

# Visualising the 2020s UK cost-of-living crisis

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## Abstract

This article is unusual in that it provides a graphical summary of various aspects of the longer-term crisis that appeared to cumulate in 2022 through to at least early 2024 in terms of especially poor economic and social outcomes for the UK. The article was submitted for consideration in a special issue in the *Journal of Social Policy and Administration* on diverse perspectives and innovative approaches to addressing the cost of living crisis. This special issues focuses on areas such as financial insecurity, inequalities, food insecurity, food access, policy analysis and the variety of responses there have been. This articles highlights the significant challenges posed by the cost of living crisis in the United Kingdom—the widespread impact on poverty rates, health and well-being, food insecurity, inequality, and social justice. It does so by presenting a series of images that were mostly produced but not used in print to illustrate the book ‘Shattered Nation’ (Dorling, 2023). These 23 images were not included in the book, but most were posted on the book website. A few are more recent.

## KEYWORDS

inequality

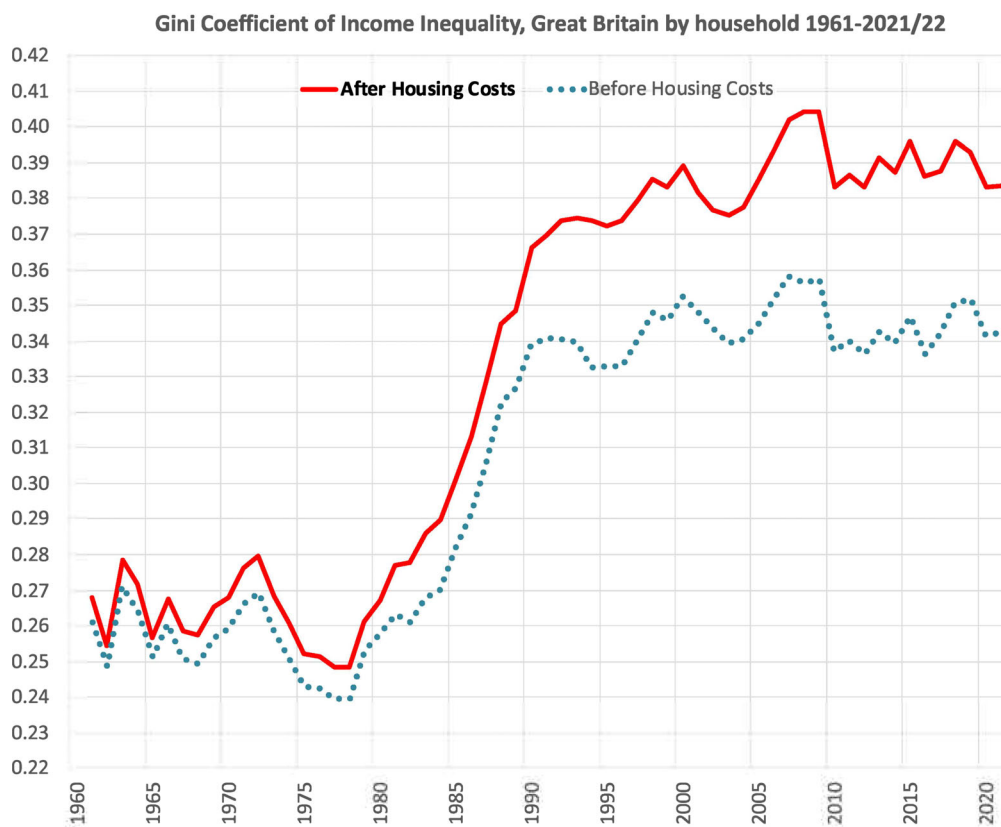
## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The UK was a remarkably equitable group of countries in the 1960s and early 1970s (Figure 1). Of all large European countries, only Sweden had lower income inequalities at that time, although you would need to look at data for

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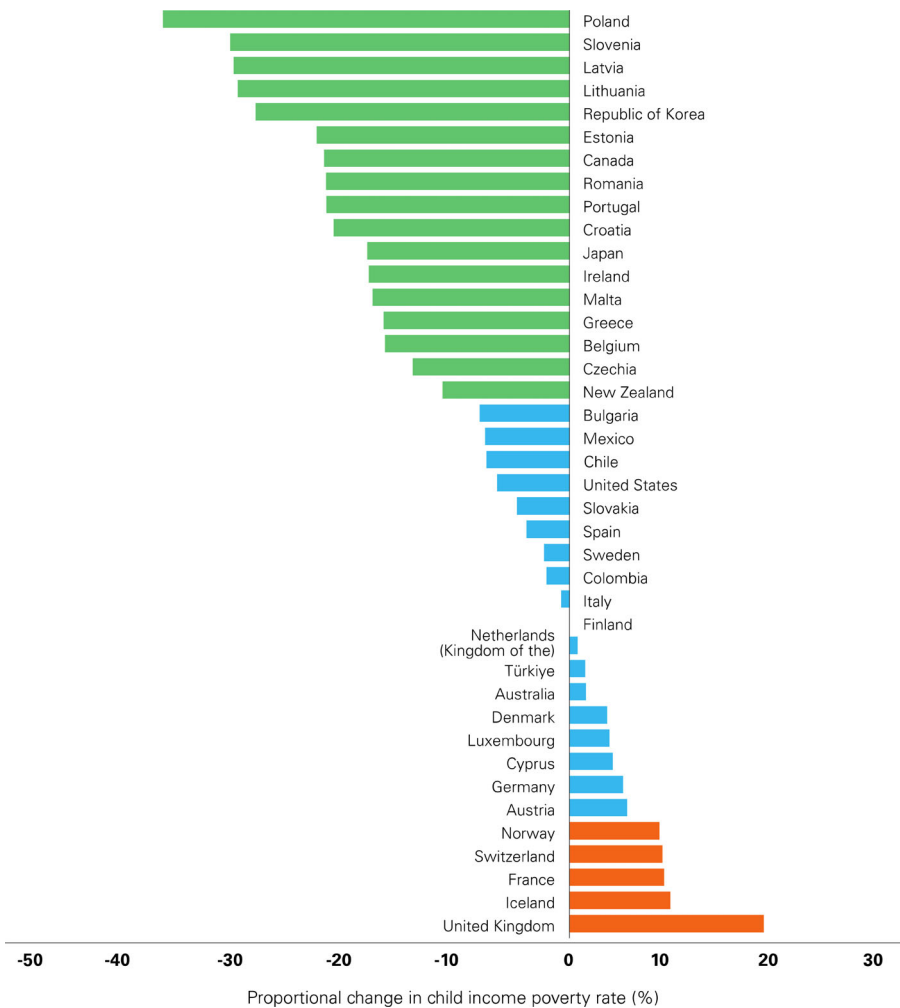
**FIGURE 1** The antecedents of the cost of living crisis. Source: IFS (2024). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]

Sweden to confirm that, as well as for many other countries (Dorling, 2017). England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were all, essential 'Nordic' in terms of the gaps between what different groups had to rely on day by day. Wealth inequalities may have been larger, there was still a relic class system with odd British features such as private schools. However, most of those schools only survived through the 1970s and into the 1980s because the state funded what were called 'assisted places'. That funding came to an end in 1997, but state assistance for private education was not needed after income inequalities rose in the 1980s.

The rich could pay their way again. The UK is an international outlier when it comes to just how much money is spent on its private schools. Even the USA spends much less. Only Chile, among all OECD countries, spends nearly as much on such a small proportion of children as regards their secondary education. We will return to Chile and what is currently happening there to deal with the global cost-of-living crisis at the end of this short article.

The huge inequality that the UK lives with in terms from how its children are schooled through to what old age is like for different social groups is only made possible because the UK maintains such high levels of income inequality (Dorling, 2023). This all helps to perpetuate the UK as a state in which children live parallel lives and income inequalities are often justified as apparently giving the most to those who 'deserve' the most.

