of schools now currently run a food bank, then we estimate that there are over 4,000 of them in England (the precise estimate is n= 4,248). This number would be higher if we counted those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – we have no reason to assume that the prevalence of school-based food banks is significantly different in these countries. This finding highlights the sheer scale of charitable food aid work happening in schools and is a crucial finding for policymakers, educators and researchers alike.

As we proposed at the start of the article, this provides the evidence to support a further important empirical claim: there are now *significantly more food banks located inside schools than outside of them in England*. We make this claim by comparing our findings with information provided by the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network. There are approximately 2,818 food banks operated by the Trussell Trust (N= 1,646) and the Independent Food Aid Network (N= 1,172) – the largest food banking organisations in the UK (Pratt 2023). Of course, they may operate at different scales, but our data provides a striking finding: there are now well over a thousand more food banks in schools than outside of them. The growth of school-based food banks has also not been adequately acknowledged in the important social policy-oriented literature on food banks.

Teacher response by school characteristics

Figure 2 presents the percentage of teachers who say their school runs a food bank by school characteristics. The percentages are presented with 95% confidence intervals calculated via logistic regressions specifying school cluster-robust standard errors (see Figure S2 in the Supplemental Materials for the distribution of teachers by school characteristic.) The percentage of food banks varies dramatically by region, from a low of around 17% to 18% in East of England, South East, and South West to a high of 24% in London, Midlands, and the North West.

Figure 2. Percentage of teachers who say their school runs a food bank with 95% confidence interval, by school characteristic.



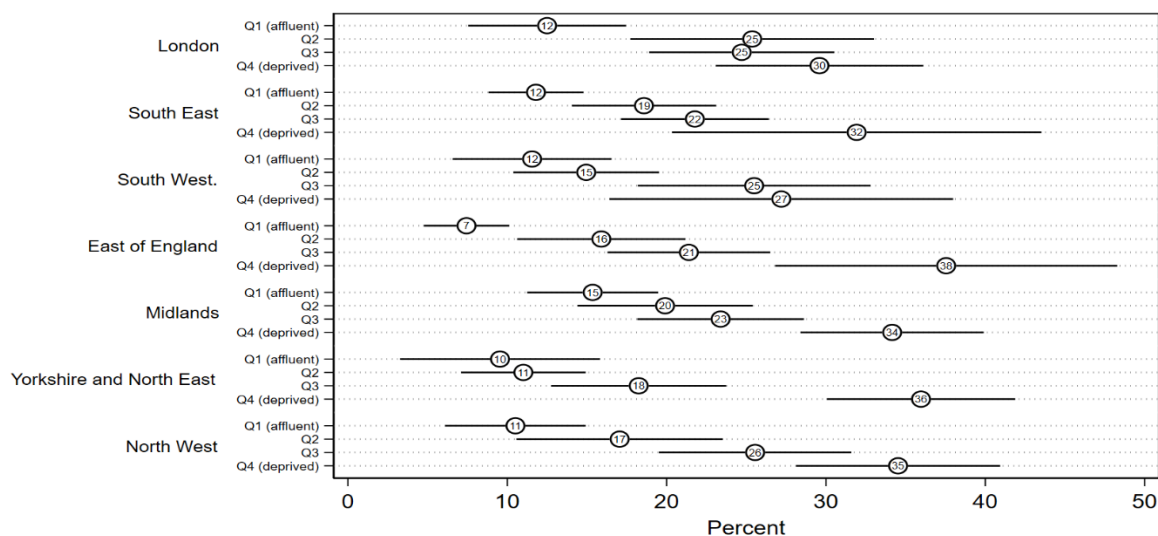
The percentage of food banks is slightly higher in primary schools at 22% than in secondary schools at 20%. By virtue of there being more primary schools than secondary schools in the UK,

it follows that in terms of the overall number of school-based food banks, the majority are located in primary schools. The percentage of food banks is higher in Local Authority (LA) community schools at 23% and large multi-academy (MATs) at 22% than in stand-alone academies at 16% and small MATs at 17%. The percentage of food banks increases with school size from a low of 17% amongst the smallest quarter of schools to a high of 24% amongst larger schools. The percentage of food banks increases with worsening Ofsted performance from a low of 19% among schools rated ‘Outstanding’, to a high of 23% among those rated as “Requires Improvement or Inadequate”. This may be because schools with high proportions of pupils from low-income backgrounds are more likely to be in school that “Requires Improvement” or is “Inadequate” (Thompson 2021)

