

# Children's experiences of poverty to inform the Child Poverty Strategy

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# Introduction

The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England was commissioned by the Child Poverty Unit to conduct a piece of research exploring children's experiences of living in poverty, for the purpose of informing the government's upcoming Child Poverty Strategy.

The aims of this project were:

- To ensure the Child Poverty Taskforce hears the experiences and insights of children growing up in poverty.
- To demonstrate the impact of poverty on children and highlight how those impacts can be alleviated.
- To ensure recommendations made by the Taskforce were directly informed by children's views, voices and experiences

These slides summarise the views of the 128 children and young people in England who we spoke between January and March 2025. These slides should be viewed alongside the office's report 'Growing up in a low-income family – children's experiences'.

**Note:** We use the term 'poverty' for ease of communication. Participants were selected based on their experiences of growing up in low-income households (see [methodology](#)), but children rarely made explicit references to poverty. Instead, they talked about the material items they lack and how their lives could be improved, the activities and experiences they wish they could do, or how they *feel* about the social and emotional burden of their family's circumstances. While some children were happy to discuss their personal experiences, others preferred to talk about these topics in the third-person – referring to, for example, 'people that might not be as well off', instead of themselves.

# Key findings

## RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty? [1/2]

- Children and young people spoke to us about the **social and emotional impact** of living in poverty, including feelings of shame and stigma, missing out on social experiences and issues such as bullying, particularly due to clothing.
- There is evidence of the **worries and awareness** that children as young as 8 have about their family's financial struggles and the focus they have on saving for essentials and the future. Children and young people described the **adult-like roles and responsibilities** they take on, such as part-time work to help supplement their household's income, acting as emotional support for their parents, and household chores, particularly amongst young carers.
- There was evidence of children and young people accepting substandard, dangerous living conditions (such as rats, mould, and collapsing ceilings) as normal, or having **low expectations** of services and amenities.
- Children and young people spoke about their **aspirations** for the future and there was evidence of how living in poverty was shaping and limiting these ambitions.
- Children and young people recognised the importance of school for their future but discussed how their home life, including digital exclusion, had an **impact on their education**, with some withdrawing from school completely, particularly where there was a lack of understanding as to the root causes of their behaviour.

## RQ1: What is it like to be a child living in poverty? [2/2]

- A recurrent theme across the sessions has been **feeling unsafe in the community**, due to issues including anti-social behaviour, knife crime and gang violence. This has an impact on children and young people's ability to take part in activities, such as attending clubs and playing outside. Children and young people discussed the heightened risk of child criminal exploitation if you are from a lower income family.
- Alongside this, there is evidence of the **importance of community** acting as a support and a buffer against the adverse effects of poverty and offering children opportunities to enjoy childhood.
- Data from [The Big Ambition Survey](#) further reflects these findings. Overall, children from lower-income backgrounds were less likely to;
  - Spend quality time with their family
  - Feel safe and protected in their local area, and have access to local, fun activities
  - Have access to good healthcare and a healthy diet
  - Enjoy school or have supportive teachers
  - Indicate an understanding of employment opportunities, or money and life skills

## RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living? [1/2]

- An increase in the **cost of living** has meant that children and young people and their families are worrying more about money and are having to make choices about which essentials they can afford.
- **Housing** was cited as one of the key things that children and young people and their families would spend more money on if they had it. Not being able to afford alternative options meant that many are living in **over-crowded, poor-quality and poorly-furnished accommodation**, with issues including mould, a lack of privacy and a lack of hot water for bathing.
- Children and young people are aware of their families' struggles to pay for **food** and bills, particularly **energy bills**. They spoke about living in cold homes, relying on food banks and food boxes and being unable to afford healthy food.

## RQ2: What essential costs affect children experiencing poverty the most? How does it impact the way the children and their families are living? [2/2]

- There was evidence that the increasing **cost of bus travel** (outside of London, where it is free) makes getting to school and to activities difficult for children and young people.
- Children and young people spoke about how their inability to pay for the additional **costs of the school day**, such as uniform, school supplies, trips and non-uniform days, puts them at a disadvantage to their peers.
- Participants also discussed how they are often excluded from **activities and clubs** because of the cost of attendance and equipment.

## RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives? [1/3]

- Children and young people living in **social housing** spoke about their interactions with councils and housing associations, in particular there was a sense that their situations were not taken seriously, including when repairs were required. A lack of housing stability was a worry and children and young people with experience of **temporary accommodation** discussed its unsuitability, such as a lack of cooking facilities and space, and distance from support networks.
- **Food banks** and food parcels provide a vital role, but there was evidence of the limitations in the amount and quality of food received. While some children spoke favourably about **free school meals**, for many there were or had been issues with how the system operated, such as portion size, eligibility and stigma in how meals were served. Young people explained how free school meals alone are not sufficient to sustain students throughout the day, and experiences vary depending on what additional free food schools provide.
- **Schools** are a locus of practical and financial support for many of the young people we spoke to, with often little reported support coming from elsewhere, however the level and effectiveness of this support varies. Emotional support and understanding from staff is a key factor in ensuring students continue to attend school. Children and young people with **additional needs including learning needs** spoke about the inconsistencies in the support that was provided by schools, and the difference that properly funded support can make.

## RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives? [2/3]

- Young people spoke about the difficulty of, and lack of support in, finding **employment**, particularly with fewer social connections and contacts. They also highlighted the impact of the level of the minimum wage for under 18s.
- Children and young people would like **more opportunities for fun** - more activities, more outside spaces, and better upkeep of the ones that are there. They spoke about the loss of community services due to funding cuts, particularly community centres and clubs, how distance is often a barrier to participation and how better advertising of opportunities is needed.
- The quality, safety and reliability of **travel**, particularly buses, was a key concern for the children and young people we spoke to. Students highlighted the difference in experience between those whose schools ran buses and those who had to use public transport, including cost and safety. The reliability and availability of transport was particularly an issue for young people in rural areas, where it had an impact on their ability to access various services.
- The children and young people we spoke to called for more money for families through the **social security** system, and shared experiences of difficulties their families have faced in accessing benefits and the stigma associated with it.

## RQ3: How do children with experience of poverty think that services can be improved to reduce its impact on their lives? [3/3]

- Discussions around **health** focused on mental health provision, particularly waiting times and quality of care. Children and young people think more could be done to prevent physical health issues and improve the NHS, including better outreach and a recognition of the barriers service users on lower incomes face.
- Young people with experience of **social care** highlighted limitations in the support they received.
- There was evidence that more streetlights and a greater police presence would help address children and young people's concerns around **safety**. Some young people would be confident to go to the **police**, whereas others are unsure of how they would be treated if they did or have previously had negative experiences.

## RQ3: What do children and young people think should be done?

- Improve the service provided by council and housing associations, particularly increasing responsiveness to requests for repairs.
- Address the unsuitability and poor quality of temporary accommodation – ensure adequate space, access to cooking facilities, and proximity to school and support networks.
- Improve the choice, availability, and quality of free food provision, such as food banks and food parcels. Ensure that children on Free School Meals are given sufficient money or food for a whole day, and that the system is not stigmatising.
- Foster understanding and support for children with challenging home lives among professionals, particularly in schools.

- Provide effective practical and financial support for students in all schools, not just some.
- Improve job opportunities and career guidance for children and young people.
- Increase levels of social security benefits.
- Create more opportunities for fun – such as clubs and activities - particularly for older teens. Improve the quality, upkeep, and sustained availability of public spaces, such as parks and community centres.
- Increase the quality of public transport and reduce the costs for children and young people, particularly in rural areas.
- Improve waiting times for, and the quality of, mental health services children and young people, such as providing support whilst waiting for interventions.
- Implement community safety strategies, such as more street lighting, Neighbourhood Watches, and improving resident-police relationships.

