

Child poverty isn't just a number. It's a smell and a look

Brian Woods



In 1999 we made *Eyes of a Child*, the first BBC One documentary in which children talked about growing up in poverty. Ten years later we wanted to see what had changed for the next generation in some of the poorest places in the UK.

A handful of families on some of the bleakest estates in West Yorkshire, the East Midlands and Scotland agreed to let their kids talk. They reveal that poverty is not just a number, but a smell and a look. Blazers that are too small, humiliated boys dressed in hand-me-down girl's clothes, mouldy bedding that stains the skin, unheated houses, damp spreading in winter.

Sam, from Leicester, is 11. He is called "Swingers" at school because his trousers don't fit and swing around his ankles. He sometimes goes without lunch, but "I save up my hunger for when dinner comes, then I eat it all up", and dreams of a "never-ending pound coin" to feed the pay-per-view meter that lets his family watch TV.

In Bradford, Courtney, 8, self-harms. She has bad eczema on her legs, and when she is angry she "scratches and scratches and scratches until it bleeds". She doesn't like holidays because, without free school dinners, the family struggle to have three meals a day.

The number of children in severe poverty remains stubbornly high. Save the Children estimates that more than 1.6 million live in similar conditions to Sam and Courtney. The best way out is education, but children are bullied at school about poverty and their concentration is hit by hunger.

But escape is possible. In *Eyes of a Child*, David told me he wanted to be an accountant, a footballer or a drug dealer — the only jobs he could see where he might make money. Within two years he was in a local authority secure unit,

where the structure and education

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transformed his life. He got a job, a girlfriend and now, at 24, has children.

The Government has pledged to end child poverty by 2020 but the Institute for Fiscal Studies projects numbers to rise by 300,000 in the next three years under current policies, while OECD research has found that, of 12 rich countries, children in the UK have the least chance of escaping poverty. This is disgraceful. Surely we can do better?

There is no single answer. More jobs, higher aspirations, affordable childcare and safeguarding Sure Start centres would all help, but most of all politicians must make good on their promises.

We owe it to children like Courtney. She tells us, lying on a bed by her slightly better-off friend Holly: "I think that my future is going to have loads of bad things in it... she's going to be richer when she grows up, and I'll be poorer." With all the wealth in our nation, let's hope that we can prove her wrong.

Brian Woods is a Bafta award-winning documentary maker. *Poor Kids* is on BBC One tonight at 10.35pm