

The Lives of Seven Children Tell the Story of UK Inequality

The lives of seven children, each representing a different income bracket, reveal the stark realities of inequality in contemporary Britain. Even the best off of the seven is disadvantaged in the country with Europe's fastest-rising child poverty rates.

By Danny Dorling

[Danny's latest book is 'Seven Children: Inequality and Britain's next generation', to be published in the UK and USA in the fall of 2024 by Hurst and Oxford University Press.]

One way to try to understand the health and priorities of a state is to look at how its children are treated. In the fall of 2018, there were about 14 million children in the UK. If you divide those 14 million into seven groups, ranging from the poorest to the richest families, and select the middle child from each group of two million, you have seven representative children by income. By chance, these seven children might also reflect the distribution of other aspects of life in the UK, their ethnicity for example, the range of geographical areas they have grown up in, or whether they live with one parent or two (or very occasionally none).

Few British families with young children have much wealth, making income the best measure to differentiate their circumstances. In the UK, income largely determines children's life chances. Seven is the minimum needed to represent the range.

Why choose 2018? Because it was a year of peak income inequality, a year before the pandemic when social statistics were still reliably collected. Comparing these numbers with recent post-pandemic data, we can get an idea of current social and economic trends. In the fall of 2024, each child will have their sixth birthday. The graph below shows how much money their families have to live on each year after they have paid their taxes and paid the rent or mortgage.



Children hula-hoop on a playground in London, England, on June 4, 2020. (Dan Kitwood / Getty Images)

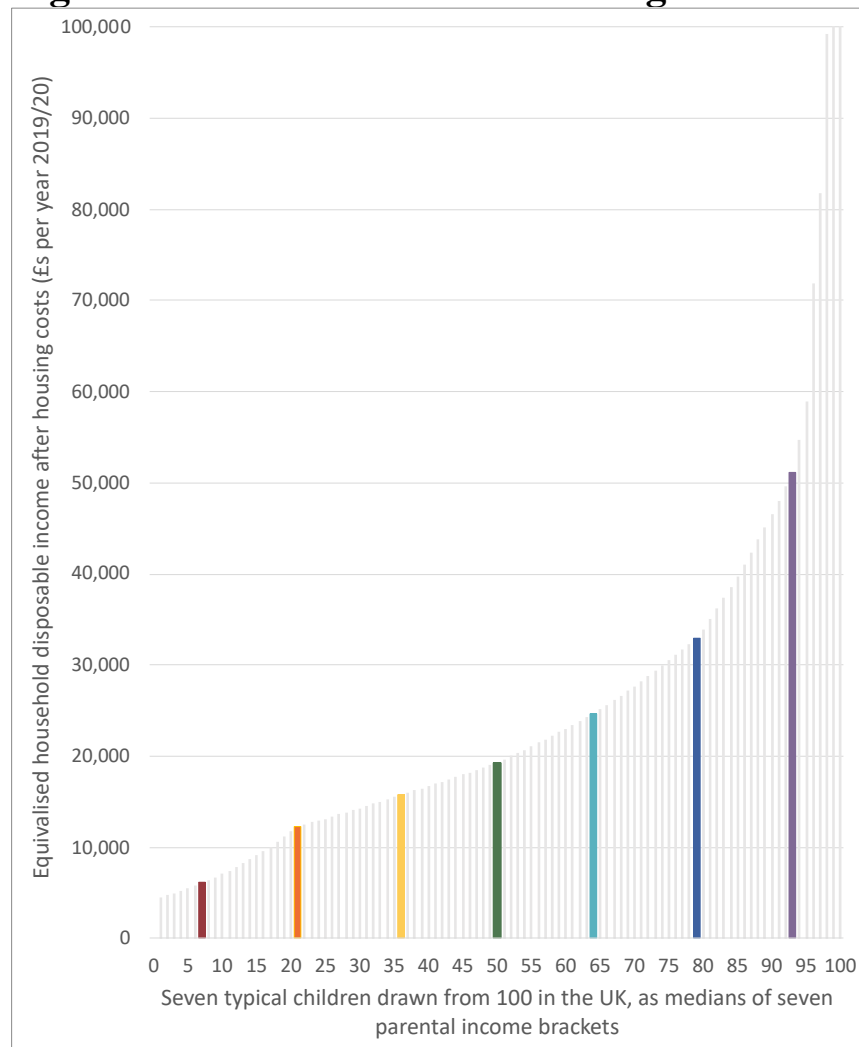
Note that *almost everyone* who publicly comments on these issues (including myself) either currently belongs to, or grew up in, a family that was better-off than the best-off of our seven typical children. However, even within the top 7% of the British income distribution, there exists a wide range of incomes, meaning one can be a part of this exclusive group and still financially disadvantaged — even though, compared to our seven typical children, you are relatively extremely well-off. This short article provides a summary of key findings from the book *Seven Children* [published](#) in September 2024 in the UK and November 2024 [in the USA](#).

Readers in the USA may be surprised by how low the annual disposal incomes are for families with children in Britain today. Factors like Brexit have contributed to making Brits poorer than people in most of the mainland of Europe in recent years. However, it's important to note that these British families do not have to set aside

money for healthcare. Roughly a tenth of adults in Britain use private health care every year, but almost no family with young children in the UK can afford it.

At the time of writing, a pound is only worth 27 percent more than a dollar (1 pound equals 1.27 dollars). Therefore, the family of the best-off-child has a disposable annual income of \$63,500 a year. Note that this has been adjusted (equivalized) to account for the number of people in the family, making it comparable to the living standard of an adult couple with no children with that annual income. In 2019, if you were living with another adult, had no children, and brought home more than \$63,500 a year between you, after taxes and after paying for your housing expenses, you were better-off than the families of the wealthiest seventh typical child in the UK.

