

Flagship study finds 2.4 million people in U.K. experienced destitution in 2019

March 30 2021, by Annie Pugh



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A new flagship study led by Heriot-Watt University on behalf of Joseph Rowntree Foundation reveals an 'appalling' rise in destitution in the U.K. between 2017 and 2019, even before the pandemic hit.

Approx. 2.4 million people experienced destitution in 2019, a 54% increase since 2017, including 550,000 children. The research found families with children are increasingly likely to experience destitution. One in seven (14%) of those experiencing destitution are in paid work.

Inadequate benefit levels and debt deductions, particularly the repayable advance many people are forced to borrow to cover the minimum five-week wait for Universal Credit, are identified in the report as key drivers of destitution. With evidence of rising debt and hardship since COVID-19 hit, there are fears that the pandemic may have pushed people experiencing destitution closer to the brink. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is calling for urgent action to make the £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit permanent, to stem the rising tide of destitution.

Led by the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) at Heriot-Watt University, the research study is unparalleled in its comprehensiveness, overcoming intellectual, methodological and logistical challenges to provide robust statistical and qualitative data on hidden and hard-to-reach groups.

The diversity of the methods used to generate an estimate of the scale of destitution at the end of 2019 necessitated a huge collaborative effort. The team involved 10 researchers from Heriot-Watt University, a research team and the national interviewer field force from Kantar Public, 18 locality coordinators and 113 crisis services alongside Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Greater London Authority and a Project Advisory Group convened by JRF.

The crisis services that participated ranged from highly informal soup kitchens run by church volunteers that opened once a week, to large-scale 24/7 crisis services welcoming hundreds through their doors on any given day. This diversity presented a huge logistical challenge to I-

SPHERE in delivering a fieldwork approach that ensured a high response rate over the same 'time window,' with almost 4,000 survey responses returned. The study also included an additional 70 in-depth interviews conducted in spring 2020 to give an insight into the impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing destitution.

Who is experiencing destitution?

While single people continue to face the highest risks of destitution, lone parents are now more likely to face destitution than previously. The number of children experiencing destitution in 2019 has risen by 52%, or by an additional 185,000 children compared to 2017.

People who experience destitution in some cases report complex needs such as homelessness, or drug and alcohol problems, but 81% do not. 54% of people experiencing destitution have a chronic health problem or disability.

Since 2017, there has been a marked increase in levels of destitutions in all regions and types of locality, but with the greatest rise in northern cities and towns.

How we can turn back the tide of destitution

JRF is urging the Government to make the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits introduced in March permanent. This lifeline is due to be cut in April 2021 which would mean 6.2 million families would lose £1,040 from their annual budget increasing the numbers facing destitution.

Helen Barnard, director of Joseph Rowntree Foundation said: "It is appalling that so many people are going through this distressing and

degrading experience, and we should not tolerate it. No one in our society should be unable to afford to eat or keep clean and sheltered. We can and must do more.

"Our [social security](#) system should act as an anchor to hold us steady when we're pulled down by powerful currents like job loss, illness or relationship breakdown. But right now, our system is not doing enough to protect people from destitution.

"The Government can act now to confirm that the £20 boost added to Universal Credit will be made permanent and extended to people receiving legacy benefits. And by working with people with experience of receiving social security, the Government can re-design our systems so that they keep people afloat, rather than drag people down."

Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, from the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) at Heriot-Watt University, said:

"Our findings clearly show that levels of destitution in the U.K. were already rising sharply prior to the pandemic and the impact of COVID-19 has intensified the difficulties many people face accessing the help they need to meet their most fundamental needs.

"The sheer scale of the issue is unacceptable in one of the world's richest countries and starkly reveals the devastating impact of the gaps, flaws and deductions in Universal Credit and other aspects of the social security system that lead to destitution by design."

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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