US and UK worst places in developed world to be a child

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The United States and Britain are the worst places in the major industrialised nations to be a child, according to a new report produced by Unicef. The organisation, which usually highlights the plight of child soldiers and children living in poverty in the so-called developing world, has turned the spotlight on 21 wealthy OECD countries. Its findings have exposed the appalling results of growing social inequality in both the UK and US. The report thoroughly refutes the claims of both governments to be reducing child poverty.

"It's a pretty bleak picture," said Professor Jonathan Bradshaw. Bradshaw, a leading social scientist at York University in the UK, compiled the report and was speaking at its launch.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the report is the high level of unhappiness reported in children living in the US and Britain. Bradshaw ascribed this to the "dog-eat-dog" attitude that prevails. "In a society which is very unequal, with high levels of poverty, it leads on to what children think about themselves and their lives. That's really what's at the heart of this," he said.

For the first time, this report has drawn the link between the widening levels of social inequality in the UK and US and the extremely high levels of risk-taking behaviour such as substance abuse and underage sex in both countries. Its statistical tables reveal a picture of misery worthy of Hogarth. Throughout its pages, the authors are at pains to point out that they are dealing with relative poverty, and that in comparison with the past, educational standards and living conditions have improved. But the statistics speak for themselves. The report is all the more horrifying for the measured tone that it takes.

The UK and US have the highest percentage of children living in relative poverty, which is defined as less than 50 percent of the national median. By this measure, more than 20 percent of American children and around 16 percent of British children are growing up in poverty.

How are we to explain these figures? Bradshaw pointed to two decades of neglect in the UK. Child poverty, he said, is twice the level it was in 1979. Experts called on to comment seemed astonished that the figures in Britain could be so high when the Labour government of Tony Blair, and particularly the Chancellor Gordon Brown, has made the reduction of child poverty such a flagship policy. Brown's Child Tax Credit scheme was supposed to lift children out of poverty. The report exposes such claims as a fraud. As Bradshaw says about the US and Britain, "What they have in common are very high levels of inequality.... They don't invest as much in children as continental European countries do."

The poverty the report exposes is the result of a massive shift in wealth to the richest members of society, partly, but by no means solely, due to the elimination of welfare programmes.

The UK and the US have levels of child poverty comparable to those in Spain, Italy and Portugal. These southern European countries came late to industrialisation and endured decades of fascist rule. This is not the case in the UK and the US. This is also reflected in the figures for Ireland. Ireland has had high levels of economic growth in the 1990s, and its economy has become known as the Celtic Tiger. But the results of that growth have been unevenly distributed. Child poverty in Ireland stands at 15 percent, among the highest in the OECD.

Nor is child poverty the result of unemployment. Fewer than 8 percent of UK children live in households without at least one working parent. In the US, the figure is even lower, with fewer than 2 percent of poor children having no working parent. The Unicef report reveals the true scale of the working poor in both these countries and the toll it is taking on the quality of young lives.

Britain and the US move up the scale when poverty is measured in terms of material possessions such as cars, televisions, computers, etc. More children in the UK and US live in families that have these consumer goods, but that still does not raise them from the bottom of the scale when the child's total well-being is measured. The actual deprivation experienced is perhaps better expressed in terms of the high proportion of 15-year-olds in both these countries who report fewer than 10 books in their homes.

When it comes to the health and safety of children, the US is down at the bottom of the league table, with the UK well below average. The US has one of the highest levels of death from accidents and injuries.

These figures were based on some of the most fundamental health indicators. They include the health of infants under one year old, immunisation rates from 12 to 23 months, and the number of accidents to children under the age of 19.

Both the UK and US are in the bottom third of the scale for infant mortality, which is one of the most widely accepted standards for social development internationally. Compared to other OECD countries, the UK and the US have extremely high rates of infant mortality.

Similarly, they have among the highest levels of low-birth-weight babies. A low birth weight is associated with an increased risk to life and health among infants and to impaired cognitive and physical development throughout childhood. It is also indicative of deprivation in the mother. The birth-weight figures for the US and UK point to two generations in poverty. These low birth weights chart the decline in living standards for the mass of population in these countries since the gains of welfare programmes began to be attacked.

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Despite its National Health Service, the UK has among the lowest rates of immunisation among OECD countries. Although immunisation rates in all OECD countries are higher than in developing countries, the standard must be high to ensure "herd immunity" from common childhood killer diseases. As the report points out there is also the danger that small differences in levels indicate a failure to "reach the unreached" and may suggest that children of marginalised groups are missing out on basic health services.