Figure 1: The seven children among all 100 children

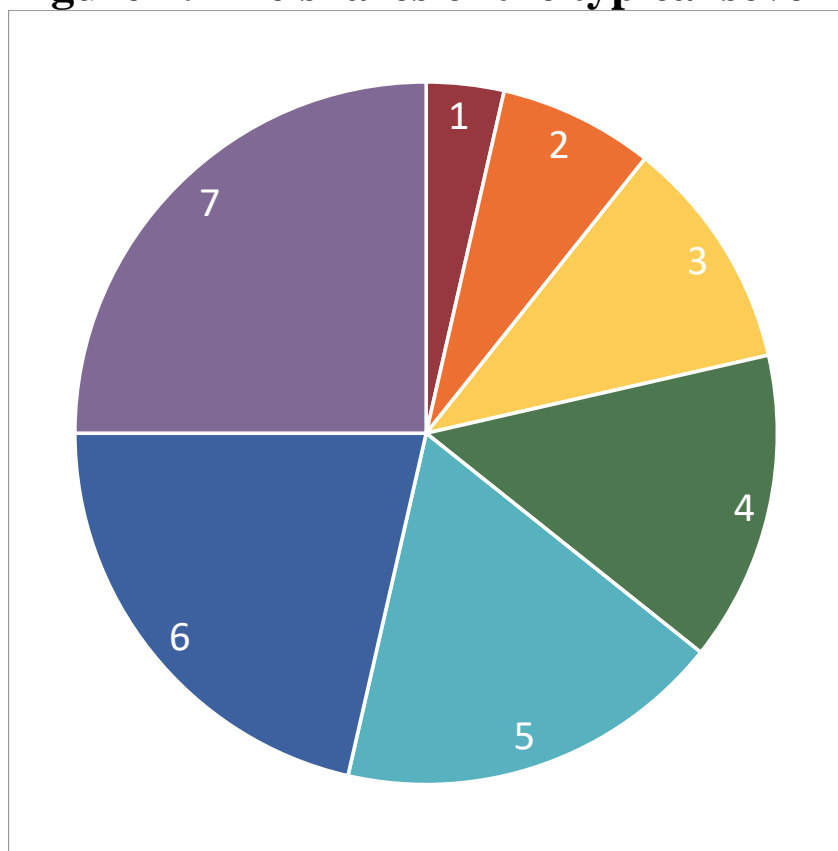


Source: HBAI (Households Below Average Income) 2019/20 data tables and, above the seventh child, percentile points from 1 to 99, for total income before and after tax; data from HM Revenue & Customs (UK).

Note: Height of bars is proportional to disposable family annual income in Britain in the 2020s. The best-off two children out of 100 live in families that have annual net disposable incomes even after paying tax too high to be included here: £144,000 (\$183,000) and £510,000 (\$648,000), respectively.

The future for Britain’s children hinges not on their own actions, but on decisions made by adults in the coming years. It depends on whether the British are willing to tolerate the high human toll of increasing inequality across British nations. If enough choose to stay silent, then nothing will improve. However, if people start speaking out and taking action, this point in time could mark the peak of inequality, rather than the beginning of a long plateau or merely being a foothill of another mountain of inequality to climb.

Figure 2: The shares of the typical seven children



Source: HBAI (Households Below Average Income) Statistics, 2019/20, UK Department for Work and Pensions.

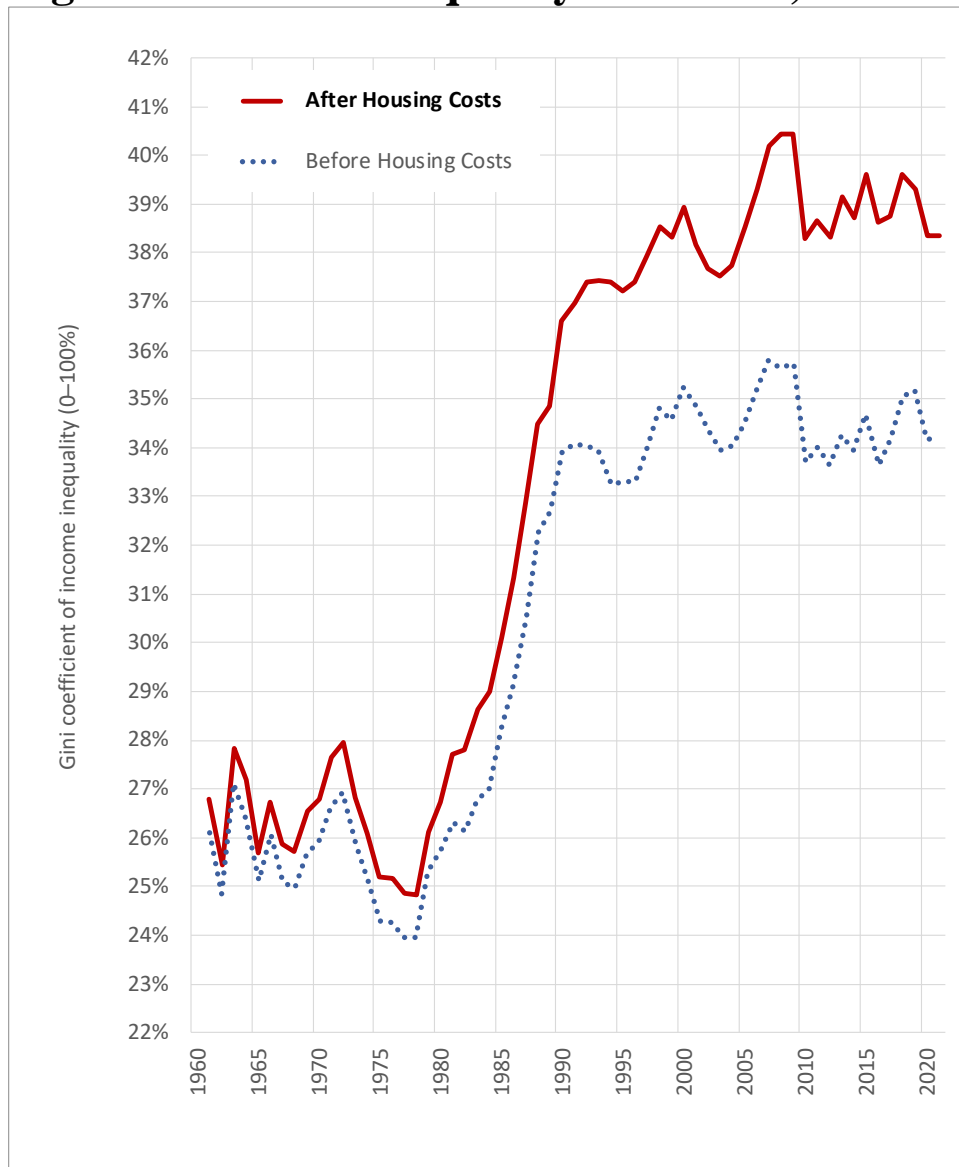
Note: Area is proportional to disposable family annual income in Britain in the 2020s. The 6 per cent of children who are better off than the seventh child live in families that receive 34 per cent of all income, and are not included here. The families of our seven typical children are thus only sharing 66 per cent of the overall UK disposable household income pie (because the families of the richest 7% take the rest, every day).

