

The UK: International child poverty outlier

Danny Dorling – second draft of 27 may 2024 – accepted by ‘Geography’

Disclosure statement: The author has no financial or non-financial interest arising from research behind this article, and no competing interests to declare. This article builds on a much shorter piece published in the By-line Times in March 2024.

Abstract (146 words):

The UK has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the rich world, and the rate rising the most rapidly. A higher proportion of children are poor in the South East of England than in Scotland. The huge rise in economic inequality in the 1980s caused the UK to become an outlier. All subsequent UK governments maintained inequality at high levels. It was a choice. Children in Britain are, on average, becoming shorter in height. Child death rates in England are rising, almost certainly due to poverty and destitution rising. As inequality rise poverty rises, but so too does separation. Those who study human geography in the UK, if they went to university in recent years, are the least likely graduates to have ever been poor. Child poverty remains off our mental maps and largely outside of our geographical imaginations. That has to change.

Keywords: Child, poverty, stunted, starving, dying, United Kingdom.

International Outlier

Thirty years ago a group of geographers wrote a book about many things, including why human geographers in Britain tended to ignored poverty (Philo, 1995). It did not result in any ‘Geographical turn’ towards looking more closely at the stark reality of poverty for British people. British geographical journals are not places where poverty is much discussed, except when it occurs ‘overseas’. This is in great contrast to sociology and social policy, where inequality and poverty have risen as concerns in

tandem with the rises in this social evil. In this short paper I argue that the situation in the UK is now so acute, that British geographers in particular cannot continue to see these issues as ones better dealt with and discussed elsewhere.

Today the UK has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the rich world. In December 2023 UNICEF (the United Nations Children's charity) published analysis showing that the rate of child poverty was growing faster within the UK than in any other country that they measured in the world. In January 2024, the UK's Child Poverty Action Group reported how the UK government was increasing the proportion of children who were poor faster through its choices and actions. A charity, Action for Children, revealed data showing how a higher proportion of children are now poor in the South East of England than in Scotland. The geography of child poverty has been changing both internationally and within the UK. In this short paper these statistics are described and contextualized in an attempt to raise awareness among colleagues and students. The geography of poverty and inequality has changed and this has changed the human geography of the UK more than any other trend in recent years.

The huge rise in economic inequality in the 1980s which caused the UK to become such an outlier is charted below and an argument made for how UK governments maintaining inequality at such high levels since then has helped to both sustain the very high poverty rates and to increase them. Data released during 2023 showing how children in the UK are now, on average, becoming shorter in height is also presented below – suggesting that nutrition is worsening for a majority of British children. There are several geographers who have studied food banks recently and similar issues, and before them there was a trend to study food deserts, areas underserved which shops. However, the underlying reasons for why some residential areas were deserted by retailers and why there has been a rise in urgency of the need for foodbanks and where that need is best and worst met are less considered in contemporary British human geography.

The rise in child death rates in England 2022 and 2023 is a further statistic reported below, especially of more children now dying between ages 1 and 4, almost certainly

due to poverty and destitution rising. This paper concludes by discussing how the death of two year old Bronson Battersby from starvation in England in the first few weeks of the year was reported and how the geography of his home town was used, by some, to try to explain his death. Human geographers are well placed to explore how places become stigmatized, how spaces of segregation are normalized, and to begin to contribute to the work currently being done by epidemiologists and in social medicine on the emergency of poverty in the UK today.

Because this is a geography journal, and because the rise in inequality may be part of the explanation for the current lacunae in our curricula, the discussion of the UK as an international outlier of child poverty ends with a few comments on those who study human geography in the UK and how, if they went to university to do so in recent years, they are the least likely people to have ever been poor of anyone studying for any degree in Britain. Once a country becomes an outlier in one way, it can become one in so many others, and the academic subject of geography itself in the UK, as it is constituted today, is partly also a product of that great rise in inequality. This need not be a reason to look away and be more concerned about the climate, places overseas and the environment in general, than with what is now happening to people within a stone's throw of all UK university geography departments.

The United Nations reports

In December 2023 the United Nations released its periodic report on the changing state of child of child poverty across the countries of the world that it monitors in the most detail, those countries for which the most consistent statistics are available. Researchers often argue about child poverty statistics, and governments are even more prone to quibble with particular definitions. There are many ways in which child poverty can be measured. The United Nations Children's Fund, the agency of the United Nations responsible for providing humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide (UNICEF) tried to seek a compromise by considering more universal measures. As they explained just before Christmas 2023: 'Poverty is often

