

UK charities say Blair government contravening children's rights

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A coalition of the UK's five largest children's charities released a report February 1 stating that the British government is violating internationally agreed standards on children's rights.

The report, entitled *Room for Improvement*, was compiled by Barnardo's, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Save the Children, the Children's Society and the National Children's Charity (NCH). It illustrates how the UK falls far short of meeting standards set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) due to conditions such as high rates of child poverty, the jailing of juveniles, the detention of refugee children, the failure to outlaw smacking and the prosecution of child prostitutes.

As the title suggests, the report is intended to persuade the government to mend its ways. Nonetheless, the social picture painted by the report's findings is a damning indictment of situation facing millions of young people under British capitalism.

Before its election in 1997, Labour promised to halve child poverty by 2010. But the report found that one in four children in England, Wales and Scotland now live in poverty, of which 16 percent endure persistent poverty. This amounts to an estimated 3.6 million children going without basics, such as meals and adequate clothing.

This must be set against a background in which the income gap between rich and poor has more than doubled since 1977, and continues to grow. The most vulnerable children are especially at risk of poverty—more than 55 percent of families with disabled children experience poverty at some time in their lives, the report states.

It continues, "Children from poor families are more likely to grow up socially excluded, homeless, to have

problems with drugs or alcohol and become victims of crime. Living in a poor family reduces children's expectations of their own lives and leads to a cycle where poverty is passed on from generation to generation."

Just days after the release of the charities report, the government released its own figures on levels of child poverty in the counties of Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire, where the coal, steel and fishing industries have been decimated over the last two decades. Given that the figures are officially sanctioned—with all the attendant tinkering and distortion—they are all the more devastating. They reveal that in the two regions, three in every ten children live below the poverty line. In some areas, such as the Manor estate in Sheffield, some 53 percent of families live below the poverty line.

As regards Britain's record on the protection of children, the report shows that over the last 30 years, there has been no improvement in child mortality rates caused by abuse and neglect.

The government is not simply a bystander in this state of affairs. The report points out that UK law still allows parents to physically assault their children, as long as they do not cause "provable injury." In changing the ruling on corporal punishment in schools, for example, the government retained the Victorian-era law of "reasonable chastisement," removing it only in cases of grievous bodily harm, wounding and ill treatment.

Moreover, some of the children most at risk of neglect and abuse are under state supervision. The report points out that children held in detention centres and prisons are subject to solitary confinement, strip searches and restraint. Since 1990, 29 children have died in custody in England and Wales, and 24 percent report being assaulted while in custody.

At any one time, there are approximately 3,000 young people under 18 locked up in England and Wales. The majority of these children show signs of mental health disorders. In 2003-2004, 3,337 children officially recognised as vulnerable entered prison service custody.

Amongst children in care, 45 percent of those ages 5 to 17 years have mental health disorders. Children from black and minority ethnic groups are over-represented in the care system: they account for nearly one in five of those in care, but just one in ten of the general population.

Children who end up on the streets are at particular risk of abuse, including prostitution (which can then lead to prosecution), crime and violence. At least 250 children are known to have been trafficked into the UK in the last five years.

The plight of child refugees and the children of immigrant workers are even more chronic. When the UK ratified the UN Convention in 1991, it entered a wide-ranging reservation on all matters relating to immigration and nationality, including the treatment of refugee children. This means that refugee children do not even benefit from the same minimal levels of protection as other children in Britain—effectively codifying discrimination in law.

The report shows that children are increasingly being subjected to accelerated immigration procedures, which offer them insufficient protection. On June 26, 2004, 60 children were detained in removal centres under immigration act powers.

Children involved in asylum determination procedures have no right to access legal representation or an independent advocate or guardian. Recent legislative changes will result in the complete withdrawal of support to families at the end of the asylum process—leaving parents at risk of being separated from their children.

Refugee families are discriminated against in terms of the financial support (they are given less than the nationally established minimum income) and accommodation they receive. Refugee children experience significant problems in accessing education, health and other services.

The standard of care received by unaccompanied children continues to be subject to chance and is often inadequate. Many receive only basic services and are

not provided with leaving care support by local authorities—in contravention of the principles of the Children Act 1989 (UK law) as well as recent government guidance. Unaccompanied children continue to be housed in temporary accommodation—government commitments to ending the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families with children do not apply to refugees.

Now the government plans to force refugee families to live in accommodation centres, where children will be segregated and denied access to mainstream schools.



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