

Britain: More than half all London children living in poverty

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A report published last month has exposed the deepening gulf between rich and poor in Britain's capital. Commissioned by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, the report revealed that a staggering 600,000 children in inner London live below the government's official poverty line.

Some 53 percent of children in London's core boroughs are suffering deprivation, making child poverty in inner London worse than in any other region of Britain. It compares with 37 percent in northeast England, the next highest area, and 22 percent in the eastern and southeastern regions.

The figures—based on analysis by the Greater London Authority of data collected by the government's Department of Work and Pensions—are the first to show how poverty is divided between inner London and the capital's relatively prosperous outer zone. Even so, in outer London 33 percent of children live in poverty.

Other sections of society are also particularly vulnerable to poverty. The report shows that 36 percent of the 400,000 pensioners in inner London live below the poverty line as well as 30 percent of the areas 1.8 million working age adults. These are the highest proportions in Britain.

Ethnic minority groups are also disproportionately affected, with 75 percent of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children in inner London and 55 percent of black children living in poverty after housing costs are taken into account.

Poverty is also feeding through into low educational standards and increased crime, whilst poor housing is contributing to a spread of tuberculosis, with notifications in London running three to eight times above those in other areas.

Data on household incomes at regional levels has only been published since 2000.

Income poverty is measured in two ways. The first is based on disposable household income after tax and National Insurance contributions, yielding a child poverty rate for the UK of 21 percent in 2000-2001. The second uses the same data, but also deducts housing costs from disposable income. On this basis the child poverty rate is 31 percent nationally.

The single most important factor for the unprecedented rate of child poverty in inner London appears to be the proportion of children living in households where nobody works. While employment is not a guarantee that households will not be in poverty—40 percent of poor children live in households where at least one person is working—the difference between the child poverty rates in London and the national average reflects the high percentage of children in the capital in workless households.

Inner London includes prosperous areas in parts of Kensington, Chelsea, Westminster and the City as well as the most deprived parts such as Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham, Southwark and Lambeth, where “unemployment is the rule, not the exception,” the report states.

“Virtually all the increase in full-time employment since 1992 has been in occupational groups where a university degree or equivalent is the prerequisite,” according to the study. Migration into London has been running at 150,000 people a year. “One implication is that London residents without the qualifications to command this type of employment may be left behind.”

The analysis supports a report published last year by the London Children's Rights Commissioner. That report found that in one London borough, Tower Hamlets, 74 percent of under-16s lived in households dependent on benefits.

While in the 1970s and '80s unemployment in

London was well below the national average, over the past 10 years the capital has had one of the worst unemployment rates in the country. Inner London has the highest unemployment rate any sub-region in Britain.

Martin Barnes of the Child Poverty Action group told the BBC that the government and local authorities must act on the findings, saying the gap between rich and poor in the capital was a chasm. “Today’s report reveals a London that many do not see or wish to ignore. Poor families and communities often live but a short walk from prosperous shops and businesses,” he said.

“Central government is best placed to tackle income poverty,” Barnes continued, “but nonetheless the Greater London Authority has been slow to give the problem of child poverty the attention and urgency it deserves.

“The fact that there are more references to pigeons than child poverty on the GLA’s web site is telling and damning.”

Livingstone is using the conditions of social deprivation in the capital to press forward with his regionalist policies. He has argued that inner London should be considered a region on its own, as it has a population of three million, equivalent to Wales or northeast England. He wants the capital to be able to keep a larger share of the revenues it generates, railing against a system of regional redistribution that enables government to shift resources from the south to decimated industrial areas of the north, for example.

In commissioning the report Livingstone wanted to prove that the capital had its own extreme problems. He has succeeded in doing so, but has also exposed his own divisive policies. Other telling statistics show that inner London also has the highest income per head in Europe. It also has the greatest number of millionaires, the most expensive properties, the most designer boutiques, and the most expensive restaurants in the entire continent.

In place of progressive demands for policies aimed at redistributing the staggering wealth that exists within the capital, however, including significant tax increases for big business and the rich, Livingstone pits workers in the south against those in the north in order to keep more wealth in the capital and therefore in his own coffers.



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