

UK child poverty at highest level in 30 years, with schools providing basic living necessities

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Figures from the Department of State and Pensions (DWP) show 25 percent of children in the UK in 2022-23 were living in absolute poverty, up from 23.8 percent the previous year. This is the largest annual increase since records began in 1994-95.

Several charities have referenced the impact of the two-child limit on welfare benefits and the benefit cap, making the most vulnerable sections of society pay for the economic crisis. 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. Low-income families have lost around £3,200 a year for any third or subsequent child born after April 2017.

Peter Matejic, chief analyst from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said these statistics show “just how far away our social security system is from adequately supporting people who have fallen on hard times”.

A January report by the Resolution Foundation think-tank, “Catastrophic caps: An analysis of the impact of the two-child limit and the benefit cap”, projects that the percentage of children in larger families in poverty will rise to a staggering 51 percent by 2028-29—an increase of 17 percent since 2014.

These two policies together affected nearly half a million families in Britain in 2022-23, including 34,000 affected by both, up from 26,000 in 2013-14 (when only the benefit cap was in operation).

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”.

The research found that two-child families in poverty would remain at around 25 percent. For larger families in 2021-22, 75 percent were in material deprivation compared with 34 percent with two or less children. Food insecurity is higher among the larger families—16 percent compared to 7 percent.

The Resolution Foundation’s cost of living survey in October 2023 shows that people in families with three or more children were over four times as likely to have used a food bank in the last 30 days (13 percent) compared to those with no children, or one or two children (3 percent).

Scrapping the two-child limit and the benefit cap would boost the incomes of the poorest families by £1,000 next year.

Adam Corlett, principal economist at the Resolution Foundation, estimates the figure for those impacted will rise from 70,000 families in 2018 to about 750,000 by the time the policy has fully taken effect in 2035.

The cost of abolishing the two-child limit in 2024-25 is just £2.5 billion, and abolishing the benefit cap with it would bring the cost up to £3 billion. Britain spends over £50 billion on the armed forces.

Olivier De Schutter, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Food, said of Britain that the “single most important” investment would be to remove the two-child benefit cap, adding that Universal Credit should rise “at least 50 per cent” to guarantee a decent standard of living. Universal Credit is Britain’s main monthly benefit payment for low-income households.

As social care services have been almost destroyed, many schools and various charities are being forced to play a key role in ensuring that children are fed and clothed.

In September 2023, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) reported that 4.2 million children nationwide were growing up in poverty—equivalent to nine children in an average classroom of 30.

Almost all respondents from the schools surveyed for CPAG’s report, “‘There is only so much we can do’: School staff in England on the impact of poverty on children and school life”, believe that child poverty in their school has increased in the last two academic years. Comments recorded include:

“[I’ve noticed] students not having basics of equipment when coming to school. Students waiting for buses in the pouring rain without any raincoats. Pupils’ lack of

concentration as they are hungry.” (Secondary school governor, South West).

“Two pupils [were] caught stealing food from other pupils’ lunchboxes.” (Primary school governor, South West).

“Children come to school concerned about their housing and home situations.” (Primary school governor, Yorkshire and the Humber).

“More children are expressing feeling worried about their family finances, or overhearing conversations or arguments about money at home. Children seem more aware of the financial pressures adults are under.

“Some children tell me they avoid asking their parents for essential equipment, or telling them about clubs and trips, as they do not want to add to their financial stress.” (Secondary pupil support and welfare, West Midlands).

“Pupils [are] desperate to find after school or weekend jobs to support family finances.” (Counsellor, North West).

“Children [are] tired and lethargic, extremely hungry.” (Primary teaching assistant, South West).

“Children [don’t have] a water bottle because they don’t want to ask parents to buy one, children [are] worrying about the cost of trips.” (Primary teacher, North West).

A report in the *Observer* this month described how schools are finding beds, providing showers for pupils and washing uniforms in addition to tackling the hunger children are struggling with. A primary school head in a deprived area in north-west England said, “We have a child who we put in the shower a couple of times a week.” The newspaper reported, “His school routinely washed uniforms for children whose families didn’t have a washing machine.” A “school recently stepped in to help after discovering a pupil begging outside a supermarket...”

Katrina Morley, chief executive of Tees Valley Education trust, told the newspaper, “We have children without beds or they might have to share with siblings... Some don’t have enough bedding and no heating so they can’t sleep because they are cold.” The *Observer* revealed, “The trust works with local charities to provide families with support on issues like finding beds, and has also discreetly donated blankets over the winter.”

School budgets have been squeezed to breaking point, as social services budgets have been devastated by local authority cuts pushed through by mainly Labour-Party run councils on behalf of the Conservative government.

Increasing demand for social support is happening at the same time as pastoral staff with more experience are being cut. One in eight local authority schools were in deficit in 2023.

Analysis from the New Economics Foundation reveals that levels of child poverty have risen almost six (5.6) times

faster in the most deprived areas since 2014/15 compared to the richest.

Laura, a social worker in Bradford told the WWSWS, “The city I work in, like many others in the UK is experiencing the worst deprivation it has ever had in modern times. Where there is deprivation there are vulnerable children and their families. It is heartbreaking to see more and more children living in substandard housing causing them lifelong health issues, their parents only able to provide the basics out of foodbanks and parental mental ill health on the rise as a result. What is more heartbreaking is the inability of a broken children’s social care and education system failing them daily.

“Teachers and social workers are organising food, clothing and toy collections amongst family, friends, and colleagues to support children. Teachers are having to perform what were traditionally social work welfare tasks because of safeguarding thresholds rising and the Children’s Trust being on the verge of bankruptcy.

“We have very few services left that can help at an early stage and the brunt of that falls on teachers and social workers. Me and my colleagues work long hours and pay for things out of our own pockets to ensure a child is safe for that day, we don’t have any longer-term solutions. I know that my colleagues in education do the same things and do things that are way out of their teaching remit to protect children.

“Both professions know that this is not sustainable and both services are creaking at the seams. The system pits teachers and social workers against each other, but really they are facing the same horrendous dilemmas daily and should work together to challenge and fight the rottenness of both children’s vital organisations.”

The terrible social crisis tearing apart the lives of children will only worsen with the expected election of a pro-austerity Labour government this year. Labour is committed to retaining the two-child limit on welfare benefits and benefit cap. The *Financial Times* noted when party leader Sir Keir Starmer announced the policy last June that he was sticking to “its pledge of responsible spending”, with Starmer saying Labour had to be “even tougher, even more focused, even more disciplined” with the election nearing.



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