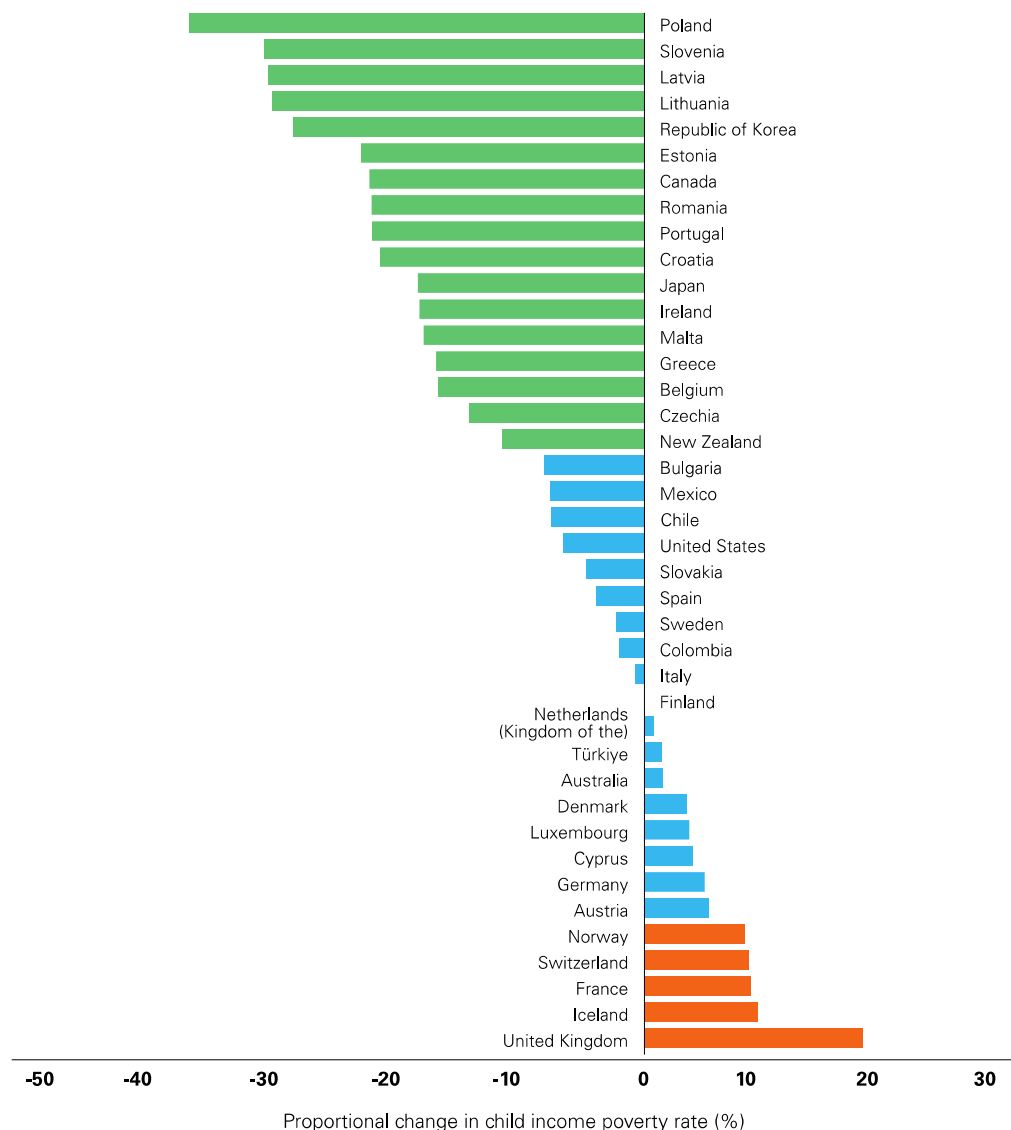
defined by income. But for most children, poverty is about more than just money. It is about growing up in a home without enough heat or nutritious food. Poverty means no new clothes, no telephone and no money for a birthday celebration.’ (UNICEF, 2023).

The headline measure UNICEF uses is an income measure: the proportion of children that live in households which fall below 60 per cent of the median household income within each country. Equivalised income is used to take account of variations in household size, as larger households can make economies and get by with a little less money per person by cooking for everyone at the same time, for example. Concepts such as a median and equivalised incomes need to be better understood because otherwise the statistics can appear obscure. The need for social statistics also often needs to be explained. By this measure, the UK ranks 28th out of the 39 countries that UNICEF compares, or 37th out of 39 when its direction of travel is also taken into account. A fifth of all children in the UK live in poverty by this measure and the UK has experienced the greatest increase in child poverty of all the countries which UNICEF compares in the world in the most recent time period (between 2012-14 and 2019-21). Figure 1 highlights this and makes it clear just how exceptional the UK has become, especially in terms of where it has been heading most recently.

The other countries in Figure 1 that have been doing badly in recent years all have much lower rates of child poverty. In Iceland only 12% of children are poor by the UNICEF measure, even after having had the second largest rise in child poverty after the UK. In France the rate is lower and the rise smaller. The same is true of Switzerland and Norway. There is now a stark geographical contrast between what is considered normal in different countries in Europe and different parts of those countries. This is a further reason for calling for more work by geographers geared towards understanding these growing geographical differences.

Figure 1: The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund 2023 Report: Change

Change in child income poverty rates, 2012–2014 to 2019–2021



Source; UNICEF (2023) Innocenti Report Card 18: Child poverty in the midst of wealth, *UNICEF Global Office of Research and Foresight*, Florence, December, <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3291/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>

There are several countries among the 39 that UNICEF compare which far worse than the UK although none of them have been experiencing the rise in child poverty that the UK has seen in recent years. Greece has a slightly higher child poverty rate than the UK, but it fell by 17% in the most recent period despite the huge austerity experienced there. New Zealand remains slightly worse, but saw an 11% fall most recently. Chile is only slightly worse than the UK but had an 8% fall. By late 2024 if

these current trends continue all these countries should now have a lower proportion of their child experiencing this severe income deprivation as compared to the UK.

Child poverty remains higher in Romania, 29% as compared to 21% in the UK, but fell by 23% in the most recent period, the eighth largest fall of all. Bulgaria is similarly improving. Only Turkey and Colombia are worse and not improving quickly enough to be likely to soon better the UK. The United States also stands out as a worse country for children to grow up in than the UK, as 26% of its children live in poverty according to the UNICEF definition, but it has been improving and it is possible to imagine that continuing and the UK and the USA trading places at some point in the future – unless the UK's fall down the ranks is somehow halted.

The report card that UNICEF produced in December 2023 gave these figures in cold numeric detail; but often they do not strike home when presented in that way. Of course, one country has to rank at the bottom of any list of improvements, but it need not be a country where child poverty was already accepted as more normal and tolerated so much, as is the case the UK – uniquely across Europe. You might say that the proportion that UNICEF presents is not especially high at 21% (or 20.7% in the table) but it is worth remembering that this is children growing up in households surviving on only 60%, and usually less than that, of what the median household in the UK gets by on each year. If you are reading this publication it is very likely that you would consider that median household income a poverty income, were you to ever have to try to survive on that little money, let alone less than three fifths of that money – each day, each week, each year.

The median average salary in the UK around the year 2023 was £26,600 a year (TUC, 2023), and for every person receiving a salary of over £40,000 in the UK in that year, there was another person paying income tax but earning no more than £19,000 (ONS, 2024a). These amounts will be higher when you read this, but the costs of basic foodstuff and other essentials have risen faster than them and so almost everyone is now worse off than they were in 2023.

