



English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2023:29

**Food aid as a
joint voluntary effort**
A study of food bank
provision in Norway

Food aid as a joint voluntary effort

A study of food bank provision in Norway

This report presents the results of a study of food bank provision by non-profit organisations in Norway, shedding light on the following questions:

- How many and which actors are involved in providing food assistance?
- How is the food bank provision service organised and structured, and to what extent is it incorporated into a broad range of aid to disadvantaged groups?
- What are the characteristics of foodbank users, and how has the demand for food aid changed in recent years?
- Why do some people need food aid, and why do some people not necessarily contact the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) to have their basic needs met?
- What characterises the cooperation between the actors that provide food aid, and how is the interaction between the public service organisations and the foodbanks?

Several types of food assistance are available for the most vulnerable groups in society. This study is limited to the provision of food parcels (bags of groceries). The serving of ready-made meals is outside the scope of this report.

The study consists of three components: an online questionnaire sent to organisations involved in food provision, a survey of foodbank users, and a case study of foodbanks in eight municipalities. The data were collected in the period May–August 2023.

The questionnaire was emailed to 490 food providers, and 58 per cent responded. The report presents responses from the 199 organisations in the survey who distribute food regularly.

A total of 22 foodbanks helped us map the users of their service, and 971 users completed the registration form. This is not an exhaustive survey of all foodbank users but provides insight into the situation for a sample of users.

We conducted fieldwork at the foodbanks in the case study, interviewing employees and volunteers as well as some of the foodbank users. We also conducted interviews with staff in the relevant local authorities and NAV.

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The food assistance service

There are several hundred foodbanks located throughout Norway, the majority of which are in cities. The actors involved range from large, national non-profit organisations to local initiatives. Food aid is provided under the auspices of churches and voluntary centres. Many user organisations provide food aid for their users. Football foundations also provide food aid, often in connection with low threshold teams for people with substance abuse problems. A few public sector actors also provide food assistance for their users.

About half of the foodbanks apply certain criteria for accessing food.

The survey does not provide a basis for determining how many people use the food assistance service. The foodbank survey shows that 14,000 people collected food at one particular pick-up day in May 2023, with the largest foodbank serving 650 people that day and the smallest one serving just two.

Growing demand for food aid

Most of the foodbanks have observed a growing demand for food aid. Two-thirds have recorded an increase in demand in the last six months, and even more have been experiencing demand growth since before the pandemic.

Those providing food aid attribute the increased demand to inflation and rising costs. Half of the foodbanks in the survey state that the arrival of a high number of refugees in the municipality due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has impacted on the demand.

More than half of the foodbanks have observed a change in the characteristics of people receiving food aid in recent years. Many report that there are more families with children than before and more refugees. The rise in demand causes that foodbanks are struggling to meet the demand for food aid.

The food parcels

Matsentralen is a major player in the redistribution of surplus food. The majority of the foodbanks in the survey get food from there, but they also get food from several other sources.

The content of the food parcels handed out reflects the food donations received, many of which are from the food industry's surplus stock. The foodbanks generally have better access to unhealthy foods than to nutritious everyday foods. Having an infrastructure for storing and handling food means that a wider range of healthy foods can be supplied, but not all foodbanks have access to such infrastructure.

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Food aid as part of the support of disadvantaged groups

Those involved in food provision can often provide other forms of aid for disadvantaged groups in addition.

The uptake of additional assistance and activities among foodbank users varies. A large proportion only receive food aid, but for others the food aid is part of a broad range of activities.

With the growing demand for food aid, the proportion receiving solely food aid seems to also have increased.

Foodbanks as part of a collective voluntary effort

Far more volunteers than paid staff are involved in providing food aid.

The largest foodbanks have several dozen employees and/or volunteers, while the smallest ones are run by one or two enthusiasts.

Most of those who provide food aid collaborate with other groups in the local community. The growing demand for food assistance combined with the limited access to surplus food works as a driving force for cooperation and coordination.

Several foodbanks have close contact with their local authority. The nature of the cooperation between the foodbanks and the municipal services may suggest that both parties regard the foodbank as a supplement to the municipal service provision.

Who uses foodbanks?

There are many first-time users of foodbanks. Half received food aid for the first time in the first half of 2023, while one in five have been receiving food aid for more than two years. There are many new food bank users from Ukraine, but also many with a Norwegian background who received food aid for the first time this year or last year. It is worth noting that just over half of the foodbank users live with children.

We cannot assess the representativeness of those who participated in the survey, but the characteristics of the group align well with groups at high risk of poverty.

- The unemployed are heavily overrepresented.
- Three out of four have a non-Norwegian background. Forty per cent of those registered have a background from Ukraine.
- Two out of three receive welfare benefit.
- Half are single, and 14 per cent are single parents.
- Two out of three rent their home, and 15 per cent are homeless.

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Although most people receiving food aid are not in employment, 14 per cent were in work at the time of the survey, and three out of ten have worked within the last five years.

The importance of food aid

Those collecting food parcels experience varying levels of food insecurity. Some do not have enough to eat, some cannot afford a nutritious diet, and some must cut back on their food budget to have money for other things.

There are several reasons why not everyone receiving food aid also seeks (additional) assistance from NAV. Some want to be independent and manage on the income or benefits they receive. Some have savings for emergencies or assets they fear they will be told they have to spend before they can receive financial assistance. Some do not want to be registered in the benefits system or to have to document their finances. Some have previously sought assistance and been informed that they do not qualify for financial assistance.

Many receive various benefits and support from NAV, and the foodbanks are a supplement to this. The food queues likely include people who do not qualify for (additional) financial assistance as per the rules for the welfare state's schemes and benefits. However, we cannot overlook the possibility that some of those receiving food assistance may be entitled to additional assistance from NAV, and that the threshold for seeking help may be perceived as too high.

What do the food queues tell us?

Although this study does not represent all those in the food queue, there is no doubt that food queues are a manifestation of poverty in Norway. Many of the foodbank users who were surveyed share the characteristics of groups at a high risk of poverty. With working people and couples with children now using foodbanks, there is reason to be alert to the possibility that a new type of poverty is now emerging. Ideally, the trend will reverse as inflation falls, pressure in the housing market eases and the influx of refugees diminishes. However, the situation may be more entrenched than that.

In conclusion, the report highlights two challenges for the welfare state as elucidated in the study: one is the risk that food queues undermine the trust in public welfare policies, not only among the disadvantaged but also in the general population. The other is that some recipients of public benefits have very low incomes over long periods, and some of them are living in persistent poverty. It is particularly concerning that children are growing up in families that depend on foodbanks to make ends meet.

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