

The poverty of care

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The [latest poverty data](#) from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is already being met with a familiar shrug. The BBC appears not to have noticed the report. Politicians are not debating it. And the headline figures look broadly unchanged. Around one in five people in the UK is still reported to be in poverty. Compared with pre-pandemic levels, the rate appears flat. For some, that will be taken as evidence that the situation is stable, or at least not deteriorating. That interpretation is, however, wrong, and dangerously so.

As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has put it:

On the surface, it might appear that nothing has changed. But persistently high poverty rates lead to worsening real-world outcomes.

What they make clear is that what has changed is not the extent of poverty, but its nature. Poverty in the UK has become deeper, more entrenched, and more destructive. And, as they note, the longer this is tolerated, the more damage it does to individuals, to communities, and to the economy itself.

There are several reasons to think those concerned with our political economy are wrong to ignore this report.

First, poverty has deepened to an unprecedented degree. In 2023/24, 6.8 million people, or almost half of everyone in poverty, were living in very deep poverty, with incomes no more than two-thirds of the poverty line. That is the highest number and highest proportion since records began in the mid-1990s. The poorest households are now, on average, 59 per cent below the poverty threshold. This is not marginal hardship. It is, all too obviously, systematic exclusion.

Second, the consequences of prolonged poverty are cumulative. The JRF highlights the lived impacts, whether they be fatigue, hunger, stress and social disconnection. These are not incidental effects. They directly undermine people's ability to work, learn, care, and participate in society. Poverty in this sense narrows horizons and reduces economic contribution. It is not just a moral failure; it is also a macroeconomic one.

Third, destitution and food insecurity have accelerated quite alarmingly. What is defined as destitution more than doubled between 2017 and 2022. Food insecurity grew even faster. Between 2021/22 and 2023/24, the total number of people who were food insecure increased by 2.8 million, which represents an increase of 60 per cent in just two years. Among people already in poverty, food insecurity rose by nearly half. This is the predictable result of a benefits system that has been allowed to drift towards levels of support where destitution is an inevitability.

Fourth, work no longer provides protection against poverty. While employment is shown to reduce the risk of poverty, it is far from a guarantee. In-work poverty has risen steadily, particularly among part-time workers, the self-employed, and those working in hospitality and administrative support. Two-thirds of working-age adults in poverty live in households where someone is in work. That provides clear evidence that low pay, insecure hours and weak labour protections are now central drivers of hardship.

Fifth, poverty follows lines of inequality. Disabled people, informal carers, renters, larger families, lone parents, and people from some minority ethnic groups face persistently higher poverty rates. Over half of the people in Bangladeshi households and around half in Pakistani households live in poverty, with even higher rates for children. Disabled people face poverty rates eight percentage points higher than non-disabled people, despite rising employment levels. This problem is not down to individuals. It is because of the structural design that creates discrimination by political choice.

Sixth, housing costs are also actively manufacturing poverty. Around four in ten social renters and more than a third of private renters are in poverty after housing costs. Many are only pushed below the poverty line once rent is taken into account. This is not a market failure; it is the obvious outcome of a housing system organised around rent extraction rather than personal security.

Seventh, geography reflects policy choices. London has the highest poverty rate, driven largely by housing costs. Scotland, by contrast, has significantly lower child poverty, in part because of the Scottish Child Payment, which indicates the impact enlightened government policy can have on poverty-related issues whilst proving that poverty is not inevitable. The implication is obvious: benefits reduce poverty when governments choose to deploy them properly.

The Government's Child Poverty Strategy does, therefore, matter. Scrapping the two-child limit was the single most effective intervention available to lift children out of poverty, and if DWP modelling proves accurate, child poverty could fall by 400,000 over this Parliament as a result, which would be a historically significant shift.

But that is not enough. Even after that reform, more than 4 million children are forecast to remain in poverty by the end of the decade. Other groups remain largely ignored. Some planned changes, including cuts affecting people who fall ill, will worsen hardship.

The basic rate of Universal Credit remains perilously close to destitution thresholds. This is not a safety net. It is a poverty trap.

The deeper lesson of the JRF analysis is unavoidable. Poverty in the UK is not the result of bad luck or temporary shocks. It is the outcome of fragmented, reactive and often damaging policy over two decades. Weak income growth, high housing costs, benefit cuts and the normalisation of food banks as a substitute for rights have produced a system that generates deepening poverty by default.

The consequences are profound. Poverty damages health, undermines children's development, constrains decision-making and suppresses future earning power. It also holds back economic growth. A society that tolerates mass hardship wastes human potential on a colossal scale, whilst reducing the spending power that resource reallocation would create.

The direction of travel must change in that case. That means abandoning the idea that poverty reduction must wait for growth, because that means it might never happen. In any case, improving living standards is not dependent on growth; it is a condition for it. That means setting social security at levels that genuinely cover essentials, re-linking housing support to real rents, rebuilding labour protections, and treating housing, care and income security as core economic infrastructure.

Above all, it means recognising that poverty is a political choice. Scotland shows that different outcomes are possible. Until the UK chooses differently, poverty will remain not just widespread, but deeper, more persistent and more destructive with each passing year. We need a politics of care. Right now we have a poverty of care