The UNICEF league table is shown in Figure 2. Countries are ranked overall according to the combined average z-score of columns 3 and 5 in the table. A z-score normalizes for variation in each of the variables being combined so that no single variable dominates the rankings produced. There are many ways in which these numbers can all be estimated, measured, combined and presented; but hopefully the message is clear. The UK is doing very badly and getting worse.

Figure 2: The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund 2023 Report: Table

League Table.

UNICEF Innocenti ranking of child poverty in OECD and EU countries

A league table created for Report Card 18 that ranks countries based on their most recent income poverty rate and their success in reducing child poverty in a period of prosperity. The overall rank is based on a statistical average of these two indicators.

UNICEF Innocenti Rank		Most recent rate of child poverty (Average 2019–2021)		Change in child poverty rate (2012–2014 to 2019–2021)	
		%	Rank	%	Rank
1	Slovenia	10.0	2	-31.4	2
2	Poland	14.1	8	-37.6	1
3	Latvia	16.3	16	-31.0	3
4	Republic of Korea	15.7	15	-29.0	5
5	Estonia	14.8	9	-23.4	6
6	Lithuania	18.3	22	-30.6	4
7	Czechia	11.6	4	-14.5	16
8	Japan	14.8	11	-18.7	11
9	Ireland	14.8	10	-18.5	12
10	Croatia	16.6	17	-21.8	10
11	Canada	17.2	19	-22.7	7
12	Belgium	14.9	12	-17.0	15
13	Portugal	19.3	25	-22.5	9
14	Finland	10.1	3	0	26
15	Denmark	9.9	1	+3.5	30
16	Malta	19.8	26	-18.2	13
17	Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	13.5	7	+0.7	27
18	Greece	22.3	31	-17.2	14
19	New Zealand	21.1	29	-11.7	17
20	Norway	12.0	5	+10.1	35
21	Slovakia	18.9	23	-4.9	21
22	Sweden	18.0	20	-2.4	23
23	Iceland	12.4	6	+11.0	38
24	Cyprus	15.6	14	+4.0	32
25	Germany	15.5	13	+5.0	33
26	Australia	17.1	18	+1.7	29
27	Chile	21.6	30	-7.7	19
28	Romania	29.0	37	-22.5	8
29	Austria	19.2	24	+5.3	34
30	Switzerland	18.0	21	+10.3	36
31	Bulgaria	26.1	34	-8.3	18
32	United States	26.2	35	-6.7	20
33	France	19.9	27	+10.4	37
34	Italy	25.5	33	-0.8	25
35	Luxembourg	24.5	32	+3.7	31
36	Spain	28.0	36	-4.0	22
37	United Kingdom	20.7	28	+19.6	39
38	Türkiye	33.8	38	+1.5	28
39	Colombia	35.8	39	-2.1	24

Source; UNICEF (2023) Innocenti Report Card 18: Child poverty in the midst of wealth, *UNICEF Global Office of Research and Foresight*, Florence, December, <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3291/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>

Within the UK

Different measures are used within the UK by government which paint an even worse picture of the current situation. In March 2023 the UK charity, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), reported that the official government statistics showed that 350,000 more children fell into poverty and the charity then explained why those numbers were about to rise throughout 2023 and into 2024. The CPAG also presented an analysis demonstrating that accepting this level of child poverty was costing the state £39.5 billion a year in terms of the effects of the impacts of poverty. They explained that the official annual poverty statistics showed: ‘an estimated 350,000 more children were pulled into poverty last year, largely because the Government cut the £20 universal credit (UC) uplift half-way through the year.’ (CPAG, 2023).¹ The official, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) figures reported that 4.2 million children were in poverty in the year April 2021 to April 2022; the most recent year available and the year after UNICEF’s reporting ended. The CPAG then explained in detail why this figure will rise in future as the full effect of new government cuts to social security (universal credit) are felt, as the austerity that began in the UK in 2010 was continued into its fourteenth year, and as inequality in income between families was allowed to remain at what was very likely to be the highest levels seen across all of Europe. High levels of inflation in the UK, especially of the cost of food following Brexit, were also exacerbating the crisis.

On January 1st 2024 a charity, Action for Children, released data, again using the official UK measures, on the local geography of child poverty in the UK. Figure 3 shows what they found when analyzing the DWP data (AFC, 2024). They used the official UK definition that a child is considered to be growing up in poverty if they live in a household whose income is below 60% of the average (median) income for that year, and then showed the results after housing costs are taken into account because families with children have no choice other than to pay for the housing they live in. They cannot live on the streets or in a tent because social workers would then take their children into care. Because this measure includes the portion of children who are poor after their parents have paid the rent, that proportion is higher than the one presented by UNICEF, it is 29% of all children living in the UK. Almost three out

of every ten children. However, of course. those who families have just a few pounds over the 60% threshold are almost as poor as those who officially count as poor.

