

Destitution in the UK 2020

The UK should be a country where everyone has the chance of a healthy, decent and secure life regardless of where they live. Instead, too many people are experiencing destitution. This means not being able to afford the absolute essentials that we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean. This is simply not right.

This study, the third in the Destitution in the UK series, reveals that even before the COVID-19 outbreak destitution was rapidly growing in scale and intensity. Since 2017 many more households, including families with children, have been pushed to the brink. Their precarious existence offered little protection when the pressure of COVID-19 threatened to push them even deeper into destitution.

The UK and devolved governments quickly provided a series of temporary lifelines to help people weather the coronavirus storm. But we need more sustained efforts to keep afloat people who are already struggling, and to turn back the rising tide of destitution.

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Recommendations

JRF recommends that the UK and devolved governments should:

- Make the £20 weekly uplift in Universal Credit (UC) and Working Tax Credit (WTC) permanent and extend this lifeline to those claiming legacy benefits.
- Work in partnership with people with lived experience of the social security system to ensure that debt deductions from benefits are not drivers of hardship and destitution. In particular, the minimum five-week wait for the first UC payment is a core driver of destitution, with many people forced to borrow UC advances to survive this period, leaving them facing unaffordable repayments.
- Invest in local welfare assistance, ensuring that every English local authority has a scheme that provides direct support, including cash, to keep added pressure off households when a crisis threatens to push them into destitution.
- Establish a targeted grant programme to support private and social renters who have fallen into arrears which they will otherwise struggle to pay back.
- Use the upcoming employment bill to reduce insecurity for low-paid workers by extending employment rights and investing in strong and effective enforcement.

Background

This research project explores the experiences of people pushed to the brink. It looks at the nature and extent of destitution across the UK as it was on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provides a unique insight into how people in the most precarious economic positions dealt with the added pressure caused by the pandemic. The study reveals the array of measures needed, some of which have already been trialled as part of the Government's coronavirus response, to lessen the pressures people experiencing destitution face, and to pull more of us back from the brink.

Key points

- Across the UK, our best estimate is that the number of households experiencing destitution at any point during the year has increased by 35% between 2017 and 2019 (with a 23% increase in households experiencing destitution in the survey week if we look at services in both surveys).
- Households experiencing destitution are also generally larger than in 2017 with more containing children, meaning the total number of people experiencing destitution at any point during the year rose by 54% and the number of children experiencing destitution rose by 52%.
- More than a million UK households experienced destitution at some point in 2019. These households contained 2.4 million people, including 550,000 children.
- Destitution levels are highest in the North East, London and the North West.
- UK nationals account for almost three-quarters (72%) of the population identified as living in destitution but people who have migrated to the UK are over-represented among those experiencing destitution.
- The majority of people living in destitution (81%) do not report complex needs (defined as experiencing two or more of homelessness, drug and alcohol problems, offending, domestic violence and begging). However, the rate of complex need is higher among people experiencing destitution compared to the general population.
- COVID-19-related support measures provided some much-needed relief, but many interviewees found the pressures brought about by the pandemic exacerbated the difficulties they were already facing. Some struggled to access the support they required to meet their essential needs.

A rising tide of destitution

There has been a significant rise in destitution in the UK since the survey was last conducted in 2017 and it has also intensified. The study measured destitution in two ways: through lack of access to essentials (shelter, food, heating, lighting, clothing and footwear, and basic toiletries) and extremely low or no income. Compared to 2017 a higher proportion of people experienced destitution on both measures (43% compared to 35%). One-third (32%) of all households experiencing destitution reported having no immediate source of income in the last month; this proportion rose to almost half (46%) among destitute migrant households. This has no place in a just society, it's simply not right.

Whilst single people face the highest risk of experiencing destitution, households in destitution have become larger. Lone parents, almost always women, have become more common in the destitute population. Our best estimate is that the number of children experiencing destitution at any point in 2019 has risen by 52% when compared to 2017. In a society like ours, this is intolerable.

Young adults (aged 34 and under) are heavily over-represented amongst those identified as living in destitution, while it remains extremely rare for over 65s. Just over half (54%) of respondents stated that their day-to-day activities were limited because of a chronic health problem or disability.

