

# Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in the United Kingdom

Statement by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur

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*The UK is the world's fifth largest economy, it contains many areas of immense wealth, its capital is a leading centre of global finance, its entrepreneurs are innovative and agile, and despite the current political turmoil, it has a system of government that rightly remains the envy of much of the world. It thus seems patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty. This is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes to see the immense growth in foodbanks and the queues waiting outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the Government to appoint a Minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard of levels of loneliness and isolation. And local authorities, especially in England, which perform vital roles in providing a real social safety net have been gutted by a series of government policies. Libraries have closed in record numbers, community and youth centers have been shrunk and underfunded, public spaces and buildings including parks and recreation centers have been sold off. While the labour and housing markets provide the crucial backdrop, the focus of this report is on the contribution made by social security and related policies.*

## **The results? 14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty.**

Four million of these are more than 50% below the poverty line,[1] and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials.[2]

The widely respected Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts a 7% rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2022, and various sources predict child poverty rates of as high as 40%.<sup>3</sup> For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.

But the full picture of low-income well-being in the UK cannot be captured by statistics alone. Its manifestations are clear for all to see. The country's most respected charitable groups, its leading think tanks, its parliamentary committees, independent authorities like the National Audit Office, and many others, have all drawn attention to the dramatic decline in the fortunes of the least well off in this country. But through it all, one actor has stubbornly resisted seeing the situation for what it is. The Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial. Even while devolved authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland are frantically trying to devise ways to 'mitigate', or in other words counteract, at least the worst features of the Government's benefits policy, Ministers insisted to me that all

is well and running according to plan. Some tweaks to basic policy have reluctantly been made, but there has been a determined resistance to change in response to the many problems which so many people at all levels have brought to my attention. The good news is that many of the problems could readily be solved if the Government were to acknowledge the problems and consider some of the recommendations below.

In my travels across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland I met with people living in poverty, whether old, young, disabled, in work or not. I talked with civil society, front line workers, work coaches, and officials from local, devolved, and UK governments; and visited community organizations, social housing, a Jobcentre, a food bank, an advice center, a library, and a primary school. I also met a range of Ministers in the central government and in Wales, as well as with the First Minister in Scotland. I spoke at length with politicians from all of the major political parties.

In the past two weeks I have talked with people who depend on food banks and charities for their next meal, who are sleeping on friends' couches because they are homeless and don't have a safe place for their children to sleep, who have sold sex for money or shelter, children who are growing up in poverty unsure of their future, young people who feel gangs are the only way out of destitution, and people with disabilities who are being told they need to go back to work or lose support, against their doctor's orders.

I have also seen tremendous resilience, strength, and generosity, with neighbors supporting one another, councils seeking creative solutions, and charities stepping in to fill holes in government services. I also heard stories of deeply compassionate work coaches and of a regional Jobcenter director who had transformed the ethos in the relevant offices.

Although the provision of social security to those in need is a public service and a vital anchor to prevent people being pulled into poverty, the policies put in place since 2010 are usually discussed under the rubric of austerity. But this framing leads the inquiry in the wrong direction. In the area of poverty-related policy, the evidence points to the conclusion that the driving force has not been economic but rather a commitment to achieving radical social re-engineering. Successive governments have brought revolutionary change in both the system for delivering minimum levels of fairness and social justice to the British people, and especially in the values underpinning it. Key elements of the post-war Beveridge social contract are being overturned. In the process, some good outcomes have certainly been achieved, but great misery has also been inflicted unnecessarily, especially on the working poor, on single mothers struggling against mighty odds, on people with disabilities who are already marginalized, and on millions of children who are being locked into a cycle of poverty from which most will have great difficulty escaping.

Most of the political debate around social well-being in the UK has focused only on the goals sought to be achieved. These goals are in many respects admirable, even though some have been controversial. They include a commitment to place employment at the heart of anti-poverty policy, a quest for greater efficiency and cost savings, a determination to simplify an excessively complicated and unwieldy benefits system, a desire to increase the uptake of benefits by those entitled, removing the 'welfare cliff' that deterred beneficiaries from seeking work, and a desire to provide more skills training.

But Universal Credit and the other far-reaching changes to the role of government in supporting people in distress are almost always 'sold' as being part of an unavoidable

program of fiscal 'austerity', needed to save the country from bankruptcy. In fact, however, the reforms have almost certainly cost the country far more than their proponents will admit. The many billions advertised as having been extracted from the benefits system since 2010 have been offset by the additional resources required to fund emergency services by families and the community, by local government, by doctors and hospital accident and emergency centres, and even by the ever- shrinking and under-funded police force.

Leaving the economics of change to one side, it is the underlying values and the ethos shaping the design and implementation of specific measures that have generated the greatest problems. The government has made no secret of its determination to change the value system to focus more on individual responsibility, to place major limits on government support, and to pursue a single-minded, and some have claimed simple-minded, focus on getting people into employment at all costs. Many aspects of this program are legitimate matters for political contestation, but it is the mentality that has informed many of the reforms that has brought the most misery and wrought the most harm to the fabric of British society. British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach apparently designed to instill discipline where it is least useful, to impose a rigid order on the lives of those least capable of coping with today's world, and elevating the goal of enforcing blind compliance over a genuine concern to improve the well-being of those at the lowest levels of British society. I provide various examples later in this statement.

**[To read the full statement, click here.](#)**

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