

Things Can Only Get Dickensian: An Analysis of Media Coverage of Britain's Cost of Living Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The period following the 2008 financial crisis saw the UK enter a period of austerity, exacerbated by the wide-ranging welfare spending cuts of consecutive Conservative governments. Nevertheless, when it appeared that the situation could not become more dire for struggling Britons, the country found itself in the grips of a cost of living crisis precipitated by several concurrent developments such as inflation, an energy crisis, and the fallout from Brexit. Using qualitative thematic analysis, this article examines coverage of the crisis by the British press by exploring how individual newspapers on both the political right and left have chosen to report on the indicators, causes, and victims. The aim is to establish whether the standard political leanings of the papers apply here, or whether the situation is so exceptional in its urgency that the usual stereotypes (strivers/scroungers, deserving/undeserving poor) have been abandoned for a more unified discourse.

KEYWORDS

cost of living crisis, austerity, inflation, inequality, mental health, thematic analysis

Introduction: Cost of living crisis in the UK

Despite being one of the world's largest economies, the United Kingdom has persistently shown some of the highest levels of social inequality among developed countries. While the three decades of the post-war consensus managed to close the class gap to some degree, delivering significant increases in social mobility and living standards for the working class, the era of Thatcherism ushered in a long-term reversal of the levelling process. In the first decades of the 21st century, British society is more unequal than it was in 1945 or even earlier.¹

The situation of Britain's poorest took a marked turn for the worse in the wake of the welfare reform spearheaded by the 2010 Conservative-led government of Prime Minister David Cameron. Abandoning the original vision of compassionate Conservatism amidst the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, Cameron's cabinet steered its social policy towards austerity, involving substantial public sector cuts. Predictably, poverty levels increased as a result, as did homelessness and dependence on food banks.²

However, the worst was still to come; in 2020, COVID-19 swept the country, putting its economy and social fabric under enormous strain. Dramatic increases in food, petrol, and energy prices followed in the wake of the pandemic, creating a cost of living crisis. In March 2022, the Office for National Statistics reported that 23% of households had difficulty paying their monthly

1 Daniel Dorling, "All in the Mind? Why Social Inequalities Persist," *Public Policy Research* 16, no. 4 (2010): 230.

2 Alice Tihelková, "Victims of Austerity or Feckless Freeloaders? The Stereotypes of the Deserving and Undeserving Poor in the Debate on Britain's Food Bank Users," *American and British Studies Annual* 12, no. 3 (2019): 89.

bills.³ According to the charity Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 3.8 million people experienced destitution – the most extreme form of poverty – in 2022, a 61% increase since 2019. More than 1 million of those affected were children.⁴

The cost of living crisis in recent years is generally interpreted as the cumulative effect of several parallel developments. A combination of climate shocks, the COVID pandemic, and Brexit, disrupted food and energy production and distribution, resulting in cost increases throughout the UK. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia pushed the prices of food, energy, and fertilizers even higher, making the shortages of food and energy more acute.⁵ A rise in inflation ensued across the globe, with the UK being especially affected due to the stagnant wage growth since 2008, with prices increasing considerably faster than household incomes.

Although this cost of living crisis is usually explained as an outcome of the global pandemic and geopolitical processes, some experts have looked for an alternative view. For instance, the working-class economist and inequality activist Gary Stevenson of the popular YouTube channel “Gary’s Economics” has contended that the underlying reason for the crisis is the UK’s massive inequality. Stevenson demonstrates that Britain’s elite class has seen tremendous wealth increases during and following the COVID pandemic, while middle- and working-class people have been steadily growing poorer. Without addressing the entrenched inequality, he argues, any attempts to tackle the cost of living will inevitably fail.⁶

The crisis has affected British society on multiple levels. The most obvious manifestation has been the inability of a growing number of people to afford food. Nine million adults experienced food insecurity in 2023, with around three million reporting having gone without eating for an entire day because they could not afford food. Related to this phenomenon is a steadily increasing reliance on food banks. While before the 2008 financial crisis there were fewer than 40 food banks in the country, more than a thousand are now in operation.⁷ Run largely by charities (the largest being the Trussell Trust), these organizations provide relief food packages for households that are left with not enough money to buy groceries after paying their monthly bills.

Fuel poverty is another problem for British households due to soaring energy costs. For many households, including those with children, “heating or eating” has become a constant dilemma. The reductions in income have also fueled housing insecurity. According to the homeless charity Crisis, rental evictions in England and Wales surged by 98% in 2023, with record numbers

3 “Impact of Increased Cost of Living on Adults Across Great Britain: November 2012 to March 2022,” *Office for National Statistics*, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/articles/impactofincreasedcostoflivingonadultsacrossgreatbritain/november2012tomarch2022>>.

