

# Poor Kids: A devastating indictment of Britain's Labour government

Liz Smith  
18 June 2011

*Poor Kids*, a documentary by Jezza Neumann and broadcast last week on the BBC, highlights the plight of some of Britain's 3.5 million children who live in poverty.

The documentary, which is available for viewing online, shows the daily struggle to survive. The filmmakers follow four families who suffer a chronic lack of money and decent housing on the poorest estates in Leicester, Glasgow and Bradford.

Children of all ages talk about different aspects of their daily lives, including their experiences at school, how well they eat, and what they do for fun. These firsthand accounts of life are interspersed with a multitude of damning statistics:

- Out of 12 rich countries studied, kids in the UK have the lowest chance of escaping poverty.
- In November 2010 the UK was 18<sup>th</sup> out of 22 European countries ranked by UNICEF for child poverty.
- Credit interest and higher fuel charges cost poor families an extra £1,280 a year.
- Poor children are two and a half times more likely to suffer chronic illness.
- 47 percent of children with asthma are from the poorest 10 percent of families.
- Over one million homes in the UK are "unfit to live in".
- 85 percent of children living in damp flats have respiratory ailments.

The documentary was produced by the same filmmakers responsible for the groundbreaking film *Eyes of a Child* in 1999. In early 2010, the BBC asked them to return to the subject of child poverty for a new generation.

*Poor Kids* does not attempt to place the dire social

conditions in context of the current economic crisis, or the huge attack being carried out by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government on families living on benefits. Nevertheless, the film reveals prevalent social conditions that in themselves are a devastating indictment of the empty promises of the Labour government, which came to office in 1997 and pledged to erase child poverty by 2020.

The film opens by showing the squalor in which Paige, a 10-year-old, must live with her family in a high rise in the Gorbals, Glasgow. The flat is permeated with damp and black mould in every conceivable part of the house, including in her baby sister's cot. The mould spores make her clothes smell and her feel sick every day.

Kayleigh, 16, and her brother Sam, 11, live in Leicester with their father, who is a single parent. Kayleigh stressed, "Money is the main priority; I always worry about it". Her dad explained that when he was working, he earned as much in a week as he now gets for one month, which is just £420. The film shows him looking for work on the Internet through the TV, for which they pay £1 for six hours. The fridge and the cooker are also paid for this way, costing him £30 a month.

Sam explains about the fuel that is paid for by prepaid tokens: "When the electricity goes everything shuts off, but when the gas runs out, the whole house is freezing".

He and the other children spoke about going without food and how that feels. Sam explains, "We have to save up what we've got, you know, like food-wise. And sometimes I don't even get lunch".

Both he and 8-year-old Courtney from Bradford speak about how the school holidays mean that they won't get a meal or food during the day, as they only get fed at school. One in five low income families

report skipping meals.

Sam is very badly bullied by his peers, due to the fact that he has to wear his sister's cast-offs as a school uniform, which is required. They call him a "big girl's blouse", because he wears his sister's old school shirt. This makes him angry, and he is put in detention at school for poor behaviour.

In one of the most harrowing scenes of the film, Kayleigh describes the emotional impacts of poverty leading to self-harm and the many attempts she made to take her own life.

The UK has one of the worst child poverty rates in the industrialised world. Recent research by the charity Save the Children revealed that 1.6 million children across the UK live in severe poverty, and 29 local authorities have more than one in five children living in severe poverty.

The impact of this economic deprivation is brought out very forcefully in interviews with the children. Without the most meagre spending money, children miss out on school trips, hobbies, and other educational and personal experiences that are crucial to social development and good mental health.

In Bradford, Courtney and her friends play in derelict houses during the summer holidays. She and her friend discuss having a holiday and what it's like. She says, "People with more money have more stuff growing in their garden and stuff inside their house. When it rains, people with more money go in and do puzzles and things like that; I go in and watch TV".

By providing an intimate and sympathetic view into life among the poverty-stricken, the documentary serves as a powerful answer to the campaign by the national media and government to demonise and criminalise poor families. Following the film's broadcast, the BBC blog page had over 755 entries, the vast majority expressing shock by what they saw.

The film concludes by stating that child poverty is set to rise by 11 percent in the next three years.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**