Eyes of the child —A chilling documentary exposing child poverty in Britain

Tania Kent
11 September 1999

A harrowing documentary about the impact of poverty on children was aired on BBC One last Monday evening. *Eyes of the Child*, viewed by millions, was followed by an hour-long debate on its content on *Newsnight.*

The film crew who worked on the programme were responsible for a previous groundbreaking documentary that looked behind the scenes of China's orphanages. Filmed for the *Inside Story* series, their latest documentary showed children the length of the country. It was also groundbreaking in that it allowed the children to talk about the conditions they live in and their hopes for the future, in their own words.

The programmes editor, Olivia Lichtenstein, said the film crew had been shocked by what they uncovered: “We were sucked into a silent, chaotic and confusing world of children who are cut off from the Britain that most of us take for granted. Some are excluded from school, some are playing with drugs, some can't be bothered to go to school, some are beaten, grounded and battered, some end up dead—all are isolated from society.”

A dozen children featured prominently in the film, as well as some of their friends and relatives. None of the children interviewed go to school. Eight-year-old twins, Kylie and Becky, and their younger sister Kayley live in a household of 12 on a Bradford council estate. None of the eight children at home attend school and no adult in the household works. The family faces eviction, due to new laws enabling councils to evict people for “anti-social” behaviour. The adults in the house are drug and alcohol addicts, with the exception of the children's grandmother.

The young girls are not bitter towards their parents and attempt to make sense of their lives. Kylie explains that she thinks drugs and alcohol are the main problems in the world, and wants the government to help addicts break their dependency. "They can't help themselves, people cannot stop once they are on them," she says. Asked about what future they would like, the twins reply, “a nice house, a quiet place, no drugs and to forget about the past.” The girls are highly articulate and deeply sensitive. It is clear that their social circumstances have robbed them of their childhood. They have had to grow old very quickly, and attempt to cope with situations that even many adults could not deal with.

In Leicester, David (11 years old), Mickey (8 years old), and their three sisters are at home every day. Their 14-year-old eldest sister looks after them whilst their mother works. Only Mickey had gone to school that day, but he was home by 10.30 am, suspended for hitting another child. David explains that he has been expelled from 19 different schools. He has also been arrested and charged with criminal damage and assault with intent. The children have been victims of violent abuse by their stepfathers. At home, and in the streets, they replay the violence they have confronted.

David is asked what he thinks the prime minister should do for children. His answer is direct: “He should sort out after school clubs and make poor children not so poor.”

In Sheffield, Steve (14 years old), and his friend Craig (11 years old) hang around the streets into the late hours of the evening. They explain that there is nothing for them to do. There are no youth clubs, and for fun they steal cars, take drugs and get "trashed". They know all the drugs you can get on the street and show how they can be used.

In Bristol, 11-year-old Ian has run away from home several times. He turned to drugs following the death of his baby brother. Without any support to help him cope

© World Socialist Web Site

with the bereavement he has turned in on himself.

In Portsmouth, Adam, 15, has to leave home to live with his girlfriend. His mother, a single parent, cannot cope with him any longer. He has had five court appearances. His mother has had to pay all the fines for him and faces eviction if he does not change his ways. Adam says he loves his mother and understands why he must leave. “If I could change my past I would be the happiest person in the world, but I can't.” He is later shown in Feltham young offenders prison, where he was held briefly on remand. Whilst there he had twice attempted suicide.

Throughout the documentary statistics were flashed onto the screen relating to the issues the children were discussing. They enabled the viewer to understand that the tragic circumstances facing the children interviewed were not isolated or “extreme cases”—as many commentators claimed after the documentary—but a social reality that confronts millions.

The statistics revealed that:

* Five million children in Britain are living in poverty—one in every three children;
* Over 350,000 children under the age of 12 are left at home on their own every day;
* Every day 600 children are excluded from school;
* Britain imprisons more children than any other European country;
* Children commit 15,000 crimes a day;
* One in eight children have behavioural problems by the age of three;
* A child dies from solvent abuse every two weeks.

The documentary sympathetically portrayed the children interviewed. As such, it was a powerful rebuff to the campaign by the national media and Labour government to demonise and criminalise poor children.

It placed the children's behaviour within the context of the broad malaise that has gripped society at the end of the century. The emptiness, alienation and despair in their lives was linked very directly to poverty. It conveyed the fact that the children's problems were those of society as a whole.

The documentary was directed at Prime Minster Tony Blair's pledge to “end child poverty within 20 years”. This promise was repeated several times throughout the hour-and-a-half documentary. It ended with a naïve appeal to Blair to make good his pledge.

Speaking on the *Newsnight* programme that followed, Social Security Minister Alistair Darling agreed that child poverty was “intolerable” but could not point to a single measure that his government has introduced that will improve it. In fact, Blair's pledge was immediately followed by a raft of measures aimed at further vilifying and alienating poor children.

The government is embarked on a draconian law-and-order drive, as a means of dealing with the social catastrophe laid bare in the programme. Labour's prescriptions are shallow—to either ban something or make it compulsory. The previous weekend, Blair had launched his “moral crusade” for the twenty-first century by demanding that parents take more responsibility for their children. The welfare state today is “often associated with dependency, fraud, abuse and laziness,” he said.

Earlier in the year, Labour introduced new "anti-social behaviour orders". These make children as young as 10 subject to punishment by the courts if their behaviour is deemed likely to cause harassment, alarm or "distress to others". Breaking the order will be punishable by up to five years' imprisonment. Launching the orders, Home Secretary Jack Straw said that “the bad behaviour of these kids stops with these kids and their parents and that's just true”. Courts are also now empowered to send children as young as 12 to "secure accommodation", i.e., mini-prisons.

None of the participants in the *Newsnight* discussion, including those from groups campaigning against poverty, drew attention to the fact that the widespread destitution accumulating at one pole of society is matched by the explosive growth of wealth amongst a tiny elite at the other. The operation of the market is taken as an unquestionable “given”.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site