Children's educational well-being was assessed on the basis of average achievements in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and science literacy, the percentage of children remaining in education between the ages of 15 to 19, the percentage of 15- to 19-year-olds not in education, employment or training, and the percentage of this age group expected to find low-skilled employment. Scored on this basis, the US comes in below average and the UK well below average. France and Austria also do badly, while Poland, one of the poorest of the OECD countries, is the third highest.

It is when the figures are broken down into their component parts that the true extent of social inequality in the US and UK is revealed. They both rank among the lowest for the proportion of 15- to 19-year-olds in full-time or part-time education. These figures mean that a high proportion of children in the UK and the US are being excluded from all but the lowest-skilled and lowest-paid jobs.

Some of the most disturbing data in the report relates to the more qualitative areas of social life. When children were asked about the quality of their relations with their family and friends, the US and UK were at the bottom of the scale. The UK's score can barely fit on the same scale as the rest of the table. These cold statistics point to a truly terrible social situation and suggest that a remarkable number of children in the US and UK do not enjoy satisfying and supportive social relations, either in the family or outside of it.

Indicators used included the percentage of children living in single-parent families and step-parent families, the percentage of children who report eating the main meal of the day with parents more than once a week, the percentage of children who report parents spend time "just talking" to them, and the percentage of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds who report finding their peers "kind and helpful."

Eighty percent of the children studied were in fact living in two-parent families, so the results are not particularly related to the issue of marriage breakdown. The US and the UK have the highest proportion of children living in one-parent and step-parent families. But they have a relatively high percentage of children who report spending time "just talking" to their parents—no mean feat given the long working hours in both countries.

It is when children are asked about their relationships with their peers that a striking difference emerges. Fewer than half of the UK children questioned found their peers "kind and helpful." This result merely hints at the toll of misery suffered as a result of the bullying, conflict, rivalry and tension that these children encounter on a daily basis.

The psychological impact of the poor quality of social relations in the UK and the US is indicated by the health behaviour and high level of risk-taking among young people in both countries. Risk-taking was measured in terms of levels of obesity, substance abuse and sexual risk-taking. Again, the UK results could barely fit on the table, and the results for the US were not much better.

Health behaviour was measured by the percentage of children who eat breakfast, eat fruit daily, are physically active or are overweight. Risk-taking was measured by the percentage of 15-year-olds who smoke, have been drunk more than twice, use cannabis, are having sex, or use condoms, and the incidence of teenage pregnancy. The experience of violence was measured by the percentage of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds who reported being involved in a fight during the last 12 months and the percentage who reported being bullied in the last 2 months.

By these measures, children's health behaviours were worst in the US. The UK has one of the lowest proportions of children who eat fruit every day. The US has the highest proportion of overweight children, although it has one of the highest physical activity levels. It is, however, difficult to make much of this because the question asked of children was how many were "physically active for one hour or more in the previous/typical week."

What is beyond dispute is that the level of obesity in the US pushes the overall figure for poor health behaviours so far above average. In both countries, children's diet is dominated by the products of the major food manufacturers and fast food outlets. Simple activities such as walking or cycling to school have declined. Even organised physical activities cannot combat the unhealthy imbalance that has been created in these children's lives.

When it comes to risk behaviours such as excessive drinking, smoking, substance abuse and unprotected sex, children in the UK are in far greater danger than in any other OECD country. Almost one third of 15-year-olds in the UK reported that they have been drunk on more than one occasion. The figures for cannabis use are similar in both the UK and the US.

The figures for 15-year-olds who have sex vary from 15 to 28 percent. Most of these report using condoms, but both the US and the UK have extremely high levels of teenage pregnancy. The authors of the report comment:

"Teenage fertility levels may also serve as an indicator of an aspect of young people's lives that is otherwise hard to capture. To a young person with little sense of current well-being—unhappy and perhaps mistreated at home, miserable and under-achieving at school, and with only an unskilled and low-paid job to look forward to—having a baby to love and be loved by, with a small income from benefits and a home of her own, may seem a more attractive option than the alternatives."

When children are asked their own opinion of their well-being, the UK scores lowest. Children were asked how they rated their own health, whether they like their school, and where they would place themselves on a life-satisfaction scale. Whatever material factors go into producing this opinion, the report demonstrates that a high proportion of children in the UK and the US are unhappy. In both, a high proportion of children perceive their own health to be poor, and fewer of them thought of themselves as satisfied with their lives than their contemporaries in other countries.

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