

# Broadcast

In Focus

## Poor Kids, BBC1

9 June, 2011



Returning to the subject of child poverty 12 years on, film-maker **Brian Woods** witnesses how risk-averse society - and TV - have become.

### CREDITS

- **Production company** True Vision
- **Producer** Brian Woods
- **Director** Jezza Neumann
- **Executive producer** Sam Anthony for BBC
- **BBC commissioning editor** Charlotte Moore
- **Assistant producers/camera** Tim Lawton, Emma Olver, Matt Pinder
- **Assistant producers**
- Frances Ogefere, Ally Roberts, Lily Murray
- **Music** Jamie Perera
- **Editors** Peter Stannus, Brian Woods, Jezza Neumann
- **TX** 7 June, BBC1

Thirteen years ago, the BBC asked my indie True Vision to make a film about children in Britain. It was initially commissioned as an hour for long-gone strand Inside Story, but a year or so later, it had grown into a whole day of programming in a way that seems unimaginable now: Kilroy, a half-hour discussion in an extended Newsnight, several pieces on news bulletins throughout the day (including Newsround) and a 90-minute primetime documentary.

Eyes Of A Child had 5.8 million viewers. Pre-digital, granted, but even so I'd say that proves that given the chance, large audiences are willing to engage with challenging documentaries, not just films about gypsies.

Even the Daily Mail joined in the cries for child poverty to be addressed, with the headline 'These Kids Shame Us'. Three days later, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown came onto ITV's This Morning to announce a host of policies to tackle the issue.

Early last year, BBC commissioning editor for documentaries Charlotte Moore asked us to look again at child poverty through the eyes, and in the words, of the kids living through it. Finding and filming those children a decade on has shown that we are now, in many different ways, living in a far more cautious and risk-averse society.

### **Getting access**

In 1999, finding children willing to take us into their lives, and parents granting this unfettered access, was a tough challenge. It took more than nine months to find a handful of kids who were living in severe poverty, but were also articulate enough and had sufficient self-awareness to work on television.

Since Baby Peter, Victoria Climbié and the Soham murders, child supervision laws have tightened. Anyone going near a child now needs a CRB check and a fear psychosis has gripped defensive social workers, terrified of any form of unmonitored adult contact with children. Occasionally, films like the Bafta-nominated *Panorama: Kids In Care* come along, offering access to the social services side of the story, but even these are increasingly rare.

I can quite understand why slightly paranoid social workers, teachers and other professionals can be plain hostile to film-makers' approaches, especially once you factor in the influence of films like *Dispatches: Undercover Social Worker*. Sharon Shoemith may have won her appeal, but her life and career have been destroyed. No caring professional ever got into trouble for refusing to work with the media, so who can blame them for either saying no, or simply pushing the decision upstairs until someone further up the foodchain says no for them?

So looking back on the 12 months or so that it took to make *Poor Kids*, I'm quietly amazed that we found four children willing to take part, and parents who agreed to let them.

The BBC reflects society's increased caution about adult contact with children. In 1999, I hadn't even heard of the Editorial Policy Unit until we finished the film. They got involved after we had delivered - just a few days before transmission - to query a couple of statistics and ask us to take out some "fucks".

In 2010, as the BBC guidelines on working with minors were being updated, Ed Pol helped draft a 5,000-word protocol that attempted to anticipate every possible problem that might arise, with the over-arching framework of Child Protection. Every member of the production team had to sign it and agree to abide by it - and, of course, everyone had to have a CRB check before they could make a single call.

True Vision now has its own 10-page Child Protection Policy, which the team also had to read and sign, outlining our responsibilities to the children we film with; our principles with respect to child protection and staff recruitment; how we handle disclosure or other allegations of abuse; what 'informed consent' means; how we will prepare young people for the impact of transmission; whether we can buy meals, pay for taxis, give phone credit and so on.

This kind of protocol is now standard for any film involving children, whether in the UK or abroad, for both the BBC and Channel 4. It's a lot of paperwork, though once you've done one, the rest tend to just be variations on that original.

But I think they are a very good idea. Thinking through the implications of a film at the beginning, and trying to anticipate what to do if, for example, a child you're filming with tells you she's worried about her cousin because of what her uncle did, means you should already be half way to having an answer if such an issue comes up.