Each of the seven children could be assigned a number, but they would not feel very human to you if they did, so below they have a name as well. It’s worth noting that the family of the seventh children has a disposable income — money available for food, heating, holidays, and expenses other than rent and taxes — that is greater than the disposable income of the first three typical children’s families combined.

1. Anna

Anna represents the poorest seventh of children born in the UK. Her situation reflects the aftermath of societal division in British since the 1970s — a terrible tear that has left lasting scars. While first reaching high inequality was initially a shock, the enduring and deepening inequality in the twenty-first century has proven far more damaging to families in Britian than was first becoming so unequal.

Figure 3: Income inequality in the UK, 1961–2022



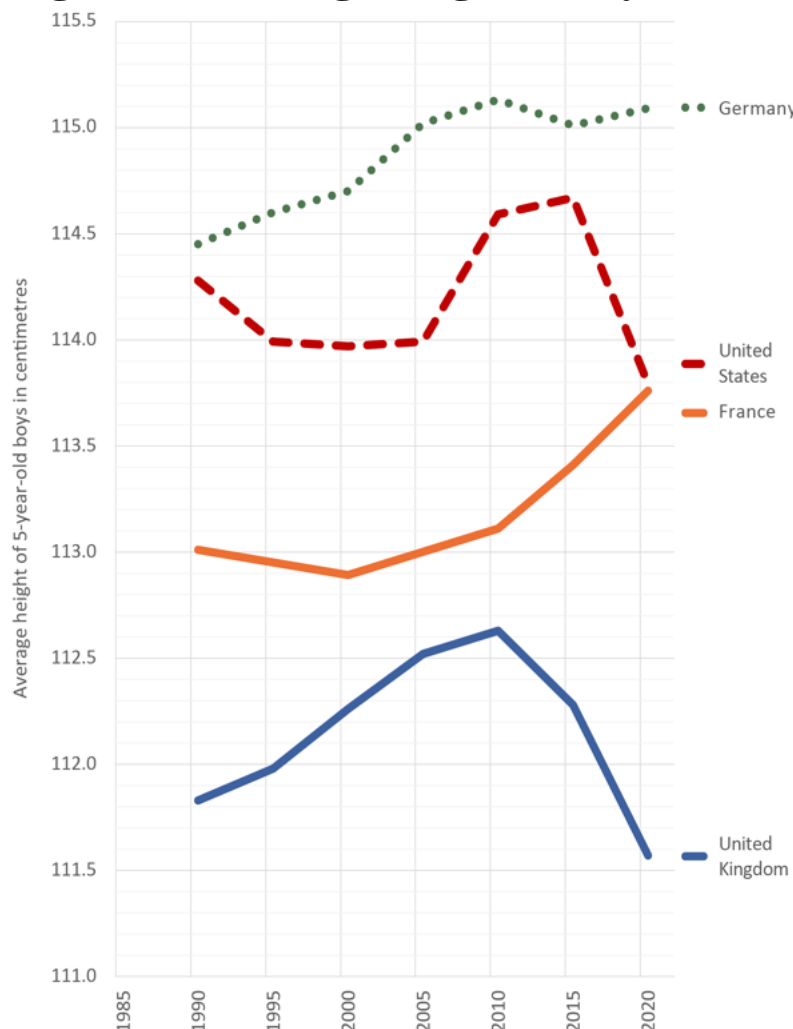
Source: IFS (2024) 'Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK', Institute for Fiscal Studies, <https://ifs.org.uk/living-standards-poverty-and-inequality-uk>

Note: Between all households, calculated as the Gini coefficient.

