# Schools become frontline battleground in escalating child poverty and attendance crisis



In the headteacher’s office of a school nestled in a deprived area of Barrow, Cumbria, Mrs Walker vividly recounted a harrowing morning. She had climbed through a child's window to find a parent incapacitated by addiction, a situation painfully reflective of the struggles that many families face today. Such tales are not anomalies but rather a manifestation of the profound crisis engulfing our education system and the children it serves, particularly when viewed through the lens of child poverty.

Since the pandemic, concerns about what Robert Halfon MP termed the “ghost children” of Britain—those who have become severely absent from school—have burgeoned. Initially alarming figures showed that 93,000 pupils were missing from classrooms, a situation that worsened over time. Today, an astonishing 173,000 students are missing at least half of their schooling, while an additional 1.6 million are absent for at least 10% of the time. A stark reality faces these children: those eligible for free school meals are nearly four times more likely to miss school, an observation likely underestimating the issue as 900,000 children living in poverty do not qualify for these meals.

Educational institutions have become increasingly strained, with many teachers resorting to extraordinary measures to ensure students’ attendance. Initiatives such as community minibus pickups, free breakfasts for parents, and significant material support are commonplace. These actions speak to the stark reality that 1.8 million children—one in four across the UK—are intricately tangled in this attendance crisis. Schools have become food banks, with those situated in areas of deprivation now outnumbering traditional community food banks.

The implications of these absences are dire. Students from low-income families face an alarming likelihood of exclusion—almost six times more likely than their peers. Furthermore, 90% of those who are permanently excluded fail to secure passing grades in essential subjects like English and maths. Poverty doesn't just impact attendance; it dismantles futures. A staggering three-quarters of young people in prison reportedly have faced suspensions during their education. The challenges are exacerbated by a broader context: child poverty rates have increased dramatically in recent years, reaching 25% in 2022-23 and affecting approximately 4.5 million children, the highest rate recorded since such statistics began in 1994.

Amid this turmoil, the moral imperative to act grows ever more urgent. The ongoing cost of living crisis, coupled with policies such as the two-child benefit cap—which, critics argue, disproportionately impacts working families—has led to cries for reform. Charitable groups are amplifying this message, urging the government to not only lift caps on benefits but also to invest in essential services that could alleviate these burdens. The Conservatives’ 14 years in power, characterised by austerity measures, are squarely blamed for exacerbating the circumstances that have led families to struggle under the weight of poverty.

Youth dissatisfaction with the status quo is palpable. Many young people, recognising the systemic barriers before them, are looking for change. Binish Syed Qureshi, a young individual from a working-class background, articulated this frustration, highlighting the difficulties of accessing higher education amidst financial constraints. Such sentiments echo across the UK, where the overwhelming majority of households with young people have struggled to afford basic necessities.

The crisis is not static and is expected to escalate. Projections indicate that child poverty could reach 4.8 million by the end of Labour’s first term if changes are not enacted. The narrative of deprivation continues, locking away opportunities for countless children who could otherwise forge a path to a brighter future.

Education, as I experienced first-hand growing up in poverty, is a crucial means of escaping dire circumstances. One of my former teachers poignantly remarked, “The only way out of poverty for a woman is education,” a lesson that rings true now more than ever. The doors to opportunity, however, seem to be closing for today's youth. The systemic failures that limit access to education and the basic necessities needed for a healthy childhood represent a national scandal, underscoring the urgent need for reform and action. The future of millions of children hangs in the balance, dependent not just on schooling but on a collective commitment to addressing the roots of poverty entrenched in our society.