4 Suzanne Fitzpatrick et al., “Destitution in the UK 2023,” *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <<https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution/destitution-in-the-uk-2023>>.

5 Tejvan Pettinger, “The Cost of Living Crisis Explained,” *Economics Help*, July 18, 2022, <<https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/170481/economics/causes-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-explained/>>.

6 Gary Stevenson, “This Is Why the Rich Get Richer,” *Garys Economics*, <<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=garys%20economics%20youtube&mid=996FC2B6349FE31E803E996FC2B6349FE31E803E&ajaxhist=0>>.

7 Alice Tihelková, “Victims of Austerity or Feckless Freeloaders? The Stereotypes of the Deserving and Undeserving Poor in the Debate on Britain’s Food Bank Users,” 89.

of families being housed in temporary accommodation.⁸ With every fifth household currently living in a private rental property and no-fault evictions still legal, millions of Britons face a considerably insecure future amidst the rising mandatory costs.

The cumulative effects of the current cost of living crisis have had a major impact on the nation's mental health. According to a survey commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation, the UK population is experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety, and hopelessness in response to financial concerns. In a poll of 3000 adults aged 18 and over, 29% of adults reported experiencing stress, 34% anxiety and 10% feelings of hopeless due to financial worries.⁹ The general quality of life has suffered as well, with people finding themselves unable to socialize and pursue hobbies due to the lack of financial resources, only further adding to the mental health strains.

Governments led by a series of Conservative Prime Ministers responded to the crisis by providing extra payments to the most vulnerable. Families on means-tested benefits received £900 in three instalments, paid directly to their bank accounts, at the total cost of £15 bn. However, there are no current plans to extend the scheme. Leading UK charities are warning that the one-off assistance does not address the long-term problem of rising costs, and these aid organizations are urging the government to continue this financial support.¹⁰

Article aim and methodology

Due to its wide economic and social impact, the cost of living crisis has been covered extensively in the UK media. The present article aims to analyze the depiction of the crisis in selected British newspapers, with two principal objectives:

- a) to identify the main themes/aspects of the crisis covered by the papers using a corpus of selected articles
- b) to elicit any differences in coverage based on the political bias of the papers (right- or left-leaning).

As demonstrated in my previous articles dealing with the 2010s Conservative welfare reform and its impacts, right-leaning papers (especially right-leaning tabloids), were frequently shown to use the stereotypes of the deserving and undeserving poor in their coverage of low-income individuals reliant on the benefits system or other forms of assistance.¹¹ In addition to the two objectives outlined above, the analysis also seeks to ascertain whether such stereotypes persist in the coverage of the current cost of living crisis, or whether due to the severity of the situation the negative stereotyping is subdued in favour of a more sympathetic view of the crisis victims.

8 Rupert Jones, "Rental Evictions in England and Wales Surge by 98% in a Year," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/feb/09/rental-evictions-england-wales-surge>>.

9 Stress, Anxiety and Hopelessness Over Personal Finances Widespread Across the UK - New Mental Health Survey," *Mental Health Foundation*, <<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/stress-anxiety-and-hopelessness-over-personal-finances-widespread-across-uk-new-mental-health-survey>>.

10 Mark Sweeney and Kalyeena Makortoff, "UK Cost-of-Living Package Doesn't Go Far Enough, Say Charities," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jul/21/government-cost-of-living-package-abandons-struggling-families-say-charities>>.

11 Alice Tihelková, "Framing the 'Scroungers': the Re-emergence of the Stereotype of the Undeserving Poor and its Reflection in the British Press," *Brno Studies in English* 41, no. 2 (2015): 121-122.

Six online dailies were selected to obtain a set of articles for the analysis: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Mirror* for the left-leaning orientation, and *The Telegraph*, *The Sun*, and *The Express* for the right-leaning orientation. Both broadsheets and tabloids are represented in the selection. Using the search feature on each site, the search phrase “cost of living crisis” was entered to obtain articles covering the topic. Since the search returned thousands of articles, limiting the material to a workable corpus was necessary. Therefore, thirty articles per paper were chosen by random selection for the 2022-2024 period, yielding a total of 180 articles.

Subsequently, the corpus was subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, described by Braun and Clarke as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes.”¹² Both inductive and deductive strategies were employed to analyze the content of the articles. The inductive approach sought to elicit prevalent themes related to the cost of living crisis in the individual sources, while the deductive approach focused on identifying the potential presence of the deserving / undeserving poor stereotype across the corpus.

