

Millions in Britain cannot afford to eat properly

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Official figures published by the UK governments' Family Food report show that millions of the poorest people are struggling to eat enough food to maintain their body weight and are facing malnourishment.

The Family Food report, published by the government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), found that 6.4 million people consumed just 1,997 calories a day in the year 2013. It is advised that people should aim to eat at least 2,080 calories to maintain a healthy diet.

The report was based on an annual survey of 6,000 UK households. It found that the average number of calories consumed by the population as a whole was five percent higher than required. However, this was not the case for the poorest 10 percent of the population (6.4 million people), a damning statistic the report did not highlight.

Chris Goodall, an expert on energy who initially discovered the figures while investigating human use of food resources, commented, "The data shocked me. What it shows is for the first time since the Second World War, if you are poor you cannot afford to eat sufficient calories."

He pointed to the growing gap between the rich and the poor. In 2001-02 there was very little difference between the calories consumed by the rich and the poor, including the richest 10 percent, eating approximately four percent more calories than the poorest. By the year 2013 that figure had surged to 15 percent.

The report showed that in 2013, the poorest members of British society spent 22 percent more on food than in 2007, and purchased 6.7 percent less. For low income families, after housing, fuel and power costs, food is still the largest item of expenditure—accounting for 16.5 percent of income in 2013.

The report highlights the fact that, according to the government's own recommended "eatwell plate" proportions, the types of food that make up a well-balanced diet are not being eaten by households in many income categories. But it is the poorest households that are the most affected.

It is accepted by academics that calorie intake is difficult to measure. However, the evidence and emerging datasets shows that many people are struggling to eat properly.

Liz Dowler, professor of food and social policy at Warwick University, stated, "there are substantial numbers of people who are going hungry and eating a miserable diet."

Dowler highlighted that one of the problems with poor diets, when people are struggling to consume enough calories, is the turn to consuming high energy food, such as chips which have a low nutritional value. She said, "You can stave off hunger by just having some relatively cheap calories but if you live like that day after day your health will suffer significantly."

"At the extreme, [malnourishment] is a cliff edge, but mostly it's not. It's a slow, miserable grind of bodily impoverishment, where you're gradually depleting your body's stores and your strength is way below what it should be. Your skin is very pale, you are exhausted all the time, you feel very low, often extremely depressed and you find it difficult to work."

The effect of poor diet on children often leads to them struggling to concentrate at school, suffering with endless coughs and colds and constantly getting sick. It is estimated that there are more than a half-million children in the UK living in families that are unable to provide a minimally acceptable diet. People living on low incomes are constantly having to trade down on the cost of food, having to eat a cheaper and often less

nutritious diet and eventually having to eat less food overall.

These figures are reflected in the massive increase in the numbers of people using food banks. According to figures published by the Trussell Trust, the biggest food bank charity in the UK, more than 900,000 people were given emergency food parcels, an increase of 163 percent in the last year. In total, 913,138 people received three days of emergency food from 400 Trussell Trust food banks in 2013-14, compared with 346,992 in 2012-13. This enormous leap in demand has coincided with an increase in those seeking help following a welfare payment “sanction.”

Trussell Trust Chairman Chris Mould said the figures were “shocking in 21st century Britain. ... Perhaps most worrying of all, this figure is just the tip of the iceberg of UK food poverty. It doesn’t include those helped by other emergency food providers, those living in towns where there is no food bank, people who are too ashamed to seek help or the large number of people who are only just coping by eating less and buying cheap food.”

The poorest are using food banks as an absolute last resort. The authors of a report commissioned by DEFRA on food poverty stated, “There is no evidence to support the claim that increased food aid provision is driving demand. All available evidence, both in the UK and internationally, points in the opposite direction.

“Put simply, there is more need and informal food aid providers are trying to help.”

Underpinning food poverty are cuts to the social security system made since April 2013 and the use of a draconian system of sanctions against benefit claimants. Those in work have seen their wages decrease in real terms, while basic staple food items have increased in cost.

The Family Food report was substantiated by a report published by cereal maker Kellogg’s, revealing that four in 10 teachers are seeing children as young as five turning up for class every day without having eaten for 12 hours. This is up from three in ten in just the space of a year. The report, based on a survey of 900 teachers in England and Wales, found that the situation was worst in the Yorkshire and Humber region. According to the survey, 47 percent of teachers in the region were resorting to feeding their students out of their own pockets.

Millions in the UK and internationally are facing the terrible consequences of the escalating growth of wealth at one pole of society and the growth of poverty at the other. In May 2014, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that the richest one percent of Britons owned the same amount of wealth as 54 percent of the population. Last year’s *Sunday Times* “Rich List” found that the 1,000 richest people in Britain had doubled their wealth in the last five years.

In response to the Family Food findings, the Labour Party’s Shadow Environment Secretary Maria Eagle said, with a straight face, that it was a “national scandal that so many people are going hungry in the sixth-richest country on the planet, in the 21st century.”

It was the 1997-2010 Labour Party government that presided over wealth and social inequality hitting levels not seen since the Victorian era and which, after bailing out the banks following the 2008 global financial crash, began the austerity measures that have been continued by the Conservative/Liberal coalition.



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