

Austerity forces British children into record levels of poverty

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10 June 2014

By 2020, an estimated 5 million children—one-third of all children in Britain—will be “sentenced to a lifetime of poverty,” according to new research from the Save the Children charity. An additional 1.4 million children will be forced into poverty during the next six years, according to the research.

This would mean levels of social misery unprecedented in modern British history.

Currently, 3.5 million children, one-in-four, live in households earning below 60 percent of median income, which is £357 a week after housing costs. Millions lack decent food, housing and clothing.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s austerity agenda is intensifying this trend. They are scaling back and destroying social services at a feverish rate, with a terrible effect on the young. This includes 23 percent cuts to social care and 19 percent to early years’ services.

Save the Children, working with economists, predict these cuts will push an extra 325,000 youths below the poverty line. The study, “A Fair Start for Every Child,” took existing Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) research and included the effects of welfare cuts.

Save the Children’s figures are based on the most conservative estimates of the level of spending cuts. Even without the effects of these attacks, “This could mean more than 150,000 more children living in a cold home, almost 90,000 more not getting enough fruit and vegetables, and another 23,000 young people a year in England not achieving good GCSEs [General Certificate of Secondary Education],” the report states.

The figures confirm a survey by the charity Oxfam, which found that welfare cuts have sunk 1.8 million families deeper into poverty.

This week, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission provided further evidence of growing

child poverty and said the stated goal of the previous Labour and current government to eliminate absolute child poverty by 2020 is “simply unattainable”.

The Commission’s research showed that in order to reach the goal, parental employment rates would have to reach almost 100 percent, which is “far beyond what has ever been achieved anywhere in the world”. Even if parental employment reached almost 100 percent, said the Commission, the absolute poverty target still could not be attained due to an overall fall in wages relative to inflation from 2010 to 2013. As a result, this will be the first decade since records began in 1961 that there has not been a fall in absolute child poverty.

Cuts to child tax credits and benefit sanctions have undermined a key safety net that millions depended on to offset declining real wages. Save the Children also warned that the under-four age bracket is the worst affected by austerity during this critical period of their development.

Budget cuts are hitting the poorest families hardest. Cuts to tax benefits alone will reduce the income of households in the lowest decile of the population by 6 percent. Overall, cuts to social spending will cost them 9 percent of income, more than double the effect on the richest households.

These attacks on children are part of a broader assault. Overall spending on social services and benefit payments has been reduced by £11,500 per person between 2007 and 2015. This includes a 1 percent cap on benefit payments.

Rising child poverty is not simply the product of welfare cuts but is rooted in the protracted stagnation of workers’ living standards.

Life for poor children is becoming ever harsher as they bear the brunt of the economic downturn. Half of low-income families have become worse off during this

period. Even without factoring in austerity, the number of children living in poverty is to increase by 1.2 million by 2020, according to research by the IFS.

“The face of poverty in the UK will be that of a child, usually within a working family,” Save the Children said. Two-thirds of poor children now live in working families, up 20 percent in a decade.

The charity reports that more than 30 percent of parents feel money worries have an impact on their families.

Many households struggle to pay for repairs and energy bills. Of those houses containing children, over one-third are in a state of disrepair. 1.6 million children suffer a lack proper heating, raising the risk of chronic illnesses such as asthma. 2.7 million children lack basic necessities such as healthy food or safe outdoor play space.

The charity warns of a “poverty premium.” Prices for necessities are rising faster than those of luxuries—as the poor suffer far more from a higher rate of inflation. Food costs rose 19 percent faster than other goods between 2007 and 2011, forcing many families, as many as 28 percent in London, to skip meals to keep costs down. Increasing numbers are forced to turn to food banks for help.

Childcare costs are soaring, becoming a massive drain on parents’ incomes. Nursery charges have risen 75 percent compared to a decade ago. Many parents struggle to afford new clothes when their children grow out of them. In poor areas, over 10 percent of parents can’t afford new shoes when their children need them, the study found.

Since it was founded nearly a century ago, Save the Children has primarily worked in so-called developing countries. However, in 2012 it was obliged to conduct its first UK-based appeal.

“Unless there is a dramatic change of course we’re at risk of writing off the future of millions of British children,” said Save the Children head Justin Forsyth. “The UK remains one of the most unfair countries in the developed world—the lottery of birth still determines millions of children’s chances in life,” he said.

He added, “Our political class is sleepwalking towards the highest levels of child poverty since records began while promising to eradicate it completely.”

The charity does not address the fact that the root

cause of child poverty is the failure of the capitalist system and the result of specific policies pursued by the political representatives of the super-rich. In reality, all the major parties are committed to implementing devastating austerity measures. The coalition used March’s budget announcement to make clear their determination to continue enforcing their £150 billion austerity programme.

Neither can the Labour opposition claim to defend the interests of children. Although official child poverty statistics improved during the early years of their previous government, they plateaued after 2004 and, in some cases, reversed. Today, they are fully committed to imposing austerity should they regain office.

These parties unconditionally defend the interests of a tiny layer of oligarchs that dominate all aspects of social life in Britain and internationally.

They responded to the 2008 financial crash by transferring billions of pounds from the public purse to bail out the banks. To pay for this unprecedented transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, the ruling class are determined to destroy all the welfare state measures won by the working class as the fruit of decades of political struggles.

This is producing an unprecedented growth of social inequality as the ruling oligarchy enriches itself by impoverishing millions of families. Britain now has more billionaires per capita than any other country. Their wealth rose by more than one-fifth during the past year.

Britain has the sixth-largest GDP in the world, yet millions of children lack the basic necessities of life. This is a profound indictment of the British state and the capitalist system as a whole. Only the socialist reorganisation of society can ensure young people are protected from a lifetime of poverty.



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