

Sharp rise in British child poverty before recession's onset

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A report commissioned by the charity Save the Children documents a sharp rise in the number of children living in “severe poverty” between 2004 and 2008. According to the report by the New Policy Institute, “Measuring Severe Child Poverty in the UK,” more than 1.7 million British children were living in conditions of “severe poverty” and fully 4 million are living in poverty.

When the report is broken down into regions and the larger urban areas, a picture emerges of entrenched poverty. London, the centre of big finance, also “has the biggest proportion of children living in severe poverty, accounting for around one fifth of all children living in severe poverty in the UK—over 300,000 children.”

Severe poverty is defined as those families earning 50 percent below the average (median) income, after housing costs “where both adults and children lack at least one basic necessity, and either adults or children or both groups lack at least two basic necessities.”

The report states, “This means that families living in severe poverty make ends meet on less than £12,220 a year (for a couple with one child). That equates to less than £33 per day to cover all basic essentials such as food, utility bills and clothing. In addition, children and parents are missing out on the things that many families take for granted, such as celebrating a birthday or taking a week’s holiday away from home.”

The Labour government defines relative low-income poverty as less than 60 percent of contemporary household median income. Absolute low-income poverty is set at less than 60 percent of 1998/99 median household income. Following its election in 1997, the government made several pledges to cut and eventually “eradicate” child poverty. In 1999 it pledged to enact

policies that would halve child poverty by 2010, from the 1998/99 figure of 3.4 million, and end it altogether by 2020. Using its own definition of what constitutes poverty, the government today claims that 500,000 children have been lifted out of relative poverty.

Having failed to meet previous targets, Labour has continuously moved the goal posts for when it would finally reduce child poverty significantly. In its 2007 budget, the government set yet another target, stating that the measures enacted would lift a further 550,000 children out of poverty. Labour recently also committed itself to enacting a Child Poverty Bill, supposedly to ensure that reducing poverty among children would be a legal requirement.

After 12 years having overseen a massive increase in social inequality and all its attendant ills, it is clear that Labour’s commitment to eradicating child poverty was never anything other than an election sop.

The Save the Children report points to a situation in which measures to tackle child poverty have “slid into reverse.” The report calculates that 1.46 million children lived in “severe poverty” in 2004-05 and four years later the number had grown to 1.7 million. Save the Children said this “means that around two-fifths of all children living in poverty in the UK were living in severe poverty” in 2007-2008—an increase from 11 percent of all UK children in 2004/05 to 13 percent.

Generalised child poverty has increased at roughly the same rate as “severe poverty.” Save the Children note that “severe child poverty” was particularly high among those living in single-parent households and those children whose parents lived on welfare benefits. The report found:

- Half of children in poverty in single-parent households were living in severe poverty.
- Half of children in poverty who live in rented

accommodation were living in severe poverty.

- Half of children in poverty whose parents have no qualifications were living in severe poverty.

Detailing the extent of child poverty within these impoverished layers, the report found that some three-fifths (60 percent) of children in families where the adults were unemployed, and two-fifths (40 percent) of those in families where the adults were otherwise without work (i.e., claiming Incapacity Benefit or Income Support), were living in severe poverty.

Most of the children living in “severe poverty” lived in households where the adults did not work. More than 50 percent of all children living in severe poverty were families where no adults work and “half of all children in families claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance were living in severe poverty... Therefore, while the majority of children living in non-severe poverty are in working households, the majority of those living in severe poverty are in workless households.”

Among different ethnic groups, particularly those in Britain’s Bangladeshi, Pakistani, African and Caribbean communities, the incidence of poverty among children was even higher. The report states, “Around one-third of children in Bangladeshi or Pakistani households live in severe poverty, as do a similar proportion of children in black African households. Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black Caribbean and black African children are more likely to be living in severe poverty than in non-severe poverty.”

White British children make up the majority of children in severe poverty (over 70 percent), but Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black African children are around three times as likely to be living in severe poverty as white children.

These figures were compiled before the onset of the latest official recession, which at 18 months was officially the longest on record. The resulting increase in unemployment and of those families forced to live on meagre welfare payment will have greatly added to child poverty. “Severe poverty” is predicted by Save the Children to have increased by a further 100,000 children as a result of the recession. It states, “The recession has had a devastating effect on children in poverty—around 130,000 more children are in workless households today, and the number of households where all adults are working has fallen by around 250,000.”

Commenting on the report, Save the Children’s

director of UK programmes Fergus Drake said, “It’s shocking that at a time when the UK was experiencing unprecedented levels of wealth the number of children living in severe poverty—we’re talking about children going without a winter coat, a bed and other day-to-day essentials—actually increased.”

The report also points to the widening level of generalised poverty in the UK. The researchers found that as many as 65 percent of families earning less than £30,000 a year “will struggle to get by this winter” and that 55 percent of families earning £12,000 or less a year will have to turn to high interest lenders to get through the winter. The poorest families in Britain are on average around £113 a week short of what they need to cover the basics of what is needed to live—food, electricity and gas, phones, other bills, clothes, washing, transport and health care.

The most critical measure of the health of a society is the value it places on and resources it dedicates to the overall well-being of the next generation. That yet another generation of children are growing up today in impoverished families is an indictment of successive Conservative and Labour governments that have dedicated themselves to enriching the already very wealthy at the expense of the vast majority.



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