

More than a million people living in destitution in UK

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Around 1,252,000 people, including 312,000 children, were living in destitution at some point during 2015.

A report released last week by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has shown that, in a typical week, there were an estimated 668,000 destitute households in the UK. According to the charity, this figure is likely an underestimation, as it is based on the number of households in contact with voluntary sector crisis services. The actual number of destitute people could be significantly higher, as those who do not make use of charitable services fall under the radar.

A person is considered destitute if he or she cannot afford the basic essentials of shelter, food, lighting and heating for the home, weather-appropriate clothing and footwear, and basic toiletries such as soap and toothpaste. Almost half of all destitute households reported a lack of four or more of these essentials in the preceding month, most commonly food and suitable clothes.

According to researchers, those experiencing destitution were generally reliant on a weekly income so low (£140 for a couple with children or £70 for a single adult, after housing costs) that they were unable to afford all of these essentials. Although shelter was often prioritised above other essentials, including food, a quarter of destitute individuals reported having slept rough on at least one night over the preceding month.

Destitution was rarely a one-off or temporary experience, but generally occurred within the context of severe poverty and hardship over a considerable period. Three-quarters of people who responded to the charity's survey were still destitute three or four months later.

Young, single men were the group most at risk of becoming destitute. Although 79 percent of destitute people were born in the UK, migrants were disproportionately affected—in particular, those from the European Union, the Middle East and Africa. They are particularly at risk of destitution due to the increasingly

stringent and chauvinistic controls on welfare benefit entitlement for migrant workers, which limit access to welfare payments such as Child Benefit, Housing Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance. This means that there is little in the way of a safety net for migrant workers who lose their job or are unable to find work.

Other key factors cited as pushing migrant and British workers alike from poverty into destitution include debt repayments (usually to public authorities), benefit delays and sanctions, high living costs and poorly paid jobs. Thirty percent of destitute people reported benefit sanctions as contributing to their struggle to make ends meet, with 50 percent having experienced some sort of problem with their claims.

The likelihood of having experienced benefit problems increases among destitute people with "complex needs" such as mental health conditions or drug and alcohol dependency, with 57 percent citing benefit problems as a major factor leading to their economic insecurity and material deprivation. Poor mental health was reported by the majority of those interviewed by the charity, with many interviewees making a direct link between their mental ill-health and the experience of going without essentials.

As well as suffering from mental health problems, many people living in destitution face social isolation and feel "demeaned", "degraded" or "humiliated" because of being forced to seek help from friends, family or charitable organisations to acquire the basic necessities. Many destitute parents often went without essentials themselves in order to provide more for their children.

The geographic distribution of destitution in the UK very closely matches that of poverty in general. The worst-hit areas are mainly former industrial regions, largely in the north of England, Scotland and Wales, where successive Labour and Conservative governments have brutally dismantled manufacturing jobs for decades.

High rates of destitution are also reported in many London boroughs and some seaside towns, with much lower rates found in the more-affluent suburban and rural districts in southern England. Labour-dominated local councils in the London Borough of Newham, Glasgow and Nottingham are three of the worst-hit areas, as Labour councillors across the UK have imposed every austerity measure demanded by the Tory government.

Although the report could not demonstrate with certainty that destitution has increased recently, because of the difficulty of obtaining accurate data from previous years, this was a very plausible conclusion due to evidence documenting the sharp rise in severe poverty, food bank use, homelessness and benefit sanction rates.

Julia Unwin, chief executive of the JRF, condemned government austerity measures, stating, “It is simply unacceptable to see such levels of severe poverty in our country in the 21st century. Governments of all stripes have failed to protect people at the bottom of the income scale from the effects of severe poverty, leaving many unable to feed, clothe or house themselves and their families.”

In response to the report, a government spokesperson issued a statement filled with contemptuous falsehoods. He declared, “The truth is that relative poverty is at the lowest level since the 1980s. ... This report ignores a number of measures we’ve brought in to improve life chances, including the ‘national living wage’, the extension of free childcare to 30 hours and increases to the personal allowance.”

The “living” wage has in reality brought no noticeable relief for the majority of working families, as it is insufficient to guarantee a basic standard of living or to compensate for the £12 billion of welfare cuts announced alongside it.



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