

# "Would you like food or a voucher?" Exploring the impact of choice in a food bank setting

## A randomised controlled trial in Brent, NW London

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### The objective

To determine if providing a choice between standard food parcels and supermarket payment cards of equivalent monetary value reduces food insecurity more effectively than food parcels alone.

Main study questions:

- When people referred to a food bank are given a choice between receiving standard food parcels or supermarket payment cards of equivalent value, what do they choose?
- Does providing food bank users with a choice to receive either standard food parcels or supermarket payment cards reduce food insecurity after six weeks, compared with users who are given no choice?



### The intervention

The trial compared the traditional parcel model against a choice-based model designed to restore agency to the recipient:

**Control:** Weekly food parcels containing standardised dry goods and surplus fresh food.

**Intervention:** A choice between the standard parcel or a supermarket payment card (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, etc.) with a value matched to the retail cost of a parcel (£40–£105/week depending on household size).

### Study setting & methodology

- **Location:** Sufra food bank, Brent (North West London). Brent has higher than average economic inactivity and unemployment, 65% of its population from minoritised ethnic groups and the highest percentage of residents born outside the UK in England & Wales (56%).
- **Population:** 203 households (96 control, 107 intervention). 58% had children; 55% had physical or mental health conditions.
- **Design:** A randomised controlled trial (RCT) with questionnaire follow-up at 3 and 6 weeks.
- **Timeframe:** September 2024 – July 2025.

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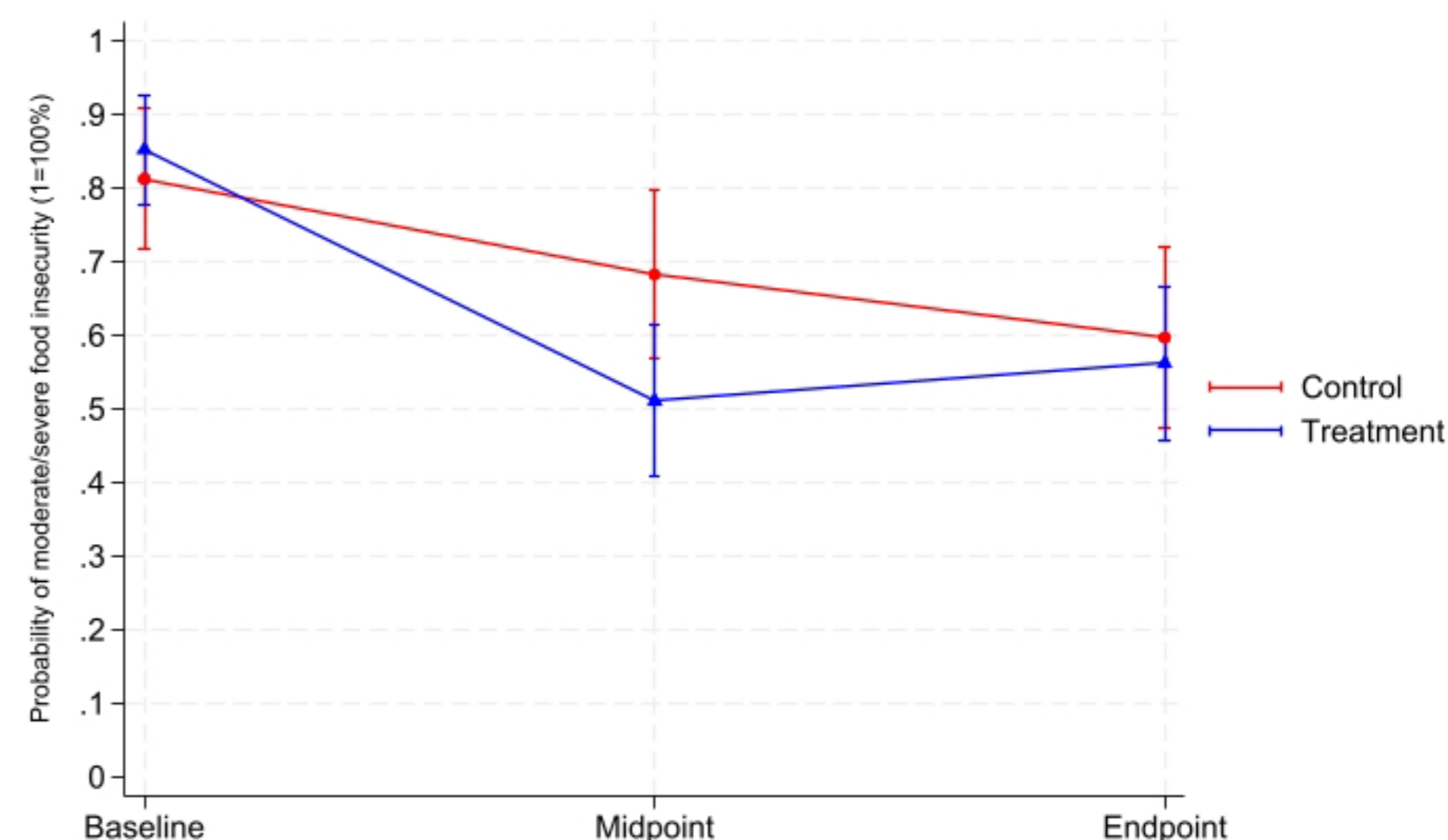


### Key findings

The trial demonstrated a clear, overwhelming preference for supermarket cards over traditional food parcels.

Outcome measure	Intervention effect
Participant Choice	98.1% of those offered a choice picked the card.
Food Insecurity	The intervention group had a significantly lower level of food insecurity at the midpoint of the trial (3 weeks) compared to control. By the end of the trial, both control and treatment groups had an equivalent reduction of about 22 percentage points compared to baseline.
Dietary quality (eating vegetables on 3+ days/week)	+18 percentage points in the intervention group (vs control group).
Agency (eating preferred foods)	+16 percentage points in the intervention (vs control group).

#### Food insecurity by treatment at baseline, midpoint and endpoint of trial.



### Scientific & policy implications

- The trial provides robust evidence that supermarket cards are as effective as parcels in reducing immediate food insecurity and may have more positive effects on healthy eating and food agency.
- Qualitative findings revealed that choice is overwhelmingly preferred because compared to food parcels, payment cards help people meet their individual food and non-food needs - where to shop, when to shop, how much to spend and what to buy.
- Despite the benefits of supermarket payment cards, 60% of all households across both groups were experiencing food insecurity at the end of the study. This highlights the need for initiatives that address the underlying causes of food insecurity, namely, low and insecure incomes.