

# TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

Children and young people speak out about their experiences of living in poverty in the UK today.



Ben, eight, walks down a street on the estate in Sunderland where he lives with his mother and sister. His mum finds it difficult to make ends meet all year round, but struggles especially at Christmas when she has to take out loans.

“There needs to be more help for families that are struggling to make ends meet.”

Save the Children Young Ambassador, 16, at a Save the Children End Child Poverty Summit, Scotland



**Save the Children**

## Introduction

### About Save the Children

Save the Children fights for vulnerable children in the UK and around the world who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice and violence. We work with them to find lifelong answers to the problems they face.

Our vision is of a society where no child is born without a chance. All children should be free to participate fully in society and fulfil their potential. To ensure that no child suffers from socio-economic disadvantage it is crucial that the government and stakeholders act to eradicate child poverty as soon as possible.

We work to ensure that the rights of children in the UK are protected, promoted and respected in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments, with a particular focus on poverty and educational attainment.

We work directly with children and families experiencing poverty and provide expertise, research and policy support to key partners, including local authorities and national government. We are members of the End Child Poverty coalition and have taken a leading role in the campaign to end child poverty.

### Child poverty in the UK

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out a framework of rights for all children aged 17 years and under, including, for example, the right to an education and the right to be protected from all forms of violence. It also states that children must have a standard of living which enables them to develop fully and fulfil their potential. All the rights

in the UN Convention are strongly linked to those of their parents and families, whose central role in children's lives is clearly recognised.

The UK government ratified the UN Convention in 1991. This means that the government made a promise that these rights would become a reality for all children in the UK. It is 20 years since the government made that promise, yet unacceptably high numbers of children continue to live in poverty in the UK today.

The UK government is also obliged to end child poverty by 2020 in accordance with the Child Poverty Act 2010, which requires the government to "eradicate" child poverty and set out three strategies for how it will do so. The first strategy was published in April 2011. In the Act, eradication means reducing the number of children living in relative income poverty to 10%, or less, of all children by 2020/21.

It has been estimated that 3.5 million<sup>1</sup> children in the UK live in poverty.<sup>2</sup> This is one of the highest rates of child poverty in Europe. Around 1.6 million children living in poverty are considered to be in severe poverty.<sup>3</sup> Save the Children campaigns to get the government to help those children in the deepest poverty.

Poverty isn't about poor money management: it's about sheer lack of money. Parents living in poverty put the needs of their children above their own, for example, missing meals themselves so they can feed their children. These sacrifices often go unrecognised. Parents in severe poverty are managing very tight budgets and don't have enough money for things such as household contents insurance, repairing a broken refrigerator or washing machine, or saving just a small amount each month for emergencies or to celebrate their child's birthday.

“It’s a struggle when you don’t have enough money. It’s a struggle to get your weans out and about like you should. If I had the money we’d have treats, we’d go to soft play, bowling, the beach – it’s £6 each to get into the soft play though: how can I do that? I just need to concentrate on the basics. I get in as much food as I can and then after that I see if there’s any extras. Food’s the priority, it comes first, and then any extra money goes on trainers or clothes and things like that for them. There’s not really money left after food usually, though.”

“As a mum I think it’s terrible for the weans, because at the weekends you can’t take them out round here. It’s like a riot down here at the weekends with all the drinking and that; it’s not safe for them up the park at the weekends. There’s no swings up there anyway, there’s nowhere to actually play. I’d definitely take them out more often to soft play if I had more money.”

**Lisa is a mother of three children aged one, three and four**

“I’m a single-parent father with a seven-year-old daughter and it’s been a struggle bringing her up on my own. We live on a very tight budget. We live in a one-bedroom flat in Manchester and my daughter still sleeps in a cot because I can’t afford a new bed. We can’t afford to move to a bigger place.”

“We live on £150 a week, and after I’ve paid the bills and done the food shopping, I usually have around £5 left. This means I can’t buy my daughter any clothes or books. We rely on free second-hand clothes from the Wood Street Mission in Manchester. I can’t even afford to buy from charity shops any more because they are getting expensive as well.”

