

Child poverty soars in Britain

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The number of children living in poverty in the UK has surged by 200,000 in recent years, as austerity measures and economic crises have driven down the living standards of millions of working class families.

On Tuesday, the Department for Work and Pensions published the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics for 2014/15. They reveal that 3.9 million children now live in families that struggle to make ends meet—29 percent of all children. An individual is considered to live in relative poverty if their income is below 60 percent of the median household income. The poverty threshold for a family with two children is a miserly £435 per week.

As with official figures generally, the number of children living in poverty is most certainly an underestimation.

A separate analysis of the new data was performed by the Resolution Foundation. It reported a 9 percent jump in a single year. This is the greatest annual rise in child poverty in two decades, with 2.5 million children living in poverty in 2015 compared to 2.3 million in 2014.

Poverty afflicts growing numbers of working families, not just the unemployed, due to deteriorating rates of pay and benefit cuts. Two-thirds of poor children live in households with at least one working adult. Sam Royston, chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition, called the figures “simply unacceptable” and added, “The government promised to ‘make work pay’ but this is not happening for the 66 percent of children in poverty who are in working families.”

This figure was 45 percent in 1997 and has risen consistently since then, due to social attacks carried out by the successive Labour and Conservative/Liberal Democrat governments.

Millions of children’s lives are being scarred by a lack of necessities. Responding to the report, Gareth Jenkins from Save the Children said, “It’s unacceptable that nearly one in three children in the UK today are

growing up in poverty. Today’s figures remain stubbornly high, resulting in a life time of reduced opportunity for millions of children across the UK.”

“The situation is even more worrying for children under five who are far less likely to do well at school if they spend this crucial period of their childhoods trapped in poverty; and are most at risk—with half of all children in poverty coming from this age group. We know the early years are the ‘golden years’ for changing these odds.”

He called on politicians to “focus on early investment in children’s futures with good quality early years teaching, which we know reduces the devastating blow poverty delivers to future life chances.”

The rise in child poverty is part of a broader impoverishment of the working class. The number of people living in relative poverty increased to 13.5 million in 2015 from 13.2 million a year earlier, in terms of disposable income when housing costs are deducted. Incomes have barely recovered from the effect of the 2008 global financial crash, reaching an average of £473 a week in 2014–15 compared to £469 in the 2009–10 financial year.

Children are bearing the brunt of spending cuts to essential social services. Matthew Reed from the Children’s Society said, “Austerity has bitten hard, with an additional 200,000 children living below the poverty line. More children face missing out on hot meals, sleeping in cold bedrooms and being bullied at school.”

Planned cuts to benefits for working parents, implemented via the Universal Credit counter-reform and the welfare cap, will further impact the poorest families. Reed warned, “The four-year freeze to tax credits already in the pipeline will only make things worse.”

This was confirmed by a United Nations study published earlier this month which located the source

of rising social misery in spending cuts imposed by the Tory government.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child voiced fears about the spending cuts' effect on children and young people from deprived backgrounds in particular, stating, "The committee is seriously concerned at the effects that recent fiscal policies and allocation of resources have had in contributing to inequality in children's enjoyment of their rights, disproportionately affecting children in disadvantaged situations."

These cuts will cause the number of children living in hardship to soar to a predicted 5 million by 2020. Alison Garnham of the Child Poverty Action Group stated, "These grim figures reinforce projections from experts like the Institute for Fiscal Studies that UK child poverty is set to rise by 50 percent or more by 2020."

Relative poverty statistics are also a measure of social inequality. Their sharp rise is another sign that the rich are getting richer due to the economic stimulus policies designed to benefit only the financial oligarchy.

In response to the hike in poverty figures, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Stephen Crabb shed crocodile tears: "A decade ago, when David Cameron became party leader, he promised that under his leadership his party would measure and act on child poverty. It's a tragedy that we are now talking about rises in child poverty, not falls."

He added, "It's also hugely depressing that at a time when we're seeing rising child poverty the government has passed legislation that eliminates its target to reduce child poverty, or even to report on the progress it is making. Child poverty isn't inevitable—the government needs to invest in our children so we can all share the rewards of a stronger economy and a fairer society."

Crabb's hypocrisy is staggering. An MP for 11 years, he voted for every attack carried out on workers' living standards by the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat government and the current Tory government.

Many anti-poverty charities issued similar futile appeals to the Tory government to adjust their policies to reduce the harm done to poor children.

Frances O'Grady, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) general secretary, said: "We can tell how strong the economy is, and how fair it is, from how well working

families are doing. But since the Conservative-led government took office in 2010, there has not been any progress reducing working age poverty. Working families were unfairly made to pay the price of a financial crisis they did not cause. With the economy now facing trouble again from Brexit, working people should not be made to pay the price a second time."

Between 1997 and 2010, child poverty fell slightly due to limited redistributive measures implemented by the TUC-backed New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The tide decisively turned in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008, which sparked a global economic crisis and led to the imposition of a social counter-revolution to pay for bailout of the banks and financial institutions.

Ever since successive Labour and Tory governments have waged a systematic offensive against the working class. The rise in poverty is the result of the British ruling elites' aim to destroy the welfare state and implement vicious pro-business policies, stepping up the exploitation of the working class to compete with their international rivals.

With political and economic crisis resulting from last month's Brexit referendum vote to quit the European Union, it is inevitable that austerity will be stepped up. David Finch, an Economic Analyst at the Resolution Foundation, warned, "The outlook of weaker pay growth, significant welfare cuts and now higher inflation stemming from the Brexit sterling plunge means the living standards of many families may come under strain in the coming years."



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