## RQ4: How do the answers to these questions vary for different groups of children?

- Speaking to children and young people from diverse groups and locations in England has highlighted the **variability** in their experiences, often due to a "post-code lottery", including their access to support and services.
- For some groups of children and young people, the impact of poverty may be amplified by other **barriers and vulnerabilities** and vice versa, for example, those with additional learning needs not being able to afford equipment that would benefit them.
- There were differences in experience depending on children's characteristics. For example, **age group** – older children were more likely to be aware of their family's income and feel the impacts more keenly; **gender** – girls were slightly more likely to be taking on emotional burdens of their family's financial situation; and **ethnicity** – children spoke about differing cultural expectations, and discriminatory interactions with services based on their ethnicity.
- Whether the children and young people lived in an **urban or rural area** was particularly significant, with children in rural locations speaking about lack of local services and opportunities, and the barrier of affordable transport, and children in larger towns and cities were often most concerned about their personal safety in the local area.
- Children and young people that reported positive experiences often received **support from a single organisation or trusted adult**, who went above and beyond to remove barriers. Not all children have access to this support.

# Spotlight on housing findings [1]

Children also talked about the instability and unpredictability in their housing situations.

One girl, at only 10 years old said, *“I’ve moved houses seven times, and the current house I’m in, I’ve been in it for two years.”*

– **Girl, 10**

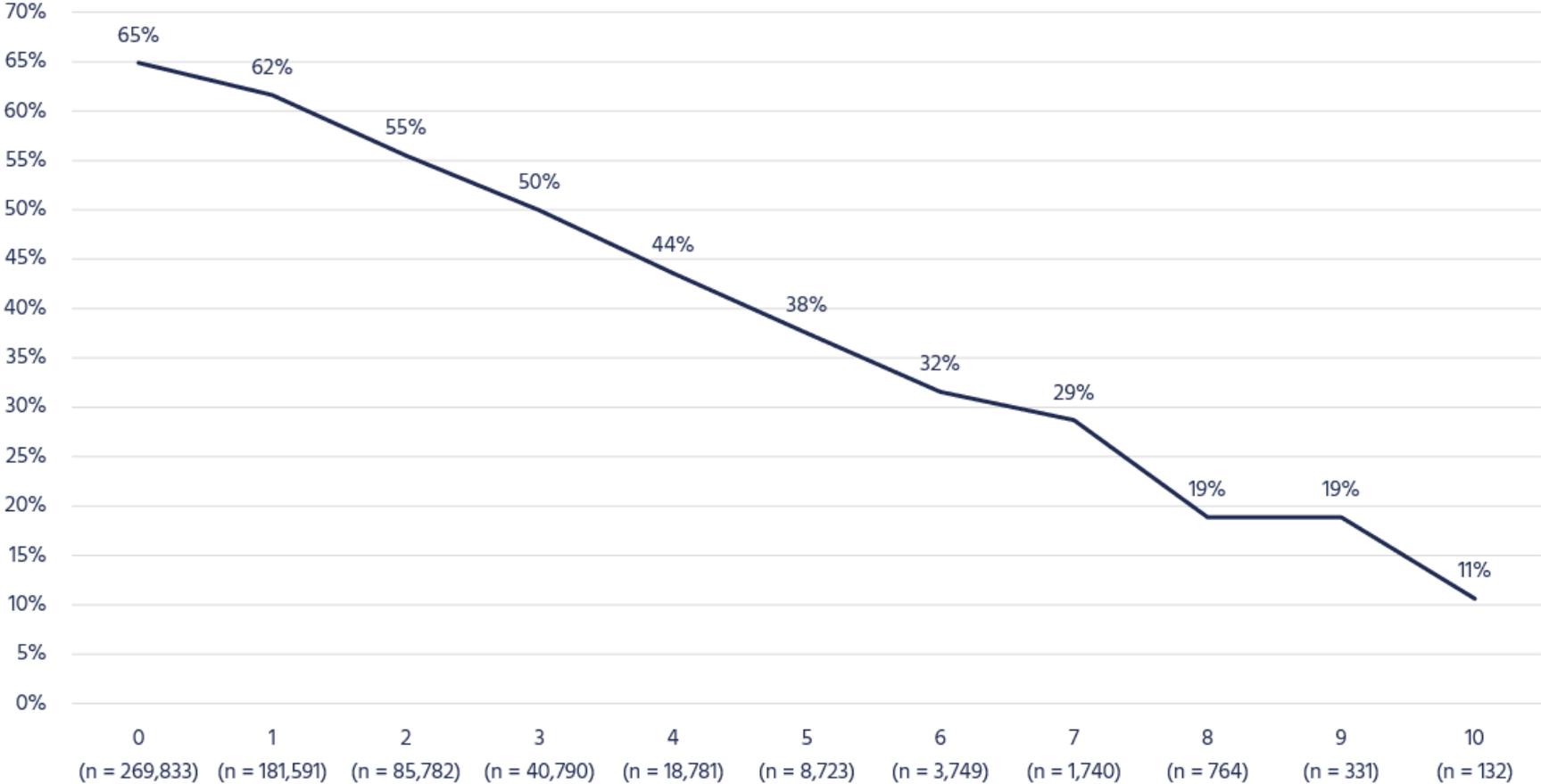
*“So I’m actually really worried because...I moved houses and the house I moved into...I’ve only been in for one year, and then some people come to my house and they said you have three weeks to move and we hadn’t even found a house because we’d just settled in. So now my mum had to find a house so now we’re just looking.”* – **Girl, 10**