2. Brandon

Brandon is the second poorest of the seven. His family live in constant fear of benefit sanctions because his father sometimes falls short on job applications, despite occasionally finding paid work when available. Few realize that the number of financial penalties, known as “sanctions,” imposed on benefit claimants by the UK Department for Work and Pensions now exceeds the number of fines imposed by the magistrates’ courts for all crimes across England and Wales, and all those fines for crimes imposed by sheriff courts in Scotland. These extreme punitive measures for benefit claimants were introduced in 1998 under Blair’s New Labour and were further tightened under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–15, implicating all three major UK political parties. Brandon’s growth has been stunted due to his family’s struggle to afford adequate nutrition.

Figure 4: Average height of 5-year-old boys, 1985–2020



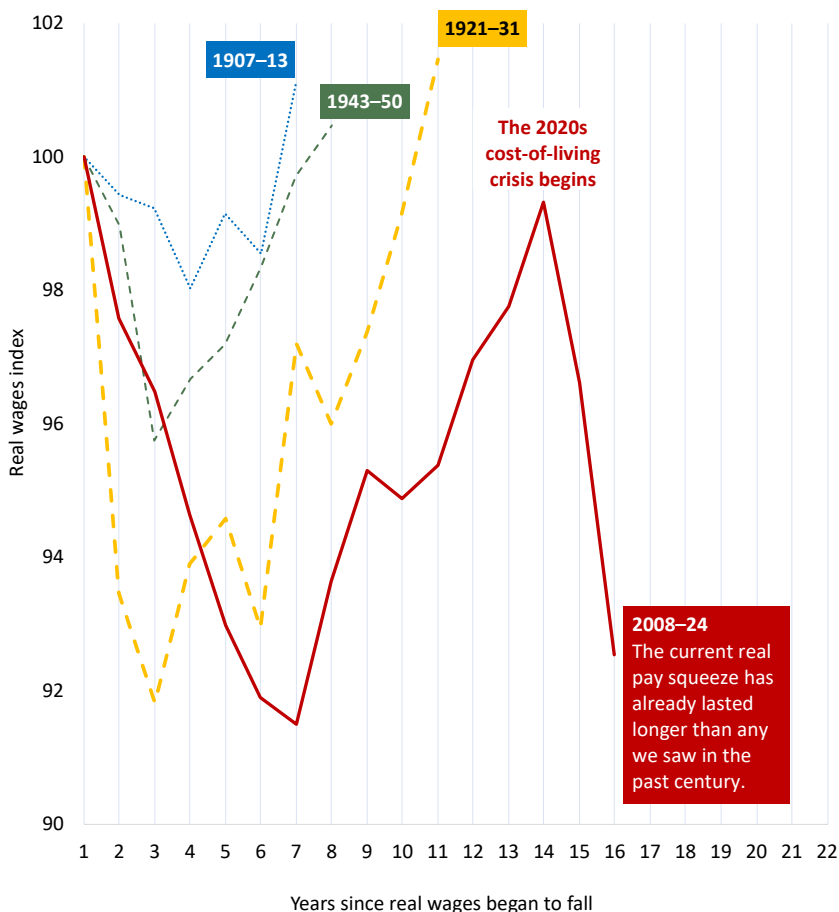
Source: Press Association (2023) ‘British children shorter than other five-year-olds in Europe’, ITV News, 21 June, data available at <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-06-21/british-children-shorter-than-other-five-year-olds-in-europe>

Note how the average height of 5-year-old UK boys has changed since 1990, compared to other nations. Only the USA has seen a similar fall in the average heights of its five year old boys, and it is less sharp and so far less prolonged a fall in heights. In Germany, there was a slight fall when many hundreds of thousands of refugee children were allowed in.

3. Candice

Candice is nearly the middle child in the UK, but determining the true middle is challenging in such a divided society. In such contexts, distrust becomes prevalent. Many people tend to think of themselves as concerned, sensible, logical, fair, decent, hard-working and trustworthy, but under such broad deprivations and fears as are now common in the UK, we often perceive others as less concerned, sensible, logical, fair, decent, hard-working and trustworthy as we are. It becomes common to attribute personal achievements to hard work and attribute shortcomings to insufficient effort or as the result of others cheating you or holding you back. Candice's family can no longer remember what life was like in 2008, a decade before she was born, when people could buy so much more with their money and were less stressed.

