

# Destitution, unlike success in football, is coming home

**“The government is not helpless to act; it is choosing not to”**

Paul Kissack, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 24 October 2023

In the summer of 2023 the England's football team came second, to Spain in the women's football world cup; the build-up to which meant that another story was barely noticed, and the aftermath of which – when it took a long time for the Spanish FA president to resign meant that other news did not make the news as much as it might. On Sunday 16 July 2023 it was reported that on the two child benefit cap, the one that ensures that child benefit is only paid for the first two children in a family in the UK (it does not apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland):

*‘Labour had come under fresh pressure to promise to scrap the cap after it emerged that one in four children in some of England and Wales’s poorest parliamentary constituencies live in families left at least £3,000 a year out of pocket as a result. Starmer’s decision to rule out lifting the cap caused alarm among anti-poverty campaigners and despair in the Labour ranks. It would cost about £1.3bn but the shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is said to have concluded it would be unaffordable due to the state of the economy. The stance is seen by some in the party as an indicator of the lack of strength of its determination to tackle child poverty. However, one party insider suggested Starmer could revisit the policy if the public finances improved. In February 2020, Starmer said he wanted to scrap it in order to help “tackle the vast social injustice in our country”. But this month he hinted that Labour would stick to the Tory policy. His latest remarks to the BBC’s Sunday with Kuenssberg show appeared to confirm that position.’<sup>1</sup>*

By September the BBC's political editor, Laura Kuenssberg had broadcast three of her episodes of 'State of Chaos' concerning the collapse in ability, in authority and the sheer extreme asininity of the Conservative party in the period from Theresa May's melancholy, through all of Boris Johnson's jollity, up to Liz Truss' temerity, transgression and termination. The Conservative party, a party she knew extremely well, was being written off in public. When Johnson resigned, all he could list as his

tangible achievements were: 'I have helped to deliver, among other things, a vast new railway in the Elizabeth Line and full funding for a wonderful new state of the art hospital for Hillingdon, where enabling works have already begun.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, the hospital had not actually been built and the Elizabeth Line had very little to do with him.

Labour was now seen by folk like Kuenssberg to be safe – willing to say, and possibly even believe, that there was no alternate to the very poorest families with children in England and Wales having to get by with three thousand pounds a year less than they would if they lived in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves had decided to change Labour Party policy that summer. But said that Labour '*might*' revisit the policy should the country suddenly becoming richer again; or revisit it at some distant point in the future should we more slowly become better-off; or never revisit it at all if the sunlight uplands appeared too far away to grasp at any point in the foreseeable future.

So, what had happened to take the UK to the point where its Labour party said that reducing child poverty was now, for the foreseeable time, unaffordable?

Part of the answer was that it was the realization that we had literally run out of money. Even those who used to claim that the country could always print more as it was sovereign, were beginning to realize that, if we did that, it would only result in even less international confidence in what Britain stood for, as well as a fall in the pound, rising prices for all those foodstuffs that are imported (and every other vital good we receive from abroad), and an increase in the interest rates that we have to pay to international bankers to borrow money that had already become the highest of any large country in Europe.

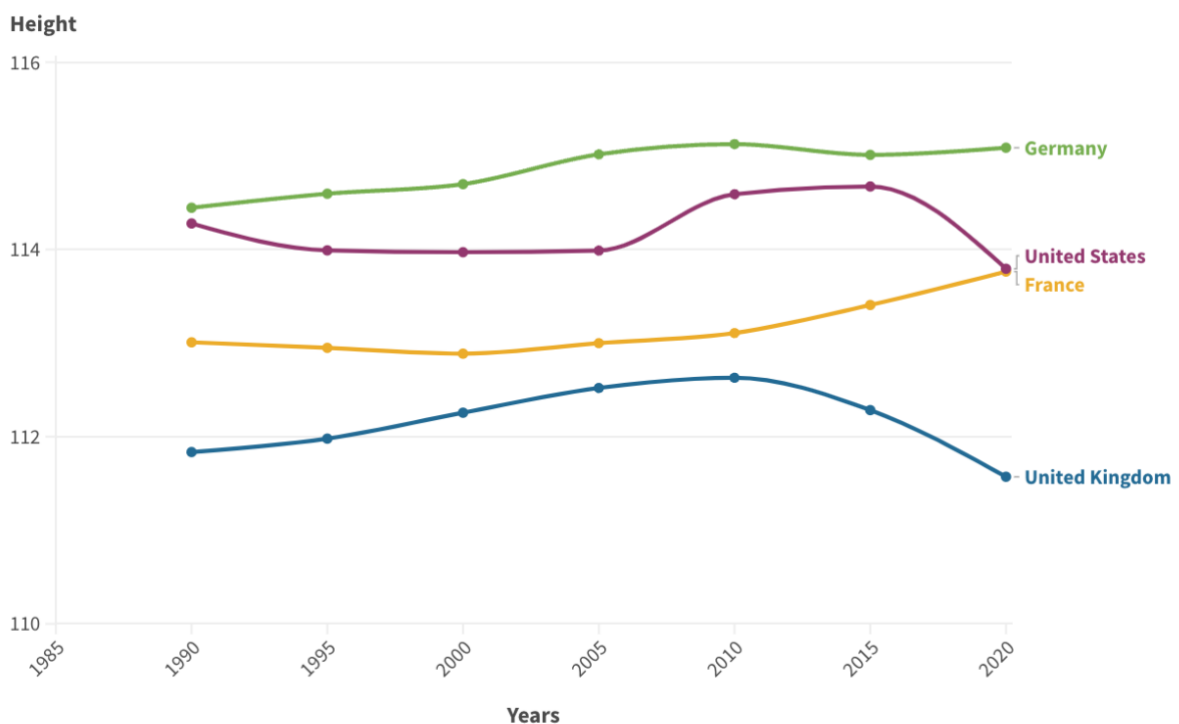
We were broken.

