

The two-child limit was introduced by the Conservative government in 2017,¹ restricting eligibility to claim Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit to the first two children born in a household.² It was one of the many policies implemented under the government's commitment to austerity³ that negatively impacted the lives of children,⁴ mothers and single parents⁵ across the UK. The benefit cap was introduced in 2013, limiting the amount of money a working age household can claim in a year, and is usually discussed alongside the two-child limit due to the strain this second policy added to families in the UK.⁶

In 2020, it was reported that over 4.3 million children in the UK were living in relative child poverty after housing costs,⁷ and as of 2024, 1.6 million children were affected by the two-child limit, depriving families of up to £3455 worth of support for each subsequent child a year.⁸ Children born into poverty are more likely to suffer from asthma, other childhood diseases and obesity,⁹ as well as developing food insecurity and mental health issues,¹⁰ but it is difficult for families reliant on these benefits to improve the lives of their children. In 2021, 44% of households affected by the two-child limit were single parents, and 86% of single parents in the UK are mothers according to the Office of National Statistics.¹¹ This means that women had a higher chance of being affected by this policy. This policy also ignored the families that could not use contraception or have abortions because of their religion, and thus they were forced to suffer financial burden.¹² Lastly, policies like the two-child limit have a knock-on effect

¹ Anabelle, Paulino, Jennifer, Dykxhoon, Sara, Evans-Lacko, Praveetha, Patalay, *The impact of the two-child benefit cap on parental mental, general, and financial health in the UK*, (2026), p. 2.

² Ibid., p. 3.

³ Kate, Andersen, Jamie, Redman, Kitty, Stewart, and Ruth, Patrick, "It's the Kids That Suffer": Exploring how the UK's benefit cap and two-child limit harm children,' *Social Policy & Administration*, (2025), p. 59.

⁴ Tom, Lee, 'Scrapping the two child benefit cap would immediately reduce poverty while investing in the future', *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, (2024), p. 1.

⁵ Ruth, Talbot, 'Britain's cruel war on single mums must end. It's time to scrap the benefit caps', *Big Issue*, (2026), <<https://www.bigissue.com/opinion/uk-single-mums-two-child-limit-benefit-cap/>> [accessed 9 July 2026].

⁶ Ruth, Patrick, and Tracey, Jensen, 'Challenging welfare mythmaking: Caps, (mis)classification and concealment of larger families' labour in austerity Britain', *Critical Social Policy*, (2025), p. 515.

⁷ Davara, Bennett, Kate, Pickett, and David, Taylor-Robinson, 'Trends in inequalities in Children Looked After in England between 2004 and 2019: a local area ecological analysis', *BMJ Open*, (2020), p. 2.

⁸ Lee, *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁰ Bennett, Pickett, Taylor-Robinson, *BMJ Open*, p. 2.

¹¹ Kate, Andersen, 'Promoting fairness? Exploring the gendered impacts of the benefit cap and the two-child limit', *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, (2023), p. 174.

¹² Ibid., p. 186.

where poorer areas of the UK see less money coming in,¹³ creating gaps in the job market¹⁴ and stunting economic growth.¹⁵ This is more than enough evidence to state that the two-child limit is a form of structural violence, as by George Fink's definition 'such violence emerges from the unequal distribution of power and resources or, in other words, is said to be built into the structure.'¹⁶

The UK's period of austerity began after the financial crisis of 2008, where cuts were made to social benefits¹⁷ and policies were introduced to promote fairness between people claiming benefits and those in paid work.¹⁸ A year before the benefit cap was implemented, the British Social Attitudes Survey reported that 62% of people believed unemployment benefit was too high, a 38% increase from the 1993 survey.¹⁹ This tracks with the rise of poverty porn in the late 90s and throughout the 2000s,²⁰ along with the increase in 'scrounger bashing' rhetoric.²¹ There was a moral panic in the UK around families that claimed benefits,²² and this was fuelled by the government to justify welfare cuts.²³

Poverty porn is a term used to define media that showcases poverty and precarious lives²⁴ and is often thought of an exploitative genre.²⁵ Series such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, *Skint* and *The Estate* all feature benefit claimants to some extent, but focused in on controversial aspects such as underage motherhood, drug and alcohol addictions, and anti-social behaviour.²⁶ Ultimately pushing a narrative that unemployed people are problematic and happy to be benefit dependant.²⁷ This perception was further emphasised by news outlets, like in the case of Michael Philpott, a man found guilty of

¹³ Christina, Beatty, and Steve, Fothergill, *The Uneven Impact of Welfare Reform: The financial losses to places and people*, (Sheffield Hallam University, 2016), p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁶ George, Fink, *Stress of War, Conflict and Disaster*, (2010), p. 2005.

¹⁷ Paulino et al, *The impact of the two-child benefit cap on parental mental, general, and financial health in the UK*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Andersen, *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, p. 174.

¹⁹ Tom de, Castella, 'Beveridge report: From 'deserving poor' to 'scroungers'?', *BBC News*, (2012), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20431729>> [accessed 9 July 2026].

²⁰ Helen, Hester, 'Weaponizing Prurience', in *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*, (2014), p. 2.

²¹ James, Morrison, "'Scrounger-bashing' as national pastime: the prevalence and ferocity of anti-welfare ideology on niche-interest online forums', *Social Semiotics*, (2021), p. 385.

²² Ibid., p. 385.

²³ Ibid., p. 384.