The percentage of food banks increases very sharply with the deprivation of school-intake from a low of 11% among the quarter of schools serving the most affluent intakes, to a high of 33% among the quarter of schools serving the most deprived intakes. Although food banks in schools are disproportionately located in schools with large number of low income and working-class children, it is also noticeable that even among the quarter of schools serving the most affluent intakes, 1 in 10 teachers are reporting their school as running a food bank. Therefore, rather than being a small-scale development located only in highly economically deprived schools, our data suggests that food banks in schools are a mass phenomenon found in all areas of the country and are embedded in all types of state funded schools.

An important finding is also the variability in the prevalence of school-based food banks between regions in England. This may reflect underlying rates of child poverty and food insecurity. Evidence clearly shows that poverty rates are higher in London, the West Midlands, Yorkshire and the North East and the North West when compared to the South-East, South West and East of England (JRF 2024). One plausible interpretation, therefore, is that the prevalence of food banks in schools reflects underlying need and food insecurity – in contrast to some more sceptical arguments that that charitable food aid reflects the ‘supply’ rather than underlying need. Figure 3 presents the percentage of teachers reporting that their school runs a food bank, by each combination of region and deprivation. We show this because the previous figures show these two characteristics to be most important.

Figure 3. Percentage of teachers saying their school runs a food bank with 95% confidence interval, by region and deprivation.