Those seen as most deserving of the most money in the UK usually did not even go to school with the rest of their contemporaries when they were children. One result of this is very high levels of child poverty being suffered in

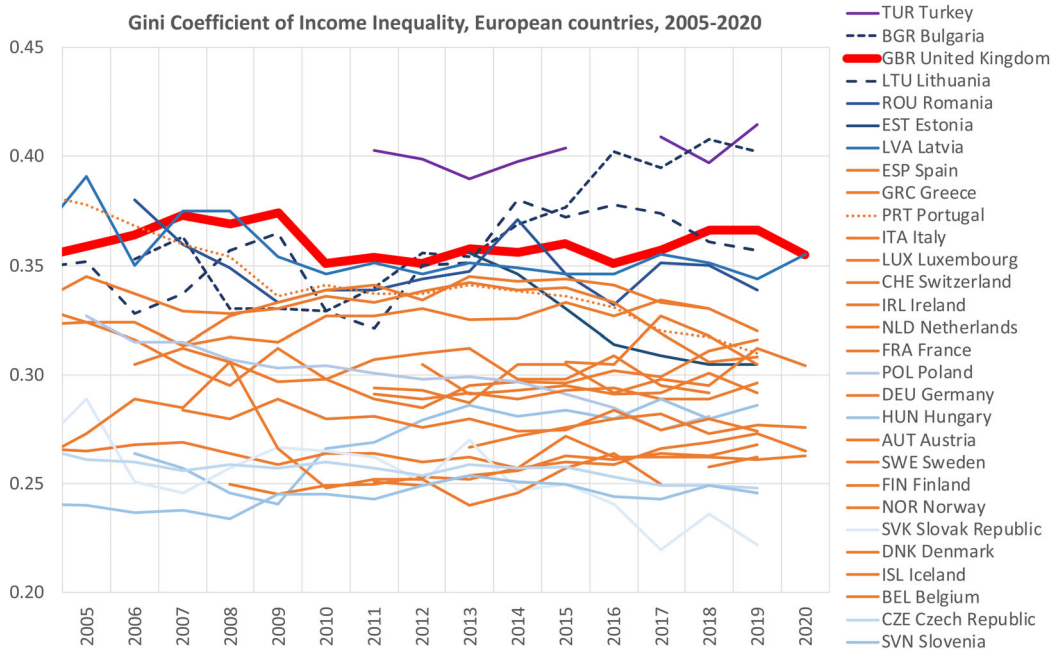


**FIGURE 2** The rise of child poverty in the UK. *Source:* UNICEF (2023). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pspa.12035)]

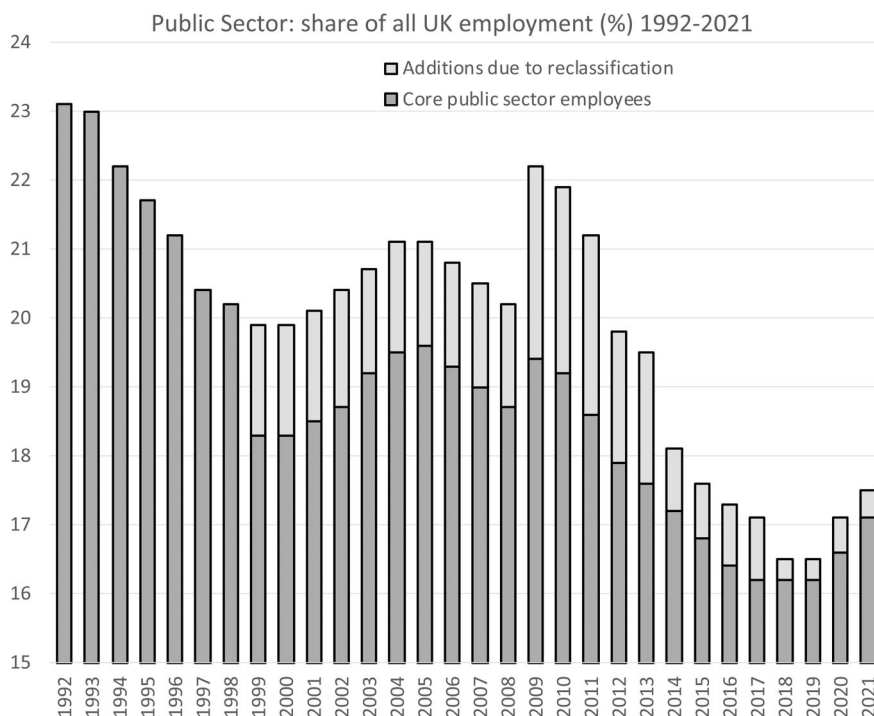
the UK, levels that are now rising faster than in any other country in Europe and possibly faster than in any that is measured in these ways worldwide. Figure 2, shown next, should have shocked people in the UK when it was released; but we had become used to such bad news.

Nevertheless, to stand out so distinctly in the most authoritative of international comparisons of trends in child poverty is truly shocking. There is nowhere else in the rich world which is quite as extreme as the UK in terms of how we are willing to allow children here to suffer. I could have included a series of images in these pages that would shock you even more, of the living conditions of many children today in the UK—pictures of their homes. But, because we are social scientists, we instead draw graphs and produce tables of figures. Please note that unlike any of the other states shown to have tolerated increases in child poverty in Figure 2, the UK already tolerated a very high rate of child poverty before the huge increase occurred most recently.

In December 2023, the United Nations released data showing that the UK had presided over the greatest rise in child poverty of any nation that it monitored in detail. That most recent rise began under the coalition government

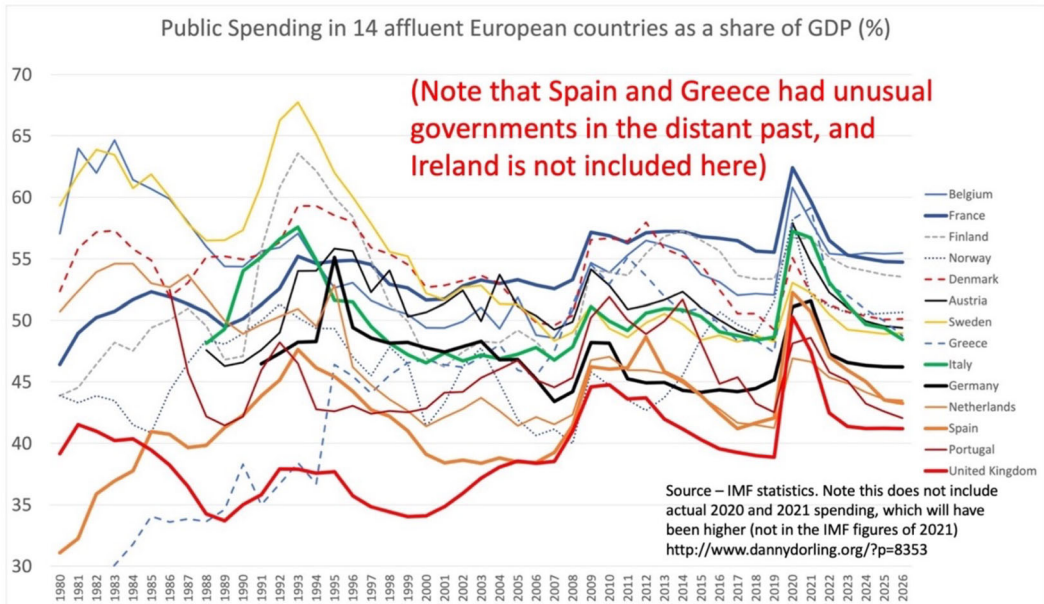


**FIGURE 3** The most and least unequal countries in Europe. Source: OECD income inequality figures as provided in 2023: <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]



**FIGURE 4** The repeated decimation of the UK public sector. Source: Dorling (2022).

In 2023 France and Belgium will spend 55% of their GDP on public services, followed in descending order by Finland, Greece, Austria...



...Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Spain, and finally both Portugal and the Netherlands at 45%, with the UK at only 41%. This is two percentage points higher than the 39% spent in 2019, reflecting the rising costs of debt repayment and a further increase in military spending.