This essentially pilot research has several limitations. First and foremost, the analysis is purely qualitative, aimed at identifying the prevalent themes related to the coverage of the cost of living in the selected newspapers. Combining this with a quantitative approach, which would necessitate working with corpus analysis software, could provide additional information concerning the frequency of the themes elicited. In addition, working with a larger corpus of articles might help fine-tune the research findings. Finally, extending the timeframe could provide insights into whether the current cost of living crisis is indeed a phenomenon of the post-COVID years, or whether it is part of a longer-term process the media had already been covering previously. Any further research on this topic may benefit from incorporating these additional steps.

The following part of the article will analyze the prevalent themes and frames in the left-leaning and the right-leaning newspaper articles. While a “theme” is understood as a subject of discourse, a “frame” refers to the representation of the theme from a certain perspective by emphasizing or de-emphasizing some of its features.¹³ In other words, attention will be devoted not only to which aspects of the cost of living crisis are covered, but also to how they are interpreted for the reader. According to Shanto Iyengar, two types of framing are distinguished: thematic and episodic. While thematic framing focuses on issues, trends, and causes from a broader context, often using general data and statistics, episodic framing attempts to capture issues using stories of individuals involved, thus providing more personal coverage.¹⁴ The implications of the types of framing will be explored as well.

Prominent themes in the left-leaning papers

The theme dominating the left-leaning coverage is the immediate impact of the cost of living crisis on the daily lives of British individuals and households, manifesting as their day-to-day struggle to

12 Victoria Clarke and Virginia Brown, “Thematic Analysis,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2016): 297.

13 Iyengar, Shanto, “Speaking of Values: The Framing of American Politics,” *The Forum* 3, no. 3 (2005): 5.

14 Iyengar, Shanto, “Speaking of Values: The Framing of American Politics,” 6.

stay on top of the rising costs. Episodic framing, in the form of personal stories of those afflicted by the crisis, is extensively used to illustrate its effects. Within this broad theme, the following three sub-themes are the most frequently covered:

- eating or heating: food/fuel poverty
- housing-related problems
- lifestyle changes forced by the financial squeeze

All three left-leaning outlets identify food poverty as the most critical and widespread effect of the cost of living crisis. Nevertheless, as pointed out by *The Independent*, the prospect of families going hungry pre-dates the crisis, having its roots in the austerity policies of the post-2008 Conservative governments. The fact that circumstances were already untenable for many low-income households a decade ago makes the current situation especially acute, as demonstrated by the fact that not only benefit claimants but also people in paid work are increasingly unable to afford food.¹⁵ In a heavily episodically framed article called “Unheard Voices of the UK Cost of Living Crisis – Photo Essay,” *The Guardian* quotes a 37-year-old mother from Birmingham faced with the choice of either eating or heating her home due to the rising costs of rental accommodation:

I’ve been living in what I consider the effects of austerity for quite a while. Skipping meals in order to feed my children. I relied heavily on food banks for a long time. When I got back into work, it did get better. My income went up, but then my rent went up. My bills went up. Now we’ve got the cost of living crisis on top. One income certainly isn’t enough to live on.¹⁶

Reporting that 15% of UK households, equivalent to about 8 million adults and 3 million children, were experiencing food insecurity at the start of 2024, *The Guardian* calls food unaffordability a “health emergency,” warning that the situation could lead to the prevalence of negative health conditions such as malnutrition or rickets. The text accompanying the photos also points out that despite the trend of falling inflation, food prices remain high. This poses a risk of food insecurity becoming the “new norm for many” rather than a temporary phenomenon.¹⁷

Similar concerns are expressed about high energy costs, with *The Independent* referring to the situation as a “humanitarian crisis” that may result in thousands of premature deaths, not only from the cold but also from the respiratory diseases caused by mold, which is becoming a major problem in unheated homes. In addition to the immediate health threat, other social costs are also identified. Quoted in the story in *The Independent*, Prof. Michael Marmot of the UCL Institute of Health Equity warns that children living in unheated homes are “less likely to be able to do their homework, leading to them fall behind at school. Long term, that is more likely to lead

15 Kate Plummer, “Reality of How Cost of Living Crisis Impacts Children Laid Bare in Shocking New Report,” *The Independent*, March 7, 2023, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cost-living-crisis-children-poverty-b2295561.html>>.

16 Kirsty Mackay, “Unheard Voices of the UK Cost of Living Crisis – Photo Essay,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2022, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cost-living-crisis-children-poverty-b2295561.html>>.

17 Patrick Butler, “‘Health Emergency’: 15% of UK Households Went Hungry Last Month, Data Shows,” *The Guardian*, February 27, 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/27/health-emergency-15-of-uk-households-went-hungry-last-month-data-shows>>.

to low-income, unstable work, and not being able to make ends meet.”¹⁸ Failure to address fuel poverty, therefore, is shown to pose a major threat to social mobility and the career prospects of the young generation.

