Austerity, sanctions and asylum: some asylum seekers’ diet comparable to pre-Welfare State conditions

We welcome the publication of this important and timely study highlighting the link between austerity, unemployment, sanctioning and food insecurity. We support unreservedly the authors’ call for effective measures of food insecurity and steps to tackle its root social and economic causes. We note the correlation of unemployment and welfare cuts with increased food bank usage, and would like to take this opportunity to share with the authors and BMJ readers the results of an as yet unpublished exploratory study we conducted which highlights the particular plight of asylum seekers. Our findings suggest that there may be a cohort in the UK for whom absolute poverty at pre-Welfare State levels, at least in dietary terms, is a daily reality.

Primary data for our study was collected using a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews, a questionnaire to capture demographic and lifestyle information and diet sheets. Our sample was comprised of seven British nationals living on state benefit as their primary income source (three of whom had used a food bank in the weeks prior to interview), six asylum seekers (five of whom used food banks or relied partly on gifts of food) and five European Union migrant temporary agency workers. While all the participants in our study were on a low income, even within our small sample there were marked differences in the nature and severity of hardship experienced, with the asylum seekers experiencing particular difficulty. Being legally unable to work and receiving no benefits, five of the six asylum seekers depended on informal social and financial support. Three were surviving on cash gifts from friends, religious organisations or refugee charities, as much as £15 if they were fortunate, sometimes just £5 a week. At times, nothing. Their diets consisted of low cost carbohydrates like baked beans, rice with chicken, bread and microwave chips. They would have liked to eat fruit and vegetables but were unable to afford them very often. Seldom would they eat more than one meal per day.

Various sources on the diet and health of working-class people in the late nineteenth century show that the diets of labourers, workhouse and prison inmates - known as ‘energy producing diets’ - were monotonous, starchy fare comprised mainly of carbohydrates, proteins and fats. Fruit and vegetables were limited; the priority was food that would provide sustained energy for physical labour, the ‘diet of toil’ reproduced today by some of our participants and an unknown number of others who have fallen through the safety net of the state, surviving hand-to-mouth.

The scale of this is very difficult to quantify, not least because of the challenge defining poverty and destitution. In their report "What is meant by poverty?", the Joseph Rowntree Foundation wrote: “when we talk about poverty in the UK today we rarely mean malnutrition or the levels of squalor of previous centuries, or even the hardships of the 1930s before the advent of the Welfare State”. Poverty is a relative concept, the report goes on to say, where ‘poor’ people are those whose standards of living are out of sync with “the majority of the population in one of the most affluent countries in the world”. However, our findings, which view poverty through a conceptual lens provided by that most basic of human needs - food - suggest that there may be a cohort in the UK who face a daily struggle to survive, living lives comparable to pre-Welfare State deprivation.

Add to the difficulties faced by asylum seekers the bleak picture painted by reports of harshly applied benefit sanctions, which we know from this study to have a significant effect on food insecurity, as well as the possibility that migrant workers...
operating in increasingly insecure labour markets\textsuperscript{8} may lose their safety net at any time.\textsuperscript{9} In this letter, therefore, we would like to add our voices to those of these authors, calling for research to explore more closely the intersectional impact of asylum, welfare, and labour market policies on the diet and health of some of the most vulnerable people in the UK.

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\textbf{Competing interests:} No competing interests

\begin{itemize}
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