**FIGURE 5** Public sector spending in Europe 1980–2026. *Source:* Dorling (2021). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

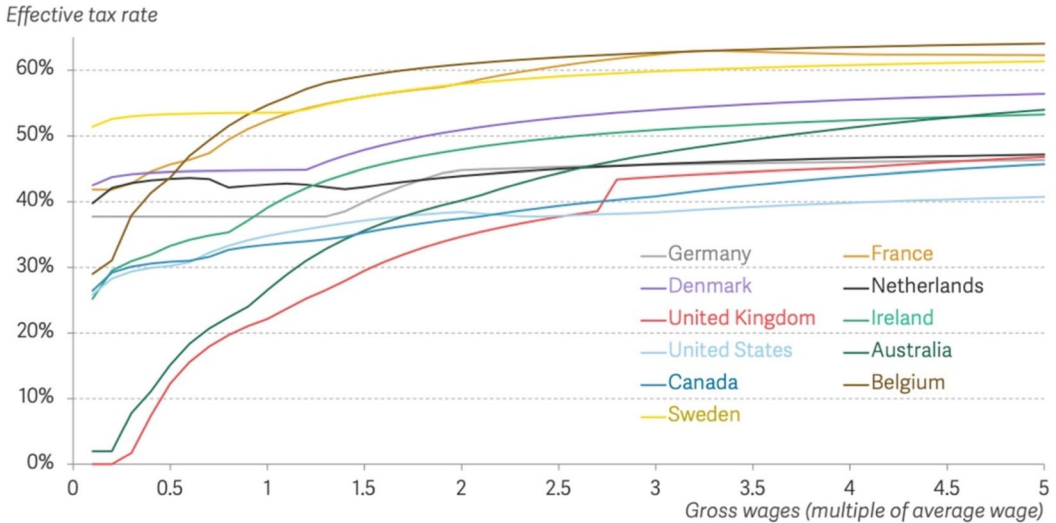
of 2010–2015 which was an alliance of the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats. The moniker ‘Tories who dislike conflict’ is occasionally used to mock British Liberals. One newspaper columnist in 2022 describe British Liberals thus: ‘Because their creed puts such stress on reason, it attracts those who are hopeless at conflict: at the recognition of its frequent necessity, and at the actual waging of it’ (Ganesh, 2022). Figure 2 shows that it is possible to have a great rise in child poverty while income inequality rates remain broadly stable but is also very high. This is partly because of the current nature of the is a cost-of-living-crisis; but mostly due to the legacy of a New Labour government that did not bring down inequality, a Conservative party that sees inequalities as good, and a Liberal party that is very similar to both of the other two main English political parties.

Long before 2010 the UK had become established as by far the most unequal large country in Europe. Only Turkey, on the very edge of the continent, and nearby Bulgaria had higher income inequality in later years (Figure 3). After 2015, income inequalities were falling, slightly, in more countries in Europe than they were rising; but in 2018 and 2019 income inequalities in the UK were even higher than they had been in the whole period since 2010. Austerity had been accompanied by rising inequality. This was the context in which the early 2020s cost of living crisis struck.

# ‘Tax policy choices help determine levels of inequality’ – Resolution Foundation, 2022.

**FIGURE 24: Across the distribution – but especially for low and middle earners – direct taxes are low by international standards**

Effective tax rates by wage level (relative to the average wage) in selected countries, 2020



NOTES: See source for full notes and caveats. Based on the tax systems for single adults without dependants. Includes employer and employee social contributions, and national and state/local income taxes (using the national average).

SOURCE: D Neidle, *How much tax do we actually pay on our wages?*, Tax Policy Associates, May 2022.

**FIGURE 6** How much tax people pay in selected countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

## 2 | FALLING INCOMES AND LOW PUBLIC SPENDING

The public sector workforce within the UK was decimated three times over between 1992 and 2021 (Figure 4). The state lost a tenth of its workforce thrice over as a result of public sector job cuts when these were measured in proportion to the number of all employees in the UK. When the cost-of-living crisis struck with rising prices in 2021 and 2022 there were far fewer public sector workers left to help. A decimation is cut of a tenth which can be seen in the figure to have occurred after 1993, after 2005, and most of all after 2009/2014—in fact the cuts are deeper than that, but the overall fall from 23% to 17% amounts to three decimations.

State spending on public services, which includes defence and war spending, did not fall in the same way, or as fast, as public sector jobs were cut. The state increasingly spent its money on the private sector and on out-sourced services and so public sector spending as a whole rose during the period shown in Figure 4, despite public sector jobs falling. Public spending also includes spending on state pensions and there were more pensioners, and it also includes

Long before the debacle of autumn 2022, the UK had a special problem. Rising inflation then began.

...extending yet further the wait for real earnings to move past 2008 levels

IFS



The UK's position is even worse than the numbers in this graph suggest, because in recent years its GDP has not risen as much as that of other European countries. Meanwhile the pound has fallen in value.

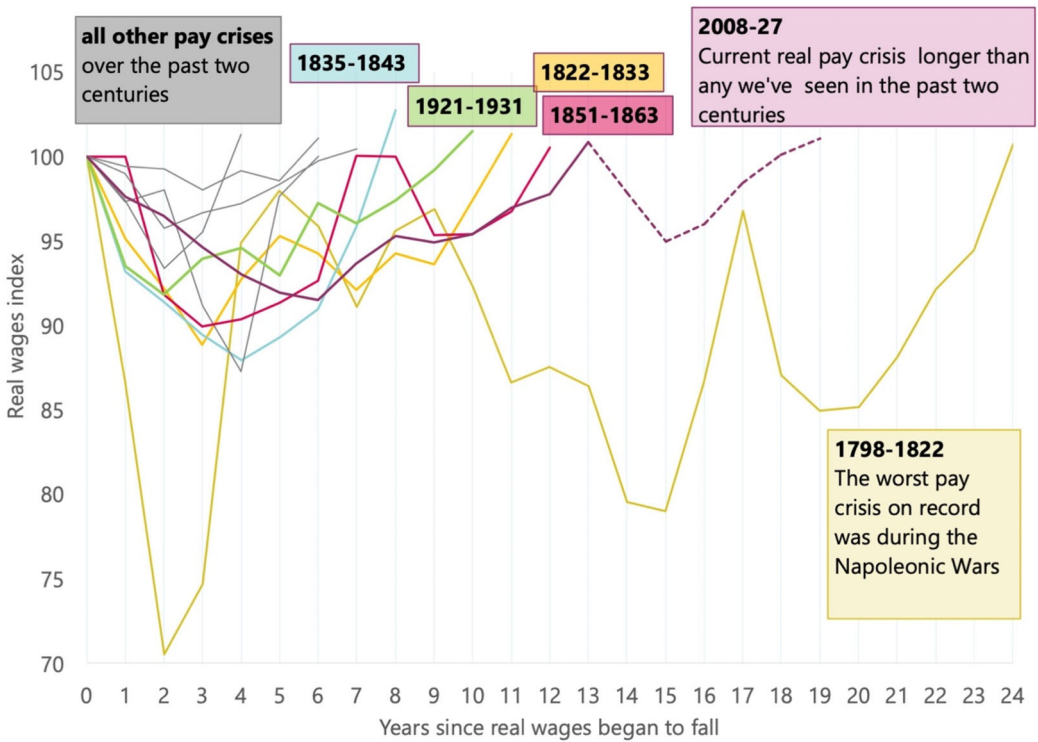
**FIGURE 7** Average earning of people in the UK forecast in 2022. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

spending on health, which rose at some points, but only because there were more old and frail folk - not due to any actual real improvements in service.

Figure 5 includes the estimates that governments report to the IMF on how much spending they intent to make in future, alongside their past actual record on spending. It does not include Ireland or Switzerland as their reported Gross National Products (GDP) are artificially inflated by US firms in the case of Ireland, and the pharmaceutical industries of Switzerland make it look, superficially, as if the Swiss have a smaller public sector than is the case.

Note that in all European countries' public spending increased greatly when the banks had to be bailed out by each state in 2008; but by more in the UK than in most other countries because the UK banking sector was, at that time, so large. Note also that the onset of the pandemic in 2020 had an even bigger effect on increasing public spending. It is because the red (UK) line in Figure 5 was so high in 2023 that people in the UK were said to be being taxed so much in that year as compared to the past few decades, but they were being taxed far less than were

## People in the UK are now suffering the worst pay squeeze since the Napoleonic wars.



**FIGURE 8** UK pay squeezes from the 18th to 21st centuries. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]

people living in almost all other European countries. Give or take borrowing, public spending as a proportion of GDP roughly equates to taxation as a proportion of GDP.