While stories in all three newspapers acknowledge the severity of the cost of living crisis, *The Mirror*, true to its tabloid character, occasionally approaches the situation from a sensationalist angle, focusing on the more curious manifestations of poverty. A case in point is an article called “Chilly Brits Will Get Frisky More Often This Winter To Save Money on Heating Bills,” according to which 71% of Britons are seeking alternative ways to reduce heating bills, with 35% of them (rising to 53% of 18-24-year-olds) planning to increase their sexual activity to stay warm:

Nearly six in ten – or 56% – think Christmas conceptions will surge this year as cash-strapped Brits get hot under the covers. Surprisingly, four in 10 Brits say that seeing snow on the ground outside is an aphrodisiac while 32% confess that mistletoe and mulled wine puts them in the mood for sex. [...] Two thirds of singletons – 67 per cent – would like to find a “cuffing companion” for the colder months via an online dating app.¹⁹

Similar articles, framing the crisis as an impetus for implementing lifestyle changes that are not entirely negative, are present in both left-leaning and right-leaning papers, mainly in the tabloids. Other such possibilities include, for instance, emigrating to a country with a better quality of life, finding freedom by shedding burdensome possessions, and reconnecting with a spouse due to the financial non-viability of a divorce. However, articles centering on these neutral or positive potential outcomes are vastly outnumbered by news stories framing the cost of living crisis as an existential threat.

In addition to food and fuel poverty, housing-related issues are widely reported as one of the major manifestations of the cost of living crisis, with rising rents, falling real wages, and mortgage payment difficulties identified as contributing causes. Described by *The Independent* as a “crushing vice,” housing unaffordability is viewed as an especially intractable problem, as economizing is difficult to implement under these conditions. An article titled “Cost of Living Emergency Evolving as Failures to Tackle Housing Crisis Starting to Bite, Say Experts” explains the underlying problem:

You see massive cutbacks in people’s spending on food, on transport. The one thing you don’t see cutbacks in is housing. You can eat less, you can heat your home less, but you can’t consume half a house. [...] That’s the real constraint we have at the moment – the fact it’s now moved into the housing crisis means people’s strategic response is really difficult. You can starve yourself, you can stop heating your home, but can’t do anything about your housing situation.²⁰

18 Samuel Lovett, “Millions Facing Significant Humanitarian Crisis Due to Rising Cost of Living, Leading Experts Warn,” *The Independent*, September 1, 2022, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/energy-bills-cost-of-living-uk-b2156557.html>>.

19 Joseph Gamp, “Chilly Brits Will Get Frisky More Often This Winter To Save Money on Heating Bills,” *The Mirror*, December 16, 2023, <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/chilly-brits-frisky-more-often-31645288>>.

20 Andy Gregory, “Cost of Living Emergency Evolving as Failures to Tackle Housing Crisis Starting to Bite, Say Experts,” *The Independent*, December 15, 2023, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cost-living-housing-crisis-latest-b2464211.html>>.

According to this article, many families are faring worse than they did during the pandemic, with certain groups, including ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, being especially vulnerable. Given the UK's acute housing shortage and long-term loss of council homes to privatization, homelessness is a real prospect for households unable to cover the spiraling housing costs.

With the cost of living crisis forcing individuals to cut back on bare essentials, other areas of life are also suffering. Among the lifestyle changes taking place, the left-leaning sources devote special attention to the loss of social life. Seeing friends and pursuing leisure time activities involves costs that many are no longer able to cover, leading to social isolation. In an episodically framed article "Not Going Out: How the Cost of Living Crisis is Destroying Young People's Social Lives," *The Guardian* relates the experience of young individuals forced to decline invitations to meetings with friends, weddings, birthday parties, or even graduation celebrations due to financial strain, leading to a loss of vital social networks. Quoting the epidemiologist Kate Pickett, co-author of the seminal book on inequality *The Spirit Level*, the article claims that "our connections to one another are an enormous part of our mental and physical health. There are long-term studies that show not having friends is as bad for your health as smoking."²¹ The text also points out the joint effect of the COVID pandemic and the cost of living crisis in generating unprecedented levels of isolation.

