

Poverty grows, health declines among UK children

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“Fairness for Children,” a report by UNICEF, reveals the income disparities that exist in the 41 richest countries and the devastating impact of inequality.

Its “report card 13” reports on how far the bottom 10 percent of children have fallen below their peers in the middle of the distribution, and ranks the 41 countries in its remit accordingly.

The report makes a comparative measure of “bottom-end inequality,” in income, educational achievement and health and happiness, to see how far children in the bottom percentile have been allowed to slip behind their peers since the financial crash of 2008. Bottom-end income inequality increased between 2008 and 2013 in half of the richest countries, worsening the health, educational outcomes and life chances of children.

Children in the UK fare particularly badly. In terms of inequality in education, UK children rank 25th out of 37 countries. This is measured by how children score in the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests in reading, maths and science at age 15. Only 12 other countries in the study do worse by their poorest children in terms of educational achievement. The UK ranks after Poland, Romania and Slovenia. Eleven percent of UK children perform below PISA proficiency level 2.

The research underlines the abject failure of the relentless exam and target-led reforms implemented by successive UK governments.

This inequality gap in educational achievement is highlighted by UK government statistics from the Evaluation Office Agency. In areas in the north of England, such as Stockport, Trafford and Warrington, just 1 in 20 schools deemed outstanding by the government watchdog Ofsted serve lower-income areas. Nor can poorer families afford to move to the

catchment areas where the more “desirable” (based on exam results) schools are.

In any case, as report card 13 reveals, educational achievement, even if measured by the narrow prism of tests, correlates with income inequality and deprivation. Finland, which has one of the lowest gaps in income inequality, also has one of the lowest proportions of 15-year-olds falling below the Pisa level 2 proficiency level.

In terms of overall health between the bottom 10 percent and the average, the UK ranks most unequal in terms of the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables and has one of the largest gaps in the amount of physical activity children take. The latter is no doubt a consequence of the selling off by governments of school playing fields to developers, combined with the squeezing out of sports from the school curriculum in favour of the “three Rs” (reading, writing and arithmetic).

UNICEF deputy executive director for the UK Lily Caprani observed that “more of our children are at risk of becoming overweight and obese.” Though all key stage 1 children (up to seven years old) are now entitled to a free school lunch, meals are provided by private companies whose priorities are not healthy eating but profit making.

Nor does this growing epidemic of obesity in children conflict with more and more children turning up at school hungry or being underweight. Malnutrition may present itself in the form of obesity, as the poor can only afford cheaper processed foods, laden with fats and sugar and depleted of essential vitamins.

A report undertaken on behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger revealed that one in five children in some UK primary schools start their first and final years underweight, a “shock increase” of

15 percent “in an age of rampant child obesity.”

Data collected for the House of Commons Library for 2011 pointed to half a million under-fives who were anaemic, the highest level in 20 years. The number of pregnant mothers with anaemia is on the rise, while an increasing number of people admitted to hospital in an emergency are found to be suffering from malnutrition.

In terms of income inequality between children living in the poorest households and the average, the UK does not rank as low as some other countries, coming seventh out of 41. A government spokesman boasted that “there are now three hundred thousand fewer children in poverty” in the UK.

Closer inspection reveals a less rosy picture. Child poverty is measured as the percentage of children in households with incomes below 50 percent of the national median income. However, median income has fallen because of the decline in wages of those in the middle. This means that though the gap between the lowest and median income is smaller, this does not indicate that the poor are any less poor in real terms.

Without what the report calls “social transfers” (welfare benefits and progressive taxes) the UK would rank among the bottom of the countries in the study. And it is these that are under ferocious attack by the Conservative government. Cuts to working and non-working benefits since 2013 and the introduction of Universal Credit are projected to increase child poverty by 50 percent by 2020, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Alison Garnham, chief executive of the Child Poverty Action Group, reiterates the point that removing the UK social security system benefits will expose children to the worse ravages of poverty “by the end of the parliament.”

In relation to the introduction of Universal Credit, which combines six benefits into one, Labour’s shadow welfare and pensions secretary, Owen Smith, said this will leave “a working single mother £3,000 a year worse off,” and “over two million working families will lose an average of £1,600 per year, driving up child poverty.”

Notwithstanding these comments, Labour is as committed to austerity as the Tories. Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell has pledged that Labour would operate under a “fiscal credibility rule” and “commit to always eliminating the deficit on current

spending in five years.”

The government is attempting to remove tax credits from the working poor. Iain Duncan Smith, the former secretary of state for work and pensions, who was also the architect of the hated “Bedroom Tax,” announced that the Tories would move to repeal the 2010 Child Poverty Act. Cuts to tax credits were incompatible with the targets outlined in the act to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

Duncan Smith spearheaded an attempt by the government to redefine the poverty level, to factor in family breakdown, debt and drug addiction, for example, and shift away from the present definition of families existing at 60 percent of the median income. The purpose is to stigmatise the poor and shift the blame for poverty away from the capitalist class and its governmental representatives.

These attacks follow unprecedented cuts, carried out by successive Labour and Conservative governments since 2008, with local authorities enforcing a reduction of spending on children and young people by £2 billion, or 71 percent.

The UNICEF report card ends with appeals to governments to alleviate child poverty by creating more employment opportunities, through progressive taxation and effective service provision. But the eradication of child poverty, along with the other scourges of austerity and war, will only end when the working class puts an end to capitalism.



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