

## **Poverty is killing children**

According to the Association of Directors of Children's Services, there are now 4.2 million children in the UK living in poverty. Seven out of ten of these children live in a household where at least one adult works and 43 per cent of children with two or more siblings live in poverty. One in four older young people have a probable mental health condition, up from one in ten in 2017. Tooth decay is the most common reason children between five and nine are admitted to hospital. Since 2017, the number of children living in destitution has risen threefold.

Professor Kevin Fenton, the President of the Faculty of Public Health, says that poverty in the UK 'constitutes a public health crisis' which impacts children particularly, reducing their life expectancy and healthy life years. The consequences will continue to damage the labour market, the economy and society as a whole for decades to come.

The most stark and horrifying emanation of this crisis is to be found in the most recent (2023) data release from the National Child Mortality Database (NCMD). In the year ending 31 March 2023, 3,743 children aged between 0 and 17 died. This was an 8 per cent increase from the previous year and the highest number of deaths since the NCMD started to collect data in 2019. These tragedies are not distributed evenly. The child death rate for children resident in the most deprived areas of England was 48.1 per 100,000 population, more than twice that of children resident in the least deprived neighbourhoods, where the rate was 18.7 children per 100,000 of population. The NCMD tells us that whilst the rate in the least deprived areas has fallen slightly from the previous year, 'the death rate for the most deprived areas continued to rise, demonstrating widening inequalities'. Allied with this, we can also see that the child death rate was highest for children of Black or Black British ethnicity, at 56.6 children per 100,000 population. For children of Asian and Asian British ethnicity, the rate was also high, at 50.8 per 100,000 population.

Infant mortality rates (babies dying under one year of age) had been falling since 1900 (when the rate was 150 per 1,000 live births) and fell consistently from the end of the Second World War until 2021. At that point, there was a change. From a rate of 3.4 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 2021, the rate has begun to climb, from 3.6 in 2022 to 3.8 in 2023. The impact of these increases, again, depends on where and to whom the child is born. The 2023 rate of babies dying was 5.9 per 1,000 of infant population for babies born in the most deprived areas, which is more than twice that of babies living in the least deprived areas, where the rate was 2.2 per 1,000 of infant population. Since 2021, the infant death rate for the most deprived quartile has risen from 4.8 to 5.9. These are unnecessary deaths.

Black or Black British babies have the highest rate of infant mortality, with 8.7 per 1,000 live births in 2023. This has risen from 5.9 in 2020. For Asian or Asian

British infants, the rate for 2023 is 6.2, rising from 5.2 in 2020. Putting the infant mortality rate for Black infants into some context, it is comparable to the current infant mortality rate for Albania or to the UK infant mortality rate 35 years ago in 1989. Children's health is going backwards, leaving our children some of the poorest and most vulnerable in Europe.

Speaking about this data, Dr Camilla Kingdon, the President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, points out that 'behind this awful data ... is a whole raft of deteriorating child health outcomes and the clear driver is rising poverty in the UK. Poverty, health inequalities and the associated loss of life is not inevitable. Poverty is a political choice.'

For those who are still to be persuaded that poverty is killing children, consider the impact of cold, damp housing as one 'smoking gun'. In 2022, research by University College London's Institute of Health Equity showed how children's lung function and brain development can be negatively impacted by living in a cold home. Young children, aged under five, are, according to NICE and Public Health England, particularly vulnerable to cold, damp houses. A further, February 2024, report by the Institute for Health Equity tells us that the UK's housing stock is one of the worst in Europe, with over 50 per cent of homes needing upgrading. The cost of fuel is 30 per cent higher than the European average and real wages are reported to 'have flatlined since 2011 compared to rises in most OECD countries'. There has been an increase in the number of houses affected by damp and mould, probably associated with a reduction in heating and poor ventilation. Damp and mould make children ill and the UK's children miss more school days due to diseases caused by damp than any EU member state.

It is no coincidence that those who live in the worst housing live in the same deprived areas and are of the same ethnicities we have already seen in the child mortality data. Be under no illusions, we have chosen to let children die.

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