Figure 5: Wage squeezes in the UK, 1900–2024



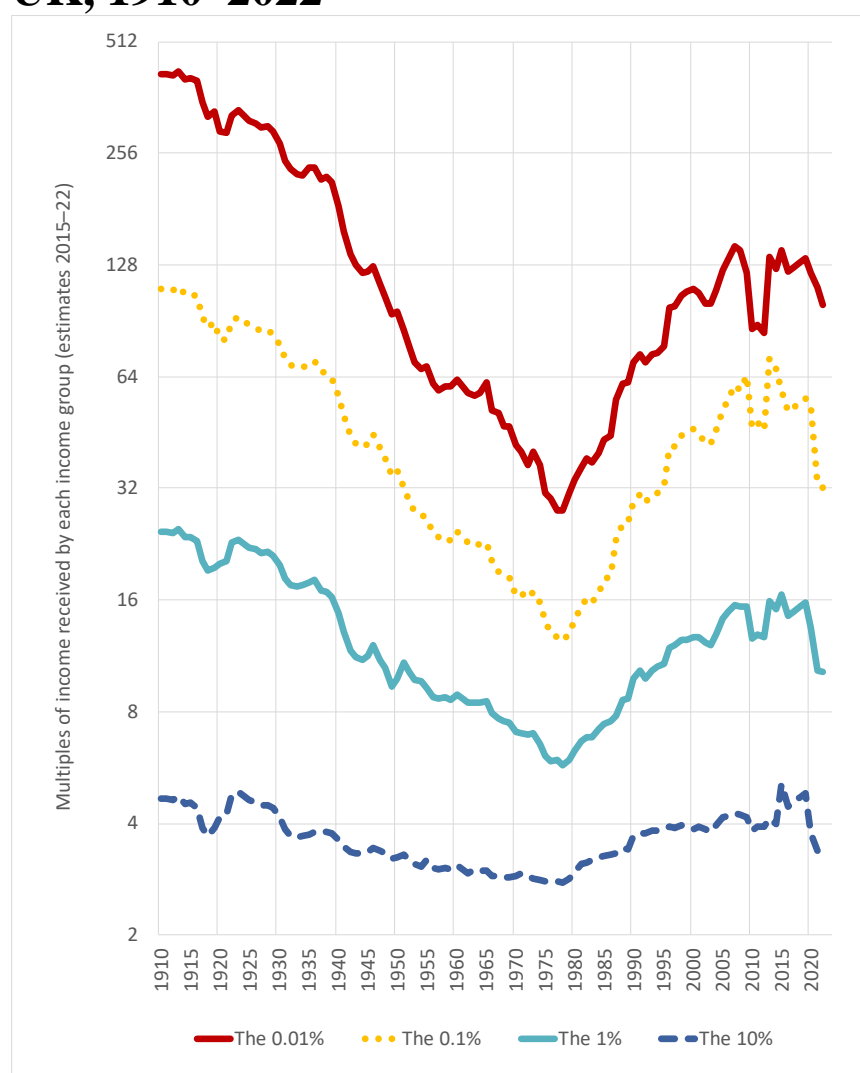
Source: Provided by the UK Trades Union Congress, originally used in Geoff Tily (2018) '17-year wage squeeze, the worst in two hundred years: Never mind the Great Depression, we're now experiencing the longest pay squeeze since Napoleon marched across Europe', TUC, 11 May, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/17-year-wage-squeeze-worst-two-hundred-years>

Note: The graphic shows how the current UK wage squeeze compares to the previous ones that occurred during the last century. This current one has gone on for far longer than any others, except for one that lasted from 1798 to 1822.

4. David

David is the typical child growing up in the UK — his is the average experience — and his parents' anxiety about future security is representative of the pervasive feeling of precarity. Insecurity and extreme precariousness will only diminish when income inequality begins to fall — but such a prospect seems far off. For those relying on an insecure income to keep a family afloat, the experience is often terrifying. For parents of young children, such fear is the last thing they need.

Figure 6: Income shares of and within the top 10 percent, UK, 1910–2022



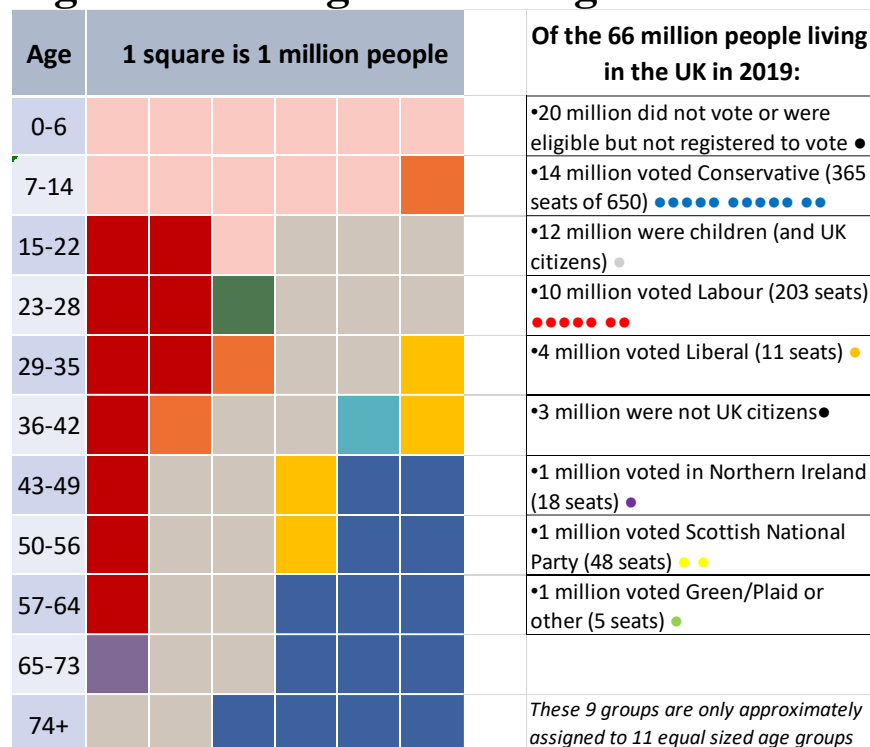
Source: Danny Dorling (2019) *Inequality and the 1%*, 3rd edition, London: Verso. Data available here: <https://www.dannydorling.org/books/onepercent/Material.html>—with estimates for 2020, 2021 and 2022 added from the World Inequality Database, accessed 19 April 2024: <https://wid.world/country/united-kingdom/>

Note: The World Inequality Database estimates suggest a recent fall in income inequality. It will be some years before we can be sure if this occurred or not. That very recent possible turn is not yet seen in another OECD countries. It may be a blip, or the UK may be just a few years ahead of a wider trend to come, one last seen after 1918 across the rich world.