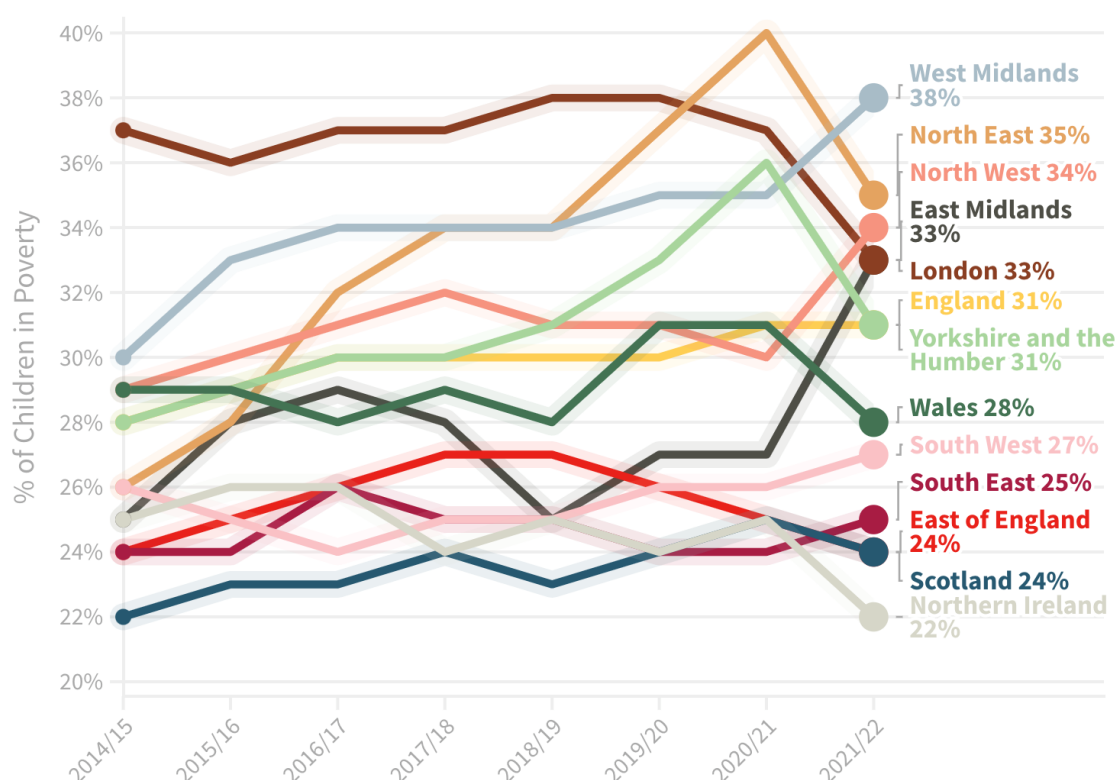
Housing costs in the AFC report include rent, water rates, mortgage interest payments, buildings insurance payments, and any ground rent or services charges; but for poorer children this is almost always rent costs that mattered most. A third of younger children in England live in private rented accommodation, which is the costliest form of accommodation of all. Almost half of all children in the UK begin their childhood now in a rental property, the large majority with private landlords, and: 'a third of millennials face renting their entire lives' (Coughlan, 2019). Private landlords make a lot of money, both from these children's families, and from the UK government (that often pays a proportion of their rent to the landlords). All these housing costs are unavoidable to families. However, note that contents insurance is not included in the list, the proportion of families that can afford to pay to insure their contents in case of fire, theft, or flood has been falling in the UK in recent years.

The proportion of parents of the poorest children in Britain who say that cannot now consider home contents insurance rose from 25 per cent to 27 per cent in the most recent DWP statistics (released in March 2023). In contrast, only 4 per cent of the best-off children's parents said this (down from 6 per cent as inequalities between these groups in the UK increase). Many poorer UK families had already given up insuring their possessions before 2019. This was happening even though the rationale for insuring was rising. Thus, the situation was worsening even while some of the statistics were not changing, such as the overall income inequality measure, because it would cost more in future, due to inflation, to replace items lost in a fire or flood, or due to theft. By 2024 many people in the UK, and especially parents for children, simply could not afford to insure against these risks any more. (Dorling, 2024).

The AFC report explained that the 'after housing costs' data allows us to compare incomes for households in different parts of the country where housing costs vary. And the result of their analysis is show in Figure 3. What is remarkable about the figure is how much the geography of child poverty has changed as compared to 20,

40 or 60 years ago. Northern Ireland now has the lowest official rate of child poverty at 22% (although the UK government ‘sanctioned’ that province during 2023 to try to force the devolved government there back into office so this proportion may be an underestimate if used as an indication of the current likely rate of official child poverty there). Scotland by 2021/22 already had the second lowest official child poverty rate in the UK at 24%. The South East of England, which excludes London, now has a higher proportion of its children living in poverty than in Scotland (and it is still rising according to recent reports). The success of Scotland is almost entirely due to the recent actions of the Scottish government to reduce child poverty by giving more money to the families with the poorest children (Dorling, 2023).

Figure 3: Child poverty across the nations and regions of the UK 2014/15 to 2021/22



Source: AFC (2024) Where is child poverty increasing in the UK?, Action for Children Report, 1 January, <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/blog/where-is-child-poverty-increasing-in-the-uk/>

Every line in Figure 3 is a line that illustrates how the English now tolerate between a fifth and in some cases over a third of our children growing up in poverty. This is poverty according to the official definition. If other definitions are used, such as