**Saeed is a father of one child aged seven**

## Listening to children and young people living in poverty

“People need to support us and our ideas. Sometimes people look at us and think negative stuff, but this is our community too.”

**A 15-year-old from Northern Ireland**

It is crucial that the voices of children and young people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are central to all government actions to end child poverty. The UN Convention says that children’s views must be taken into account when decisions are being made that affect their lives – this includes children and young people living in poverty.

These children are experts on their own lives and understand what it means to be poor – what it feels like when they have to go to school in a uniform

that is too small for them, when their parents have to choose between turning on the heating or putting a hot meal on the table, or when they are too ashamed of their home to invite their friends round. Yet too often their voices are left out of debates and discussions about what the government should do to end child poverty.

To help address this problem, Save the Children has put together this report. It sets out the views and experiences of children and young people from some of the poorest communities in the UK.<sup>4</sup> These children either work directly with Save the Children or have taken part in the BBC I documentary *Poor Kids*.<sup>5</sup>

Save the Children works with children and young people across the UK through its In My Back Yard programme – an innovative, grassroots programme

in which children, young people and parents run their own advocacy project in their local area. For six months they engage in a series of activities to share and build their knowledge and understanding of issues important to them in their local community and create change.

True Vision is one of the UK's leading makers of social documentary, and has won numerous BAFTAs and other international awards for its films. In 1999 the company made *Eyes of a Child*, the first-ever BBC1 feature-length documentary in which children growing up in poverty were asked to talk about their lives, their hopes and their experiences.

In early 2010 the BBC asked True Vision to return to this theme a decade on and invite a new generation of children to share their insights into their lives in poverty in Britain today. *Poor Kids* is the result: four children – Courtney, eight, from Bradford, Paige, ten, from Glasgow, Sam, 11, and his sister Kayleigh, 16, from Leicester – take us into their lives and show us the unvarnished reality of growing up below the poverty line.

This report gives children and young people the opportunity to make their voices heard through a combination of direct quotes and case stories based on what children have told us about their lives. We have grouped the things they talk about under four headings, although we recognise that some of the themes overlap. These are: family income, education, housing, and neighbourhoods and community. It is clear, from what children and young people say across all these areas, that there is still stigma attached to living in a family where money is scarce, and that this often has a negative effect on a child's confidence and emotional wellbeing.

We all have a responsibility to treat children living in poverty with the dignity and respect to which they are entitled, and this includes listening to and acting on what they have to say. We hope that this report will help to do just that.

## Family income

The children and young people in this report are very aware of their family circumstances. They clearly understand how tight their family budgets are and how their families struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet. They know that this often means they cannot have things that other children and young people may take for granted, such as toys and story books, clothes that fit, educational resources and family days out.

**Ryan lives in Oldham and is 17 years old.** He is at college and has been a peer educator for two years, running workshops with young people from schools across Oldham.

**“I'm from Oldham. For some this means a town with some areas with the highest levels of deprivation in the UK, child poverty, barriers to education, and a town dealing with a history of racial tensions. But for me, it's just everyday life. It's just normal.”**

Ryan reflects on what it was like to grow up without much money:

**“When I was growing up my mum was a single mother with three children under ten. We were claiming every benefit to which we were entitled and my mum worked (when not looking after us), but it wasn't enough. We were barely scraping by on just about everything. We only just had enough to cover necessities... just. There was no money aside for little treats, for new toys, for the more expensive school trips. My mum found the money for things and hid how hard it was from us.”**

Ryan's situation has changed now, but he has been left with lots of ideas about how child poverty should be tackled. He thinks there should be greater awareness of the problem and greater consultation with people experiencing poverty, and that resources should be targeted towards those who need them most.

“Now, I’m an A-grade student, I’m labelled as a rich kid; very few people know about my past and my mum now runs her own business. I want to work in the fashion industry. It’s only now that I realise that not all young people have had the same experiences as I’ve had and that some kids grow up with more than they need.

“If I could suggest three things, they would be:

1. Raise more awareness about child poverty in the UK.
2. Talk to the people who are experiencing poverty about what they need – don’t just guess. Our work in school showed that young people didn’t feel they were being consulted enough, even though they are the ones living the changes.
3. On the basis of meaningful consultation, target resources to those who really need them – without further stigmatising them.”