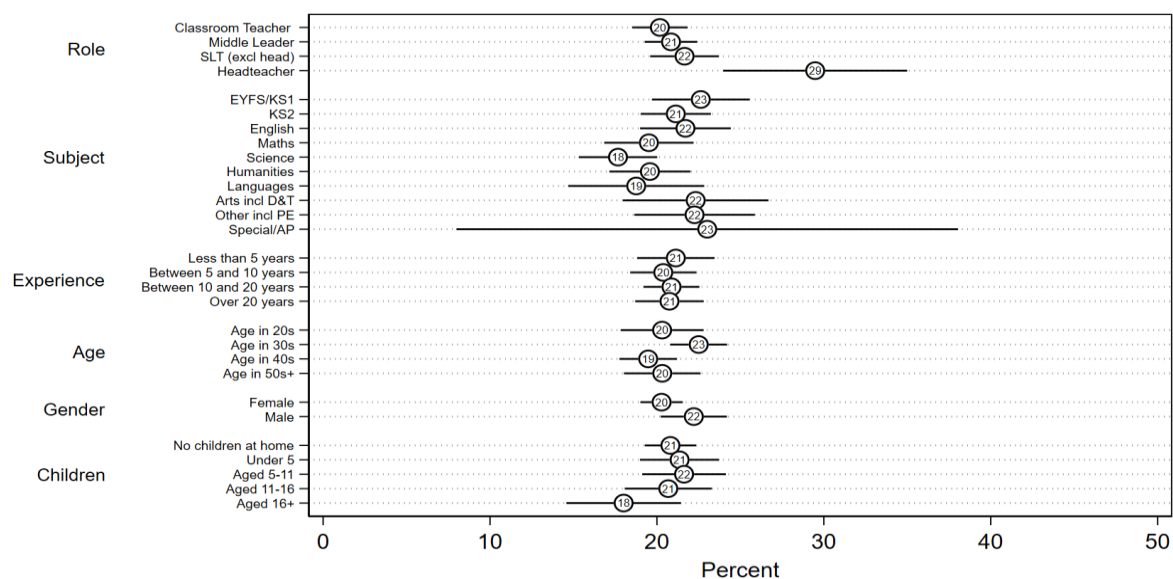


As one would expect, within each region, the percentage of food banks increases dramatically as we move from less to more deprived school intakes. However, the nature of this income gradient differs notably across the regions. For example, while only 12% of teachers working in London schools judged to be in the least deprived quarter of schools nationally report running a food bank, this percentage raises to a very high 25% for the second quarter of schools. This is a stark result given that all schools, even in this second quarter, are still judged less deprived than the average school in the country. The percentage for the third quarter of schools remains at 25% before rising to an even higher 30% for those schools in the fourth and most deprived quarter. The East of England presents a different picture. The percentage of teachers reporting food banks running in schools in East of England ranges from a low of 7% teachers in schools judged to be in the least deprived quarter of schools nationally, to a high of 38% in schools judged to be in the most deprived quarter of schools nationally. Thus, while across all regions, teachers in East of England report the lowest percentage of food banks (Figure 2), they also report the greatest change in the percentage of food banks as schools move through the distribution of school intake deprivation.

Teacher response by teacher characteristics

Figure 4 presents the percentage of teachers reporting that their school runs a food bank, by teacher characteristic (see Figure S4 in the Supplemental Materials for the distribution of teachers by teacher characteristic).

Figure 4. Percentage of teachers saying their school runs a food bank presented with 95% confidence interval, by teacher characteristic.



These results are less dramatic than those reported by school characteristic but they nevertheless help extend the existing evidence base. A notable finding is teacher role where we see that 29% of headteachers report that their school runs a food bank compared to 20-22% among teachers of all other roles. Given that headteachers are presumably best informed as to whether their school truly runs a food bank, then the actual percentage of schools running food banks may in fact be even higher than the headline figure of 21% suggested by our analysis in Figure 1.

8. Conclusions

In this article we have presented evidence on the number and distribution of food banks and schools in England. To reiterate a core finding which we take to be a major social scientific, social, and political significance: there are now *more food banks located inside schools than outside of them in England*. This suggests schools are increasingly having to provide ‘crisis’ services to families to support their well-being and children’s ability to succeed in school (Baker 2023). This also speaks to the UK’s on-going crisis of child poverty and how schools are having to compensate for an increasingly limited and fractured welfare state.

The *Teacher Tapp* data underpinning this article helps provide the best available empirical overview of food banks in school across England. We therefore make a crucial contribution to the emerging research literature of charitable food aid in schools and the studies examining the interconnection between food, education, poverty and inequality (Baker 2023, Bradbury and Vince 2021, Bradbury and Vince 2022). Existing research has been hampered by the absence of quantitative data on the scale and scope of charitable food aid in schools – this article helps strengthen the empirical

foundations for research in this area. Given that charitable food aid in schools appears increasingly central to how schools support families, there is a strong case for local authorities and the Department for Education to collect comprehensive data relating to this development and provide further financial support to schools. Of course, there are limitations in what our data can show. For example, there is a need to look at the geographic spread of food banks in schools beyond very broad regions. Developing a more fine-grained account of where food banks in schools are located is essential for future research (e.g., towns or cities, rural or urban and so on)

The fact that so many schools now offer a food bank raises the possibility that they have already become thoroughly normalised and institutionalised within schools in England. By normalised we mean that they are becoming accepted by teachers, parents, schools and society at large as a way of responding to poverty, hunger and food insecurity (Beck and Gwilym 2023). This may be part of a broader shift in the “moral economy of welfare” where it is seen an appropriate and perhaps even desirable for charities and schools to provide food to families rather than it being understood as a primary duty of the state (Koch 2021). By institutionalised, we mean many schools are dedicating time, resources and organisational bandwidth to providing food aid, and emergency services, to children in an increasingly formalised way. This is part of the broader trend of school’s becoming the “fourth emergency service” because of the range of complex and crisis services they often have to provide in children’s basic needs are to be met and they are in a position to learn (Adams 2019).

We suggest that this represents a new phase or ‘wave’ in the development of charitable food aid within the UK. It’s therefore important to focus attention on this development in the charitable food aid landscape. The social policy orientated literature, has focused heavily on the archetypal example of the Trussell Trust food bank (e.g., Garthwaite 2017; Lambie-Mumford 2017 and 2019). Whilst this literature has been of foundational importance, the spread of food banks into schools suggest a need to broaden the empirical and theoretical focus of scholarship in this area. Education researchers are ideally placed to contribute to this endeavour.