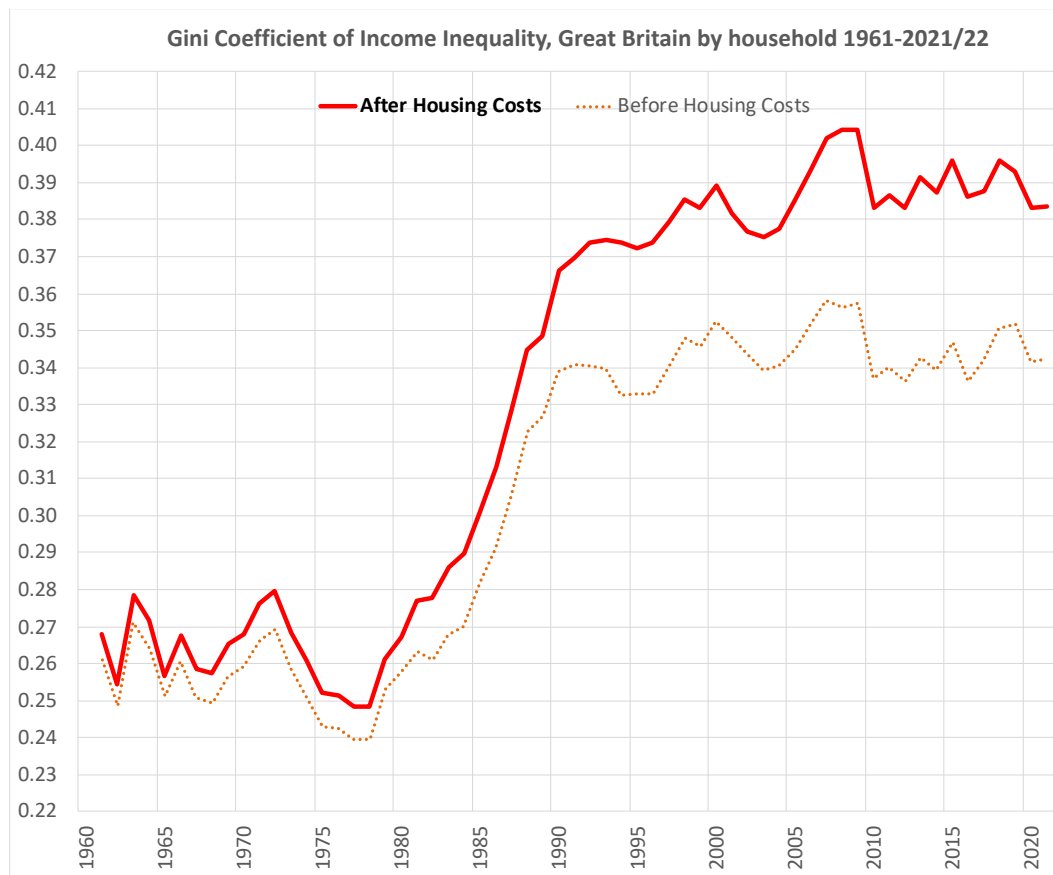
whether a family has enough to live on above a minimum income standard, the proportions are all higher. The other countries of the UK are less tolerant of high rates of poverty, but other than Scotland's recent fall, which now looks as if it will be permanent, this is a graph of shame. Some other lines appear to fall in the year 2021/2022 because of temporary pandemic social security measures and random fluctuation in the sample used to measure them which was badly taken due to the pandemic and The UK government deliberately reducing the sample size.

Obscuration was not the reason why the UK government deliberately reduced the sample size of the survey it funds to, among much else, estimate of official numbers of children living in poverty. The survey was cut in size to save money. No UK government minister since 2010 has shown much interest in what the survey reveals. Before then it was of more interest because of UK wide child poverty targets. The only part of the UK where they are still a target being taken seriously is Scotland. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act of 2017 required Scottish Ministers to ensure that less than 18% of children in Scotland were living in poverty by the official measure in 2023/24, and that less than 10% of children will be living in poverty by 2030. So far the target in Scotland has not been hit. However, having a target clearly has an effect as Figure 3 illustrates, and the new emergency measures introduced in Scotland are now having an effect (Kidner, 2024).

The origins of the great rise in child poverty

Figure 3 shows how people in the UK have come to learn to live with very high rates of economic inequality which inevitably result in extremely high permanent rates of child poverty. Figure 4 shows how income inequality was forced up to grow high across Great Britain from its lows in the 1960s and 1970s to quickly reach a plateau by the year 2000 which it has never descending (IFS, 2024). The UK as a whole moved during this period from being one of the most equitable countries in Europe to being the most inequitable. Child poverty soared as a result. Families with children were worse hit than most families, especially after housing costs were included.

Figure 4: The long-term trend in income inequality in Britain: from equitable to very unequal



Source: IFS (2024) Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK, Institute for Fiscal Studies, <https://ifs.org.uk/living-standards-poverty-and-inequality-uk> (accessed 11 January 2024).

The final uptick in Figure 4 indicates inequality rising slightly in the most recent period measured. This occurred because the short-term measures to relieve extreme poverty during the pandemic were removed (outside of Scotland). However, there is a limit to how much graphs and tables of data can have an impact, so I'll end this paper with the story of one child, and his slow death in England in early 2024, following the death of his father.

On the 16th of January 2024 the Sun Newspaper broke the story of two-year-old Bronson Battersby who had been found starved to death curled up next to his father Kenneth. Kenneth had died of a heart attack at the age of 60. The two had last been seen by a neighbour 14 days earlier (Pattinson and Dale, 2024). Five days after the initial press reports, the BBC reported the police and crime commissioner of the county Bronson and Kenneth died in as suggesting that any speculation over their demise was at that point 'unhelpful' (Iredale, 2024).

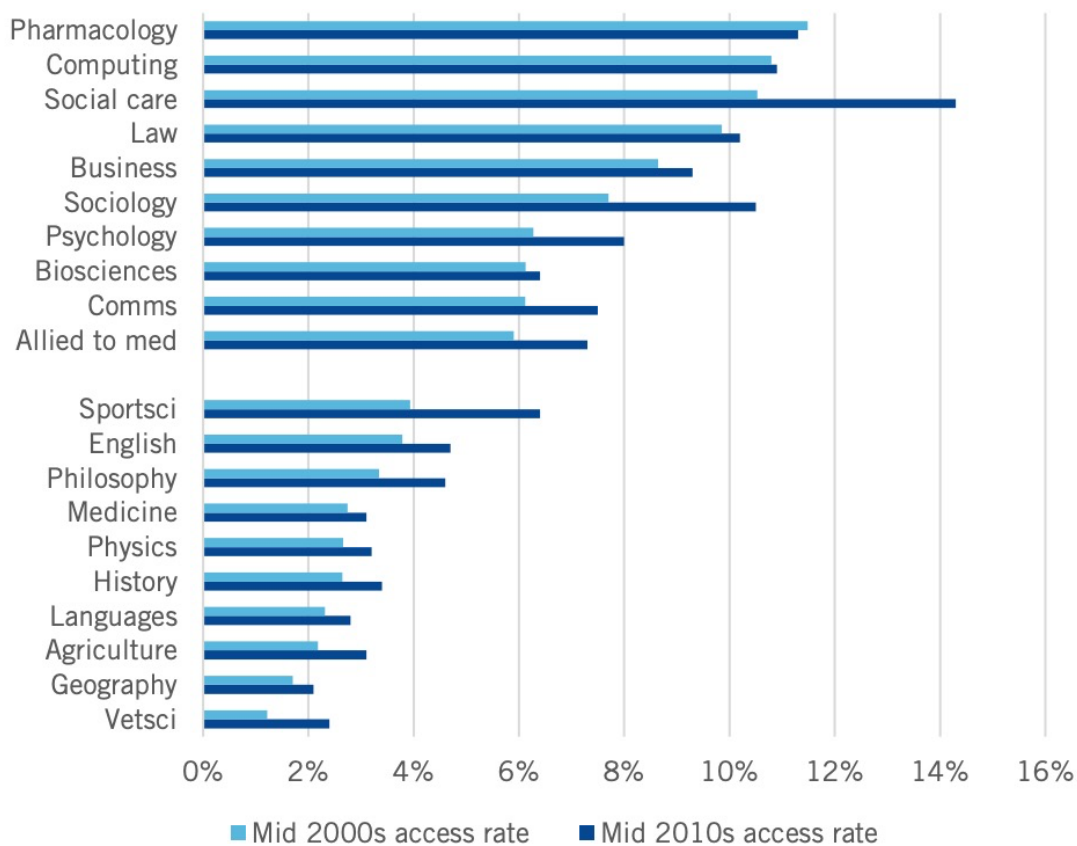
A week on and other news reports suggested that in places like the town in which Bronson and his father died, a place of much poverty and where more than usual lived 'chaotic lives', often it is only the local social services who might 'pick up the pieces' (Staff Reporter, 2024). These reports pointed out that there was only one social worker for every dozen children known to be very vulnerable nationally, and those social workers had a great deal more to do than just keep an eye on that dozen children. The news reporters explained that social work was becoming harder to do as other services such as GPs withdraw; as deprivation rises; and because the starting salary for social work is only £24,000.