The highest average rates of destitution are in the North East, followed by London and the North West, with Yorkshire and Humber, the West Midlands and Scotland also relatively high. The regions with the lowest levels of destitution are the South East, East of England and South West of England.

The need for a strong social security lifeline

Half of all households experiencing destitution surveyed in autumn 2019 were receiving UC or had applied for it. Claimants reported having no choice but to accept a repayable advance to cover the five-week gap while they waited for their first payment. Repayment of these advances sometimes left them little to live on, particularly when claimants had to plug the gap between Local Housing Allowance and private rents, while at the same time repaying other debts. Many interviewees made a direct link between the repayment of the UC advance and their need to use food banks.

“... as soon as my claim went through ... I owed them £514 ... Because for six weeks I had no income, so when I got the advance, that went on everything that I [already] owed ... Then by the time I got to December – you’re just never catching up, because of the way it starts. Hence, the reason that we had to use a food bank to even survive.”

Woman, aged 25-45

The temporary (until April 2021) £20-per-week enhancement to Universal Credit standard allowance and Working Tax Credits was a considerable help to some participants, enabling them to afford food, electricity and other essentials, when families have been faced with the extra costs of having children at home all the time.

“[The £20 has made] a huge difference ... It helps a lot ... because with the addition of the £20 ... everything in this house is electric, so the light goes fast ... Yes, so at least we get some money to top up more on the electricity.”

Woman, aged 25-45

The relaxation of benefit conditionality (from March to June 2020) had been effectively communicated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and was a source of great relief to those with health problems that made job search requirements challenging to satisfy prior to the pandemic.

Delays in the processing of disability benefits claims and appeals had a detrimental effect on the mental health of some vulnerable interviewees and their material well-being. However, the positive resolution of these disability-related benefit claims had pulled some people out of destitution.

Affordable debt recovery is key to preventing destitution by design

Problem debt was common among UK nationals experiencing destitution. These were largely debts owed to DWP, local authorities and utility companies, and were mainly those predating the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than those triggered by it.

Interviewees who experienced a sudden drop in income when they lost work during the pandemic sometimes found it even harder to manage pre-existing debt. However, the temporary halting of most debt-related benefit deductions in April 2020 (excluding repayment of UC advances) was crucial in easing the pressure on many destitute households.

Secure work as a route out of destitution

One in seven (14%) survey respondents experiencing destitution were in paid work. Those experiencing in-work destitution tended to be in precarious forms of employment with uncertain incomes. A number of these were interviewed several months later and some reported that they had lost their jobs as a direct result of COVID-19, for example when the restaurants they worked in closed temporarily or permanently. Others were self-employed in the cleaning, construction and security sectors, and were unable to work during the initial lockdown period.

Except for one interviewee who had been furloughed, none had been able to access COVID-19 protections and so turned to UC for financial support. The online process for claiming UC was straightforward for those who were born in the UK and were previously in employment but was problematic for those who had been self-employed and people who had migrated to the UK.

A small number of participants classed as 'key workers' – working in supermarkets and in the care sector – saw their hours and overall pay increase during the initial lockdown period. This pulled them back from the brink of destitution in some cases, at least on a temporary basis.

The importance of a decent, affordable home

While most households experiencing destitution lived in their own house or flat (56%), mainly in social housing, a large proportion were homeless or vulnerably housed, with 5% sleeping rough at the time of completing the survey.

Housing affordability was a prominent theme across the qualitative interviews, especially in London. Several interviewees had paid rent arrears with credit cards to avoid eviction, and others were expecting eviction once the protection offered by the COVID-19 moratorium had ended.

“We’re being evicted because we can’t afford the rent ... before the whole COVID thing started up, we were being evicted, that’s why we’re not out yet [the government ban on evictions], we were due to be out about a month ago...”

Man, aged 25-45

Ability to cope with the pandemic lockdown relied very much on the space that a household had at its disposal. The extreme pressure of living in confined and sometimes overcrowded or inadequate accommodation, with little access to outside space, was clear from across interviewees' accounts.

