

Britain: New report finds over five million live in absolute poverty

Robert Stevens
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A new report estimates that over five million people live in absolute poverty in Britain. The survey, *Breadline Europe: The Measurement of Poverty*, researched measurements of poverty across the continent and concluded that there were increasing drastic levels of poverty in the UK.

The survey took its definition of absolute poverty from a 1995 United Nations statement, defining it as "a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs." The UN statement defined anyone lacking three or more of the following items as living in absolute poverty: food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and access to social security benefits.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council funded the report. David Gordon, senior research fellow from the University of Bristol, who co-authored the study, said: "Absolute poverty is not supposed to exist in a country like Britain." He added that according to the definition agreed at the UN in 1995, 17 percent of the British population were living in absolute poverty.

The researchers asked 1,600 people who had taken part in the *General Household Survey* what they thought was socially and materially necessary in order to live properly. In the survey, nine percent of UK households reported that their income fell "a lot" below what was required each week to keep them out of absolute poverty. Another eight percent said that their income was "a little below" the necessary level. One of the most striking findings in the survey was that four percent said they or their partner had gone without food in the last year.

The report said that the highest rates of poverty in the UK were to be found among single parents. More than two fifths of single parents who had one child reported

that their income fell below the minimum of £163 a week they said they needed to live on.

A quarter of single pensioners surveyed said their income was below a minimum income of £106 they required in order to live decently. The authors of the report note that £106 is £20-30 higher than the basic state pension they received at present.

The survey found that poverty was not simply a phenomenon effecting single parents or pensioners, however. Families comprising two adults and one child stated that they required at least £205 a week to live on without falling into poverty; and of those families, 15 percent had less than this amount coming in each week. Over half of those families surveyed having two or more children reported they had less than the income they thought was necessary to live on.

According to the report, the percentage of single pensioner reporting absolute poverty was 24 percent; single adults 20 percent; a couple with two children 9 percent and a single parent with two children 54 percent.

The report indicates that the growth of social inequality, which accelerated under the Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997, has continued unabated under Labour.

The report's co-editor Peter Townsend, professor of International Social Policy at the London School of Economics, pointed out that the UK was becoming a "special case" among European countries, because it is shunning previous welfare state policies and modelling much of its social policy on the US. The report also surveyed countries in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, revealing a large-scale increase in poverty. In 1998, 60 percent of the Russian population lived in poverty and 25 percent were living in extreme poverty. The latter figured compared to 11 percent in 1992.

Breadline Europe: The Measurement of Poverty follows the results of other research issued over the past year that substantiate its findings of widespread poverty in the UK, particularly among children.

An international survey, published in February of this year, concluded that at 16.2 percent, the UK has the second highest child poverty rates in the European Union. The highest figure was Italy, where 19.5 percent of children live below the poverty line. The co-editor of the study, Koen Vleminckx, a sociologist at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, said of the findings, "Especially in the affluent economies of the industrialised world, there are no valid excuses that would prevent governments from achieving a low child poverty rate."

A direct country-by-country comparison found that the highest level of child poverty was in Russia, which had 23 percent said to be living in that state. Researchers reported that child nutrition in Russia was often very poor and comparable to parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The report also found that relative poverty rates for children in the USA stood at 20.3 percent, rising to 26.3 percent in New York.

In June 2000, a survey by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that child poverty in the UK is among the worst of any advanced nation. UNICEF ranked the UK twentieth out of 23 countries in their table of relative poverty, with higher levels of child poverty than Turkey and the eastern European states of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

The UNICEF table is based on the number of families with an income less than half the national average. It found that while child poverty had remained at a fairly stable level in other industrial nations over the last 20 years, it has tripled in the Britain.

UNICEF estimates say that between three and four million children live in British households effected by poverty. The UK fails on five key indicators of childhood poverty the report states: The childhood poverty rate is very high, the number of lone parent families suffering from poverty is also high, and the number of households with no wage earner is high, lastly, the number of people who suffer from low wages or have low benefits is also very high.

The Labour government tried to dismiss the UNICEF report by stating that it was based on "old" figures compiled in 1995. Moreover, it boasted that since

coming to office in 1997 it had developed an agenda to eradicate child poverty in the UK, which would be achieved in 20 years time! However, the UNICEF report warned that far from reducing deprivation, some of the government's social policies would lead to increases in child poverty in Britain: "Cuts in lone parent benefit and other changes will mean that one in six children in the poorest tenth of the population will see their household incomes fall."

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