Our findings connect to a broader set of issues, four of which are particularly important. Firstly, there is very little awareness of the growth of foodbanks in schools by policymakers. This is clearly an important development that is having an impact on schools and the families they serve. However, there is currently an absence of policy debate, guidance or policymaking relating to charitable food aid in schools. As Bradbury and Vince (2023: 53) have recently noted:

There should be greater acknowledgement of the role of schools in providing food and other essential goods for families. This might be through a reformed inspection system, but also more widely recognised in policy.

As it stands, there is a policy-vacuum around charitable food aid in schools in England and across the UK. This is despite the significant attention that has been given in recent years to “holiday hunger” and introducing universal free school meals provision (Gooseman et al. 2020). Relatedly, there is little public or scholarly debate about if schools *should* be running food banks at the scale that they are. We hope that this article acts as a catalyst for such debates.

Secondly, given that so many schools are engaged in this type of work, it is surprising that there is little guidance, locally or nationally, that can identify ‘best-practice’ or help schools make effective decisions as they navigate their way through this complex terrain. As a consequence, schools are likely to be operating in isolation with little collective dialogue about how this work can be done most effectively. There is therefore a need for resources and toolkits to be developed that can support schools providing (or thinking about providing) charitable aid to families. This should not only be practically helpful but also gives due weight to questions of justice and the legal obligations of states to ensure that citizens “Right to Food” is not being violated. Thirdly, and as Bradbury and Vince (2023: 55) also note, if schools are judged and evaluated on how well they support vulnerable families and on the range of support services they offer, including charitable food aid, this could be acknowledged through a “reformed inspection system” that gives full recognition to how schools support low-income and working-class families. Finally, as far as we’re aware, teachers receive no systematic training or continuing professional development opportunities about food insecurity or organising charitable food aid through schools. Given that food insecurity and food banks in schools are seemingly ‘here to stay’, school staff would benefit from greater awareness and training around this critical new development in England’s education system.

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Supplemental materials

Figure S1. Distribution of teacher responses to the question: Does your school currently run a food bank? Results reported by occasion.

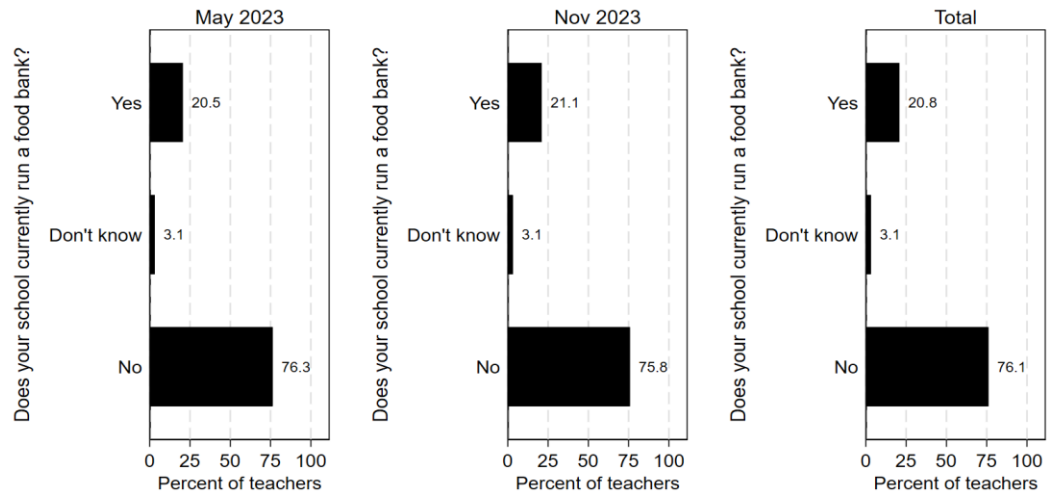


Figure S2. Distribution of teachers, by school characteristic.