**Amy is 15 and lives in a deprived area of Cardiff where a large proportion of children live in jobless households.** She explained to us the difficulties that she and her family face and some of the things she worries about.

Amy has been out of school for approximately four years. During that time both her parents have been seriously ill. Her dad is unable to work and her mum is unsuccessful in trying to find work because of her poor health. The family are very close but struggle from day to day to find money for food and amenities. Amy worries about her parents’ health and the strain they are under. She worries when people come to the house demanding money for debts. Amy is very isolated and wants to do something to help her family and her area. She often sits and watches from the window, afraid to go outside in case people pick on her. Their house has been vandalised many times. Amy hopes that the Save the Children project will make a real difference to her area. She wants to help others and try to make life a little bit easier for people in her community.

**Alex, Paulo and Faiza are aged between eight and ten and live in a ward that is part of the London Borough of Westminster.** The area is in the most deprived 10% of wards in the country and also suffers from a significant problem of housing disadvantage. These young children are well aware of how families struggle to pay for the basic goods they need and how high energy bills can exacerbate this problem:

“Lots of people in my family can’t get a job, so we can’t have a lot of nice things.”

Alex

“Low-income families have to pay 20% more than others. The money that we pay for bills is ridiculously high, and my whole family wants bills lower! If low-income families have to pay high prices for their bills, they cannot afford enough clothes, food and equipment for their children. This needs to stop!”

Paulo

“If we pay more for our bills, then that means that my parents can’t buy me any resources for my learning.”

Faiza

**Sam, 11, from Leicester,** describes how his dad often struggles to afford even enough food for his family:

“We have to save up what we’ve got, you know, like foodwise. And sometimes I don’t even get lunch.”

Children and young people are very conscious that their families, struggling to afford their basic needs, can easily get themselves into debt, which can also have a negative effect on them. A **young person from Bradford** explains:

“People living in poverty can get themselves into debt and find it almost impossible to get out of it... Debt and lack of money affects the whole family. Children are particularly impacted – they don’t get

the same holidays, Christmases or other things that other children have. When you see your parent in debt it affects you both physically and emotionally.”

**Similarly, Kayleigh, 16, from Leicester**, talks about how coming from a disadvantaged background can make her feel isolated and withdrawn:

“You always want to compare with your friends and what you’ve got, and when you haven’t got the background, or the financial background should I say, to support you in that, then you tend to reclude... You tend to just start merging into the background, not wanting to join in, because you don’t want people to know what’s going on at home.”

## Education

When talking about school, children and young people living in poverty often say how expensive it can be. Affording school uniforms can be difficult for their families, and children can sometimes be prevented from studying certain subjects simply because of their family circumstances. These **young people from Bradford** explain:

“Lack of money can also affect courses young people can do at college. For example, I was interested in an art course, but the equipment you had to buy to do the course cost £200, which is too expensive.”

“As well as uniforms, there are school trips that need to be paid for. Some of them are expensive, so lots of kids can’t go on them, and they might get bullied for that too. When children get bullied they might turn into a bully themselves, so the problem only gets worse.”

“School uniforms can be expensive, and lots of schools will only let you buy from them, so there’s no way you can save money by buying it somewhere else. When we went back to school a

few weeks ago, not everyone had a new uniform, and sometimes those kids get bullied. Teachers might get mad if you don’t have the proper uniform, and you can sometimes get detention for it. That’s not fair though, because some people just can’t afford it.”

**Sam, 11, from Leicester**, is familiar with this experience. Sam’s dad can’t afford to buy him new school trousers even though he desperately needs them – his current ones are worn out and much too short for him. As a result, Sam is bullied at school:

“Well, people call me ‘ankle swingers’, cos I’ve got, you know, ripped trousers and they’re too small for me... and when I go forward they swing, and cos it’s at my ankle that’s why they call me ‘ankle swingers’. I don’t think I would be bullied when I’ve got new trousers... they won’t call me names and bother me.”