Figure 6 shows that people in the UK contribute a lower portion of their income in tax than in other European countries (note that social security payments are a form of tax when compulsory). This is true all the way up the income scale to people earning up to five times the national average income. The very lowly paid may pay very little income tax, but so do the rich in comparison to their European neighbours. As a result, there is only a very weak state to fall back on in the UK when crises, such as that of cost-of-living, hit. Furthermore, the poor pay a far higher proportion of their income in indirect taxes than the rich, such as in value added tax which rises in direct proportion to rising prices. The cost-of-living crisis in the UK is made worse by this.

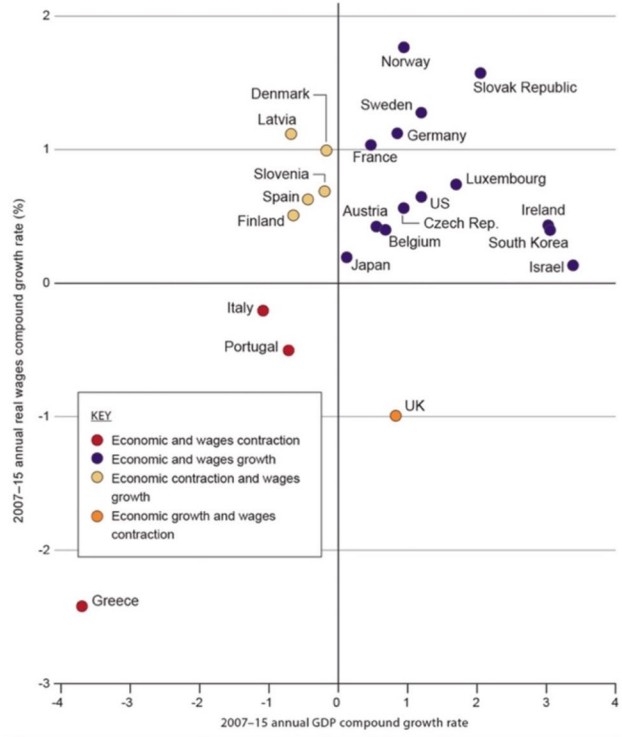
When the most recent cost-of-living crisis hit, it was further exacerbated by the stalling and falling of wages and salaries in the UK, a situation that had prevailed since 2008. In 2022, figures were published suggesting that in that year it was possible that they (wages and salaries) might have finally returned to their 2008 levels (Figure 7). However the inflation that actually occurred during that year meant that this never happened, and that the Office for Budget Responsibility's (OBR) forecasts were too optimistic.



Shattering has occurred in many ways in the UK, but it was mostly silent shattering in the social statistics.

By 2015 the UK had become unique in Europe. The wages of people across the UK were 1% lower in 2015 than in 2007. This put the UK in the company of Italy, Portugal and Greece, which had also seen wages fall in real terms. But these countries had had no choice, as their GDP had fallen. In Britain, what recovery there was, was taken by the bosses and wealthy taking a little more for themselves.

FIGURE 9.1: THE UK WAS ALONE AMONG ADVANCED COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD IN 2015



*How the UK differed from all other affluent countries in 2015: economic growth but falling wages."*

FIGURE 9 The UK was an outlier in Europe: dividend take. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

In contrast to what the OBR predicted in 2022, it now looks as if real average UK wages and salaries will not return to their 2008 level until at least 2029 due to the current cost-of-living crisis eroding the value of income. Analysis undertaken by the TUC suggests that the only similar period of pay squeezes in British history is that which took place between 1798 and 1822 (Figure 8). That was 24 years in which hunger was also an issue—as it is again now.

It is unlikely that the current pay squeeze will last for 24 years, through to until 2032. But that is not impossible as the cost-of-living crisis makes the post 2008 pay squeeze much worse. Rents have risen greatly, as have prices for those who have the least risen the most as well, not least food and fuel. And, as a write in May 2024, inflation is still high by the standard of recent decades and so living standards are still deteriorating in the UK. Everything, on average costs roughly 25% more than it did just a couple of years ago. Prices are still rising, not falling, and they would have to fall a great deal even to return to the very bad situation we were in 2022.

In 2022 the International Monetary Fund pointed out that Estonia and the UK were the two countries in Europe where living costs for the poorest 20% of households were set to rise by about twice as much as those for the wealthiest.

In 2023 Stephanie Flanders, head of Bloomberg Economics, explained that in the UK, “The poorest fifth of the population are now much poorer than [in] most of the poorest countries in central and eastern Europe.”

“On present trends, the average Slovenian household will be better off than its British counterpart by 2024.”  
(John Burn-Murdoch, 2022).



**FIGURE 10** The UK’s financial journalists report the shock. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spot.13035)]

By early 2023, leading mainstream commentators were not just commenting on how bad the situation in the UK had become as compared to other countries in Europe. Prices rises were often a little higher in the UK than was inflation elsewhere on the European continent. A part of the reason for this was because of Brexit increasing the costs of importing goods. Wage increases were less high in the UK because of similar factors (the cost of Brexit) and because when GDP did rise, that increase in national income was more often taken by the very well-off in terms of dividends and other ways that mostly the very rich find over time to syphen off money towards themselves. That had been happening for many years in the UK, but was most noticebale in terms of how unusual the UK had become, in 2015 (Figure 9).

Figure 9 shows how, even when GDP rose by 1% in the UK between 2015 and 2017, the average earnings of workers was allowed to fall by 1%. The difference was taken by those extracting profit, for instance as dividends on their shares of the profits of the companies they owned. Three other European (and other rich in a global league table set of) countries—Greece, Italy and Portugal—saw both earning and GDP fall in this period. Five more progressive countries saw GDP fall, but incomes for workers rise: Latvia, Denmark, Slovenia, Spain, and Finland. The rest, which were more conventionally successful in their economic trends and which all had lower income inequality, saw both incomes and GDP rise. The UK stands out like a sore-thumb in Figure 9, just as it does in so many other ways now. Thus, when prices rose, those who worked for a living had less income, and hence had been able to save less, to deal with those rises, whereas those who lived on profit were much better-off than they otherwise would have been and were able to cope with prices rises far more easily. They could simply buy less expensive luxury items in some cases once the cost-of-living crisis hit.

# In the last 30 days, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?

The Living Standards Outlook 2023

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FIGURE 7: Severe and moderate food insecurity is rising sharply

Percentage of respondents in moderate food insecurity: UK, 2019-20 (left) and 23-30 November 2022 (right)

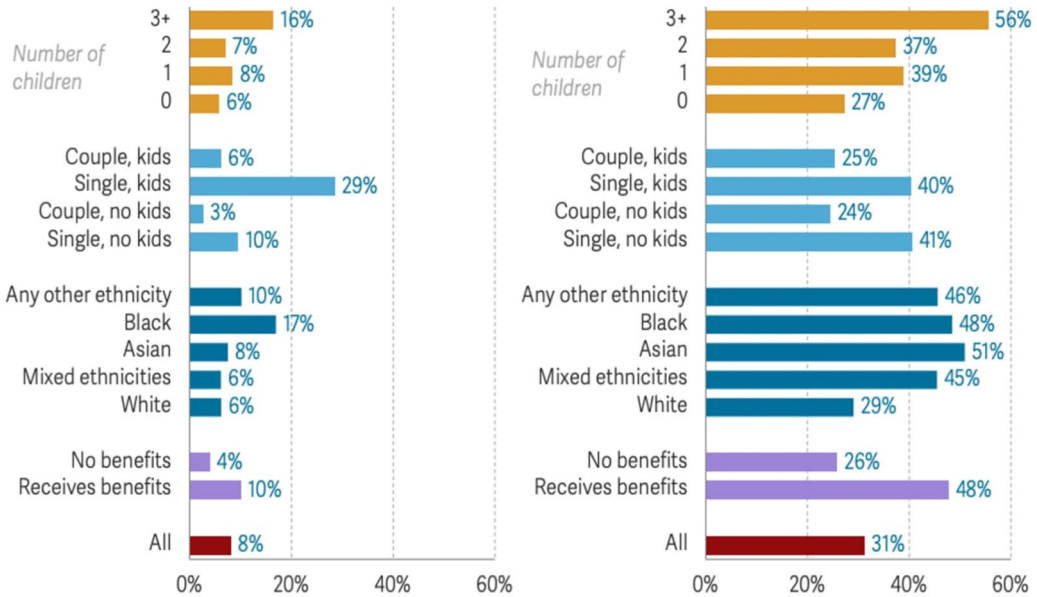


FIGURE 11 Children and adults going hungry in the UK. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