How little we understand each other

No one asked why the pieces were falling apart. Instead, an inquiry was begun to ascertain whether any failings could be ascribed to individual professionals and 'missed opportunities' (Anonymous, 2024). All such enquires are limited in their scope. The death of the 60-year-old man, Bronson's father Kenneth, was treated as commonplace. But there was a time when our health was improving, when poverty was falling, when lives were less chaotic, and when fewer children and adults died each week. More people now die of destitution in England, more are only found much later, their bodies putrefied (Hiam, et al, 2023).

Figure 5: Geography university students are the least likely to have ever been poor in the UK

Figure 8. Proportion of students eligible for Free School Meals, by subject studied. Top 10 and bottom 10.



Source: Britton, J., Drayton, E., and Van der Erve, L. (2021) Universities and Social Mobility, London: The Sutton Trust, 24 November, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/universities-and-social-mobility/>

I am English and I am writing this article in a small city in the heart of England. You may be English too, but if not you have a better chance of understanding a part of what is wrong. We, the English, are a people that do not know themselves. Nowhere is this more the case than in our study of the human geography of Britain. We cannot know ourselves because we have become so very divided. We can try to understand others, as geographical explorers once tried to understand those whose lands they crossed, because our experiences of life now differ so much that in the case of academic geography in Britain, 98% of us have never experienced poverty as a child. Figure 5 shows a graph drawn to illustrate which groups of people were most and least likely to have ever eaten free meals at school because their parents were poor by the subject they went on to study at university. In the 2000s geography

undergraduates were the second least likely (Britton et al., 2021). By the 2010s they were the least likely of all. Of all 86 subjects studied in UK universities by more than 500 students the subject studied most by the rich and least by the poor is human geography (Dorling, 2022).

Two months before Bronson Battersby's slow death, the President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health pulled the alarm. No one listened. Dr Camilla Kingdon was reacting to the latest release of the National Child Mortality Database which showed a dramatic increase in deaths among children aged 1 to 4. She said: *'Behind this awful data published today, is a whole raft of deteriorating child health outcomes and the clear driver is rising child poverty in the UK.'* (Media & Public Affairs Team, 2024).

She was speaking, in effect, to an empty room. This was not an issue deemed of much importance anymore, at least not in England. People in the other parts of the UK appear to care a little more which may be why child poverty is slightly more rare there (Figure 3). Other statements she made on other issues were reported in the press, but not her warning on the deaths of children in the UK (Hallows and Sawer, 2023). This perhaps helps illustrate why it matters if academic subjects such as geography do not see poverty and inequality as a priority. That view can then pervade more widely. I am not arguing that geographers matter that much, more that the general lack of interest being low among those who are better-off matters greatly.

Death rates have risen among England children of all ages, and all social classes, but most of all for those who are living in poor areas and especially for the youngest children like Bronson. The greatest rise had occurred in the most recent twelve months, between 2022 and 2023. But, so what? We are used to these stories now. Many of us cannot remember a time when there was good news. 'Tragic but inevitable' appears to be the response, and at least (we secretly think to ourselves) it is mostly only happening in the poorest of areas – even if child mortality is now rising everywhere, in all social groups but most of the poorest of all.

