Millions in the UK go hungry in the shadow of COVID-19

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The number of people facing food insecurity in Britain has quadrupled under the COVID-19 lockdown.

This was the finding by Dr. Rachel Loopstra from King's College London, in her analysis of data provided in a YouGov survey commissioned by the Food Foundation charity. The survey results indicate that more than three million UK residents have gone hungry in the first three weeks of lockdown.

Respondents said, "someone in their household has been unable to eat, despite being hungry, because they did not have enough food."

According to the survey, of 8.1 million people (16 percent of the population) in Britain believed to be facing food insecurity during the crisis, just over one fifth (21 percent) did not have enough money to buy adequate food supplies, half were unable to get the food they needed from the shops due to shortages and a quarter were unable to leave their homes and had no other way to get the food they needed.

It found that an estimated 7.1 million people had someone in their household who had to reduce or skip meals because they could not access or afford sufficient sustenance.

The findings reveal that more than 1.5 million adults in Britain are worried about obtaining enough food for themselves and their families, including 53 percent of workers employed in the National Health Service (NHS). Over one million people must go a whole day without food since the UK went into lockdown.

With schools closed, half of parents on low incomes with children eligible for free school meals reported they had not yet received any of the substitute meals promised by the government. This means an estimated 830,000 children are likely to be going without adequate daily nourishment.

In a further threat to life and welfare, 12 percent of those surveyed—equating to 6.1 million adults—said they were struggling to follow the "stay at home" regulations because they had to keep working to survive.

Based on the responses, an equivalent of over one million people had lost all their income, with 43 percent of those who reported a drop in income expecting to receive no help from the government.

The long-term consequences of the current food insecurity will be the further indebtedness of the very poorest. This is indicated by the share reporting they had already had to borrow money (6 percent) in the form of a loan, just a week into the lockdown. Households with children were two-and--a-half times more likely to have borrowed in order to survive.

On March 21, the government instructed people at greater risk from COVID-19 to self-isolate for 12 weeks. It said it would contact 1.5 million people in this category and set up a system, including local authorities, voluntary organisations, and business, to deliver food parcels to the homes of those who lacked family support.

But according to a report in *Guardian*, one week later "the scheme [was] not yet running and will take a few weeks to scale up to supplying food to 400,000 people." The Food Foundation has calculated that already more than twice that number—860,000 people who fall into the medically vulnerable categories—were suffering from food insecurity even before the pandemic crisis.

The antecedent history of the coronavirus pandemic in Britain, as internationally, is one of 12 years of economic and social austerity imposed on the working class. This has been the unrelenting programme of the financial elite following the 2008 global economic crisis.

Years of austerity and below inflation wage increases have had a devastating impact on the conditions of millions of the most vulnerable. In fact, the Food Foundation itself released a report just 18 months ago, revealing that half of all households in the UK were unable to spend enough to meet the cost of the government's own basic recommended dietary requirements.

As well as a food crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, deteriorating housing conditions are also a major negative factor for workers, placing them at increased risk of infection.

A recent report by the New Policy Institute (NPI) titled "*Accounting for the Variation in the Covid-19 Caseload*

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across England: An analysis of the role of multi-generation households, London and time" —placed particular emphasis on the two largest and most affected regions: the capital, London and the second largest city, Birmingham, in the Midlands.

Looking at a single day, April 5, the research established "there is a statistical link across local authority areas between the confirmed COVID-19 caseload and the proportion of households where pensioners and working-age live together, especially in areas of high deprivation."

Even after allowing for the much higher infection rates in London, the NPI study finds that the top five most-crowded areas in the country have seen up to 70 percent more coronavirus cases than the five least-crowded, where better-off homeowners are likely to live in larger homes, often including spare bedrooms and more than one bathroom.

London has 21,357 confirmed cases (with 3,825 deaths in hospitals alone), followed by the Midlands, which has 16,903 cases (with 2,900 hospital deaths) and is fast becoming a new epicentre of the disease in the UK. Both include areas of extreme overcrowding. Over 11 percent of homes in the capital and 9 percent of homes in Birmingham are classed as overcrowded–the two highest rates in the UK.

The report confirms fears that the cramped living conditions in the poorest and most overcrowded parts of Britain's cities are accelerating the spread of the virus.

NPI director Peter Kenway told the *Observer* newspaper, "Our models show that even when you allow for the obvious factors, there is still a heightened risk to overcrowded households, especially when you have older people living with younger people," he said.

Professor Gabriel Scally, President of Epidemiology at the Royal Society of Medicine, said, "Houses in multiple occupation must be in the same category as care homes because of the sheer press of people. I have no doubt that these kinds of overcrowded conditions are tremendously potent in spreading the virus.

"The Victorians paid the price for housing people in fundamentally unsatisfactory, unhealthy places when cholera and typhoid came calling. We're now in an era of new novel diseases, which will just love the modern equivalent of Victorian slums, where people do not have enough space or, quite possibly, enough ventilation or sunlight."

The *Observer* cited the conditions of a handful of families in London and Birmingham.

Walid Alhusien, a 46-year-old pizza delivery driver, "lives with his wife and five children in a room just four metres square in Mitcham, south London. They must share a bathroom and kitchen with four strangers. He fears what might happen if the virus strikes. 'I can hear two of my neighbours coughing all the time,' he said. 'It is really scary. I want to protect my family but what can I do?'"

He is also compelled to work four days a week, "I feel guilty I am taking this risk. I know I could bring it into the house, but I need the money. I have to look after my children's needs."

Aisha Malik lives in a severely overcrowded house in Ladywood, Birmingham with elderly parents and her husband, who developed coronavirus symptoms while working in a local supermarket. Malik, her husband and her two children squeeze into one bedroom while her parents sleep on the sofa downstairs. Her sister's family cram into another bedroom and her siblings must share beds elsewhere in the house.

"My mum and dad are old and vulnerable … they both suffer from diabetes and my dad's got heart disease as well," she said. "We are literally all living on top of each other–how can we stay safe?"

The Birmingham constituency of Ladywood has the highest rate of overcrowding outside London and the city also has one of the highest proportions of families sharing with elderly relatives in the country.

The NPI analysis suggests that areas with a high proportion of over-70s sharing with younger families had almost three times the coronavirus cases compared with neighbourhoods where more elderly people lived in their own homes.

The report concludes, "the lockdown is revealing the inequality in our housing … this research shows there is a clear link between local area deprivation and Covid-19 cases."

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government stated recently, "We've given councils access to £1.6bn to help them during this national emergency, including for finding safe and suitable accommodation for families who need it."

To put class relations in coronavirus Britain into perspective: £1.6bn is barely one tenth of overall local funding cuts by central government since 2010. The richest 15 individuals in Britain had a collective fortune of £184 billion in 2019, which has only grown since then, far exceeding the annual budget for the NHS throughout the UK.

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