## 3 | THE IMPACT OF INEQUALITY, STAGNANT WAGES, AND CUTS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

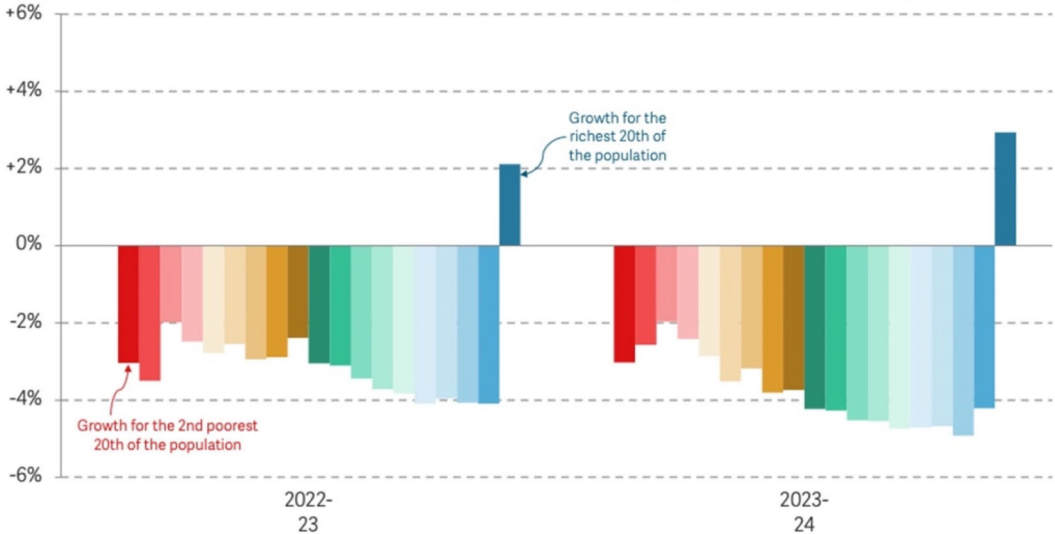
A sense of shock in the UK rose among mainstream journalists and academics when figures like these began to be revealed. John Burn-Murdoch of the *Financial Times* and Stephanie Flanders of *Bloomberg* exemplified the new widespread disbelief when they began to make comments in the early 2020s showing how they were beginning to realise that the UK had become a peripheral European state with a huge mass of very poor people—poverty that rose because the price of gas to heat homes, or electricity, of basic foodstuff and of essential clothes rose (Figure 10).

By early 2023 it had become apparent that a majority of children in Britain who had two siblings (and very rarely more) were going hungry at least once a month (Figure 11). These same statistics showed that in 2019 black children had been almost three times more likely to go hungry once a month in Britain as compared to white children. However, they were less than twice as likely 3 year later as everyone's chances had risen so quickly. We almost all

‘The only part of the income distribution where incomes grow is in the top 5%, where households benefit from higher interest rates.’ (Resolution Foundation 2023)

**FIGURE 32: Low-income households face larger income falls in 2022-23 and 2023-24 when differential inflation is accounted for**

Annual real growth in average equivalised household disposable income for non-pensioners using differential inflation rates, after housing costs, by income vigintile: UK



NOTES: We exclude the bottom 5 per cent, due to concerns about the reliability of data for this group.

SOURCE: RF analysis of DWP, Households Below Average Income; and RF projection including use of the IPPR Tax Benefit Model, ONS data, and OBR forecasts.

**FIGURE 12** Which households lost out most due to inflation? [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]

became poorer and a little more equal at the same time - because the better-off had the most income and wealth to lose.

A rising cost-of-living crisis does reduce some inequalities. The bars in the right hand panel of Figure 11 are all longer than their equivalents in the left hand panel showing the situation mostly just before the pandemic began (the year ending in March 2020). There is less variety in the lengths of the bars for November 2022, shown to the right in Figure 11. In some ways we are now more ‘all in it together’.

The graphs produced by the think-tanks began to become farcical at times because many of their more complex illustrations now showed patterns that were becoming so very simple (Figure 12). So few people were benefitting that only those who were living off substantial savings—otherwise known as ‘the rich’—were doing well and becoming better-off. For a few their wealth was growing because they were receiving high interest payments on their wealth. Interestingly, by 2023–2024, it was the best-off half of the income distribution—shown by the blue bars in

## Controlling food prices in mainland Europe

In 2014, a cap was introduced on Greece's beaches to stop greedy proprietors trying to charge more than €1.15 for a cheese toastie. By 2022 price controls on basic foodstuffs had been extended to the food and drinks sold in airports, cinemas, theatres, bus stations, hospitals, clinics, archaeological sites and museums, passenger ships, trains, sports grounds, courts, nursing homes, universities and schools. The items affected included bottled water of any kind, which was capped at half a euro for half a litre. A single Greek coffee was capped at €1.20, French filter coffee at €1.30, an espresso coffee at €1.45, a frappé at €1.30 and English tea at €1.30. Passengers in first class could be charged more. The point of these regulations was to stop exploitation. By 2022 the price of a toastie had risen by 10 cents to €1.25, or €1.45 if it also contained ham.



Danny Dorling *Shattered Nation* (Verso, 2023)

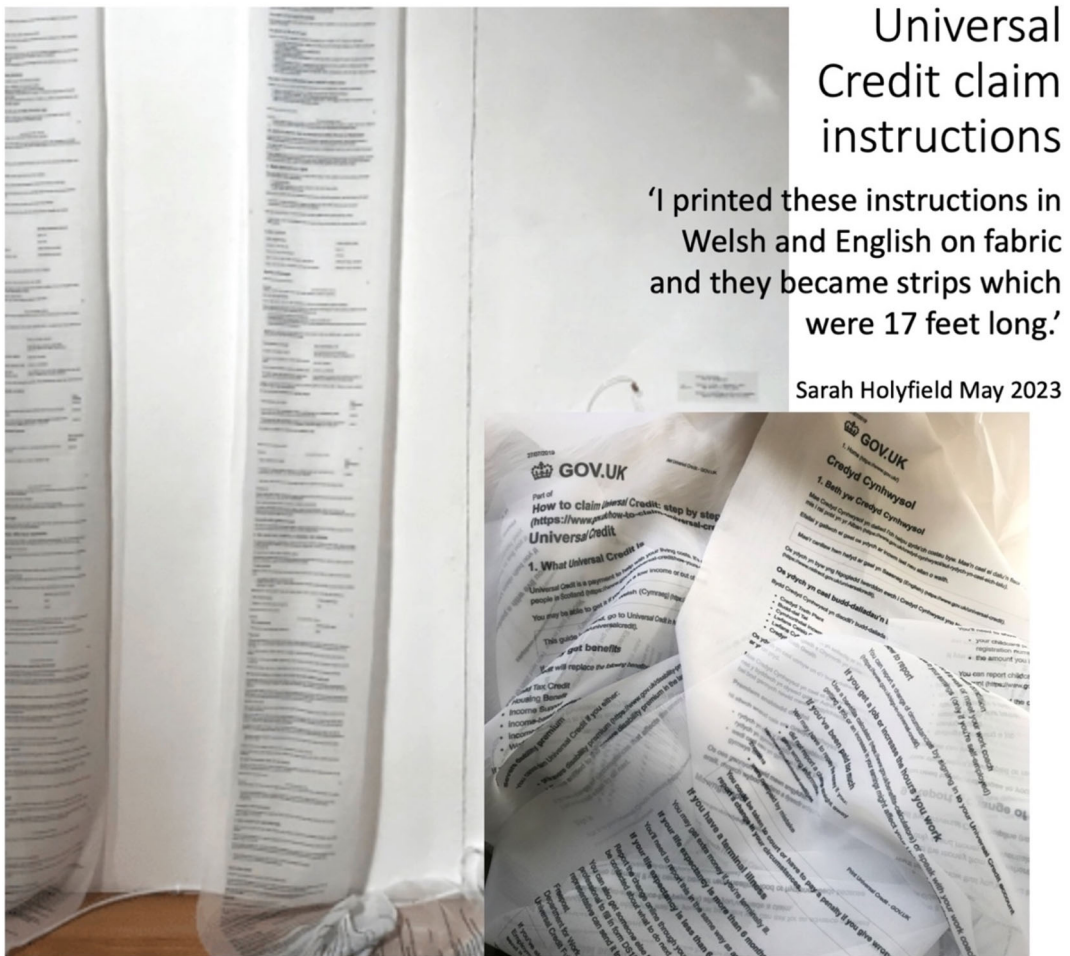
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**FIGURE 13** Even food sold on beaches in Greece is price fixed. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Figure 12—who experienced the greatest proportionate falls in their income (excepting the very richest 5%). Note that pensioners and the very poorest 5% are not included in Figure 12.