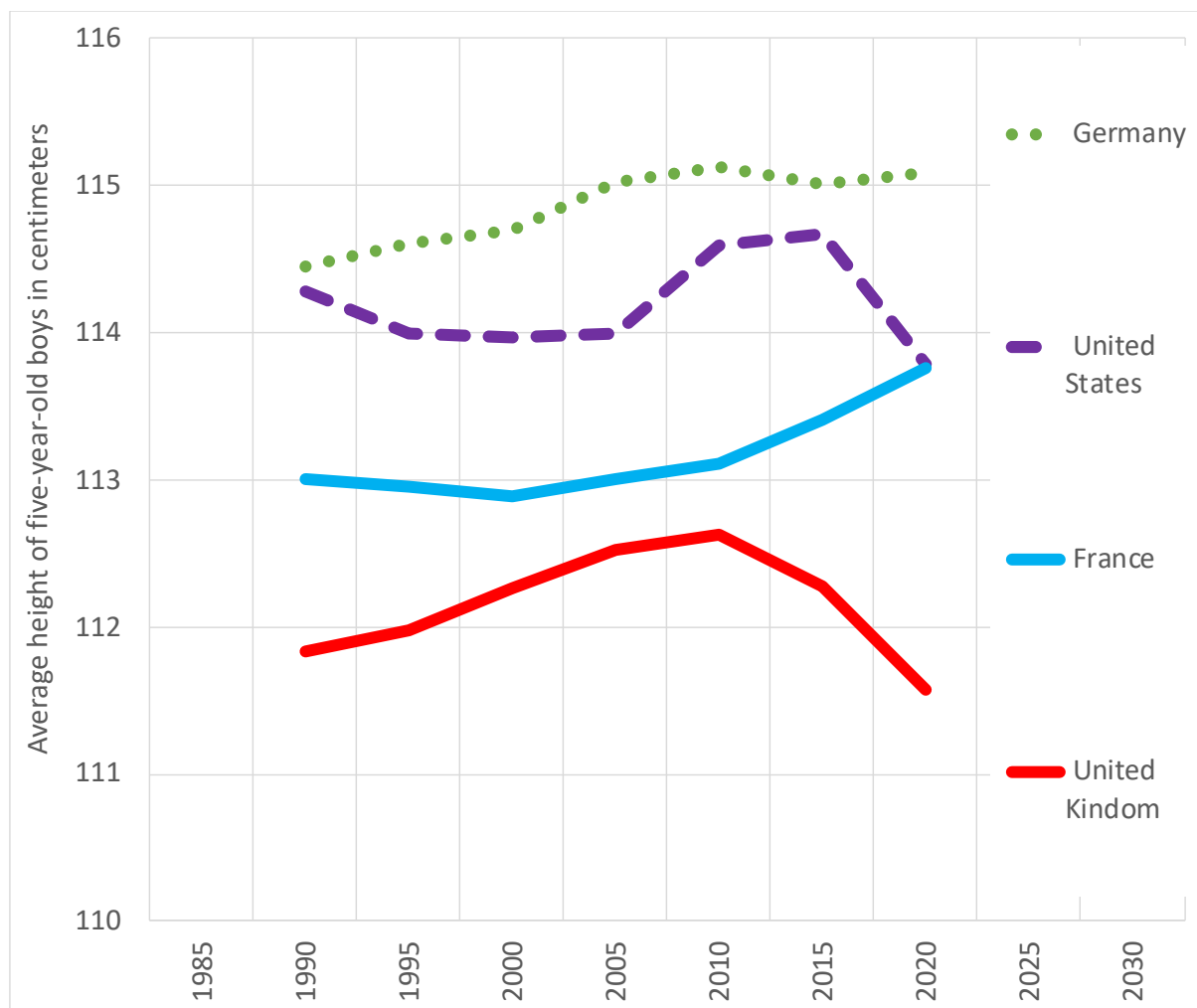
In times like these people tend to keep their children close. Teachers do not talk about the lives of other children, and few poor children take the academic subject of geography at school once there is the option to drop it. Geography is sold as one of the ten academic subjects most likely to get you a high paid job if you study it, but that is only because of who goes on to study geography at university, not because of what they learn there (Dorling, 2022). When inequality is high, trying to get a well-paid job becomes even more of a desperate priority for the already well-off because being normal becomes terrifying, poverty is unimaginable. There is a temptation not to stay friends with people who are beginning to lead more chaotic lives. You aim upwards; choose 'better' friends; and worry about climate change.

When we tolerate this

The National Life Tables for the UK were released five days before Bronson and his father were found dead (ONS, 2024b). The first revision since 2021; but we don't look any more – it is no longer news. Life expectancy in the three years to 2022 was 78.6 for men and 82.6 for women. It had been 78.7 and 82.7 before. It was falling partly because the period before included a pandemic-free year. A decade earlier, men lived over 79 years and women 82.8. But that was back in 2012-2014.

The deaths of two-year-old boys make a tiny contribution to the national figures. By 2020-22 the national UK mortality rates of two-year-old boys, like Bronson, according to the new National Life Tables had risen to 15 per 100,000; its highest level since 2015-2017. In all of British recorded mortality history it has never risen by as much as it was reported to have risen most recently. The National Child Mortality Database figures are even more up to date. They are worse. So, we already know that it will be higher again when the life tables are next updated, probably two years from now.

Figure 6: The change in the average heights of boys in selected countries 1990-2020



Source: ITV (2023) British children shorter than other five-year-olds in Europe, study finds, Television News Reports of Imperial College London research findings, 21 June, <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-06-21/british-children-shorter-than-other-five-year-olds-in-europe>

We don't ask the most important question of all. Why don't ask the geographical questions. We ask about the competence of professionals, or the supposedly fecklessness of individuals, but we do not ask *why*, more children are now dying young. We don't ask why the heights of our children have been falling, beginning for those born in 2005 who were hardly any taller than those born five years before them (Figure 6). British Children's height had been rising for more than a century. We don't ask why this can be when child heights are still rising in France and only stalled for a short time in Germany, and only then in the brief years when hundreds of thousands of children from war-torn Syria were allowed in as refugees (ITV, 2023). And we don't ask why we are behaving like the only other country in the rich world to be seeing the same thing occur – we don't ask why are we copying the United States

of America? Internationally the study of Geography is dominated by the United States and the UK. Is it any one we have such a warped view?

We don't ask why the two largest political parties in England now support the two-child policy on benefits – condemning a majority of English children (56%) with two or more siblings to go hungry several times a month in 2023 (Dorling, 2023). In England we do not know that in Scotland this is not done; or that the special extra Scottish child payment was increased in November 2022 so that no children north of the border need go cold or hungry – or be so stunted in height in the future.

To be honest, I can see why. I am using colloquial language rather than academic language; but I want to get my point across, and academic language is often not the best way to do that. There comes a time when you might as well just give up; throw the towel in; accept that our children will be worse fed, shorter in stature, and most will live lives a little more desperate than before. Why not accept that hope is dead and all we can do is to try to look after just ourselves and our families because we killed our society, our social empathy, our soul?

