

The UK government has failed to act on extreme poverty

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The UN's special rapporteur on extreme poverty has said that the UK is "in violation of international law" over poverty levels. This is shocking, but not surprising, argue Lucinda Hiam and Danny Dorling

In 2018, Philip Alston, the UN's special rapporteur on extreme poverty, described in detail the "gross misery" that the UK government had "inflicted" on the population through the "punitive, mean spirited, and often callous" policies of austerity.¹ Alston said the levels of child poverty in the UK were "not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster."¹

In November 2023, Olivier De Schutter, Alston's successor as UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty, visited the UK. So, what's changed? The "disgrace" of child poverty has not improved. In fact, it has worsened. A reported one million children in the UK experienced destitution in 2022.² This means their families "could not afford to adequately feed, clothe, or clean them, or keep them warm." The destitution was the result of cuts to benefits and an utterly inadequate government response to the cost of living crisis.² This was anticipated and, arguably, could have been prevented. The alarm has been raised repeatedly and consistently over the harms of austerity in the past decade. For example, in 2014, an open letter to then prime minister David Cameron raised substantial health concerns about the impacts of food poverty and poor nutrition.³ Yet, food insecurity and food bank use have increased, closely linked to government implemented austerity.^{4,5}

Between 2022 and 2023, the number of children living in food poverty almost doubled,⁶ and in September 2022 one quarter of households with children had experienced food insecurity in the past month, rising to 42% of households where there were three or more children.⁷ Five year old boys in Britain are now shorter than those of the same age in Europe.⁸ The trend in heights had been steadily increasing from 1990, but this ended and reversed after 2010, so much so that by 2020 they were shorter than they were in 1990. And now, in 2023, startling data from the National Child Mortality Database show rising infant and child mortality rates across England, with increasing regional deprivation and ethnicity inequalities.⁹ Despite all this, the government is reportedly considering freezing working-age benefits—a move that the Resolution Foundation estimates would put an additional 400 000 children into absolute poverty.¹⁰

The enduring disgrace of child poverty in the UK is perhaps the worst of so much that is going wrong in a state where things have fallen apart.¹¹ And of course, solutions do exist in a state as rich as the UK. According to Action for Children, the temporary increase in Universal Credit during the covid-19 pandemic (by £20/week) lifted 400 000 children out of poverty.¹² The withdrawal of this increase, combined with the cost of living crisis, meant the number of children living in poverty returned to pre-pandemic levels of 4.2 million.¹² In contrast, in Scotland, where they have maintained child benefit payments for the third child in a family (and others), child poverty is now lower than in eight of the nine regions of England, with fewer children in poverty in Scotland (24%) than in England as a whole (31%).¹³ Furthermore, Scotland has recently raised its additional Scottish child payment to £25 a week for any child aged under 16 in any household in receipt of benefits, which will lower child poverty there further.¹⁴ Wales's children's commissioner is advocating to introduce a similar payment in Wales.¹⁵ Child poverty can be reduced if the will is there.

Given the levels of child poverty and hunger in the UK—often said to be the fifth richest country in the world—it is not surprising that De Schutter has found that “things have gotten worse”, saying “The warning signals that Philip Alston gave five years ago were not acted upon”.¹⁶ De Schutter has said that the current universal credit that a single person over 25 receives (£85/week) is “too low to protect people from poverty” and that this, in turn, is a violation of human rights law.^{16 17} This is consistent with evidence demonstrating that universal credit does not provide enough money to live healthily.¹⁸⁻²⁰ But what impact will De Schutter's shocking statement have?

This is not the first report of its kind, nor will it be the last. It is hard to find the words to express the impact of 13 years of a government that does not accept, let alone act upon, such damning evidence from a respected international body. But as Michael Marmot explained in February 2023, the UK government is now: “Creating the conditions for ill health by denying minimum income for a healthy life. It is government policy that people who need benefits, Universal Credit, will have only 70% of the money they need to live healthily.”²⁰

In response to the UN rapporteur, an unnamed government spokesperson made a series of claims about 1.7 million fewer people living in absolute poverty as compared to 12 years earlier and households being better-off if they worked.¹⁶ The selective use of numbers or indicators to refute the robust findings of multiple experts is not a useful response from a democratic government. De Schutter said: “There's a huge gap, which is increasingly troubling, between the kinds of indicators the government chooses to assess its progress on one hand, and the lived experience of people living in poverty.”¹⁶

Before the past 13 years of austerity, statements about the levels of poverty in the UK from international bodies like the United Nations would be shocking. But, in the UK today, these headlines, along with the evidence being given in the covid inquiry, are met by many with apathy.²¹ On 7 November 2023, the King's Speech mentioned children in two areas: one in a welcome move to restrict sales of tobacco and electronic cigarettes to children, and the other relating to a criminal justice bill.²² There was no mention of the one million children living in destitution, the four million children facing food insecurity, the 4.2 million children living in poverty, or the cuts in public services, wages, and benefits that have put them there. We must demand more from our government and expect that by the time the next UN special rapporteur visits the UK, we will have seen significant positive change.

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