5. Emily

Emily is a little better off than average, and her parents try to be hopeful about the future. It seems unlikely that the UK will continue to have the most extreme income inequality in Europe (other than occasionally Bulgaria). After all, recent UK governments' modest tax schemes, particularly light on the rich, nevertheless allow for future governments to reverse austerity cuts and increase public spending (and decency) without looking at all out of line with other rich countries. The UK currently taxes at one of the lowest rates in Europe. Emily's parents likely voted Labour in 2024 and perhaps 2019, as did many in their age group, including better-off parents. It is mostly only the old that vote not to help others now; but the British Labour Party is not what it was when these seven children were born and is now offering little actual hope. These seven children were born in the year after Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party resulted in the largest annualized swing to Labour ever recorded (between 2015 and 2017). But, by the time they were aged one, Corbyn's reputation had been crucified by the British press as an alleged antisemite in a cynical move to ensure the short-term ending of the policies that had been so popular in 2017 being presented to the British people as feasible – as there being an alternative to extreme inequality – in 2024 no progressive plans were offered up.

Figure 7: Voting at the UK general election, 2019



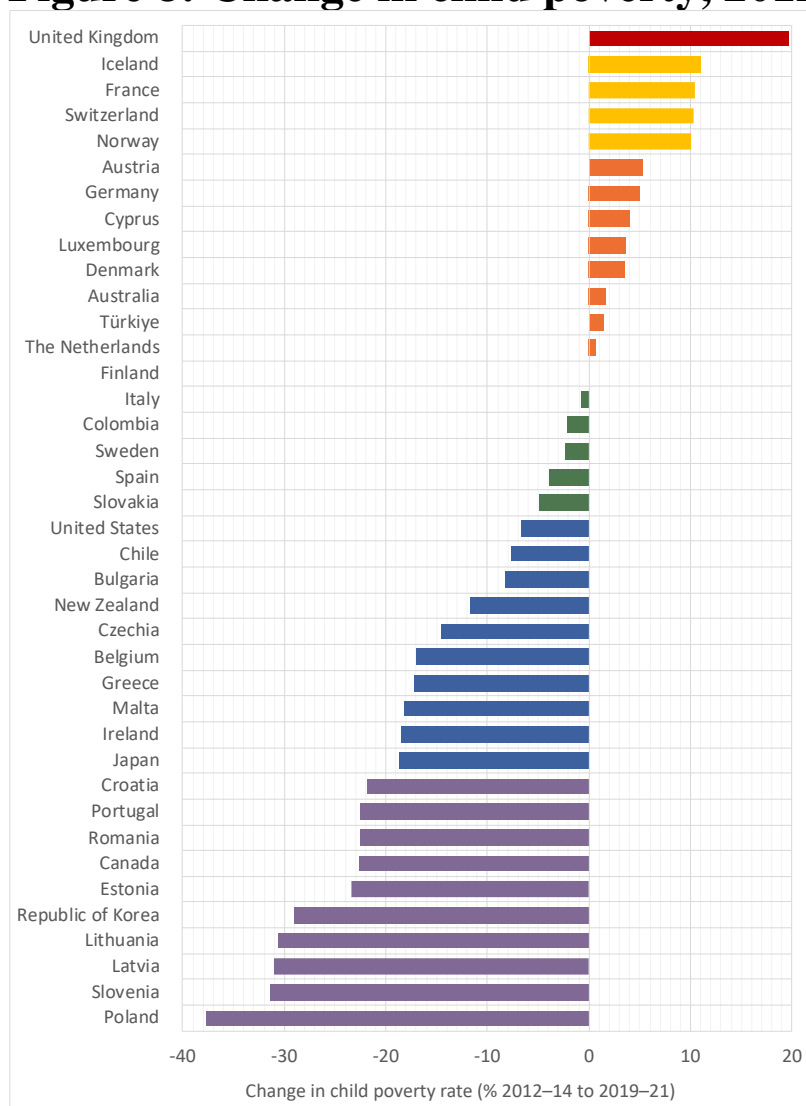
Source: James Sloam and Matt Henn (2019) 'Young cosmopolitans and the deepening of the intergenerational divide following the 2019 general election', LSE Blogs, 13 December, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/young-cosmopolitans-andge2019/> and Gideon Skinner and Roger Mortimore (2019) 'How Britain voted in the 2019 election', Ipsos, 20 December, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>

Note: Voting by major political party and age, approximated to groups of 1 million people.

6. Freddy

In mainland Europe, a child in Freddy’s position would fare much better because of greater equality. Despite being from the second most prosperous group of seven families in the UK, Freddy’s family occasionally struggle. The success of the few in accumulating great sums of wealth depends on an increasing number of others remaining poor or barely getting by. This relative poverty drives people into debt, including trying to sustain mortgages they find grow as interest rates rise, and compels them to do all the work that employers delegate – far more than might be reasonable, including working very long hours. Freddy’s family have not accumulated great wealth. They simply “get by,” residing in one of the poorer countries of the Global North, where child poverty has seen the most significant rise in recent years.