Lots of the families of children and young people at **17-year-old Ryan’s school in Oldham** also don’t have the money to pay for school uniforms and school meals. There is also a lot of labelling and stigma associated with being ‘poor’ or being seen to be ‘rich’.

“A guy at my school wore the same blazer for five years, only because he couldn’t afford to fork out £40 for a new one. I lent him my tie twice and gave him my old shirts a few times.

“I used to know people who were ashamed to accept free school meals, as they didn’t want to be labelled as poor. But at the same time in school it was just a normal thing to be claiming free school meals.

“If someone got new clothes they were labelled as rich kids in school. If you went out once a month and got new clothes, even from Primark, you were a rich kid. In my last year of school I went shopping every month and it was my turn to be labelled the rich kid.”

**Kayleigh, 16, from Leicester**, is aware of the differences between the educational achievement and opportunities of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those of their richer peers:

“You’ve got the advantage that the more money you have when you’re brought into the world as a child, and the more money your family has, the better chances you have of getting that higher education, as it’s supposedly called... like going to university without having to worry about student fees and getting into the higher colleges and better schools like Eton and Oxford and all that... If I wanted to, and if I put the effort into it, I could probably get there myself. It might take me a little longer but I’d still get there... Not everybody can do that, because a lot of people have given up.”

Children and young people also talk about the need for schools to provide more specific support to children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are struggling to learn. **Jane is 16 and comes from Belfast**. She’s been out of mainstream education for the past three years, as she found school tough and couldn’t deal with all the rules it enforced, especially as her home life was so difficult.

Jane has been involved with a training provider that offers informal education and she’s learning about computer games design as well as maths and English:

“It’s great here cos the staff are so nice and I get treated with respect. Sometimes in school people looked at you as if you had two heads.”

Jane and her friends are trying to capture the voices of other children in the community talking about how poverty affects them and their lives:

“We want to make something that people will watch and really listen to, and understand that we deserve chances in life too.”

## Housing

A key issue raised by children living in poverty is their poor housing conditions and cramped living arrangements. This often prevents children from sleeping properly, which can make it hard for them to concentrate when they are at school. Many of their homes do not provide the space they need to play and do their school work.

**James is nine and lives in a deprived ward of an inner-city London borough**. He lives in a flat with only two bedrooms, which is home to seven other people. It is also quite damp. With so many people living in the flat, he doesn’t have space to play or do his homework. He shares a room with two of his brothers and his uncle. His brothers sleep on the bunk bed, while he shares a bed with his uncle. James says he finds it quite hard to sleep, as the older brothers he shares the room with like to keep the lights on and go to bed late. He feels that if he had a bigger house, he would finally have the privacy he so desperately lacks at the moment, and he would also have the space to learn and grow up to become a doctor:

Housing problems such as these are not confined to children living in London. Here **two eight-year-old children who live in one of the most deprived areas of Cardiff** talk about what it’s like at home for them:

“I have to share with my sister sometimes in her bed.”

“Sometimes there are more people than beds in our house.”

“Sometimes our lights go out and we have to use candles.”

“I have had to share a bed with my sister before and there is never enough space for both of us.”

When learning about poverty in Northern Ireland, **Jane, 16, from Belfast** felt that she had nothing to complain about, as she was lucky:

“Yeah, I slept on a mattress and shared a room with three other people, but it could be worse: I could have been homeless. My ma always made sure we had something to eat.”

Children also describe living in housing which is extremely damp. **Courtney, ten, who lives in Scotland**, talks about where she lives:

“I don’t really like living here, nor does the rest of my family. My little sister said that it’s like a stinky house. It’s not really stinky, cos this is my house and really I don’t want to upset my dad. My gran says to us all the time that we smell of mould. But we do. So I’m not blaming her. My clothes smell of mould, my clothes get all mouldy and it destroys all my toys and everything. I have to throw half of my toys out, yeah.”

**Paige, eight**, used to live in the same housing estate as Courtney and explains what it’s like to live in a very damp house:

“Kids just... they get slagged and everybody talks about them cos they stay here. Because their house hasn’t been done up and stuff... It’s just not a nice place for kids when their friends come and all that. Some people get bullied because of their house and because they haven’t got stuff...”

