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Westminster needs to follow Scotland in tackling child poverty

Danny Dorling, 16 April 2025.

The annual figures released show that child poverty is rising in England. In fact, the only place across the UK where child poverty has fallen in the last decade is Scotland. Danny Dorling argues that a cultural difference has emerged between how England and Scotland think about child poverty, and that Westminster has a lot to learn from the Scottish Government.

Another Spring in the UK, another set of statistics are released on [child poverty](#).¹ The British government does this just once a year. It could choose to do it more often if it cared more. It could choose to update the statistics as frequently as for GDP, or as often as inflation statistics are released; but our political leaders do not prioritise poverty and the extremely high levels of income inequality that underlie the remarkable extent of poverty which now pervades the countries of these islands.

The statistics released in March revealed that the 10 largest rises in child poverty in a decade had been in some of the already poorest political constituencies in the UK: Middlesbrough, Leeds (South), Liverpool (Riverside), Birmingham (Hodge Hill, Ladywood, Yardley and Erdington), Grimsby, Blackpool, and Bradford (South). In those areas an extra child in every six or seven was poor by 2024, compared to 2014.

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The areas just listed are all the north of England. This is not because poverty has risen most only in the North, but because the measure released by constituency was poverty as measured [before the costs of housing are included](#).² If those costs were included, London constituencies like Holborn and St Pancras, Hackney North and Stoke Newington, and Hackney South and Shoreditch would be included in those places that have seen child poverty rise by the highest amounts too. The costs of housing are an inevitable cost when it comes to children. You are not legally allowed to sleep with your children on the streets in the UK.

Child poverty has fallen in only twelve of the 650 constituencies of the UK in the last ten years. This is as measured and released by government. The falls are small in each of them, but extremely significant, especially, the fact that every single one of them is in Scotland. The only places where a lower proportion of children are officially poor than was the case in 2014:

Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire

Stirling and Strathallan

Glenrothes and Mid Fife

Airdrie and Shotts

Dunfermline and Dollar

Hamilton and Clyde Valley

Midlothian

Mid Dunbartonshire

East Renfrewshire

Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke

Rutherglen

Lothian East

The case of Scotland

When UK countries and regions are compared, child poverty is now lowest in Scotland. This did not used to be the case. In the 1990s Scotland, and especially Glasgow, had some of the highest rates in the of the UK, and across all of Europe. The immediate reason for this turnaround and the most recent reasons for the fall only being in Scotland has been the introduction of the [Scottish Child Payment during the pandemic by the Scottish Government.](#)³

Why did the Scottish government decide that it wouldn't tolerate rising child poverty anymore, contrary to the Westminster Government? (The administrations in Wales

and Northern Ireland do not have sufficient political powers here to intervene enough.)

Why did the Scottish government decide that it wouldn't tolerate rising child poverty anymore, contrary to the Westminster Government?

Scotland has seen great change by the devolution which Labour introduced in 1997. In many ways its people and press now behaves much more like the people and media in Nordic countries behave. Take, for example the headline of the local paper today 'Fife Today' (which claims to have been going – in one form or another – since 1871). On the 7th of April 2025 that newspaper's headline read "**Heartbreaking child poverty figures revealed for Fife**"⁴ In short, people in Scotland are now much more likely to care about issues such as child poverty as compared to people in England.

That story in the Fife Today paper continued with this statement: "...Figures from the Department for Work and Pensions show 11,038 children under 16 in Fife were living in relative poverty in the year to March – down from 12,118 the year before. ... Across the UK, 2.7 million (22 per cent) children were living in relative poverty, including 145,804 (16 per cent) children in Scotland."

So, in Fife, high child poverty figures are still presented as heartbreaking even when falling by over one thousand children in a year. In contrast, the BBC, when writing about **child poverty across the UK** said: "Separately, the Scottish government has missed its legal targets for reducing child poverty for 2023-24."⁵ The focus of the main story was Scotland missing its targets, and only later on in the analysis section is, there an admission that the Scottish numbers: "...**are also markedly better than the UK-wide ones.**"⁶

Research published by LSE, when the latest figures were released, explained the situation simply: "The UK Government could lift 700,000 children out of poverty overnight by matching Scotland's fiscal commitment to driving poverty down."⁷ And the **Scottish National Party** also pressed the point home: "According to the CPAG, child poverty fell in Scotland, with the three-year average poverty rate falling in Scotland from 24 per cent to 23 per cent – with the latest one-year data showing a fall from 26 per cent to 22 per cent. Meanwhile in England it has risen from 30 per cent to 31 per cent, from 23 per cent to 24 per cent in Northern Ireland, and from 29 per cent to 31 per cent in Wales."⁸

For the English more left leaning middle classes, **The Guardian** updated the story it releases each year, the one about how things were worse again: "The figures, released on Thursday, show an extra 100,000 children were living below the breadline in the year to April 2024 – the final full year of child poverty statistics for the last Conservative government. It is the third year running that child poverty has increased."⁹

The idea that we are making short term sacrifices, during which the poor suffer, in order to generate economic growth no longer seems like a viable strategy.

The Government is running out of excuses

So, what is to be done, or might be done? One possible silver lining to what is happening across the Atlantic with the Trump administration's attempts to ignite a global trade war is that it blows all of the Chancellor's excuses for supposed careful balancing of some fictitious set of economic rules out of the water. The idea that we are making short term sacrifices, during which the poor suffer, in order to generate economic growth no longer seems like a viable strategy.

Without a doubt, the Government will blame any further cuts to welfare to a continuously shifting global order, instigated by the Trump administration. We have heard a lot about the importance of safety and national security during these times. His Majesty's executives like to say: "The first duty of the government is to keep citizens safe and the country secure."¹⁰

But providing food and shelter from cold for the citizens who are children is also a big part of keeping them safe. Of course, ideally you keep all citizens safe and secure. But in a crisis when your resources are limited, it is the children you secure first.

Within the UK, Scotland has shown what can be done and needs to be done. It is almost impossible to imagine now that the UK government will not, grudgingly, begin to change direction.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.



¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2023>

² <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/>

³ <https://www.dannydorling.org/?p=9803>

⁴ <https://www.fifetoday.co.uk/news/people/heartbreaking-child-poverty-figures-revealed-for-fife-5069935>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx2g03ykxeko>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c04zw32qg06o>

⁷ <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2025/c-March/New-analysis-shows-700000-children-could-be-lifted-out-of-poverty-overnight-by-following-Scotlands-approach>

⁸ <https://www.snp.org/scotland-is-the-only-uk-nation-that-is-reducing-child-poverty/>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/mar/27/children-poverty-government-benefit-welfare-cuts-uk>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office>