

Nearly a third of UK children in poverty even before pandemic

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Big business and the super-rich have seen their fortunes reach stratospheric levels in recent years. Last year's *Sunday Times* Rich List revealed the richest 1,000 people in Britain had amassed nearly £750 billion in known income and assets. Throughout the pandemic multi-billion-pound bailout schemes shovelled more wealth to those at the top.

But as the pandemic began, record numbers of children were living in poverty. A survey of households earning less than 60 percent of average income in March 2020 found the number of children living in poverty had risen to 4.3 million, up from 4.1 million the year before.

This means nearly a third of UK children were living in poverty even before the pandemic hit.

Analysis of the government's figures by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) charity showed:

- 51 percent of all children in poverty are in families with a youngest child aged under five
- 75 percent of poor children lived in working families in 2019-20, up from 72 percent in 2018-19, and 12 percent of poor children had a self-employed parent
- Poor families have fallen deeper into poverty: 2.9 million children were in deep poverty (i.e., with a household income below 50 percent of AHC [After housing costs]), 600,000 more than in 2010/11
- 1.7 million children went hungry because their family could not afford enough food
- 49 percent of lone parents are now in poverty (up from 44 percent in 2018-19)
- 47 percent of children in families with three or more children were in poverty, up from 43 percent the year before and 36 percent a decade earlier

Commenting on the figures, CPAG chief executive Alison Garnham said, "Today's poverty figures show

what was clear all along, that low-income families with children entered the pandemic financially vulnerable and with child poverty having risen by 700,000 since 2012 when benefit cuts began...

"We have now seen a decade of cuts to our social safety net and entered the pandemic expecting to spend £36 billion a year less on social security, so it is no surprise that child poverty has risen."

While the national average figures alone are dire, granular analysis of the survey data has revealed pockets of devastating impoverishment across Britain.

The *Daily Mirror* reported April 3, "In several neighbourhoods in Glasgow and one in Milton Keynes, shockingly every single child is thought to be living in poverty. In fact, there are 649 neighbourhoods across the country where at least half of children are estimated to be living below the breadline."

The newspaper quoted End Child Poverty coalition chairperson Anna Feuchtwang's response, "we are asking children to live in shame, without somewhere decent to live, without adequate food and clothing, and denying them the secure and healthy childhood we all agree children are entitled to."

In February, a BMJ (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) editorial spelled out the link between poverty, health and the pandemic, "Even before COVID-19, extremely disturbing trends in health were emerging in England. Growing child poverty, homelessness, and food poverty led to an unprecedented rise in infant mortality, mental health problems, and stalling life expectancy, especially for women in the poorest areas and cities.

"These were the same areas where 10 years of austerity measures had hit the poorest groups the hardest. Larger cuts in government funding to local authorities with higher proportions of children in

poverty meant a reduction in spending on vital preventive services in areas where they were needed most. The pandemic arrived in the middle of this worrying scene and amplified existing inequalities...

“Food poverty increased, with free school meals—an essential nutritional boost for many low-income families—having to be replaced by emergency measures to prevent children going hungry during school closures. Government support for this scheme has been precarious, and at times the measures have been inadequate to maintain the health of growing children.”

Applications for Universal Credit welfare payments have doubled during the pandemic to six million people. Under pressure, the Johnson government granted a £20 a week increase in Universal Credit payments, but only until September. The government’s pandemic furlough scheme, covering 80 percent of wages, is also due to end that month. Autumn is expected to bring a surge in unemployment, fuelling an immense social crisis.

Dependence on food banks has risen markedly. The Trussell Trust, the UK’s biggest food bank charity, reported on April 22, “In the last year, a record 2.5 million emergency food parcels were distributed to people in crisis by food banks in the Trussell Trust network. A 33 percent increase on the previous year and a devastating 128 percent increase on the same period five years ago (2015/16). Without the hard work and dedication of thousands of food bank volunteers and staff, at over a thousand locations across the UK, the impact of the pandemic on hundreds of thousands of people would have been even more severe.”

The Trust reported that 94 percent of people referred to food banks are destitute.

Although the Trussell Trust is the biggest food bank provider, it is by no means the only one. Around a thousand independent food bank providers were operating in the UK last year. A study by Kellogg’s published in February, “Filling the poverty gap: the increasing role of schools in supporting families” noted, “Shocking new research reveals families impacted by poverty during the pandemic are turning to their local school for food. A fifth (18 percent) of schools say they’ve started a foodbank to provide families in their community with access to emergency food parcels.”

The numbers of school children registered for free

school meals increased by around 200,000 during the first year of the pandemic to over 1.6 million. This represents around a fifth of the 8.2 million children in state schooling.



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