²⁴ Hester, in *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*, p. 1.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

manslaughter for six of his children.²⁸ The news reported that his motive was welfare abuse,²⁹ when in actuality Philpott was a misogynist and abuser who was attempting to frame his ex-girlfriend for the crime.³⁰ It is clear that both entertainment media and news outlets in the UK have played a part in villainizing people on benefits. The narrative that all benefit claimants are ‘scroungers’ is untrue, as 59% of claimants were classified as being in work in 2023.³¹ It was also falsely stated by the welfare secretary Iain Duncan Smith in 2013, that 1 million people capable of work had been claiming benefits for at least 3 years, when in actuality 600,000 of those people were not classed as able to work.³² This negative perception of benefit claimants in the UK likely led to policies such as the two-child limit.

Despite having one of the richest economies in the world, the UK has continuously punished the most vulnerable people in society,³³ while other European countries such as Italy, Spain and Poland have introduced policies to support children and families.³⁴ The two-child limit was implemented during a period of time where the nation’s debt was partly blamed on benefit scroungers, but in the past this animosity was not so strong.

For example, an early version of the benefit cap was posed in 1980 but did not go ahead due to fears it would appear as an ‘anti-family’ policy and there were also concerns of the hardships it would cause larger families.³⁵ However, its popularity was undeniable three decades later, which led to its introduction.³⁶ There are positives in incentivising people to work, as the policy intends,³⁷ encouraging independence and increasing tax revenue, but it is also difficult to fully support the policy when child poverty is on the rise.³⁸

The government’s commitment to austerity led to many welfare cuts contributing to the reason the two-child limit caused families to struggle. Between 2000 and 2010 relative child poverty decreased around five percent.³⁹ During this period ‘Sure Start’

²⁸ Tracey, Jensen, and Imogen, Tyler, “‘Benefits broods’: The cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense’, *Critical Social Policy*, (2015), p. 5.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

³¹ Andersen, et al, *Social Policy & Administration*, p. 60.

³² Randeep, Ramesh, ‘Is Britain a nation of lazy scroungers?’, *The Guardian*, (2013), <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/reality-check/2013/apr/24/benefits>> [accessed 17 July 2026].

³³ Talbot, *Big Issue*.

³⁴ Andersen, et al, *Social Policy & Administration*, p. 58.

³⁵ Patrick and Jensen, *Critical Social Policy*, p. 516.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 517.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 515.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 514.

³⁹ Bennett, Pickett, Taylor-Robinson, *BMJ Open*, p. 3.

was created, a programme designed to improve the lives of children under five in disadvantaged areas of the UK.⁴⁰ This programme would have been helpful to families affected by the two-child limit, because it would have provided childcare, health advice, family support and more, giving parents more opportunity to look for work and lessen the stress of having to find money to pay for those services themselves.⁴¹ Of course this programme comes at a cost, and that is why its funding was cut,⁴² but you cannot make continuous cuts to welfare and expect everything to get better.

When introducing the two-child limit, a set of exemptions were defined to combat this narrative that the government was blindly punishing families for claiming benefits.⁴³ The exemptions included multiple births, adopted children and children conceived through rape.⁴⁴ However, this last exemption was flawed because it required victims to prove non-consensual conception occurred.⁴⁵ This created a risk that doing so could re-traumatize women and have potential social repercussions, making it more difficult for a women to come forward.⁴⁶ The exemptions were a good idea on paper, but in reality they were very exclusionary and limited support to only a select few who needed it.

Originally the Labour government refused to abolish the two-child limit,⁴⁷ however after increased pressure from the party, Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced that the two-child limit would be lifted from April 2026.⁴⁸ This would cost the government £1.7 billion annually,⁴⁹ but child poverty is also costly, as it would cost the government £40 billion by 2027⁵⁰ through greater unemployment and lower earnings.⁵¹ It is still early to see the results, but scrapping the two-child limit will lift an estimated 350,000 children out of poverty and improve the lives of 700,000.⁵²

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴² Ibid., p. 3.

⁴³ Andersen, *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, p. 176.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁷ Patrick and Jensen, *Critical Social Policy*, p. 514.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth, Mahase, 'Budget 2025: Government scraps two child benefit cap in major U turn', *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, (2025), p. 1.

⁴⁹ Bennett, Pickett, Taylor-Robinson, *BMJ Open*, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Isabella, McRae, 'What does the end to the two-child limit mean for you?', *Big Issue*, (2026), <<https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/what-does-end-two-child-limit-mean/>> [accessed 18 July 2026].

⁵¹ Isabella, McRae, 'How many children would be lifted out of poverty if the two-child limit was scrapped?', *Big Issue*, (2025), <<https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/two-child-limit-end-children-poverty/>> [accessed 18 July 2026].

⁵² McRae, *Big Issue*, (2025).

Going forward it is important to invest in supporting these children and their families. The government has expanded the eligibility of free school meals and has launched *Best Start Family hubs* which provide support for families with young children.⁵³ There is still more to do though, such as investing in education, affordable housing⁵⁴ and lifting the benefit cap,⁵⁵ before real change can be achieved. Lifting children out of poverty and improving their living standards will have positive effects on the country in the future⁵⁶ as well as the children's development.⁵⁷ It is crucial that when new policies are introduced, that all citizens will be taken into consideration so that people are not left to suffer.

⁵³ McRae, *Big Issue*, (2026).

⁵⁴ Andersen, et al, *Social Policy & Administration*, p. 60.

⁵⁵ Talbot, *Big Issue*.

⁵⁶ Lee, *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Andersen, et al, *Social Policy & Administration*, p. 60.

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