In contrast to what was occurring in the UK, elsewhere in Europe the basic prices of key foods was often being controlled in ways that reduced hunger (Figure 13). Furthermore, electricity companies were nationalised, such as in France, to ensure fuel bills did not rise as quickly as they would otherwise have done. Flat rate fees to use public transport were introduced, most notably the nine Euro monthly tickets in Germany which were quickly copied in many other countries on the European mainland. These allowed a person to travel on as many trains as they wished in a month after only paying for one ticket. There were also huge falls in the use of air travel in Germany as a result. The cost-of-living crisis in these countries was spread out over the population far better than it was within the UK and the impact of the crisis in other states was reduced through the use of public sector payments and progressive taxation. A cost-of-living crisis can be mitigated. Bar some limits on the size of the rise of fuel prices to heat homes, very little was done in the UK.

Instead of helping people get through the cost-of-living crisis by introducing regulations on the behaviour of private businesses in the UK, we made our regulation on individual people and individual families receiving benefits even more strict—more regulated. For a short time universal credit was uplifted to reduce the amount of absolute destitution and then that uplift too was ended. Even printed at normal font size, the regulations you now need to



## Universal Credit claim instructions

'I printed these instructions in Welsh and English on fabric and they became strips which were 17 feet long.'

Sarah Holyfield May 2023

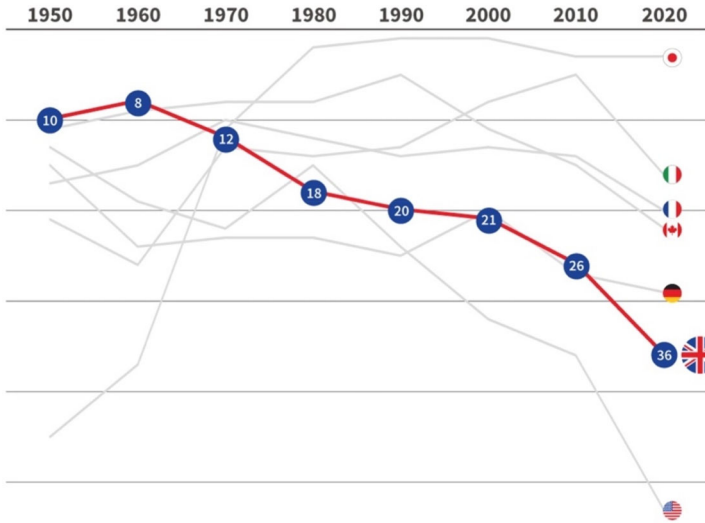
**FIGURE 14** The instruction to claim assistance in the UK. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]

read to understand the rules of universal credit are 17 feet long when printed out and turned into a tapestry (Figure 14). These are the basic instructions to be followed if you wish to try to claim those benefits today. Should you wish not to starve if you are poor.

## 4 | THE COLLAPSE OF THE UK STATE IN MANY GLOBAL RANKINGS OF PROGRESS

The UK has been falling down the ranks in all kinds of ways, most obviously when measured by health (Figure 15) and in particular when infant mortality was rising during the austerity years at many times, and again in 2023 in a way that was fast and which caused great shock even among hardened professionals. Child mortality in England rose especially quickly for children in the poorest areas of the UK and there was also a rise in very young deaths among those born to the poorest parents (NCMD, 2023). The sharpest rise in child deaths in England in 2022 and 2023 was seen in children who had reached age 1, but had not yet got to their fifth birthday (Dorling, 2024). Only the USA did worse among rich nations in terms of falling down the ranks.

## Countries of the G7's international life expectancy rankings, 1950–2020



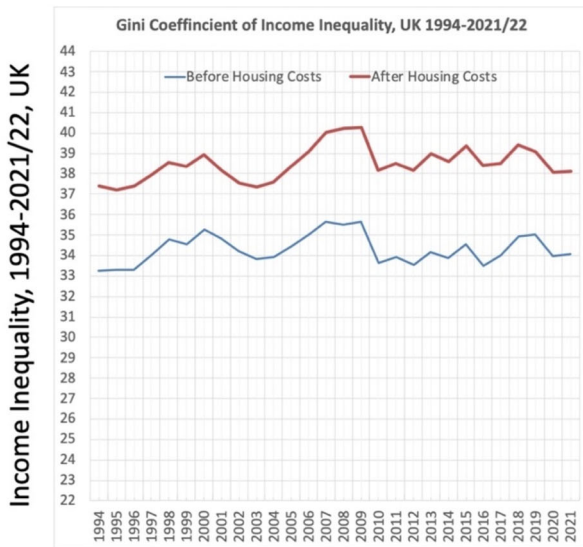
**FIGURE 15** The UK rapidly falling down the health ranks. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jsp.13035)]

Neonatal mortality rates as reported by the World Health Organisation were higher in the UK than in all but five extremely poor European countries already by 2020, and then the UK rates worsened further and faster in 2022 and especially when measured in early 2023. The mortality rates of mothers in the UK rose around the time of the birth of their children in these years, mostly due to an increase in suicides by ‘mothers to be’ or among those who had just had their babies. There were so many other terrible statistics to report that it takes a book to include even a sample of them and it is a very distressing process even just to pull them all together (Dorling, 2023). The ‘cost-of-living crisis’ is too weak a phrase to use when, for many, what is being talked about is destitution, rapidly growing fear, and even more widespread despair.

All of the worsening of the social and economic structures of the UK began long before the current cost-of-living crisis. The crisis we are currently living through was cemented into our lives with the acceptance of high inequality by the previous 1997–2010 Labour government (Figure 16). That government did a huge amount that was harmful to the majority. It introduced and then increased university tuition fees (two thirds of British people go to university by age 30). It brought in more NHS privatisation and began the academisation (privatisation) of state schools, it built very few council houses and it fought international wars, diverting money that could have been used to reduce poverty at home, rather than kill people in Iraq.

New Labour claimed to have removed a million children from poverty but moved them only ever so slightly over a line in such a way that the overall inequality statistics for the UK did not improve at all! And, in reality, behind the spin of the New Labour publicity machine, things were not getting better, they were getting worse. That spin was at its most Machiavellian around the year 2002 when the government release statistics claiming that everywhere, in

At a private dinner in Hampshire in 2002, Margaret Thatcher was asked what her greatest achievement had been. She replied: 'Tony Blair and New Labour. We *forced* our opponents to change their minds.'