Just two days earlier, on 14 July 2023 the Office for Budget Responsibility had reported that '*As things stand, Britain's long-term debt is on an "unsustainable path" that is expected to rise from about 100 per cent of GDP this year to 310 per cent by the mid-2070s. Yet this is only a baseline projection by the watchdog. It warns that*

public debt could reach...'<sup>3</sup> You really do not want to read on as their text becomes a horror story.

Later in the summer the European press reported that: '*The UK's second city Birmingham is bankrupt.*'<sup>4</sup> Reports of school roofs falling in began to proliferate, over one hundred were unable to properly open in the autumn, more later, and large parts of some hospitals began to shut because the concrete above patients' heads was now understood to be unsafe. Even an Oxford college had to put up tents because the dining hall was too dangerous to eat in.<sup>5</sup> A court in Germany refused to extradite a prisoner to the UK because basic living conditions and risks to life in British prisons were now so poor.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1: How the average height of five-year-old UK boys has changed since 1990, four 'nations'<sup>7</sup>



Press Association (2023) British children shorter than other five-year-olds in Europe, study finds, ITV News, 21 June, <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-06-21/british-children-shorter-than-other-five-year-olds-in-europe>

You could have some sympathy for Starmer and Reeves as the bankrupt Britain news stories rolled in. Maybe it was true? Maybe we had to let the children go hungry and for them to become stunted, ever more stunted than in the mainland? A stunting that it was clear to see had begun when the heights of children born in the UK in 2005, aged five in 2010, began to no longer rise as much as in other nearby

countries and then actually fell for those born in 2010, and even more for those born in 2015 (see Figure 1 for how this began before the Coalition government).

The stunting began under New Labour and then rapidly accelerated under the coalition Conservative-Liberal government. We will have to wait until children's heights are next measured in 2025 to know whether there has been any slowdown in this tragic new trend. But we do now know that more and more children are going hungry in the UK, a majority (56%) of those with two or more siblings now several times a month. Going hungry can stunt your growth, as can poor quality cheap food.

However, at least going hungry if you have too many siblings is not the case in Scotland. So we expect the stunting to continue to England but not to have occurred to the same degree in Scotland where, throughout 2023, thanks to the Scottish Child Payment no child need now go hungry or be stunted in future.<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland' children should also fair a little better to as compared to those of England and Wales.

Perhaps someone thought it would be an interesting natural experiment to see what the effects of depriving poorer children of food in England (especially in the more expensive parts), but letting them still eat each day of the month in Scotland might be? We social scientists will be getting a lot of very useful data soon. It is just an enormous pity, a great shame, or depending on your political view even a social crime or great magnitude, that in the twenty-first century we are measuring the heights of children in the UK and asking why are they not growing as they should.

Destitution, unlike success in the football, it's coming home.

As the summer of 2023 began, it was reported that in the most recent month: *'one-in-eight social tenants (13%) and one-in-twelve private tenants (8%) had not eaten for a whole day for three or more occasions, because they did not have not enough money for food.'* The report explained that it was the families with children in these tenures were more likely to be among those went hungry, but so too were huge numbers of children whose parents had a mortgage, especially as interest rates rose. That report continued: *'52% of those in the private rented sector feel their*

*financial situation is making their mental health worse (this rises to 64% of private renters in receipt of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit).<sup>9</sup>*

British born children were not suffering the worst of the new destitution. As always it is the most weak who suffer first, those with least power. New, and even more racist, immigration laws were proposed in 2023 to deny refugees even the most basic of rights, let alone food. 'Freedom from Torture' erected an additional blue plaque as the illegal migration bill was passed by parliament (but not yet implemented, see Figure 2 for the plaques). They reported that 'Public figures from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have condemned this bill as immoral and legally dubious.'<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 2: Blue plaques erected for the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister in 2023**