Several articles report that the crisis is preventing individuals from making desired choices in their personal lives. For instance, young people are forced to delay weddings or parenthood due to the costs involved. Likewise, adult children find themselves unable to leave parental homes (or are forced to return to live with their parents), thus postponing important rites of passage leading to personal independence. Finally, *The Guardian* draws attention to a phenomenon called a "cost of children crisis," where households face increased financial pressures during holiday periods with the daylong presence of children at home. To cover the costs, parents (some of them middle-class) report getting further into debt, washing less frequently, selling family valuables, or delaying healthcare procedures such as dental treatment.²²

The sharp decline in the nation's mental health is another major theme on which the left-leaning papers focus in relation to the crisis. Citing "food insecurity, fuel poverty, debt and the loneliness and isolation that come with it" as the contributing factors, *The Independent* calls the mental health emergency "a threat of pandemic proportions," adding that more funds must be provided to mental health services to overcome the "unprecedented challenge."²³ In an episodically framed article called "It Screws with an Already Vulnerable Mind': How the Cost of Living Crisis Is Affecting the Nation's Mental Health," the mental health crisis is depicted as a culmination of long-term unaddressed problems. Relating the experience of a former white-collar worker who

21 Daisy Schofield, "Not Going Out Not Going Out: How the Cost of Living Crisis is Destroying Young People's Social Lives," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/26/not-going-out-how-the-cost-of-living-crisis-is-destroying-young-peoples-social-lives>>.

22 Jem Bartholomew: "Cost of Children Crisis': UK Parents on Coping with Half-Term on a Shoestring," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/oct/26/cost-of-children-crisis-uk-parents-on-coping-with-half-term-on-a-shoestring>>.

23 Samuel Lovett, "Britain's Mental Health Faces 'Threat of Pandemic Proportions' from Cost of Living Crisis," *The Independent*, June 20, 2022, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cost-of-living-crisis-mental-health-uk-b2104963.html?src=rss>>.

lost steady employment due to excessive work stress, the article illustrates how work insecurity coupled with rising costs can snowball into full-blown anxiety:

Our credit rating is shot. We can't borrow any money, can't get a mortgage. Buying a home seems like a very distant prospect. Because I'm not contributing financially, it really affects my self-worth and self-esteem. I feel a lot of pressure. There can be something on the news about the energy bills going up, or we get a message from the utility company that can really, really bring me down very quickly. It definitely screws with an already vulnerable mind.²⁴

This article from *The Guardian* expresses concern for the mental health of children affected by the sudden deterioration of family finances. Using survey data from the Childhood Trust, the disturbing trend of children self-harming in response to the changes in family finances is documented. A third of the 608 parents questioned reported their under-18s had raised concerns about the crisis. Of these, 208 parents or 30% indicated that their children felt stressed, 21% said their children smiled less, and, most concerning, 17% claimed their children had started self-harming. The descent into financial hardship is reported to be undermining children's self-worth, leading to feelings of shame and anxiety:

The cost of living crisis risks plunging many previously financially stable families into poverty for the first time and the outcomes could be disastrous. A lot of kids are finding themselves in this appalling situation for the first time. They are deeply, deeply ashamed and embarrassed and worried about their predicament.²⁵

The story in *The Mirror* offers advice to struggling individuals via an interview with clinical psychologist Thomas Richardson, who identifies feelings of shame and self-criticism along with the traditional British reluctance to discuss money with others as obstacles to enlisting help. Richardson explains the cyclical character of the relationship between money problems and mental health:

There can often be a vicious cycle between the two. For example, somebody might be so worried about being unable to pay the bills that they end up feeling highly anxious. The anxiety makes it harder to manage finances, for example avoiding opening bills, and thus the financial situation gets worse still. Serious mental health problems can mean people have to accept lower paid or unstable jobs, or be on benefits which then impact their finances.²⁶

Individuals suffering from mental health issues due to the cost of living crisis are framed by the left-leaning sources as victims of circumstances beyond their control. They are not blamed for an inability to budget or for making detrimental lifestyle choices. Any self-defeating behaviors on their part are presented as understandable given the strain of the situation. The sharp decline in mental health is argued to have far-reaching impacts, as it threatens to reduce life expectancy, thwart the educational and career prospects of young people, and deepen persistent inequalities.

24 Patrick Butler, "Health Emergency: 15% of UK Households Went Hungry Last Month, Data Shows."

25 Tom Ambrose, "Children Stressed and Self-Harming Over UK Cost of Living Crisis," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/18/children-stressed-and-self-harming-uk-cost-of-living-crisis-childhood-trust>>.

26 Paul Speed, "Money Worries and Mental Health: Expert Explains What to Do If You're Struggling," *The Mirror*, February 16, 2024, <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/money/money-worries-mental-health-expert-32140495>>.