Also, if something really bad does happen, and you end up in an Ofcom hearing - or worse, in court - then being able to point to a lengthy protocol that opens with the words "In line with True Vision's Child Protection Protocol, in the making of this film, in all decisions the child's welfare shall be the paramount consideration" might help offset a jury's initial presumption that social workers always have children's best interests at heart, while we are all evil journalists bent on exploiting kids for a good story no matter what the cost.

### **Unwilling public**

Another fundamental shift in society since 1999 is that the public are simply far less willing to be filmed today.

Many wildly successful and high-rating programmes of the past decade have had the ritual humiliation of the slightly less than perfect as one of the cornerstones of their success. The unblinking eye of the Big Brother camera rig followed every blow in the gladiatorial combat that passed for life in the house, exposing any personality flaw in ruthless detail.

Unsurprisingly, the public are now more cautious about allowing an observational documentary crew into their homes. Do they suspect that we might film domestic harmony for six weeks, only for one rare argument to be at the centre of the final cut?

Another challenge was that indie Friel Kean Films had made a series for BBC Scotland on the Onthank housing estate in Kilmarnock. The Scheme excited strong passions in Scotland and was condemned by some as 'poverty porn'. The BBC staunchly defended it, but our team on the ground in estates in Glasgow and Edinburgh learned that saying "BBC" was a really good way to ensure a swift invitation to go forth and multiply.

After watching *The Secret Millionaire* and *How The Other Half Lives*, the families we sought now wanted to know what was in it for them. Back in '99, it was fine to say: "We can't pay you, but we can offer you the chance to have your voice heard." But today, expectations have changed: they see people on TV being given large cheques, treated to holidays or new flats, and want their share.

Many children were ruled out because their parents wanted to be paid. Sometimes the kids too would ask our researchers very direct questions: "Are you being paid to do this? Then why shouldn't we be paid?" A tough question to answer when your protocol says "no payments".

Back in 1999, we had been commissioned by then head of docs Paul Hamann to make "a film about children". We had only that vaguest of briefs, and it wasn't really until we were well into filming that we decided it should be about the then trendy political issue of "social exclusion". We didn't even mention being poor, so the social stigma of that scary word "poverty" never arose.

Arguably, therefore, we didn't have fully informed consent, as the critical line in the consent form "the nature of the programme has been fully explained to me" could not have been fulfilled. But when we showed the film to the families, they were happy. This is always the most important test for me: if contributors recognise a film as a true and accurate representation of their lives, then we have done our jobs.

### **Bond of trust**

These days, a programme description has to be agreed before research even begins. It should ideally be included in the consent form, and in our case, our protocol specified that "a laminated card with the programme description on one side and the researcher's and the production office's contact details on the reverse" can be left with the child and their parent or guardian.

Bad idea. Making an observational documentary depends on a bond of trust being built up between filmmaker and contributors. That means talking, giving people DVDs of other films we've made, promising a fairness and accuracy screening, and so on. Leaving little cards with 25-word descriptions that have been agreed by committee and are bound to end up being inaccurate - as films inevitably evolve in the making - is not a good way to start building a trusting relationship.

Despite all this, almost nine months later than we were supposed to deliver the film (thank you to a very understanding and patient commissioning editor) director Jezza Neumann (cameraman on *Eyes Of A Child*) completed *Poor Kids*, and it was broadcast on BBC1 this week. Sadly, 10 years on, boys are getting bullied for wearing their sister's hand-me-down shirts; meals are being skipped; and bodies smell of stale sweat because there is not enough money to heat the water to wash in.

In many respects, it has been the most difficult film we have ever made. But I hope that, like a swan, it appears all grace and beauty on the surface, and the frantic paddling that went on down below is invisible.

► **Poor Kids** will be screened as part of Sheffield Doc/Fest in The Town Hall Assembly Rooms at 4.45pm on 11 June, followed by a Q&A session with Woods and Neumann. Anne Morrison will interview Woods about his career in the Town Hall Council Chamber at 2.30pm on 10 June





## Related Jobs

[Sign in](#) to see the latest jobs relevant to you!

- [Ingest Technician](#)  
Competitive London; Central London
- [Programme Operations Manager](#)  
Competitive London; Central London

[Find more jobs](#)

[Print](#)