# UK schools face surge in absenteeism amid worsening child poverty crisis



In the headteacher’s office of a school in a deprived area of Barrow, Cumbria, Mrs Walker recounted the moment she had to climb through a vulnerable pupil’s window. Inside, she found a parent struggling with addiction, passed out. Demonstrating an extraordinary commitment to her role, Mrs Walker ensured both the child and parent were supported—ushering the child into school while guiding the parent towards recovery. This anecdote encapsulates the dedication of educators faced with an alarming backdrop: the pervasive issue of school absenteeism, particularly among the most disadvantaged children.

From the time of the first COVID-19 lockdown, this issue has escalated, with figures revealing that 173,000 students in the UK are now missing at least half of their schooling. This dramatic increase, building on a previous report of 93,000 “ghost children” in 2021, highlights a significant crisis affecting educational access, especially among pupils from low-income families. Approximately 87% of teachers have reported witnessing poverty-driven exhaustion in their pupils, and tragically, those eligible for free school meals are nearly four times more likely to be absent from school—a statistic likely to underestimate the true scale of the issue, given that many living in poverty do not qualify for such assistance.

The root of this concern lies in the socio-economic landscape influencing childhood experiences across the UK. With recent statistics showing that around 4.5 million children, or 31% of all youth, are living in poverty—an increase of 100,000 from the previous year—the urgency of addressing this crisis cannot be overstated. Notably, regions with high proportions of children in poverty often overlap with those reporting the highest rates of school absences. More than half of the children living in poverty reside in families where three or more children present additional challenges, creating a compounding cycle of deprivation.

Schools have increasingly become lifelines, offering not just education but basic necessities. Services such as free breakfasts have expanded to include meals for parents, while food banks located within schools have outnumbered those operating within the community. These initiatives, illustrating the lengths to which schools are going to combat hunger and deprivation, underscore the stark reality faced by many students. For those in deprived areas, education is not merely an academic pursuit; it has evolved into a critical resource for survival, laying bare the systemic failures that have left these children vulnerable.

Moreover, long-term prospects for this demographic remain bleak. Students from low-income backgrounds are almost six times more likely to face permanent exclusion from schools, with 90% of those excluded failing to attain basic GCSE qualifications. These statistics point to a wider societal issue, as educational disengagement often leads to cycles of poverty and criminality. Reports indicate that three-quarters of young individuals in prison have experienced school suspensions, reflecting how the educational system can both hinder and, through exclusion, condemn young lives.

Amidst this crisis, there lies an opportunity for systemic change. As Terri White recounts from her own experience, education has the power to transform lives, serving as a key to escape the clutches of poverty. White’s journey, from a childhood marked by hardship to a successful career in journalism, highlights both the promise of education and the shame of its inaccessibility for many today. She calls out the growing voices advocating for educational reform, emphasising that every child deserves a fair opportunity to break free from the cycle of poverty—a sentiment echoed by educators and advocates alike.

The future for children in Britain hangs in a delicate balance. With projections indicating that child poverty could escalate to approximately 4.8 million by the end of the next parliamentary term, the urgent need for comprehensive policies that address the root causes of deprivation becomes ever more critical. It is a societal obligation to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, can aspire to a future filled with hope and ambition. The voices of educators, like Mrs Walker, serve as reminders of what is at stake—challenging us all to listen and act before more generations slip into silence.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: 1
2. Paragraph 2: 1, 2
3. Paragraph 3: 3, 5
4. Paragraph 4: 1, 4, 6
5. Paragraph 5: 3, 4, 7
6. Paragraph 6: 1, 4, 6
7. Paragraph 7: 1
8. Paragraph 8: 3, 5

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/society/child-poverty/2025/05/britains-ghost-children> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/20/record-170000-children-in-england-missed-at-least-half-of-classes-in-2024> - In 2024, a record 170,000 children in England missed at least half of their classes, marking the highest number since data collection began in 2006-07. This significant increase in severe absenteeism is attributed to various factors, including the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and socio-economic challenges. The unauthorised absence rate also rose from 2.4% in 2022-23 to 2.5% in 2023-24. Educational leaders emphasize the need for a collaborative approach involving schools, parents, and government to address this crisis effectively.
3. <https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-statistics-new-record-high-and-further-breakdowns> - Recent statistics reveal that 4.5 million children in the UK are living in poverty, marking a 100,000 increase from the previous year. This equates to 31% of all children. Notably, 44% of these children reside in households with a disabled member, and 72% live in working families. The data also highlights that 44% of children in families with three or more children are in poverty, underscoring the disproportionate impact on larger families.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/nov/18/more-than-one-in-three-uk-children-in-poverty-deprivation-record-high> - A recent report indicates that 36% of children in the UK, approximately 5.2 million, are living in deprivation, the highest rate recorded this century. This represents an additional 260,000 children compared to pre-pandemic levels. The report also highlights that over half of these children live in families with three or more children, emphasizing the need for policy interventions to address the root causes of child poverty.
5. <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/blog/uk-poverty-stats-children-in-poverty/> - Current statistics show that 4.5 million children in the UK are living in poverty, accounting for 31% of all children and an increase of 100,000 since the previous year. Additionally, 4 million children (28%) are experiencing material deprivation, meaning their families cannot afford essentials like nutritious food, a warm home, or social activities. The data underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to combat child poverty and support affected families.
6. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/our-uk-work/child-poverty-uk/> - UNICEF UK's 2024 report highlights a 20% increase in child poverty over the past decade, with 2.4 million children (20.7%) living in poverty as of 2021. The report also notes that child income poverty rates among minority ethnic groups are more than twice as high as those for children defined as White British. These findings call for targeted interventions to address the disparities and rising poverty levels among children in the UK.
7. <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-2024/> - End Child Poverty's 2024 statistics reveal that 4.3 million children were in relative poverty after housing costs, representing 30% of all children in 2022/23. The data also shows that two-thirds of parliamentary constituencies have a child poverty rate of 25% or more, with regions like the North West and Wales being particularly affected. The report advocates for a comprehensive roadmap to end child poverty, focusing on systemic causes and cross-departmental action.