

New survey shows widespread deprivation in Britain

Harvey Thompson
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A national survey carried out by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has revealed important information on the extent of social deprivation in Britain. The study, produced by researchers at four universities (Bristol, Loughborough, York and Heriot-Watt) and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, claims to be the most comprehensive and rigorous of its type ever conducted.

Interviews with a sample of individuals taken from the General Household Survey (GHS) for 1998-99 were used to draw up a list of items and activities that a majority considered "necessities". These were defined as those things that everyone should be "able to afford and which they should not have to go without." A follow-up survey was then conducted, weighted towards those with lower incomes, to find out how many actually lacked these necessities and to accumulate additional information on poverty.

Over 90 percent of the people questioned defined necessities as a bed, heating, a damp-free home, the ability to visit family and friends in hospital, two meals a day and medical prescriptions. Less than 10 percent considered dishwashers, mobile phones, and Internet access or satellite television to be necessities. The method used by the researchers enabled them to compare their findings with results from two earlier "Breadline Britain" surveys.

The study produced some damning statistics:

- * Some four million do not eat adequately by today's standards, i.e. they cannot afford to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, or two meals a day.

- * Around 9.5 million people cannot afford to keep their homes adequately heated, free from damp or in a decent state of decoration.

- * Some eight million people cannot afford one or more essential household item such as a refrigerator or

carpets for the living area of their homes.

- * Approximately 10 million adults cannot afford regular savings of £10 a month.

- * Almost 6.5 million adults go without essential clothing due to lack of money.

- * Nearly 7.5 million people are too poor to engage in social activities considered necessary, such as visiting friends and family, attending weddings and funerals or having celebrations on special occasions.

The impact of such deprivation on children was also laid bare by the study. It found that more than two million children go without two or more necessities and around four million (or 34 percent) lack at least one essential item, including such things as adequate clothing, a healthy diet, items to help their educational development, an annual week's holiday away from home or social activities.

As many as one in 50 children go without new, properly-fitting shoes, a warm waterproof coat and daily fresh fruit and vegetables. Child poverty was highest in homes where no adult had any work at all or worked part-time; lone parent households; large families; households where someone was chronically sick or disabled and in families with ethnic-minority backgrounds.

Commenting on the findings, Jonathan Bradshaw of the University of York, co-author of the study, said: "Britain now stands at a cross-roads in terms of adopting effective measures to stop and reverse the damaging structural trends that have increased poverty and social exclusion in the past 20 years. High rates of social deprivation have the effects of worsening health, education and job skills, as well as relationships in families, between ethnic groups and across society as a whole. If Britain is to become an inclusive society in which everybody has a stake and is able to participate

then the most important task facing government is the ending of poverty and social exclusion.”

And Sue Middleton, part of the team at Loughborough University that analysed the data on children, said: “This evidence is vitally important at a time when government is seeking to abolish child poverty within a generation. Some British children are going without items which are widely accepted as being vital to the health and development of children.”

The sympathetic and expectant tone the researchers adopt towards the Blair government's pledge to end child poverty within 20 years, are belied by their own findings. Poverty has risen under the Labour government. In 1990, 21 percent of households officially lived in poverty, i.e. they could not afford three or more necessities. In 1999, two years after the election of Prime Minister Blair, poverty has increased to over 24 percent of all households.

Yet even after noting this increase, the researchers comment, “This dramatic rise in poverty occurred while the majority of the British population became richer. Poverty appears to have become more widespread but not to have deepened over the 1990s.”

Their claim that much of the British population is becoming richer is not consistent with other recent studies. A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development at the beginning of this year estimated that the majority of the British population have experienced poverty at some time over a six-year period. Before benefit payments are taken into account, 55 percent of the population of the UK fell below the poverty line at least once during that period, and even after considering benefit payments the figure is still nearly 40 percent.

The researchers point out that deprivation is more “widespread” but less “deep,” indicating that a greater portion of the population now find themselves on the margins of poverty. Large numbers now live a precarious economic existence, in which even basic needs are increasingly harder to come by.



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