

One and a half million poor in Britain going without gas and electricity

Chris Marsden
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Gas and electricity companies last year forced between one and one and a half million of Britain's poorest people to "self-disconnect" their energy supplies, because they could not afford to feed the prepayment meter.

The Consumers' Association report into fuel poverty, "Final Demand: ending fuel poverty", found that more than one and a half million people a year are going without gas and electricity because of the inflexible attitude of the energy companies towards people who struggle to pay their bills.

The number of people unable to pay their gas bills almost doubled last year, as gas companies cut off nearly 30,000 homes. More serious still is the one million electricity and 500,000 gas consumers with prepayment meters who cannot afford to feed them and are reduced to self-disconnecting their energy supply.

Prepayment meters are the most expensive way to pay for energy; with meter rates on average about 7 percent higher than paying bills by cash, cheque or direct debit through the bank. Swalec in South Wales charges meter users £34 more a year than a monthly direct debit customer. Most companies have a policy of forcing those in debt to switch to a metered supply, deliberately penalising the poor. Only Scottish Hydro does not charge customers more for using prepayment meters.

In the first three months of this year, 24,000 warrants were obtained to install prepayment meters or cut off supplies, with companies forcing their way into more than 5,000 homes. The Consumer Association dubbed this "Sheriff of Nottingham" tactics.

Cold homes are blamed for more than 30,000 deaths each winter, according to official statistics. The elderly account for 20,000 of these deaths. The causes include increased susceptibility to influenza and other viruses,

as well as hypothermia.

Another group placed in danger are the children of single parents. The environmentalist organisation Friends of the Earth says the government is "fiddling the figures" and downplaying the extent of the fuel poverty problem. It estimates that some 50,000 people die every year in the UK because they cannot afford to pay their heating bills, the worst figure in Europe.

One in five British household—7 million people—live in fuel poverty, defined as paying 10 percent or more of their income on energy to keep warm. The situation is worse amongst pensioners. The charity Help the Aged estimate that one in three single pensioners is in severe fuel poverty, spending 20 percent of their income on trying to keep warm.

The Labour government promised to tackle the problem, but has done little, aside from set up a task force. A scheme set up this year by Help the Aged and British Gas sets out to provide home insulation and a telephone hotline for those in difficulty.



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