“Well, when I was staying here I was actually embarrassed to take my friends round my house, because of the carpet – my mum did do the house up at first because she thought it had no dampness, and then when the dampness came through, the house started looking ugly. And it wasn’t really, it wasn’t that nice. It wasn’t that nice.”

## Neighbourhoods and community

Children and young people frequently raise concerns about the poor upkeep of their areas, the amount of rubbish lying around, and not feeling safe. **Dan and Cian both live in Northern Ireland. Dan is 17 and comes from Belfast, and Cian is 13 and lives in Derry/Londonderry.** Both live in areas of disadvantage. This is what they say about their local communities:

“Our area has been forgotten about. People don’t care, except politicians who come round once in a while and promise stuff, but the parks, the houses, everything is still crap.”

Cian, 13

“If you live in an area where you’re not as well off as others you are more likely to be burgled or a victim of crime.”

Dan, 17

**Paige, eight, who lives in Scotland**, talks about some of the things that scared her on the housing estate where she used to live:

“There were always people sitting in the backstairs taking drugs and stuff like that. And all the fights that were happening on the landing, I mean I walked out the landing once and the next-door neighbours were fighting and there was blood all over their faces and I was scared, I just ran in the house... Kids shouldn’t see all that – they should have a good time and grow up.”

These **primary school-aged children** live in an area of London that suffers from a range of social problems and a recent history of gang violence:

“On my way home I see gangs doing weird things.”

“People leave bottles, cans and junk food packages lying around instead of in the bin. They should start

to put litter in the bin and start thinking about if they would like people dumping litter in their garden. It's not very good and it means people are not safe."

Similarly, **James, 12, from Wales**, speaks about glass and other hazardous rubbish being left around in his area, which can be dangerous for children playing outside:

"They've got all this empty space across the road and just down the other side of the road. They got all the space but they just don't put nothing in it. There's glass bottles lying around and that... My little cousin runs through the grass a lot of the times and he fell over once when a glass bottle smashed over there and he cut all his hand open. He had to have seven stitches... People just dump the glass over there. People get drunk and all that. They chuck needles, drugs, everything over there. Anything that they got on 'em."

Another frequent complaint from children and young people is the lack of affordable activities in local communities. Young people in **17-year-old Ryan's community in Oldham** feel that there aren't many opportunities and not much to do if you don't have money. Ryan felt the same when he was growing up:

"I recently carried out research in school, including asking young people to identify the biggest challenges facing them. A lack of opportunities and a lack of anything to do came out as big issues for Year 9 pupils. When I was younger I found there was nothing to do, unless you left Oldham or had money to spend somewhere else. I spent my time getting drunk in houses, in the street or in the park. I'd rather of gone to the cinema, go shopping, be somewhere exciting."

A similar view was expressed by a **young person in Bradford**:

"There is a lot of tension in my community. I want to play football, because it brings people from different communities and cultures together. There should be more sports activities like free football tournaments for people who live in areas like ours, so we don't have to walk a few miles just to play football. I have to walk at the moment, because the bus fare is expensive and I can't afford it."

## Conclusions

This report sets out the views and voices of children and young people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. It highlights their ability to speak directly about major policy issues affecting their lives and the lives of other children.

Save the Children would like to see local and national government place the voices of disadvantaged children at the heart of the drive to end child poverty, in line with its obligations under Article 12 of the UN Convention. The insights they have and the passion they show reinforces our conviction that all children have a valuable contribution to make in all decisions that affect their lives, that no child should ever endure poverty, and that with the right support and opportunities, every child can achieve great things.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This figure is after housing costs are taken into consideration. An estimated 2.5 million children are living in poverty if housing costs are excluded.

<sup>2</sup> M Brewer and R Joyce, *Child and Working-Age Poverty from 2010 to 2013*, Briefing Note 115, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children, *Severe Child Poverty: Nationally and Locally*, Save the Children, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the names in this report have been changed.

<sup>5</sup> To be screened 7 June 2011.

**Save the Children works in more than 120 countries. We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them achieve their potential.**

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