Or you can pick yourself up and say this far and no further. That we do still have a society. That there were people who did knock on Bronson's door to try to help, and there are millions who care, deeply, but we also know that the situation could get much worse. And neither of the two main political parties is committed to reducing child poverty any more, or even to abandoning the cruel two-child-policy in who receives child benefits – which never applied in Scotland. If you want to look for hope in the UK you do not have to look far. Scotland now make additional payments to families with children in addition to all the benefits they received before. The English try to pretend that is not happening. Geographers can help in rectifying this problem greatly, both by learning more about what is happening, and then by teaching about the growth in poverty and inequality, starting with children.

References

AFC (2024) Where is child poverty increasing in the UK?, Action for Children Report, 1 January, <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/blog/where-is-child-poverty-increasing-in-the-uk/>

Anonymous (2024) Baby Bronson: Social services did what they could within the powers that they had, Social Work Today, 19 January, <https://www.socialworktoday.co.uk/News/baby-bronson%3A-social-services-did-what-they-could-within-the-powers-that-they-had>

Britton, J., Drayton, E., and Van der Erve, L. (2021) Universities and Social Mobility, London: The Sutton Trust, 24 November, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/universities-and-social-mobility/>

Coughlan, S. (2019) Half of babies born to families renting, BBC News, 28 March, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47723672>

CPAG (2023) Official child poverty statistics: 350,000 more children in poverty and numbers will rise, Child Poverty Action Group, Report of 23 March, <https://cpag.org.uk/news/official-child-poverty-statistics-350000-more-children-poverty-and-numbers-will-rise>

Dorling, D. (2022) Where are we heading? The example of generational change in British academic Geography. *Environment and Planning F*, 1(1): 125-142.

Dorling, D. (2023) *Shattered Nation: Inequality and the Geography of a Failing State*, London: Verso.

Dorling, D. (2024) *Peak injustice: Solving Britain's Inequality Crisis*, Policy Press, Bristol. Figures in the introduction to Section 6: 'Yesterday, tomorrow – and hope'.

Hallows, R. and Sawyer P. (2023) Colleagues left 'appalled' by top doctor's comments on Israeli response to Hamas attacks: Dr Camilla Kingdon also failed to mention child hostages when writing about conflict and hospital strike in Gaza, *The Telegraph*, 21 October, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/10/21/royal-college-president-dr-camila-kingdon-israel-hamas-war/>

Hiam, L., Estrin-Serlui, T., Dorling, D., McKee, M. and Minton, J. (2023) A deathly silence: why has the number of people found decomposed in England and Wales been rising? *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 21 November, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01410768231209001>

IFS (2024) Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK, Open Access Spreadsheet, Institute for Fiscal Studies, <https://ifs.org.uk/living-standards-poverty-and-inequality-uk> (accessed 11 January 2024).

Iredale, T. (2024) Speculation over Bronson Battersby death 'unhelpful', *The BBC*, 21 January, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-68035493>

ITV (2023) British children shorter than other five-year-olds in Europe, study finds, Television News Reports of Imperial College London research findings, 21 June, <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-06-21/british-children-shorter-than-other-five-year-olds-in-europe>

Kidner, C. (2024) Scottish Child Payment: evidence presented to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee 16th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), 23 May, Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) <https://www.parliament.scot/~media/committ/8361>

Media & Public Affairs team (2024) RCPCH responds to latest National Child Mortality Database figures, Royal College of Paediatrics and child Health, Press Release, 10 November, <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/rcpch-responds-latest-national-child-mortality-database-figures>

ONS (2024a) Percentile points from 1 to 99 for total income before and after tax, Office for National Statistics, 29 February, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/percentile-points-from-1-to-99-for-total-income-before-and-after-tax>

ONS (2024b) National life tables: UK, Official for National Statistics, 11 January, <https://cy.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/datasets/nationallifetablesunitedkingdomreferencetables>

Pattinson R. and Dale, R. (2024) Horror as ‘gorgeous’ Bronson Battersby, 2, in pyjamas [sic] left to die alone next to his dead dad – why did no one save him?, The Sun, 16 January, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/25386865/bronson-battersby-died-alone-dead-dad/>

Philo, C. (1995) Off the Map: Social Geography of Poverty, London: Child Poverty Action Group.

Staff Reporter (2024) Bronson Battersby: a toddler's tragic death, The Week, 27 January, <https://theweek.com/crime/bronson-battersby-a-toddlers-tragic-death>

TUC (2023) ‘UK workers will miss out on £3,600 in pay this year as a result of wages not keeping pace with the OECD’, Trades Union Congress, 10 July, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/uk-workers-will-miss-out-ps3600-pay-year-result-wages-not-keeping-pace-oecd>

UNICEF (2023) Innocenti Report Card 18: Child poverty in the midst of wealth, Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, December, <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3291/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>

¹ Universal Credit is the current name for the set of means-tested social security benefits that can be applied for by people of working age who are on a low income, live in the UK, and fall into eligible citizenship categories. So many jobs pay so little money that many people receiving universal credit are in work. The payment can include allowances to make possible some of the cost of cheapest of housing, the most basic

items needed for raising children (mostly food), extra costs associated with having a disability, or with being a carer for someone who needs care. Which of these people receive depends on their circumstances, and is very difficult to understand. If an application is successful, then Universal Credit is paid monthly. In Scotland, people can choose to have it paid twice a month. Outside of Scotland, they can ask for it to be paid twice monthly but such a request can be refused. It is the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that calculates how much money a person receives and in short, they apply two steps in that calculation. They calculate what the DWP thinks a person should need to live on, based on their household's circumstances, and then they subtract some of the income an applicant is receiving from the amount of Universal Credit that is awarded. This is called 'tapering' and means that most people in very low paid work receive very little extra money for the work they do. More information is available here: <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/get-support/information-for-your-situation/universal-credit-uc/what-is-universal-credit-uc> and note that the main proposed alternative to Universal Credit is what is called A Basic Income and it is not means-tested (see: <https://basicincome.org/>).