The third recurring theme in the left-leaning newspapers is criticism of the government's handling of the cost of living crisis. While the government is generally not held responsible for causing the crisis, as the origins are depicted within a concurrence of wider economic and geopolitical forces, the papers agree that the government's response to the manifestations of the crisis has not been adequate. The criticism is expressed either directly through thematic framing, or indirectly through the stories of individuals affected. In one of *The Guardian* articles quoted above, a Bristol-based single mother recounts her Dickensian living conditions, blaming the negligent government for ignoring the plight of low-income households:

I'll put candles on now instead of lamps, which just sounds ridiculous. It sounds like we're living in Victorian Britain, and a full-time working adult shouldn't be having to think like this. It's the people we voted in, they're the ones controlling the situation and not doing anything for us. They're not the ones affected. They live off our tax money, their energy bills are paid for by us. We're the sixth richest country in the world. And the fact that they're giving us advice of essentially how to live like the Victorians did is a joke. We are a joke."²⁷

Another issue of *The Guardian* features an opinion piece by Gordon Brown, Labour Prime Minister during the 2008 financial crisis. Titled "The Government Has Lost Control of the Cost of Living Crisis – Here's How Businesses Must Step In," the text refers to the "hidden injuries of class" and the "epidemic of poverty," blaming the current Conservative government for failing to tackle the inequalities that exacerbate the impact of the crisis:

Our social fabric is being ripped apart. We are now divided as we were in Victorian times: the income of our top 0.1% - about £ 9,615 a week - is 100 times more than that of a universal credit claimant, on £92 a week. So as we enter one of the hardest winters in modern times, with not just food and fuel but almost every household item more expensive than last year, the autumn statement on 22 November is a defining moment, an acid test of whether poor people will remain invisible to the chancellor. I fear that their desperate needs will again be ignored."²⁸

Compared to the wave of scathing left-leaning media criticism of the Conservative government in the wake of the 2011-2012 austerity policies, however, the criticism of its current actions regarding the cost of living crisis appears rather muted, largely limited to vague objections to complacency about inequality and insufficient provision of welfare support. It would be worth investigating why such seeming reluctance to criticize specific policies and programs is the case. One possible explanation could be that given the current surge of populist and anti-system forces in the UK,²⁹ the present centrist Tory government, which is more open to social spending than the 2010s pro-austerity cabinets, appears more palatable to the left-leaning commentators than some of the alternatives from the extreme right or left.

27 Kirsty Mackay, "Unheard Voices of the UK Cost of Living Crisis – Photo Essay."

28 Gordon Brown, "The Government Has Lost Control of the Cost of Living Crisis – Here's How Businesses Must Step In," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/16/cost-of-living-crisis-businesses-poverty-winter-companies-charities-gordon-brown>>.

29 Tanya Gold, "Where Populists Rush in: How George Galloway Harnessed the Middle East to Derail an Election in Forgotten Rochdale," *Politico*, March 1, 2024, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/rochdale-by-election-george-galloway-populism-palestine/>>.

Prominent themes in the right-leaning papers

While the left-leaning papers mainly concentrate on the human cost of the crisis, the right-leaning sources are primarily concerned with its economic manifestations. A recurrent theme is the impact of the crisis on retail, especially the closures of businesses due to high energy costs and reduced consumer spending power. Numerous articles express concern over the disappearance of popular retail outlets from the British high street. Using episodic framing, these stories relate the woes of owners unable to continue their business or shoppers grieving the loss of the local store.

The most extensive coverage of the phenomenon is provided by *The Sun*, which frames the business closures as local tragedies, using emotional headlines such as “‘Tragic’ News Sob Shoppers as Bargain Store with 190 Sites to Shut ‘Great’ Shop for Good in Days,” “‘We’re Turning into a Ghost Town’ Sob Shoppers as Major Retailer with Over 1,200 Branches Shuts High Street Store,” or “‘I’m Heartbroken’ Mourn Sausage Roll Fans as Bakery Chain with More than 2,000 Locations Shuts ‘Amazing Branch for Good.’” The businesses that closed tend to be portrayed as locally popular and indispensable, with their disappearance seen as contributing to the gradual death of town centers. In addition to retail stores, the closures of pubs such as those of the popular Wetherspoons chains are lamented as a blow to local community life. The same applies to entertainment venues closing across the UK such as the legendary Wire nightclub in Liverpool, with the “changing lifestyle choices” precipitated by the crisis blamed for their demise.³⁰

Along with these largely episodically framed stories, the papers also use thematic framing to cover general news concerning energy and food prices, changes in the benefits system, or the development of inflation. While *The Sun* and *The Express* tend to be pessimistic about Britain’s economic prospects, *The Telegraph*, the newspaper closest to the Conservative government, delivers more optimistic coverage, running a series of articles claiming that the cost of living crisis is easing off and the British economy is recovering.³¹

