

Death by starvation of toddler Bronson Battersby due to UK poverty and social care catastrophe

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The tragic death of two-year-old Bronson Battersby, whose body was found curled up by his dead father, Kenneth, in the seaside town of Skegness on January 9 has shocked millions.

Bronson's autopsy released on January 14 revealed the toddler had died of starvation and dehydration after his dad suffered a fatal heart attack around December 29. He was alone for days, too small and young to reach for food and water or to call for help.

The Conservative government's response has been to ritualistically blame social workers to detract from the impact of its policies of unending austerity and the chronic underfunding of social services, which have caused a dramatic rise in child poverty.

Bronson was known to social services. Referrals had been made raising concerns for his welfare. Kenneth, 60, had a heart condition and was Bronson's sole carer. Neighbours and family said that he was struggling to look after the two-year-old unsupported. The home, a rundown and dilapidated downstairs basement flat, had been visited by social workers on a weekly basis.

Lincolnshire's director of children's services, Heather Sandy, confirmed that her team's last contact with Bronson's dad was on December 27. A social worker went to the home on January 2, as arranged. When there was no response to the knock at the door, she looked at other addresses to try and locate Bronson and, when she could not, spoke to her manager and then contacted the police.

The police made no response.

The social worker returned on January 4 and again got no response. She informed the police again, but no visit was arranged. She returned on January 9, at which point she spoke to a neighbour, alerted the landlady

and, through her, was able to gain entry to the property and found the bodies.

Police attended the scene only after the gruesome discovery. The local force has referred itself to the Independent Office for Police Conduct and an investigation into the events that lead to the tragic deaths has been opened.

Bronson's mother, Sarah Piese, also from Skegness, was separated from Kenneth and lived with her two other children by him, aged 3 and 7. She told the *Sun*, "Now all I can think of in my head is him, starving, reaching up and trying to get them [snacks]. I can't bear it. He was about two inches off being able to reach the fridge to open it."

Many comments were left on social media defending the social worker. "Whoever the social worker is I pray she is being supported. I hope all seniors around her have mobilised all support possible. There's nothing she could have done differently here," said one. Another commented, "I'm so sorry for the little boy and his dad but I also think about the social worker a lot and I hope she/he is getting the support they need so much right now."

More could have been done to protect Bronson and the tens of thousands of children who are in social services care and at risk if the system had not been brought to breaking point by savage cuts to spending, implemented by Tory and Labour councils throughout the country.

Warnings were issued in a report commissioned by the Tory government and published in May 2022, "The Independent Review of Children's Social Care," led and authored by Josh MacAlister. Prime Minister Sunak responded to the report at the time by claiming

he both “welcomed” and would act on its findings, but then did nothing.

The report noted, “An urgent multibillion-pound overhaul of children’s social care in England is needed to transform the life chances of thousands of vulnerable young people and reform a system that is spiralling out of control.” Failure to tackle major problems in children’s services “would lead to record numbers of youngsters entering care within a decade.”

One of the key demands was for “A windfall tax on the profits of private care providers” to help fund reform of the commercial market for children’s residential care and fostering. The privatisation of social care, including for the most vulnerable, has reaped huge financial rewards for the private sector, which now provides 83 percent of residential care places.

The report concluded that “Without major reform, 100,000 children could be in care by 2032, up from 80,000 now, with costs rising by 50% to £15bn.”

Added to chronic underfunding is a crisis of recruitment and retention of staff. The Children’s Social Care tracker for 2023, published by the Commission on the Centre of Government Performance, reveals how local authorities are struggling with serious workforce shortages as the sector faces the highest level of turnover since 2013 and the first decline in overall numbers of children’s social workers in a decade, even as the need for social workers rises.

Local authorities spent £11.1 billion on children’s social care in 2021/22, up £0.5 billion in a year. Of this, £0.48 billion was attributable to pandemic-related expenditure, such as higher residential care and agency staff costs. Between 2009/10 and 2021/22, spending increased by 41.6 percent in real terms.

Many local authorities have either announced that they are bankrupt or face bankruptcy in the immediate future. Nationally, councils ended up spending more than they budgeted on children’s social care each year from 2014/15 to 2019/20. In 2021/22, 46 percent of councils overspent their budgets by at least 20 percent, while 10 percent of councils overspent their budgets by at least 40 percent.

The Department for Education (DfE) has stated that the risk of “market failure” for children in care placement is “critical to very likely” over the 2023/24

financial year due to rising prices and its assessment that local authorities are unable to afford appropriate placements.

Bronson’s death also exposed the lack of any restorative and family-based interventions. Spending on acute services such as family support rose by 43.2 percent between 2009/10 and 2021/22, at the expense of universal and preventative services such as Sure Start children’s centres and other spending on children under five, which fell by 73.4 percent over the same period. Government funding for the Early Intervention Grant has been cut by almost £600 million since 2013.

Above all the vast growth of children in need of intervention or in care is driven by the rapid growth in poverty, while social wealth is monopolised by the major corporations and the super-rich, who are shielded from paying taxes by their governments. This has been fuelled by the cost-of-living crisis and cuts in health, education and social spending while military spending is set to increase massively to finance the war in Ukraine and the genocidal war in Gaza.

There were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2021-22, making 29 percent of children, or around nine in a classroom of 30. Some 44 percent of children living in lone-parent families are in poverty, along with 42 percent of children like Bronson in families with 3 or more siblings.

Skegness has some of the highest levels of poverty in the country. More than four fifths of the town’s 109,000 residents live in some of the most-deprived 20 percent of areas in England. More than 40 percent of the population is classed as economically inactive, meaning they are not in work or education and are not actively seeking employment.



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