

Many UK children go to school hungry

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A survey conducted by YouGov on behalf of breakfast manufacturer Kellogg's has exposed the extent of food poverty among children in the UK.

The survey took a nationally representative sample of head teachers, classroom, and supply teachers at state and independent schools throughout England and Wales.

YouGov found that four out of five teachers see hungry pupils arriving at school without having eaten breakfast each week, with many having nothing to eat until lunchtime. Nearly 50 percent of teachers said some pupils arrived at school hungry at least three or four times a week. The situation is mirrored in Scotland, with an increasing number of pupils going to school hungry. In some cases, children are stealing food from classmates, according to teachers.

The impact has been felt widely by those in the teaching profession, who have expressed heartfelt reactions to the children in their care. Eight percent of teachers said they had given pupils money for food, and approximately three in 10 admitted that they have brought food into school for pupils they believe have not had breakfast.

Nearly two-thirds of teachers said they knew of children at their school who regularly ate nothing until lunchtime. Almost two-fifths of school staff said they see pupils turning up for class who have not had enough to eat every day, while a similar proportion see it between one and four times a week.

Hunger is clearly detrimental to a pupil's health and wellbeing. It has a devastating impact on their education, as pupils who are hungry are more likely to be lethargic and unable to concentrate. This contributes significantly to pupil behaviour. How can a child concentrate with an empty stomach? Nearly a third of those polled suggested that a child has blamed falling asleep in class on hunger or thirst.

Teachers and schools are being forced to deal with

the outcome of a situation created by successive Labour and Conservative governments, which have funded financial institutions with vast amounts of money instead of providing for the basic requirements of working families.

According to YouGov, of the teachers that said there had been an increase in hungry pupils, 69 percent thought one of the main reasons was families continuing to struggle due to the economic downturn. Some 56 percent said welfare cuts are affecting families' financial situations, making it tougher for them to provide breakfast for their children.

Just under half thought that some parents were struggling to find work and cannot afford to put food on the table in the morning.

This should not come as a surprise to Kellogg's, considering they have contributed to the unemployment of families in the UK and globally. Over the past decade, the US-based conglomerate has shut factories and relocated to other countries to increase profits. The company has introduced "annualised hours", changing the shift patterns of production staff at its UK plants in Wrexham, Wales, and Trafford, England.

Paul Wheeler, Kellogg's director of corporate communications, said, "It's a crying shame that so many children are going to school without having eaten a basic breakfast." But the fact remains that the company's interests are laser-focused on raising the profits made from their breakfast products, not the plight of families struggling to make ends meet. Figures released in 2015 revealed that the firm, which uses a number of tax avoidance loopholes, effectively paid no UK corporation tax in 2013 despite reporting huge profits.

Many large companies increasingly rely on zero-hours contracts, with the number of these increasing by almost a fifth during 2015. Under zero-hours contracts, workers earn less per hour than staff in similar roles

and are denied benefits such as sick pay.

Parents feel compelled to work which can lead to cutting out meals like breakfast. A smaller group of teachers surveyed cited that the pressures of work and the impact of unsociable contracts meant they were “too busy” to make breakfast.

Fully 20 percent of teachers said that the number of pupils arriving at school hungry had increased over the past 12 months, while 77 percent said it had stayed about the same.

Research last year by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) revealed that children were turning up for school cold, hungry and wearing unwashed or unsuitable clothing, because their families are facing serious financial problems. One unnamed teacher said, “Children ... should not be hungry and coming to school with no socks on and no coats—some children are living in Victorian conditions—in the inner cities.”

Some teachers tell stories of pupils “hugging radiators” to keep warm, bringing in mouldy food in their lunch boxes and getting upset when they lose basic items such as pencils and rubbers.

More than three in four had seen pupils arrive at school with “inappropriate clothing” including no coat in bad weather. More children were being sent home with letters about unpaid school meals. Pupils who were sick were still being sent to school because parents could not afford to take time off work.

No attempt at tackling this desperate situation has been undertaken by those in power. A few token measures have been applied which cover free school meals for all key stage one pupils (aged between 5 and 7) and a paltry “pupil premium” budget to allow disadvantaged pupils to receive funding for trips and for “closing the gap with their peers”.

However, these only place the problem of hunger on schools with already stretched budgets.

Teachers also have to cope with the wider problems associated with family hardship, such as children living in temporary accommodations or relying on food banks. A UK all-party report released at the end of 2015, found that “hunger is now regarded as a ‘permanent fact of life’ in the UK’s poorest communities.”

Hunger has been “woven into the lives of people for whom going without food on a daily basis is now

almost inevitable.”

The Scottish teaching union, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), also recently carried out a survey on the impact of poverty in schools.

The leaders of the education trade unions make token criticism of government policies that lead to children going to school hungry, but the relentless austerity that has led to this intolerable situation only continues, because the unions have suppressed all struggles against government cuts to pay and conditions. In October, the EIS accepted a measly pay deal of just 2.5 percent over two years with 1.5 percent for 2015-16 and a further one percent for 2016-17.



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