

UK population poorer and hungrier

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Official statistics and a recent report paint a desperate picture of the lives of millions of people in the UK in 2016. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and a report by the Food Foundation, “Too Poor to Eat, Food insecurity in the UK,” reveal huge increases in the numbers of people who have experienced poverty in the last three years and who are regularly unable to put food on the table.

One in three people, 3.9 million, have experienced poverty in Britain in the last three years. The ONS figures show that the numbers of people who are moving in and out of poverty is high.

The data was calculated based on the number of people who earned less than the 60 percent of the national average after tax—£9,995 or £20,907 for a family including two adults and two children.

The UK, compared with other European Union (EU) countries, showed a greater turnover of people in and out of poverty, resulting in a higher proportion of people suffering hardship. Between 2011 and 2014, 32.5 percent of the UK population had experienced income poverty at least once.

In 2014, the UK had the twelfth-highest figure among the EU countries, with 16.8 percent of the population at risk of poverty. Between 2010 and 2013, 7.8 percent of the UK population entered poverty, with only Greece and Ireland having higher entry rates.

A major contributory factor influencing people falling into poverty, and the chances of escaping, is low pay and overall job insecurity.

The proposed solution to low-pay -“social mobility,” via getting better, higher paid work - is a chimera. In reality, the number of low-paid, insecure jobs is increasing. An investigation conducted by the Resolution Foundation think tank last year found that over a 10-year period just a quarter of low-paid workers managed to move into better-paid jobs.

Poverty among older people is also on the increase. A

study carried out by the Independent Age charity shows that nearly one million over-75s are living in poverty. Once in poverty, it is more than likely they remain poor, with over 75s being twice as likely to be living in poverty persistently for the last four years.

“Too Poor to Eat” shows that 8.4 million people living in Britain are struggling to put food on the table, with over half of those regularly going a day without eating. The data for this report was gathered by the United Nations, via a national representative telephone survey carried out with 1,000 adults in 2014. No British government has collected data on food insecurity since 2003. Last year the ruling Conservatives rejected calls to monitor hunger.

The number of people in the UK who struggled to put food on the table in 2014 is equivalent to the entire population of London. This is the situation in the fifth-richest country in the world.

The foundation estimates that 4.7 million people aged over 15 were severely “food insecure.” Food insecurity is defined as experiencing hunger, inability to secure enough food of sufficient quantity and quality to enable good health and participation in society, and having to cut down on food due to financial necessity.

With 10.1 percent of adults in the UK having suffered food insecurity in 2014, this places the UK in the bottom half of EU countries experiencing food insecurity—below Estonia, Hungary, Malta and Slovakia.

The report noted there has been a marked increase in the numbers of people who accessed assistance from food banks. The Trussell Trust, a major provider of food banks in the UK, saw a massive increase in the number of people receiving food parcels for three-day emergency assistance between the years 2008/9 and 2014/15. In that period, the number of people requiring parcels increased from 25,899 to more than 1 million.

However, food bank data alone underestimates how

many people face food insecurity. The data from the Food Foundation shows that 17 times more people are food insecure. Many poor people use other food banks, and it is likely that many more do not access food bank assistance at all.

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Rachel Loopstar, an Oxford University food poverty expert who worked on the Foundation study, said, "We knew the number of people using food banks did not capture everyone who faces not having enough to eat in the UK; what these figures tell us is just how much bigger the problem of hunger really is."

The cost of food has gone up by 8 percent in real terms since 2007, with research carried out by Cambridge University showing that the cost of healthy food rose more in the last 10 years than unhealthy food.

The National Diet and Nutrition Survey, jointly funded by Public Health England, an executive agency of the Department of Health, and the UK Food Standards Agency, reports sharp differences in nutrition consumption between the poorest 20 percent as against the richest 20 percent of the population. The poorest eat less fish, fruit and vegetables, fibre and protein and eat more sugar.

The stagnation or even decline in incomes impacts on food spending, with government data showing that disposable income has gone down every year since 2004 for the poorest 20 percent of UK households.

In response to the ONS data, Labour Shadow Treasury Minister Rebecca Long-Bailey said, "These figures should shame [Prime Minister] David Cameron."

They are just as much an indictment of the Labour Party and its trade union backers. Over the last 30 years successive Labour and Tory governments have overseen a significant rise in poverty across the UK, driven by decreases in wages and attacks on welfare provision. Drastic cuts to public services are administered via mainly Labour run local authorities.

Under the 1997-2010 Labour government, the income inequality gap grew to its widest since records began in 1961. Poverty increased markedly under Labour, even prior to the 2008 global financial crash and the resulting mass austerity programmes. Some 11 million people were living in poverty by March 2008, a rise of 200,000 since 2006, with 2.9 million children living in

poverty in 2007-08.



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