

Scotland report exposes child poverty

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8 February 2002

Last month the Scottish branch of the National Children's Home charity (NCH) released the first of a series of reports that reveals the extent of poverty and deprivation in Scotland.

Compiled from official statistics, *Factfile Scotland* paints a damning picture of social inequality and its impact on tens of thousands of young people. At the end of an economic boom that has lasted since the mid-1990s, social divisions have become even more pronounced. While Britain has more millionaires than ever, levels of social redistribution of wealth are at a postwar low.

Co-funded by the devolved Scottish Executive, the report found that in Scotland 310,000 children up to the age of 16 live in households officially defined as poor (receiving less than half average income). This means that around 25 percent of children live in households that are reliant on Income Support, a benefit paid by central government to the most socially disadvantaged.

Those born poor are more likely to experience poverty, ill health, and drug and alcohol problems throughout their lives.

In addition, young people from poor backgrounds were found to be three times more likely than the national average to be injured in road traffic accidents and are far more likely to get in trouble with the police. Some 10,000 young people have at least one parent that has spent time in prison.

Educational attainments are also deeply affected by poverty, with poor students more likely to be excluded from school and less likely to go on to university.

Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, is singled out for the high levels of poverty concentrated within its boundaries. Some 42 percent of those under the age of 16 live in a household dependent on Income Support. Only 17 percent of those leaving Glasgow's state schools go on to higher education, compared with 50 percent from the affluent suburban area of East

Renfrewshire, just outside the city. In Glasgow itself, amidst malnutrition and within walking distance of slum housing, a prestigious new development of apartments in the gentrified Merchant City area offer luxury living for between one quarter and half a million pounds.

Thousands of the city's pupils are entitled to a free school meal—in many cases the only hot or vaguely nutritious meal they will eat in a day. Perhaps the most shocking figure is that 20 percent of all children attending the Yorkhill Sick Children's hospital in Glasgow have shown signs of malnutrition.

The Labour-led Scottish Executive has welcomed the report as a starting point that will allow them to tackle "social exclusion", but this caring rhetoric contrasts with Labour's record in office both in Scotland and Westminster.

The growth of social inequality, which accelerated under the Conservative governments from 1979-1997, has continued under Labour. These levels of deprivation are mirrored across the UK. It has been estimated that five million people in Britain suffer from "food poverty", unable to feed themselves with enough nourishing food to ensure good health.

In June 2000, a survey by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) reported that the level of child poverty in the UK is among the worst in the developed world. UNICEF placed the UK twentieth out of 23 countries in their table of relative poverty, and found that the number of families suffering from poverty had risen much more rapidly in Britain than in most other west European states.

Over the last quarter century the British ruling class has been among the most vigorous enforcers of welfare cuts and market liberalisation. Removing restrictions on the accumulation of capital far more quickly than other countries in the European Union, Britain has experienced social polarisation on a greater scale.

Programs redistributing wealth have been slashed in the interest of improving returns for businesses, with catastrophic results for millions of people, especially the most vulnerable groups in society.



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