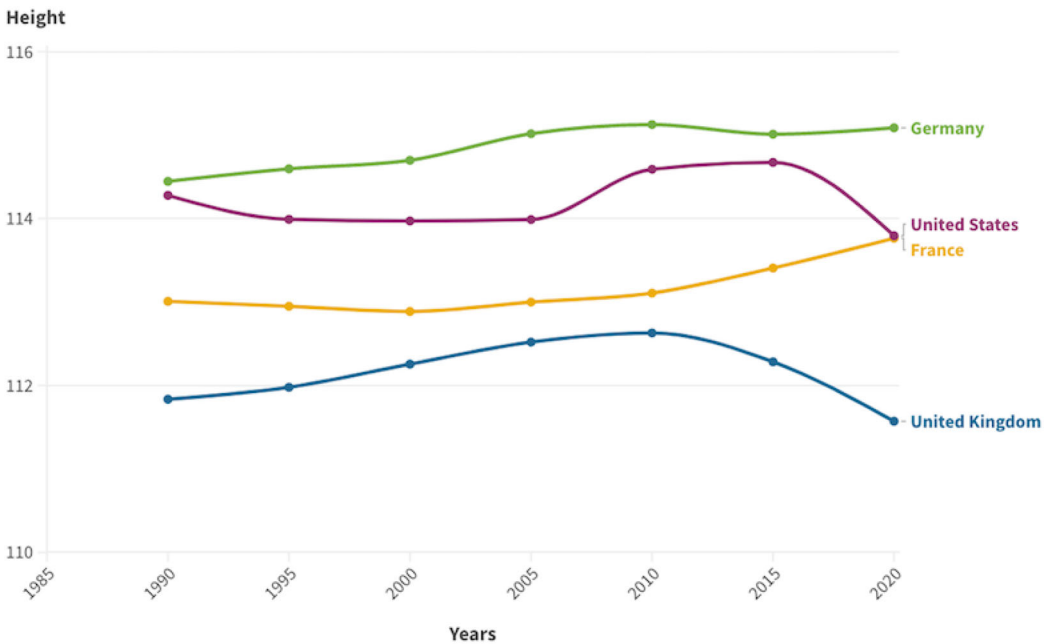
**FIGURE 16** The acceptance of Thatcherism as normal. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

every way, everything they measured was improving (Dorling et al., 2002). Figure 16 shows that inequality did not fall under New Labour, and includes a haunting image of how the 1980s became reflected in the early 2000s. We are 20 years on again, today with absolutely no exaggeration or malice, Kier Starmer's face could be put to the right of Blair and Thatcher's, not least as the policies of British leaders move further and further to the right politically. Keir Starmer is the current leader of the Labour party as I write, and the most likley next Prime Minister of the UK. Starmer's beliefs about society and equality, at least in terms of those publicly expressed, are almost identical to those of Thatcher and Blair.

Everything was not improving in the years before prices suddenly started rising very high, far from it. In the UK, the previous gains in height in children began to slow-down after 1995. For boys born in 2005, aged five in 2010, they began to fall and that fall accelerated. The fall in the height of children in the UK began when New Labour was in power. There was also a slight fall in Germany when well over a million of refugees from Syria, many of them children were allowed in (Figure 17), but the UK had not allowed in hundreds of thousand of children stunted by war. It was not migration that accounted for the heights of children in the UK falling—it was poor nutrition due to rising poverty.

In France, where child nutrition is better and child poverty is lower, children's' heights not only rose but accelerated upwards in these years. Children in the UK were both the shortest and saw almost the fastest fall in their





**FIGURE 17** Average height of 5 year old boys, selected countries. Source: <https://www.dannydorling.org/?p=9881>. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

heights of those countries compared. Only the USA did worse. The USA became the place where the cost-of-living crisis was even more acute because inequality was slightly higher when it hit so poor families were even poorer. Children in the USA had been taller than those in France, especially in the 1950s and 1960s when they were some of the best fed in the world.

In late February 2024 OECD released figures showing that income inequality in the USA had jumped up under Joe Biden's presidency. In 2022 the Gini Coefficient of income inequality rose to 0.395, the first rise in 3 year and back up to its height in 2019 (see <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>). What exactly had Biden's regime achieved? Income inequality was as high at its ends as it was when it started, but was rising. And there was no sign that the stunting of children in the USA was abating, just as it was not in the UK. The UK had copied US social policies since the early 1980s, but the worse effects of that copying were not evident until four decades later.

## 5 | WAYS OF TRYING TO PRETEND THAT THINGS ARE NOT AS BAD AS THEY ARE

The BBC was tasked by government to produce good local news stories to try to boost the morale of the UK nations as the cost-of-living crises deepened (Figures 18 and 19 are two example of these attempts). But even these stories, when you read them closely, are stories about foodbanks and housing costs that have become too high to be affordable anymore.

The BBC reporters were not willing to be completely supplicant propaganda tools of government. In their reports they included pointers to what was actually going on—perhaps with an eye to how these might both be read at the time, but also thinking how people might one day in future look back on them? Most of us know that we are living in terrible times in the UK and that something has gone terribly wrong.

## Example of the BBC carrying out its remit of producing positive stories from the regions.

‘Once a down-on-its-luck coal-mining town, the unassuming Welsh city is experiencing a tourism boom – and locals say there's more to love ...’

‘While many were sceptical when Reynolds and McElhenney took charge in 2020, everyone I spoke with felt the duo's community-forward approach, which includes everything from **matching local foodbank donations** to promoting local bands, has helped propel improvements across Wrexham that were [apparently] already underway.’

### Wrexham



**FIGURE 18** A good news story about Wrexham during the crisis. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

In writing a feature on Cornwall, on BBC reporter exhausted the usual tropes of ‘beloved tourists spots’ and the oddities of the Cornish language and mentioned the housing crisis, unemployment and ‘more’. The more might have been interesting had it been spelt out. More too could have been said about the unemployment issue as it is very hard to be unemployed in the UK and receive any benefits that are sufficient to support you. People are now forced to labour with very little free will allowed. In Cornwall, as everywhere else in the UK, you will be pointed to jobs that you could do or sanctioned if you appear not to be trying extremely hard to get a very low paid job.

## 6 | DESPERATE MEASURES TO TRY TO ADDRESSES THE SERIES OF CRISES

In September 2022 a budget was proposed that was so ridiculous that even the International money market analysts refused to accept it (Figure 20). The bankers of the world rapidly downgraded how viable they though the UK was as

Another example of one of many positive BBC stories from the ‘nations and regions’.



‘Although modern Cornwall is one of the United Kingdom’s most beloved tourist spots, the region struggles with **unemployment, a housing crisis and more**, firing up calls for more independence from distant London amongst nationalist groups who are proud of their distinct heritage. ... *“Dalghus yw Kernewek avel tra yn gwirvos [Cornish is inclusive as a phenomenon]”* said Will Coleman, the founder of Go Cornish, an educational project providing Cornish language teaching programmes to primary schools.

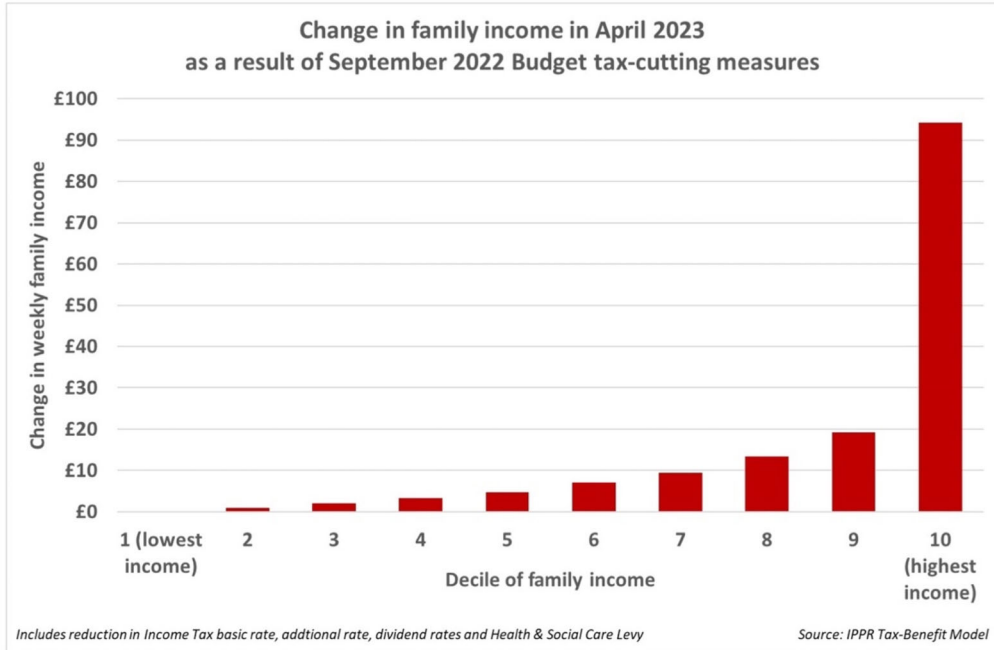
**FIGURE 19** A good news story about Cornwall during the crisis. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

a state and increased the premium for borrowing money by that state. As I began to write this paper, in the autumn of 2023, if the UK government wished to borrow money, promising that it will pay it back after 30 years, it had to pay an interest rate of 5.5%—the highest in Europe at that time. That is an enormous sum of money and shows how the government is facing its own cost-of-living crisis—but mostly due to its own actions in proposing to hand money to the rich just as inflation was rising.