As we stand on the brink of potential change, it is essential that we recognise the lives and aspirations of the children facing these challenges. Each one deserves a chance not just to survive, but to thrive and contribute to society, untethered from the limitations of their circumstances. In this pivotal moment, we must ensure that their rights to education, security, and a hopeful future remain paramount.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.
2. Paragraphs 2, 4, 5.
3. Paragraphs 4, 5, 6.
4. Paragraphs 5, 6.
5. Paragraph 1.
6. Paragraph 2, 5.
7. Paragraphs 1, 5.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## 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.ft.com/content/dd180705-6331-4187-acd5-fc07ca6da3ac> - This article reports that in the UK, the proportion of children living in absolute poverty has increased to 25% in 2022-23, the highest rate since records began in 1994-95. This represents an estimated 3.6 million children living below the poverty line, a notable increase from 23.8% the previous year. The rise has sparked calls from charities for immediate welfare policy reforms, including abolishing the two-child limit on benefits and increasing child allowances. Amidst the backdrop of Covid-19 and the ongoing cost of living crisis, income disparities have widened, with the poorest households experiencing the most significant reductions. Additionally, material deprivation among individuals aged 65 and over has increased for the first time in nearly a decade. Critics, including Labour's Alison McGovern, blame Conservative policies for the worsening situation and propose measures such as building affordable housing and expanding school breakfast clubs. The government acknowledges the challenges, highlighting past cost-of-living support and plans to uprate benefits and pensions.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/7b0600fe-c78a-4a5d-acf2-feacd5faa49e> - Research by a group of charities revealed that 81% of two-parent families affected by the UK's two-child benefit cap are working families, raising questions about the policy's effectiveness. The policy, aimed at ensuring families on benefits make similar financial decisions as working families, stops additional benefits for families with more than two children. Critics, including the End Child Poverty Coalition, argue it drives working families into poverty. Labour faces pressure to scrap the policy as part of its manifesto, with the Resolution Foundation estimating that removal could lift nearly half a million children out of poverty at a cost of £2.5bn. Child poverty rates are particularly high in Labour constituencies, with data showing rates exceeding 50% in 14 areas. Despite criticism and calls for repeal, Labour has yet to commit to ending the policy, instead proposing broader measures like free breakfast clubs and a real living wage to combat child poverty.
4. <https://time.com/6992498/uk-election-tory-conservative-austerity-poverty/> - For 14 years, Conservative rule in the U.K. has led to increasing poverty among young people. Austerity measures that aimed to reduce public spending have significantly impacted welfare and social services, exacerbating issues of youth unemployment and the cost-of-living crisis. Binish Syed Qureshi, from a working-class background, couldn't afford extracurricular activities and now has to work a low-paying job instead of pursuing higher education. Research indicates that 92% of households with young individuals struggled with essentials between 2022 and 2023. Young people, like Qureshi, are disillusioned but determined to vote in the upcoming general election, hoping for systemic change. Proposed solutions include introducing a universal welfare system, but significant reforms are needed to address the rising child poverty and ensure economic security for future generations. With the Labour leader advocating for a younger voting age, there's hope among young Britons for better representation and policies that will address their grievances.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/child-poverty-comparison-northern-europe-uses-old-inaccurate-data-2024-10-01/> - A recent social media post comparing child poverty rates between the UK and Nordic countries used outdated and inaccurate data, misleadingly exaggerating the disparities. The post claimed UK child poverty at 32.1%, with significantly lower rates in Denmark (2.4%), Finland (3.2%), Norway, and Sweden (3.6%). However, these figures are based on decades-old data and incorrect metrics. The OECD's 2000 data indicated the UK’s child poverty rate at 16.2%, not 32.1%, measured as children in households with less than 50% of median national income. The latest comparable OECD data from 2019 show UK child poverty at 14.1%, higher than Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden but not as dramatically. Using Eurostat's 2023 data, with a different metric (households below 60% median income), the UK's rate was 22.4%. The post’s cited figures are thus found to be misleading.
6. <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2024/43million-children-in-poverty-are-being-failed---uk-gov-needs-to-wake-up> - Responding to the Households Below Average Income figures, Meghan Meek-O'Connor, senior child poverty policy adviser at Save the Children UK, said: 'Today 4.3 million children are being failed. It is an outrage that 100,000 more children are in poverty – they are being forgotten. These shocking figures should be an urgent wake up call to all of us, especially the UK Government: we cannot go on like this. There is no reason children should be going without food, heating, toys, or beds. Families need an adequate social security system that keeps children out of poverty, and provides them with a basic level of safety and security. The UK Government must scrap the unfair two-child-limit, and introduce a ‘child lock’ on children’s social security to protect children from hardship and suffering.'
7. <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2025/news-quote-45-million-children-now-living-poverty-source> - LONDON, 27 March, 2025 - Statement in response to the HBAI (Households Below Average Income) child poverty figures which show a record 4.5 million children are now living in poverty in the UK, increase of 200,000. Dan Paskins, executive director of policy, advocacy and campaigns at Save the Children, said: 'These figures are a source of national shame. The rise in child poverty to 4.5 million - the highest figure on record - is a direct consequence of political choices. Ministers may have inherited these figures from past UK Governments, but they must now take immediate action to ensure more children do not fall into poverty next year. If they don’t, this could be the first Labour Government that oversees a significant rise in child poverty – a record no one wants. The two-child limit and benefit cap must be scrapped, and child related benefits locked to rise in line with wages or average earnings, whichever of the two is higher. UK ministers should take this as a clear warning sign that they need to invest in social security and ensure all children across the country are guaranteed a childhood without limits.'