

UK: A quarter of Greater Manchester's population living in "extreme poverty"

Trevor Johnson
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The Greater Manchester Poverty Commission states that 600,000 people are in "extreme poverty" in the Greater Manchester region. The region is the largest urban conurbation in the north of the UK, with a population of nearly 2.7 million.

That poverty is so entrenched in a region covering two cities and eight towns is a devastating indictment of the cumulative effects of central and local government policies over the last three decades carried out by the three parties of big business, Labour, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

Extreme poverty was defined as those on an income of £12,000 or less, 46 percent of the region's median income of £26,000. Many of those living in the worst poverty were not unemployed, but rather were part of a growing army of working poor—either homeowners or families with children—often having to get by with only part-time work. The report makes clear that people have little or no control over whether they fall below the poverty line. The immediate cause is often the loss of income of a working member of the household.

Six of the local wards (electoral districts) in Greater Manchester are in the 60 most deprived wards in the UK. The Commission report includes low income levels, high unemployment, minimal chances of getting a job or entering education, and high crime levels, as measures of deprivation in a given area.

The report [PDF] adds that the number of people in extreme poverty could rise to 1.6 million if the economic crisis deepens further.

The Poverty Commission is made up of Kate Green, the Labour Party Member of Parliament for Stretford and Urmston in Greater Manchester, as well as other politicians, a former Trades Union Congress bureaucrat, academics, and heads of local businesses and police forces. It is led by Bishop of Manchester

Nigel McCulloch.

Having presented a detailed exposure of the poverty pervading Greater Manchester, the commissioners offer a list of minor palliatives to avoid examining why almost a quarter of the population is living in poverty in a major urban centre.

Green is an MP for a party that presided, whilst in government from 1997 to 2010, over an increase in inequality exceeding that of Victorian-era Britain. It was former Prime Minister Tony Blair's close adviser, Peter Mandelson, who said that the Labour Party was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich". In Green's own constituency, almost a quarter of children live in poverty.

The Commission accepts the inevitability of mass unemployment and poverty wages, merely calling for free public transport for the unemployed, a small increase in the minimum wage and better co-ordination of food banks (funded by charities) to deal with these conditions.

Even this was too much for big business, with the panel's recommendation to bring in a paltry "living wage" of £7.45 an hour subjected to immediate criticism from Brian Sloan, chief economist at the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, who described it as an inflationary measure.

The Commission panel warns of a poverty "time bomb" with major implications. Commenting on the report, Bishop McCulloch stated that the growing gap between rich and poor is a cause for grave concern. Their concern is fear of the development of a mass working class movement against poverty, and growing inequality on a much broader scale than the raw social anger of young people that erupted in the August 2011 inner city riots.

Far from the gap between rich and poor narrowing, it

is set to massively widen due to deepening of the Conservative/Liberal government's £155 billion austerity programme. In addition to the growing economic crisis leading to further job losses, there are to be major cuts in essential provisions such as housing benefit, while prices—especially for food, fuel and transport—are moving inexorably upward.

Poor families have been hit by winter temperatures and accompanying sharp increases in fuel prices. Based on the commission's findings, the report estimates that one in every five households is living in what is termed fuel poverty, spending at least 10 percent of their income just on keeping warm.

The level of unemployment in Greater Manchester is one of the highest in the UK, affecting more than 15 percent of the working age population. In Bury, Tameside, Trafford, Stockport, Wigan and Salford rates of unemployment have more than doubled between 2007 and 2012.

Just over 150,000 residents in Greater Manchester were in receipt of Incapacity Benefit or Employment Support Allowance in February 2012. This is 8.7 percent of the working age population, higher than the national average. In recent years, recipients of Incapacity Benefit have been hounded as a result of government policies to throw millions of people off benefits. With the introduction of Employment Support Allowance, all disabled people are subject to Work Capability Assessments. The aim is to try to prove that their disabilities are not sufficient to prevent them from working.

Attendance at breakfast clubs, which provide a basic breakfast for many in poverty, has increased from just over 4,000 in 2005 to nearly 7,000 in 2012. Church parishes around the region now distribute 242 food hampers a month, compared to 103 previously. David Atkinson, a manager at Salford Central Foodbank in Broughton, said demand had "snowballed" since its opening in November. He added: "Many families are choosing between heating, feeding their children and feeding themselves. They are choosing to feed their children and going hungry."

Evidence presented in the report shows that the majority of poor people take out "payday loans" at high rates of interest, and use them mainly to cover bills or to buy essential items such as food, nappies or fuel.

A warning is made in the report that Citizens Advice

Bureaus are being put under increasing strain, due to the many poor and over-stretched families seeking help with welfare, employment and housing problems.

Shortly after the Poverty Commission findings were published, a *Guardian* article reported the increasing numbers of people nationwide who, like some of those depicted in the novels of Charles Dickens, were resorting to stealing food to stave off hunger. The *Guardian* article, "'Stealing to eat' cases increase as austerity bites", reported that while shoplifting overall in Greater Manchester is declining, there are increasing numbers stealing groceries for personal consumption. Many of those involved are either the mothers of hungry children or pensioners.

The devastating picture outlined in the Poverty Commission report follows other surveys revealing that already entrenched poverty in the region has accelerated since the 2008 global financial crash.

An official report in January named the Falinge estate in Rochdale as the most deprived area in England for the fifth consecutive year. Official statistics based on data collected in 2009 revealed that among the 1,500 people living on the estate, 72 percent are unemployed and 80 percent of children are growing up in poverty. Some 71 percent are in low-income households and 7 percent of residents have never had a job. People living on the estate cannot expect to live beyond the age of 69, while those living just two miles away, in more affluent Norden and Banford, have a life expectancy that is ten years longer.



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