Many interviewees who had migrated to the UK and/or reported having complex needs lived in shared or institutional forms of accommodation which made social distancing requirements challenging to fulfil. Hostel-based interviewees struggled with limited personal space and privacy during the lockdown period, compounded by having to cope with the increasing desperation of those around them.

Public and community services are essential when people are struggling

Many households experiencing destitution turned to foodbanks when they were unable to afford essential items. By 2019, this outstripped the in-kind support provided by statutory local welfare assistance funds. Some interviewees had continued to receive support from food banks during lockdown, but other people who needed it had not received this help, sometimes because they could not access referral agencies such as Job Centres and Citizens Advice.

The pandemic-induced closure of libraries impacted negatively on interviewees who had migrated to the UK and/or reported having complex needs, who often used libraries to access the internet, for company, and for warmth. The closure of charity shops was felt by people experiencing destitution, who relied on them for cheap clothes and other goods. The closure of playgrounds, and sometimes parks, was another key problem given that most of these families lacked gardens.

While communication from DWP during the COVID-19 crisis was praised, many interviewees reported difficulties reaching local authorities when offices closed because telephone call charges were unaffordable. Improving this situation would be a great help to people experiencing destitution.

Interviewees with complex needs often faced mental health challenges that generally predated lockdown but had increased in intensity during the crisis. The loss of face-to-face contact with health and other services hit those with mental health or drug and/or alcohol problems especially hard, as they felt much less benefit from online or telephone-based support. Finding ways to continue to provide these face-to-face services safely would be a great support for affected interviewees.

Overcoming the digital divide is essential for those on the lowest incomes

COVID-19 has shone a light on the digital divide and the consequences for people living in destitution. Without ready access to Wi-Fi as public places closed during lockdown, many interviewees reported either being digitally excluded or needing to spend a significant proportion of their income to access the internet. Digital access was needed for a myriad of reasons included managing their UC claim, supporting their children's education, accessing support services and information, and to overcome social isolation.

“I don't have a computer in the house, in the flat. I don't have, of course, internet. All my life is on the mobile phone ... At the very start of the COVID thing, the library was open for a limited time ... That's been a couple of weeks, bam ... closed totally.”

Man, aged over 45

Working in partnership with low-income and vulnerable groups to find the best ways to bridge the digital divide is urgently needed.

Conclusion

There has been a steep rise in the number of individuals and households experiencing destitution since 2017. In a society like ours, this is intolerable. **Destitution in the UK 2020** vividly illustrates the corrosive impacts of being unable to afford the bare essentials. Most found that the added financial pressures brought about by the pandemic exacerbated their struggles, although these were sometimes alleviated by temporary changes to housing and social security policy. [Separate research](#), completed by the same team for the Trussell Trust, indicates that the onset of the pandemic has increased destitution dramatically, extending its reach across a wider range of geographies and household types, with effects across all tenures.

Urgent and compassionate action is needed to continue to support people being pushed to the brink. All those living in the UK, regardless of their immigration status, should have access to an adequate income to purchase food, shelter and other essentials.

The right thing to do is to act now to stem this rising tide and protect the most vulnerable members of society from being pushed into destitution, designing just policies to assist them so we provide security for every member of our society.

About the project

This summary is based on research from the report **Destitution in the UK 2020** by Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Glen Bramley, Janice Blenkinsopp, Jenny Wood, Filip Sosenko, Mandy Littlewood, Sarah Johnsen, Beth Watts, Morag Treanor and Jill McIntyre, I-SPHERE, Heriot-Watt University. This work was conducted in partnership with Kantar Public. The project fieldwork comprised case studies in 18 locations across the UK, including a survey of 3,914 users of 113 crisis services (in October/November 2019), and in-depth interviews with 70 people (in spring 2020) who were identified as experiencing destitution at the time of survey completion. Secondary analysis of over 40 quantitative datasets enabled the scaling up of statistical findings from these case studies to national level. A detailed account of the methodology can be found in the accompanying [technical report](#).

The Greater London Authority provided funding for two additional case study areas in London and ten qualitative interviews.

JRF are grateful to Poverty2Solutions for co-designing the policy recommendation on debt.

For further information

The full report, **Destitution in the UK 2020**, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free PDF at www.jrf.org.uk

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