So the key question was, had the money really run out? Does Labour in England really have no option? Guardian journalist Polly Toynbee wrote in July 2023 '*Starmer's comments about the two-child benefit cap on Sunday sent shock waves through Labour ranks: the party had attacked it time and again for affecting 1.5 million children, 1.1 million of whom are in poverty ... This time, when there's so much less money than in 1997, voters know promises are not credible unless backed with hard cash. Of course we Labour people yearn for a promise to return to*

*the single market, for wealth taxes and the revival of every moribund public service. But only winning matters, so every obstacle has to be swerved, as the Tories try to turn attention away from their failures on the cost of living, the NHS, the economy and the climate.'*<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 3: The Prime Minister's five properties for 2023 (release on 4 January)<sup>12</sup>**



Toynbee was wrong. Sunak did then turn to talk more and more about the cost-of-living crisis, of cutting HS2 to Manchester, and numerous other initiatives. He suggested that he was dealing with it and did not obfuscate. He talked about the NHS and put cutting waiting-lists as his fourth priority, just above the small boats in his five pledges (Figure 3), and he did talk about the climate – it is just that he began to say we were doing too much too soon to try to reduce climate harm; but he did not swerve.

So does Labour have an alternative? Of course it does. Of course we need not have children being stunted in England. Of course we could still welcome refugees, not least because without them our future labour force looks weak! Destitution is coming home because that is what people in the UK are being sold as the only option by the main political parties. They are competing for a particular credibility by trying to demonstrate just how mean they can be.<sup>13</sup> And that is far from good.

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# DESTITUTION, UNLIKE SUCCESS IN FOOTBALL, IS COMING HOME

*Danny Dorling is an English social geographer and academic. Since 2013, he has been Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography of the School of Geography and the Environment of the University of Oxford. He is the author of 'Shattered Nation: Inequality and the Geography of a Failing State' published last month.*

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Starmer's decision to rule out lifting the cap caused alarm among anti-poverty campaigners and despair in the Labour ranks. It would cost about £1.3bn but the shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is said to have concluded it would be unaffordable due to the state of the economy. The stance is seen by some in the party as an indicator of the lack of strength of its determination to tackle child poverty. However, one party insider suggested Starmer could revisit the policy if the public finances improved. In February 2020, Starmer said he wanted to scrap it in order to help "tackle the vast social injustice in our country". But this month he hinted that Labour would stick to the Tory policy. His latest remarks to the BBC's Sunday with Kuenssberg show appeared to confirm that position.<sup>1</sup>

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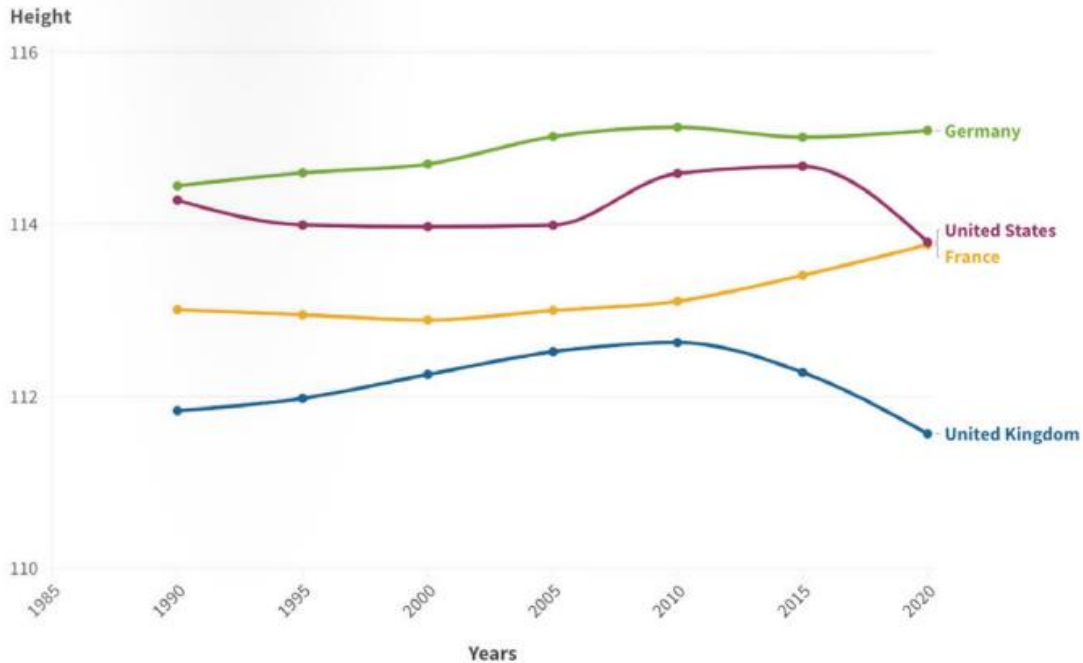


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