It is often said that the Bank of England undermined the government in the autumn of 2022, but the governor of the bank had himself been critiqued in February 2022 for suggesting, while being paid an annual salary of £575,538, (including pension) that: ‘he wanted to see “quite clear restraint” in the annual wage-bargaining process between staff and their employers to help prevent an upward spiral taking hold’ (Partington, 2022). A great deal of work has been published in recent years explaining how the Bank of England’s previous quantitative easing policy

# What was proposed in September 2022 was not allowed by the international money markets.

The September 2022 measures were halted:



**FIGURE 20** The budget proposed by Liz Truss's chancellor. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]

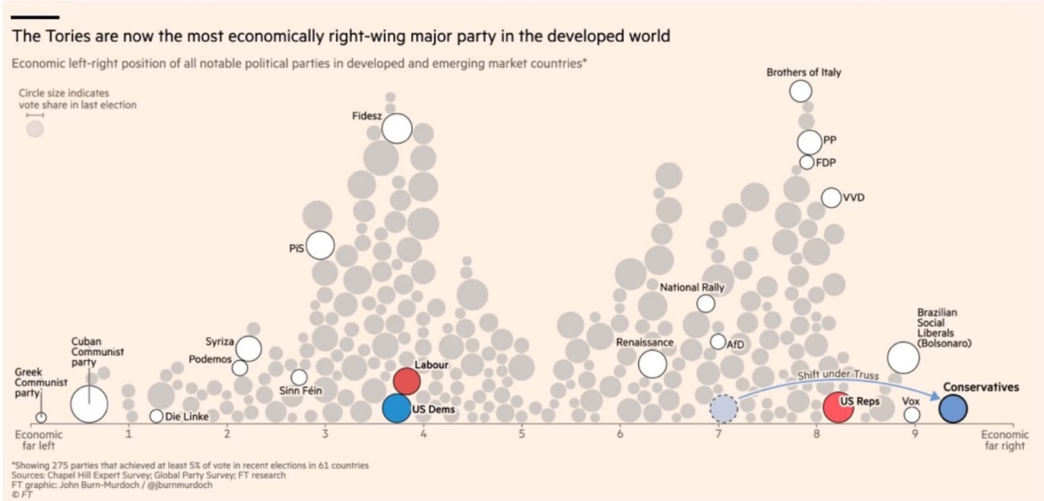
handed over huge sums of money to the best off in the UK that later became clear to see in the growth of wealth disparities and in how impoverishment and destitution then increased further (Dorling, 2024).

The UK has danced to the far right political over recent decades (Figure 21). The situation is so bad in the UK today, as compared to other countries, because those in charge do not see it as terribly bad. They still do not. If they did see it as terrible then they would not use food, and the hunger of one's children, as the key mechanism to force many adult people to take jobs they do not want to do.

In Scotland, if you have a third child you receive child benefit payments for that child. In England and Wales you do not. As a result Scotland, and Northern Ireland (because of caps on housing costs there), now have a lower official child poverty rate than any of the regions of England or Wales. More children, as a share of all children, are today poor in South East England (which does not include London as a statistical region) than in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Figure 21 illustrates how, by 2022, the Conservative party had become the economically most right-wing party of any political party in the rich or medium income world. There is little that surprises us now about beeting these various world records in the UK, be it on how far-right our mainstream political party is, or in how fast children poverty is growing. However, there are also signs of hope within the UK.

## Dancing to the right? Cameron aligned with *AfD*.



**FIGURE 21** The economic position of the UK during the crisis. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pspl.13035)]

## 7 | THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE – HOW PEOPLE IN SCOTLAND REACTED TO RISING PRICES

Attention began to focus on the most greedy when the cost-of-living crisis hit, but there was also an increase in hope in some parts of the UK furthest from London (Figure 22). There were ways out of the crisis. In Scotland, by November 2023, after a year of special Scottish Child Payments being received, no child in Scotland needed to go cold in the winter of 2023/24, or hungry. Scotland also enacted rules to insist that landlords could not increase rent by more than a very small amount (by 3% a year).

There are other places we can look for many signs of hope. Internationally, those OECD figure referred to above showed that income inequality was rapidly falling in Chile to a Gini Coefficient of 0.448 in 2022, down from its maxima of 0.496 in 2020. Chile shows how it is possible for even the most unequal countries in the world to change rapidly (there was a social ‘explosion’ in Chile in 2019 a great wave of demands for change). Chile is the only place in the better-off countries of the world where children are as educationally divided as they are in the UK. Like Scotland, it is somewhere else we have to look to know what is possible.

Figure 22 is the penultimate image in this collection. Drawn shortly before the new British King and Queen ascended to the throne, it describes what was actually happening during 2023 to deal with the cost of living crisis in



*'It is then in making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, that the ways to peace can be entered.'*

Raymond Williams, essay on CND, 1989.

**2023:** In Scotland, the Scottish Child Payment – given to any family in receipt of benefits, on top of other support – was raised to £25 a week for every child aged 16 or under.

When Charles and Camilla holiday in Balmoral this summer, they will do so in the only part of their kingdom where a poor family with three young children will be receiving an extra £3,900 in 2023 as compared to 2022 and so will be able to put food on the table. In the coldest months of the year, they may also be able to afford to heat their home, as long as they are frugal. Nicola Sturgeon left office only when the most important part of her work was done.

**FIGURE 22** Scotland did act to confront the crisis. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.13035)]

part of the UK. Northern Ireland keeping housing costs low had a similar effect. The state still owns a large proportion of homes in Northern Ireland.

Wales also began to act differently, although it had fewer devolved powers (it could reduce road traffic speeds in almost all residential areas to 20mph and it did). But in England almost nothing was being done to try to make life safer and more sustainable, especially where housing costs were highest. More and more people, and most often children, and the adults in families with children, increasingly went hungry, got cold, were worse clothed than before and so more and more, when asked, not only said they had no summer holiday—they began in rising numbers to say they did not need one. By early 2024 an annual single holiday had become a luxury for those who can afford to rent a caravan in Scarborough.

The final image here (Figure 23) is of the new King, the king of the cost-of-living crisis, and all the pomp and circumstance of the ceremony to enthrone him. This figure shows the images that people in future will look back on when thinking of the years in which hungry rose so rapidly; when so many more people became cold; when more children died than before; when the school roofs crumbled and the hospitals could not cope; when the black mould spread in the homes of the poorest and shoplifting (just to eat) increased, when life expectancy for the old was still lower than it had been in 2014; when debt was rising for almost everyone; when affording a home was becoming harder than it had been for decades; when a malaise spread across the countries of the UK; and before many people understood that this had all been a choice—because too few comparisons were made with other countries in Europe to ask why people there were better fed, better housed, better schooled and better cared for in ill health. The

In the spring of 2023, it was far from clear how the year would play out. People appeared to be confused, unsure, and very uncertain.



**FIGURE 23** The King and Queen of the cost-of-living crisis. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pspa.13035)]

poorest fifth of people in the UK were, by 2023, poorer than the majority of the poorest fifth across all of Eastern Europe. Only a handful of the poorest of countries on the European mainland reported child mortality rates worse than those of the UK by early 2024. And two very rich old people stood on the balcony of a run down palace in London, and waved.

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#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the data used to create the figures in this article are freely available in the public domain.

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