

Around a million children in the UK are living in destitution—with harmful consequences for their development

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Millions of people in the UK are unable to meet their most basic physical needs: to stay warm, dry, clean and fed. This is known as

destitution.

[Recent analysis](#) from charity the Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([JRF](#)) estimates that around 3.8 million people in the UK experienced destitution at some point during 2022. This is a 61% increase since 2019—and a 148% increase since 2017.

Living in destitution means severe material hardship. The JRF's [2022 survey](#) of crisis service users in the UK found that 61% reported going without food in the month before the survey. They often put other needs, such as accommodation or feeding their [children](#), over feeding themselves.

About half of the people surveyed were not able to afford adequate clothing and basic necessities, such as toiletries. Many talked of living in insecure and low quality housing.

One particularly alarming aspect of these most recent statistics is the steep increase in the number of children living in destitution. In 2022, around 1 million children lived in households who experienced destitution. This is an increase of 88% since the charity's corresponding 2019 study, and a 186% increase since the 2017 study.

Impact on children

Destitution causes immediate suffering. But for these children, this experience of hardship at a young age will have consequences that last throughout their lives. There is little doubt that both [money](#) and [environment](#) (housing quality, parental mental health and nutrition, for example) contribute to inequalities in child development. Both of these factors are affected by living in destitution.

When children reach the age of three, stark differences are [already](#)

[evident](#) between those who live in poverty and those who do not. Children from more well-off families have better developed skills in both cognitive tasks, such as understanding basic concepts like colors, letters, numbers and shapes, as well as socio-emotional skills, such as self-control and resilience.

Other factors that are important in shaping children's skills include housing quality and parental mental health.

Inequalities so early in life can compound and widen over time. These differences between the disadvantaged and the better off can [be seen in](#) educational achievement, health and criminal activity.

These types of inequalities were also exacerbated by the pandemic. While pupils everywhere missed out on education, these learning losses were not equally distributed: young people from lower socio-economic background fell [further behind](#).

Despite large [increases](#) in funding for the early-year sectors, socio-economic inequalities in [child development](#) have [not generally narrowed](#), particularly in recent years.

And now, the sharp increase in the share of children living in destitution does not paint a optimistic picture for the future.

Making a difference

However, many of these issues can be changed by [government policy](#). For example, we know that being hungry at school makes it difficult to concentrate and learn. Measures that address hunger, then, can make a difference. [Analysis](#) of a trial of breakfast clubs in English schools, which offered free breakfast to disadvantaged children aged six and seven, found that the free breakfast lead to the equivalent of two months'

extra progress in reading, writing and math across the course of one year.

[Research has shown](#) that many early interventions—such as high quality childcare and education programs for at-risk children—can have long-lasting positive effects. From an economic perspective, acting early to lift children out of poverty and improve their home and learning environments can be a cost-effective way of helping in the long run, both for individuals as well as wider society.

Another option would be reform of the benefits system to make sure families have enough money to live. In the [2022 Joseph Rowntree Foundation survey](#) of people who used crisis centers, 72% did receive [social security benefits](#)—but were still destitute.

This rise in children living in household experiencing destitution must be given serious attention. [Successive governments claim](#) to hold upward [social mobility](#) as a important goal—that is, the ability of people to move up the economic and social ladder, regardless of their own upbringing and social background. Reducing destitution would not only benefit children right now, but would help them throughout life.

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