

Hunger affecting millions of children in UK

By Joe Mount
9 May 2017

Hunger affects an increasing number of children in Britain. Up to three million children in Britain are threatened with malnutrition outside term time, when they are not provided with school meals, according to new research.

A third of these children qualify for free meals provided by schools during term time and often go hungry during school holidays. Two million are from working households that earn poverty wages, but do not qualify for free school meals.

This was the conclusion of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger, who commissioned two months of research, including 52 written submissions, interviews with panels of expert witnesses and consultation with charities that provide food relief.

The APPG was established in 2013 by several members of parliament (MPs) led by Frank Field, the right wing Labour MP for Birkenhead in the North West. Field chairs the Work and Pensions Select Committee and was briefly the welfare minister in Tony Blair's 1997 Labour government.

The study details the causes and impact of malnourishment affecting children. Many must go days or weeks without a proper meal due to empty cupboards, while others rely upon poor-quality, cheap food that is low in nutrients such as cereals. Hunger also affects parents who feed their children before themselves.

Hunger blights young lives across the country, with over half a million children in London facing food insecurity during school breaks.

A significant proportion of teachers notice hunger among pupils when students return from school breaks. A survey of 600 teachers, conducted by the National Union of Teachers, found that half of them reported pupils affected by hunger during school holidays. The majority believed the problem has worsened in recent

years.

The study found that children return to school "malnourished, sluggish and dreary" and struggle to concentrate on their schoolwork. Those with an inadequate diet return to school lagging behind by weeks or months in intellectual and physical development compared to their better-off peers. This creates a further social barrier to healthy development and maturation into functioning adults.

Academics from Birmingham City University told the inquiry, "For vulnerable and low-income families the risks relating to nutrition, learning, emotional well-being, social interaction and financial security are most pronounced during 13 weeks of school and nursery holidays... this is most pronounced during long summer holidays where parents and carers find themselves under increased pressure to feed children and provide activities for them... upon returning to school, children and their wider family network experience decreased health and well-being, are less prepared for school and see an increase in referrals to specialist services."

The report cites one case where a group of children participating in a holiday football tournament had to drop out due to exhaustion, after not eating a full meal for several days prior to the event.

Increasing numbers of "food insecure" households rely upon emergency food assistance, but provision is insufficient, sporadic and geographically sparse due to the lack of funds and organisation. Many rely on charities, and food banks have mushroomed across the country, involving tens of thousands of volunteers. The crisis is intensifying, with the Trussell Trust food bank network reporting a doubling of cases in 2016 compared to the previous year. Over a million food parcels are now distributed by the Trust each year.

Teachers are taking on an increasing burden of feeding children by running breakfast clubs and

after-school activities. Many teachers pay with their own money to feed children who begin the new term hungry. Volunteer groups run a limited number of holiday food projects nationally.

The report states that immediate causes of the malnutrition crisis are the increased financial burdens that arise during school holidays due to increased childcare costs, fuel bills and other outgoings associated with caring and providing activities for children full-time outside school. Other families struggle due to working fewer hours to look after children, reducing their household income.

A survey by Kellogg's found that 41 percent of low-income parents suffered isolation because they cannot afford to go out and entertain their children during holidays.

Increasing numbers of children are growing up in poverty, which affects almost a third of children in Britain. Many families live on the edge of destitution, threatened by unemployment, low pay, insecure contracts, welfare benefit sanctions, unexpected bills and debt. Recent years have seen a sharp growth in impoverished working families, with two-thirds of poor children living in households with at least one working adult.

Economic instability is causing a precipitous decline in living standards of the working class in Britain and internationally. Over the past decade, wages have flat-lined while household budgets are battered by inflation, with food costs rising.

The underlying causes--which the report's authors, as supporters of the profit system cannot address--are rooted in the social misery inflicted upon the most oppressed layers of society by the capitalist ruling elite.

The responsibility for imposing these conditions lies with successive governments of all political stripes and their allies in the trade unions. The then Labour government bailed out the super-rich after the 2008 financial crash and began imposing harsh austerity measures to pay for it. This has been escalated by Conservative-led governments since 2010. Government strategy is the wholesale destruction of what remains of the welfare state, taking away social services and benefits upon which millions depend. Recent benefit cuts alone will force up to 200,000 more children into poverty and leave many families up to £3,000 worse off, according to research by the Child Poverty Action

Group and the Institute for Public Policy Research.

That millions of children face hunger in the world's fifth-richest country is a stark indictment of the failed capitalist system. The effects of hunger only entrench the social gulf dividing rich and poor. The crisis exposes the irrationality of the market system that results in tonnes of food being dumped in landfills if it cannot be sold for a profit.

The proposals advanced by APPG on Hunger to resolve the growing phenomenon of child malnutrition do not seriously address the crisis.

The report's authors suggest palliative measures, including using the revenue from a sugary drinks tax to fund volunteer-based charitable organisations, appealing to the "rich cultural tradition" of middle class philanthropy. They call for a "government lead in giving local authorities duties to convene churches, community groups, businesses, schools and public bodies in their area."

In fact the resources to address the hunger crisis exist. However, any serious attempt to deal with the question of mass poverty requires a frontal attack on the entrenched profit interests of the super wealthy. This cannot be implemented through impotent appeals to the existing political structures, but requires the independent mobilization of the working class on a socialist program.

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