Practical advice on navigating the cost of living crisis is another major theme recurring in the right-leaning papers, especially *The Sun* and *The Express*. Ideas on how to reduce food or energy bills are offered, often through input by various experts or “hacks” by knowledgeable public members in articles such as “Aldi Boss Shares Three Simple Things You Can Do to Save Money on Your Food Shop” (*The Sun*), “‘I saved £500 on Food!’ Woman ‘Counting Pennies’ Shares App That Helps Slash Costs” (*The Express*) or “Young People Must Learn to Appreciate Home-Cooked Food – their Wallets (and Waistlines) Will Thank Them” (*The Telegraph*). Typical advice includes switching supermarket chains, buying cheaper own-branded food, cooking at home rather than eating out, shopping less frequently to save on transport costs, not leaving the heating on all the time, etc.

Well-intended as these recommendations may be, they might be missing a vital point. As argued by finance journalist Felicity Hannah, countless struggling households have already been

30 Olivia Marshall, “Legendary Nightclub Issues Emotional Statement as It Confirms Closure After 18 Years – Exact Date It Will Shut Forever,” *The Sun*, April 20, 2024, <<https://www.bing.com/spotlight?q=lake+tekapo+south+island&spotlightId=LakeTekapoNewZealand&FORM=M403J9>>.

31 Tim Wallace, “Economy ‘Going Gangbusters’ as Britain Escapes Recession,” *The Telegraph*, May 10, 2024, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2024/05/10/economy-gangbusters-britain-escapes-recession/>>.

applying draconic money-saving strategies since the start of the post-2008 austerity era, so there is simply nothing left for them to cut. The money-saving tips, therefore, may in fact be a source of distress for them:

Lots of people are tightening their belts for the first time, or the first time in a while, and it's easy to focus on tips and support for them. But if we report on the struggle like it's a new situation then we really risk alienating the people who have been struggling for much longer and who are now facing financial disaster. I am always very conscious that if I offer tips like "wear two jumpers and keep the thermostat down a degree" that I also acknowledge that many people have already done this and more.³²

Among the financial experts featured, the most ubiquitous presence is Martin Lewis, an award-winning financial journalist, founder of the MoneySavingExpert website, and frequent TV show guest. Lewis uses his expertise to advise readers on benefit payments, entitlement to financial assistance, important payment deadlines, and changes in the prices of goods and services. Lewis positions himself as an advocate of struggling households, frequently delivering criticism concerning energy prices, lending rules, the practices of debt collectors, etc.³³

The third theme re-occurring in the right-leaning papers is to a certain extent similar to the theme covered by the left-leaning papers regarding the everyday life impacts of the crisis. While the left-leaning sources tend to focus more on issues related to food poverty, destitution, debt and social isolation, the right-leaning coverage is more oriented toward lifestyle modifications that may be unappealing, but do not pose an existential threat. One example is an episodically framed *Sun* article titled "I Won't Pay a Penny in Rent After Turning My Parents' Garage Into a Tiny Home With My Girlfriend – But There Is a Downside," episodically framing the reliance on parental resources to tackle housing unaffordability. The article relates the experience of a couple inhabiting a parental garage to avoid paying rent as follows:

Josh and his girlfriend seem incredibly happy with their tiny home, which is complete with a bathroom, bedroom, and kitchen. Living in your parents' converted garage is a great way to save cash for a house, whilst still having your independence. As the cost of living crisis continues to bite, more and more adults are struggling to get on the property ladder and are choosing to live in their family home for longer.³⁴

Despite living in a makeshift abode, the couple can rely on their middle-class family's support and are portrayed as likely to become homebuyers at some point. Their situation is far removed from the stories of mothers skipping meals to feed their children, pensioners freezing in unheated homes, and families facing eviction as covered by newspapers such as *The Guardian*.

Some of the lifestyle changes reported by the right-leaning papers include:

32 Felicity Hannah, "How Can Journalists Report Responsibly on the Cost of Living Crisis?" *Journalism.co.uk*, August 17, 2022, <<https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/how-can-journalists-report-responsibly-on-the-cost-of-living-crisis-/s2/a956327/>>.

33 Tom Haynes, "Ban Debt Collectors from Bombarding Households, Warns Martin Lewis," *The Telegraph*, December 6, 2022, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/consumer-affairs/ban-debt-collectors-bombarding-households-warns-martin-lewis/>>.

34 Olivia Stringer, "I Won't Pay a Penny in Rent After Turning My Parents' Garage Into a Tiny Home With My Girlfriend - But There Is a Downside," *The Sun*, May 7, 2024, <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/27777118/garage-conversion-tiny-home-cost-diy/>>.