Figure 8: Change in child poverty, 2012–14 to 2019–21



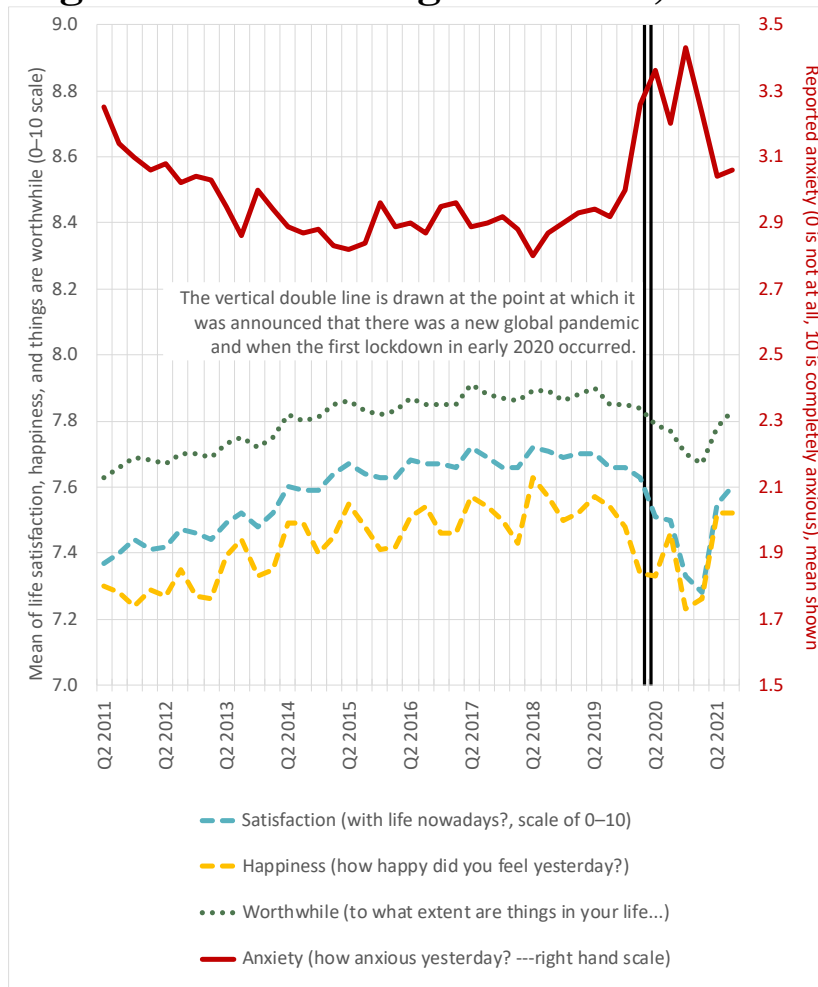
Source: UNICEF Innocenti—Global Office of Research and Foresight (2023) ‘Innocenti Report Card 18: Child poverty in the midst of wealth’, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, December, <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3291/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf>

Note: UNICEF report the relative percentage change shown here, not the percentage point change.

7. Gemma

Today, Gemma, our most privileged child of the seven, no longer wins solely by dint of her birth. Only one million children in the country are in better circumstances than her and yet her parents are increasingly fearful, anxious, and less satisfied with life. Their situation has improved since the financial crash. Despite this, their anxiety remains higher than ever.

Figure 9: Well-being in the UK, 2011–21



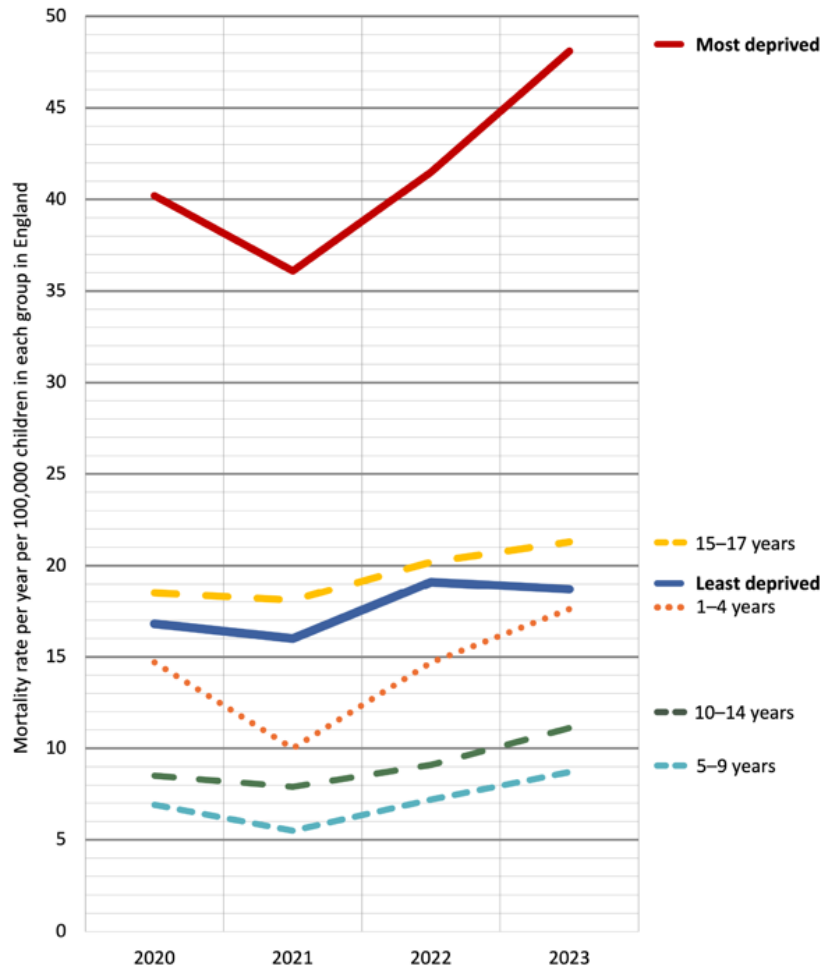
Source: David Finch and Adam Tinson (2022) 'The continuing impact of COVID-19 on health and inequalities: A year on from our COVID-19 impact inquiry', The Health Foundation, 24 August, <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/longreads/the-continuing-impact-of-covid-19-on-health-and-inequalities>

Note: These estimates are the official measures of mental well-being of the people of the UK, as reported by the ONS for each quarter of the years 2011–21.

