

How thousands of children rely on charities to eat

EXCLUSIVE
by Pamela Owen

THERE are few more cheering sights than hungry children tucking in to a good meal.

But take away the bright colours and modern trappings and this could be a scene from a Third World refugee camp or Victorian poor house.

The youngsters are eating meals supplied by a charity because their families don't earn enough to keep them well fed and healthy.

It is nothing more than a scandalous scene. In today's headline Britain, unemployment and benefit cuts leave a growing number of kids hungry.

Malnutrition has left toddlers with the bone condition rickets, children of 11 the size of seven-year-olds and teenagers looking like skeletons.

The Sunday People joined children's charity Kids Company for the evening meal service at its centre in Lambeth, South London. Each day, the charity deals with dozens of cases of hungry children and reckons for more than three-quarters it is their only meal.

One of the children eating roast chicken, potatoes and veg is six-year-old Peter. He had arrived at school that morning in dirty clothes, crying because he was so hungry. He stopped when his teacher gave him a banana.

She buys a bunch every day because so many children in her class are suffering hunger pains. At lunch, Peter begged to finish other kids' leftovers.

Last year, his mum was caught shop-lifting food three times as she did not have enough to feed herself, Peter, his two-year-old brother and his elderly gran. Sadly, his story is not unusual.

Eight-year-old Jayne confessed she is often forced to steal food by her mother so they have enough to eat. She revealed she was beaten sometimes if she returned empty handed.

Skeletal

Her jobless mum owes a loan shark £600 which she can't repay and the interest is spiralling out of control.

Jayne confided in her Kids Company mentor that her life was not worth living and she wished she was dead.

Huddled around a table next to her was ten-year-old Sarah, who was frantically stuffing a savoury pancake, topped with tomato and cheese, into her mouth. For her, food is a luxury. She is hungry most of the day and comes to Kids Company so that she can get a hot meal.

On Wednesdays and weekends when the charity is shut, she often has nothing to eat at all.

Tuesday is her favourite day as her single mum gets "some money in the bank". Sarah said: "I think she gets about £70 and I always beg her to buy food but she often doesn't. I think she needs it to pay bills instead."

"My brothers will ask for things like shoes and games but I always beg her to get food as I'm hungry."

Sarah is one of six children living in a hostel with her mum and says the lack of food causes tensions and rows. On weekends she will sometimes visit a relative so she can eat.

She recalled how her



Picture: DAREN COOL

mum once had just £4 to spend on a week's grocery shop to feed them all.

Kids Company provides about 3,000 meals a week at its centres in North and South London, Bristol and Liverpool. It also provides support and guidance for 36,000 children.

Campaigns director Laurence Guinness said: "The rate of malnutrition is reaching worrying levels. Children are being denied fresh foods because families cannot afford to buy them."

"We've had 11-year-olds who look like seven-year-olds, toddlers with rickets and others with terrible teeth. We have a nurse who deals with all these cases."

Each week, 30 new children come to the Lambeth centre of their own accord because a school pal has told them about it. Others are sent by parents who can't afford to feed them. We have changed the names

of the children mentioned in this story to protect their identities.

Laurence said: "We had a six-year-old come through the doors because they'd heard through a friend that we serve hot meals. When you see hungry teenagers looking skeletal you understand why they join a gang."

Last year, a report by a coalition of UK churches found nearly 100,000 of Britain's poorest children went hungry due to severe benefit sanctions.

It highlighted the damage of punishments such as stopping payments for a month or more for welfare claimants who fail to meet strict Jobcentre demands.

Niall Cooper of Church Action on Poverty, which helped produce the report, said: "If you commit a crime, no court is allowed to make you go hungry as a punishment. But if you're late for a Jobcentre appointment they can remove your income and leave you unable to feed your family for weeks."

Reading University researchers have

interviewed children at Kids Company. When asked how they deal with hunger, one child said: "I just want to sleep because when I go to bed hungry and sleep, I'm not hungry." Another told how it was normal to find empty cupboards at her home.

Support worker Susie Cunningham helps run cooking classes at the centre to teach kids skills. She said: "We often have Ready Steady Cook-style classes where we put out random bits of food

and get the children to concoct something. It's because so many of them will have the bare minimum at home.

"Some come up with amazing dishes. It's a brilliant lesson and it's rewarding when they come back and tell us they managed to repeat a meal at home."

Kids Company was founded in 1996 by businesswoman Camila Bat-manghelidjh to support children whose lives have been affected by poverty, abuse and trauma. Its therapy centre



GRUB'S UP: Tasty menu

SCANDAL OF KIDS WHO GO HUNGRY

RELIEF: Kids get hot meal

Pope hints at exit plan

POPE Francis has dropped a strong hint that he may resign like his predecessor Pope Benedict rather than stay in the role till he dies.

Benedict broke with tradition by quitting in 2013.

Francis, 78, said in a Mexican TV interview on Friday: "I have a feeling my pontificate will be brief. Four or five years. I do not know, even two or three."

He called Benedict "courageous", adding: "Maybe he won't be the only one."

TENOR RUSSELL IS BACK ON SONG

EXCLUSIVE by Patrick Hill

RUSSELL Watson says his voice is back to its best – eight years after he was almost killed by a brain tumour.

The tenor was told he would never sing again after the seven-hour op that saved him but this month starts a 52-date UK tour.

Russell, 48, said: "This is the first time I genuinely feel myself again. I feel really well and vocally as strong as before."

Russell had a brain tumour removed in 2006 but a year later it came back – and haemorrhaged in four places.

The bolt-cutter from Salford who became the UK's top-selling classical artist needs drugs to survive. He said: "I've been asked to do I'm a Celeb but the tumour destroyed my pituitary gland. I wouldn't last more than 24 hours without medication."

The father-of-two is also preparing to marry girlfriend Louise Harris, 26, in August.

WELL: Russell Watson

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