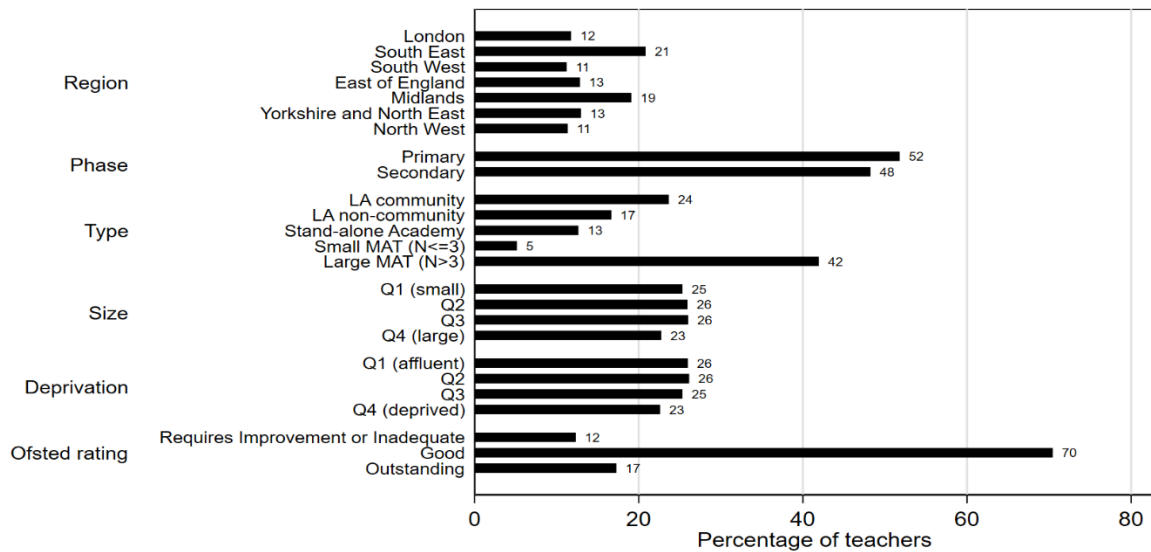


Figure S3. Distribution of teachers, by region and deprivation school characteristics.

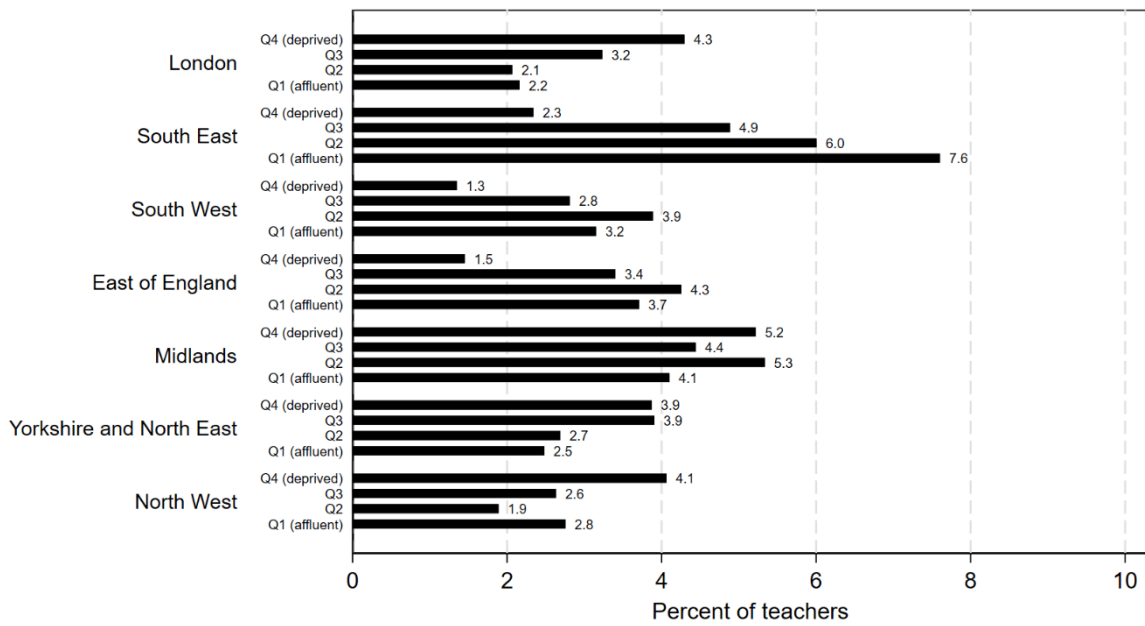


Figure S4. Distribution of teachers, by teacher characteristic.