- preparing homemade food instead of eating out or ordering take-aways
- “unretirement” of pensioners, i.e., their return to work to cover their rising living expenses
- cancelling media subscriptions (such as Netflix) and forgoing foreign holidays
- growing one’s own food (typical for middle-class households with gardens)
- emigrating to more affordable countries.

All these adjustments imply a necessity to economize, but not immediate destitution.

Among the three right-leaning papers, it is *The Express* that is the most inclined to report on the impact of the crisis on the poorest members of society, with articles such as “How Can It Be That in 2023 Britain We’re Skipping Meals to Save Cash?” penned by Gareth McNabb of Christians Against Poverty. McNabb writes:

Our latest poll, launched this month, shows there are now over 14m people regularly skipping meals. One in 10 of the adult population has gone without electricity or gas, in order to cope with rising costs. And ten percent of people say that the cost of living has them questioning whether it is really worth living. The picture we’ve seen emerge is one of growing income inequality, where those on the lowest incomes are being hit the hardest. It reveals that millions of people have finally run out of financial resilience, having already cut back to the bone. Value range food – budget supermarkets – price comparison websites – been there, done that, years ago. There are no more moves that most low income households can make.³⁵

Such a text expressing concern for the plight of the poorest is very similar in character to the journalism typically found in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, demonstrating that, on occasion, the left-leaning – right-leaning dichotomy does not apply.

As mentioned earlier, the coverage of the Conservative welfare reform of the 2010s in right-leaning papers was rife with the stereotype of the undeserving poor, with the articles targeting able-bodied but economically inactive individuals dependent on state aid in a thinly-disguised attempt to justify the social spending cuts. The study of the cost-of-living-crisis corpus reveals very little negative stereotyping about people unable to manage financially without government assistance. The only newspaper reporting on problematic behavior related to the crisis is *The Telegraph*, which on several occasions mentions shoplifting in supermarkets by hungry customers and their aggression towards retail staff.³⁶ In all other instances, there appears to be a recognition of the systemic nature of their financial hardship, with no tendency to interpret it as individual failure to make more suitable occupational, lifestyle, and financial choices. While budgeting tips are provided by various experts, the tone is seldom judgmental. The sources, both right- and left-leaning, also agree that continued government support is required to prevent the exacerbation of an already critical situation.

35 Gareth McNabb, “How Can It Be That in 2023 Britain We’re Skipping Meals to Save Cash?” *The Express*, October 4, 2023, <<https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/1819962/Cost-of-living-crisis-best-budget-supermarket-debt-counselling>>.

36 Charles Hymas, “Shoplifting Prosecutions at All-time Low Amid Warnings Thefts Will Soar Due to Cost of Living Crisis,” *The Telegraph*, April 7, 2022, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/07/shoplifting-prosecutions-all-time-low-amid-warnings-thefts-will/>>.

Conclusion

The study of the corpus revealed a number of differences as well as similarities in the coverage of the cost of living crisis, sometimes depending on the political orientation of the papers selected. The left-leaning papers predominantly focus on the human cost of the crisis, detailing its impacts on various areas of day-to-day life (eating, heating, housing, socializing, etc.). They also devote considerable attention to the correlation between the crisis and the nation's deteriorating mental health. In addition, these news stories are more vocal in criticizing the government for not offering sufficient support, although the government is not blamed directly for causing the crisis as such. Episodic framing is used extensively to show concrete manifestations of the crisis in the lives of those afflicted. The right-leaning papers, on the other hand, devote the largest share of attention to the economic details of the crisis, especially its impact on retail and local businesses. While *The Telegraph* remains fairly general in its coverage, mostly opting for thematic framing of the wider economic trends, *The Sun* and *The Express* are disposed towards covering the themes episodically. All three newspapers also provide copious financial and consumer advice to struggling households. Both left- and right-leaning papers (with *The Telegraph* something of an exception) report on the lifestyle alterations forced by the crisis. The left-leaning papers, especially *The Guardian*, focus on the more drastic changes leading to destitution, while the right-leaning papers are more concerned with various downsizing strategies of (often middle-class) households to stave off acute poverty. The left-leaning sources are more likely to accentuate inequality as an important factor in the manifestations of the crisis; nevertheless, none of them comes close to the radical interpretation of the economist Gary Stevenson, who sees inequality as the root cause of the entire phenomenon.

Contrary to the media coverage of the Conservative welfare reform of the 2010s, which showed substantial differences depending on the political orientation of the papers, the cost of living crisis does not seem to represent a particularly polarizing issue. The papers across the corpus offer similar interpretations of its causes and show similar concerns for the victims. Negative stereotyping of the poor is almost completely absent from the coverage, with the systemic character of the crisis widely acknowledged.

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