In the past, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in the UK, the extremely wealthy were far rarer. As a result, there were far fewer in dire straits and far more people who managed happily without either winning or losing. Even the people who lost out back then, did not lose out by so much. More importantly, almost all of those who were economic winners only won by a little. Most importantly, the economic winners of that time were generally well off rather than mega-rich, and so the immiseration of so many at the bottom was not necessary to ensure their enrichment.

Policies built on the crushing of compassion and the evisceration of empathy in the 1980s and 1990s led these children’s grandparents to believe that there was no such thing as society. The ascension of this belief and its policy substrates had a profound impact: their children suffered and now their grandchildren live separate, parallel lives as a result, making them the most divided children in Europe and the most divided in Britain for almost a century. Life in the UK is now growing increasingly precarious for everyone, especially for the poorest of all. Even death rates are rising.

Figure 10: Children dying in England, 2020–23



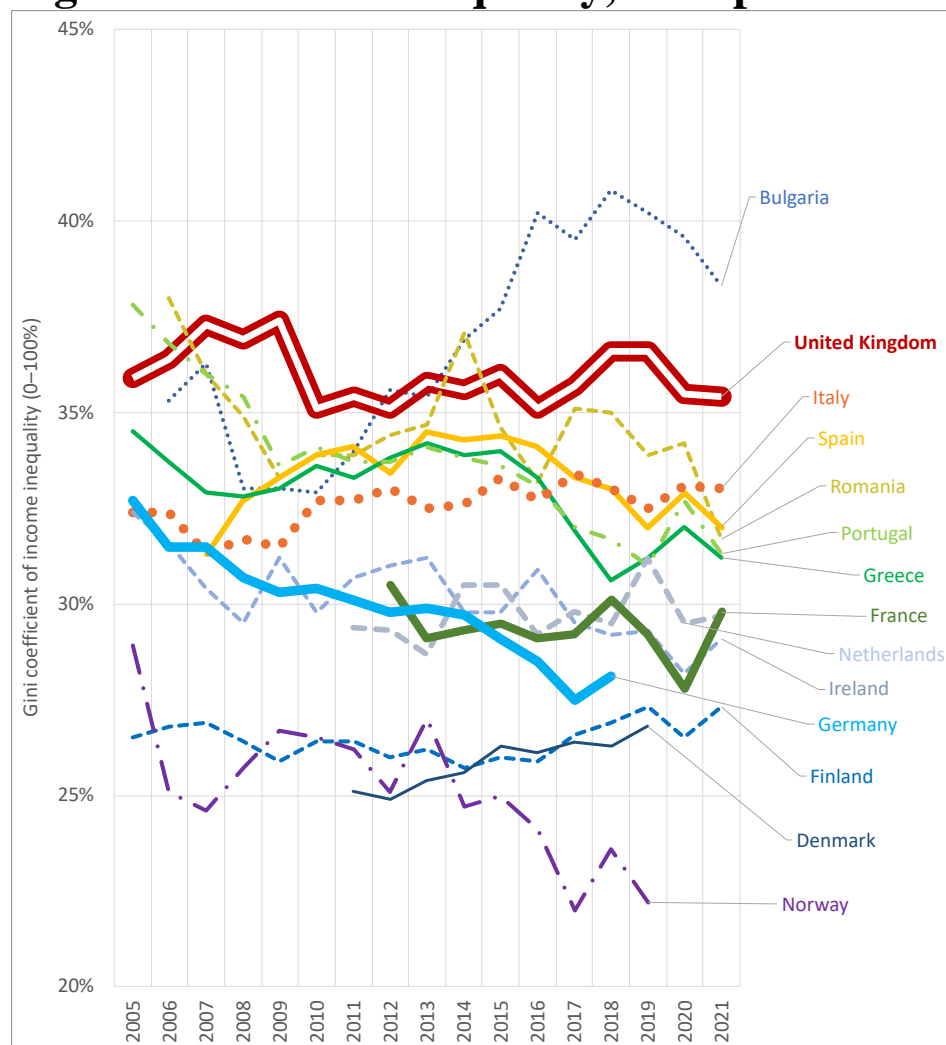
Source: NCMD (2023) ‘Child death review data release: Year ending 31 March 2023’, National Child Mortality Database, release of 9 November, <https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-data-2023/>

Note: These figures are the mortality rates of children in England by age and neighbourhood deprivation, 2020–23.

But how does the rest of Europe fare? And what does the future hold? Inequality rates have declined in more European countries than they have risen in the last couple of decades. Nothing is foretold, but keeping a state like the UK so unequal is a very expensive business (see the note above, under figure 6). Those staunchly upholding these enormous economic divisions that British children and their families now endure may find their efforts increasingly unsustainable as

resources dwindle. For those hopeful of a better path, examples from across mainland Europe provide inspiration. There are so many ways in which housing can be better organized, schools and universities be better run, private-for-profit interests kept out of health care, and the rich being taxed than is now the case in the UK. One thing is now sure: the British must move their focus much more shiftily away from the legacy of the free marketeers across the pond, from which so much bad advice came. The USA is the place that the UK tried so hard to emulate from 1979 onwards. It has been the grandchildren of Thatcher's children that have suffered most as a result of that terrible mistake.

Figure 11: Income inequality, European countries, 2005–20



Source: OECD 'Income inequality', <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/incomeinequality.htm>
 Or <https://www.amazon.com/Seven-Children-Inequality-Britains-Generation/dp/1911723502/>
 Note: These are the latest OECD measures of income inequality in fourteen European countries (May 2024).

Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at the University of Oxford. His latest book is *Seven Children: Inequality and Britain's Next Generation*, to be published in the UK and the United States in the fall of 2024 by Hurst and Oxford University Press.