

UK's two-child limit welfare policy driving children into poverty

Simon Whelan
19 April 2023

A study by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) reveals how the UK's two-child policy for welfare benefits is negatively affecting 1.5 million children, with more than a million of those affected growing up in poverty.

Official government statistics revealed last summer that one in 12 of all UK children now live in families hit by the two-child limit. It is forecast to affect roughly 3 million children in the future.

The 1.5 million figure includes all children in a family subject to the limit rather than only each subsequent child who is ineligible for support as a result of the policy. Additional children in the family without additional income mean less money all round.

Speaking on the report April 5, CPAG chief executive Alison Garnham said, "Six years to the day since this nastiest of policies came into effect, our survey is showing its devastating effects. The two-child limit makes it impossible for parents to provide their children with essentials—and the cost-of-living crisis is adding extra pain."

The two-child limit restricts child universal credit and tax credits allowances to the first two children in a family, unless the children were born before April 2017 when the policy was introduced. CPAG found that families were being deprived of up to £3,235 a year.

Exemptions apply only for those who had children in a multiple birth or children conceived due to rape or coercion. Even the exemptions themselves are reactionary as women must disclose that they were raped in order to be eligible—under what has become known as the "rape clause".

The cruel and vindictive two-child limit was introduced by Theresa May's Conservative government as a stick to beat the poor. It was justified with the implication that the working class are frivolous welfare cheats who only have children to avoid employment and claim supposedly

"generous" welfare benefits.

A government spokesperson responded to the CPAG report by doubling down on the Dickensian policy: "The two-child policy means families on benefits are asked to make the same financial decisions as families supporting themselves solely through work, including considering our comprehensive childcare offer for working parents and child benefit for all children."

In fact, 58 percent of families affected by the limit are in work. As for childcare, the private sector is bleeding parents dry—a part-time nursery place (25 hours a week) costs an average of nearly £8,000 a year.

The CPAG study found zero evidence to suggest the two-child policy had affected fertility rates but plenty of proof that it was pushing very large numbers of children into or deeper into poverty.

Last year a study by academics at universities in York and Oxford found the continuation of the two-child limit during the cost-of-living crisis was "creating an almost impossible context for affected families, with a risk of long-lasting harm for millions of children".

As part of their study, the CPAG took submissions from more than 3,000 parents who have taken part in an ongoing survey about the two-child limit. The researchers found that in the last year many more families had struggled to pay for basics like energy bills and food. Individual testimonies relate parents missing meals, a daily reliance upon discounted foods, children unable to join school clubs and outings and mothers financially forced to return to work when their babies are only months old.

Respondents told the CPAG:

"I now find myself struggling to put food on the table. I couldn't even bear to think what will happen when I run out of oil heating which I know will happen soon... I'm really, really struggling."

"I work full time, my wife cares for our children and my

elderly mother. We are doing everything right and yet we can't afford the basics.”

“We can't afford much. Literally living hand to mouth, everything has gone up. Have one meal a day as a parent so kids don't go without.”

“It would have been nice to be able to afford clothes and other basics. We are going to really struggle when our third child starts eating food.”

Similar statements are collected under the subheadings: Children are losing out, Families going into debt, and Mental health suffers.

The study by the CPAG showed that of working families affected by the two-child limit 87 percent said the policy made it harder for them to pay for food during 2022-23, up from 78 percent a year before. The percentage for non-working households is 90 percent. For all affected families, the proportion struggling to pay energy bills rose from 73 percent to 82 percent.

The CPAG notes that while the government has provided small payments to assist with living costs for low-income households, these are made at a flat-rate and make no allowance for the number of children in a household.

Alison Garnham, CPAG chief executive, stated, “The number of children in poverty rose by 350,000 last year – and the two-child limit played a big part in that rise. There is no place for this policy in a country that believes all children deserve a good start. Ministers must remove it before it does more damage to children and to family life.”

Recent analysis by the Scottish government suggests that, in terms of reducing child poverty, the two-child limit would be the most cost-effective UK welfare reform to reverse.

The CPAG calculates that abolishing it would cost a mere £1.2 billion and would lift 250,000 children out of poverty, with a further 850,000 lifted from deep poverty. By way of comparison, the Tory government has already spent well in excess of £5 billion pursuing NATO's war in Ukraine against Russia and pledged billions more.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)