The ‘new normal’ for Britain? Poverty and destitution

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Destitution is a child crying from hunger and a parent eating just one meal a day to make sure their child has as much as they can offer (Getty Images)

The warning signs have been around for some time now – increasing foodbank use, the very public fight over who should foot the bill to feed hungry children during lockdown – but we’re close to having to face up to a very unpalatable truth about modern Britain: we are a country that allows its citizens to slip into destitution.

Destitution is not poverty. Poverty is already all around us. In 2019-20, 4.3 million children and young people grew up in poverty in the UK, almost a third of all children or nine in every school classroom of 30. This in itself is a relatively recent situation.

Around 15 years ago, after some concerted effort, the number of children trapped in poverty had reduced to around 600,000, according to the National Education Union. But in 2016, child poverty reduction targets set out in the Child Poverty Act of 2010 – and the government's duty to meet them – were scrapped. Now child poverty rates are now 600 per cent higher. Perhaps, one might speculate, this is why the target was scrapped altogether?

Poverty is pervasive and widespread, but destitution is something else. It is not relative, but absolute. Destitution means the inability to afford the absolute basics required to maintain a healthy life: food, shelter and warmth. We are months into a cost of living crisis that is only going to sharpen, and already destitution is on the rise.

A study published by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research this week predicts that the 1.25 per cent rise in national insurance, due to come into force in two months' time, will push extreme poverty rates up by 30 per cent when combined, devastatingly, with the effect of rising food and fuel bills. That could leave one million households subsiding on such a low income that they can be called destitute.

The report highlights the effect of the pandemic on incomes and accuses the chancellor[1], Rishi Sunak, of withdrawing Covid relief for hard-up families too rapidly, particularly those in areas hit hardest by changes to employment patterns. The chancellor could have done more, in particular offering a decent level of sick pay for anyone forced out of work for 10 days due to contracting Covid.

It's true that the hard pandemic years and associated isolation rules have escalated the descent into this abyss for many. But poverty in Britain isn't an entirely new problem. Unlike the novel coronavirus itself, it is not a social crisis that came upon us suddenly and without sufficient prediction or preparation. We knew that poverty rates were rising, we knew that children were living in homes that lacked heating and were going without food, and somehow we have normalised it.

Are we comfortable with this? If we are, why so? In just two decades, attitudes towards those in poverty have hardened to such an extent that statistics like these, which should chill us, are trotted out like football scores. Those lives described as impoverished or destitute aren't just about economic facts and figures, or numbers on a screen.

The reality for those families is something far more tangible and brutal: it's a toddler sleeping on damp sheets because a flat is too cold to prevent condensation seeping into every belonging; it's a child crying from hunger and a parent eating just one meal a day to make sure their child has as much as they can offer; it's a mother leaving her young children alone after school to work a third job just to try to keep up with the cost of living. When we reduce them to statistics, these are the stories we stop hearing.

The government no longer believes it should measure its performance in this important area because of a disagreement over the definition of poverty. Most charitable bodies working with

[1] Rishi Sunak is the current UK Prime Minister.

poor families in Britain agree that mapping what is known as ‘relative poverty’ matters. They say (and I agree) that we need to know how the lives of children are affected by how much less they have, materially and in terms of opportunity or support, than others around them.

To pretend that relative impoverishment doesn’t exist is willful ignorance. Most of us know what it feels like to have less than someone else. Of course this experience begins in childhood, and of course it has long-standing effects when that disparity is so vast. To suggest, as some members of the current government have, that we don’t have poverty in the UK because our poverty doesn’t look identical to that in, say, parts of India, is embarrassing, and represents political neglect.

That stance has also had a dangerous numbing effect on the general population. A drop in what is considered an acceptable standard of living was simply wrapped into our national psyche. If we allow this to happen again, as destitution begins to rise, we’ll permit a rapid regression in what we consider a life at all in modern Britain. Will we allow it, or will the shock of witnessing true destitution help reset the barometer?

It wouldn’t take much effort on the part of the government to pause, reconsider and start making amends. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, adding £10 a week to child benefit would lift 450,000 children above the poverty line. Reinstating the £20 Covid uplift to universal credit would give even more children what we might agree is an acceptable standard of early life.

That would require, however, the one thing this hubristic government simply cannot seem to do: admit that it has made a mistake, and correct it.

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