The office wanted to understand the impact that housing instability had on children’s lives and recently examined the relationship between house moves and educational outcomes, finding that housing instability is associated with poor educational outcomes for children.

# Spotlight on housing findings [2]

The analysis showed that pupils whose home postcode never changed between Reception and Year 11 were most likely to get five GCSEs passes, including English and maths (65%) whilst just half (50%) of those with three home moves over their school career achieved this; and just over one-in-ten (11%) of t

**Figure 1: Proportion of children who passed five or more GCSEs, including English and maths, in Year 11 by the number of home moves across their school career**



# The Children's Plan – a census of all schools in England

Last year the office launched its census to understand what challenges children bring to school, how schools respond, and what more is needed. Children have a wide range of additional needs outside of the classroom, for example **62% of schools** could not report exactly on how many lived in unsuitable accommodation.

**The Single Unique Identifier due to be introduced** must be implemented ambitiously and without delay so that schools understand children's lives without excessive new bureaucratic workload.

## **A national statement of ambition for all children**

The forthcoming Education White Paper and subsequent reforms should provide a clear statement of ambition for all children. That should include concrete goals of reducing absence and every child being able to go to a school that can meet their needs, every day

## **A new focus on a broader range of additional needs for those who need support inside and outside the classroom.**

This should include safety, pastoral, health and learning needs. That definition should be set out in a new additional needs framework.

## **Extra help for schools to deliver targeted and specialist support**

The first part of that core offer should ensure that schools are enabled to provide high quality pastoral support. The second part should be access to key professionals and services. Both should be funded by the new funding premium.

# Solutions



# What do children and young people think should be done?

- Improve the service provided by council and housing associations, particularly increasing responsiveness to requests for repairs.
- Address the unsuitability and poor quality of temporary accommodation – ensure adequate space, access to cooking facilities, and proximity to school and support networks.
- Improve the choice, availability, and quality of free food provision, such as food banks and food parcels. Ensure that children on Free School Meals are given sufficient money or food for a whole day, and that the system is not stigmatising.
- Foster understanding and support for children with challenging home lives among professionals, particularly in schools.
- Provide effective practical and financial support for students in all schools, not just some.
- Improve job opportunities and career guidance for children and young people.
- Increase levels of benefits so families have enough money.
- Create more opportunities for fun – such as clubs and activities - particularly for older teens. Improve the quality, upkeep, and sustained availability of public spaces, such as parks and community centres
- Increase the quality of public transport and reduce the costs for children and young people, particularly in rural areas.
- Improve waiting times for, and the quality of, mental health services children and young people, such as providing support whilst waiting for interventions.
- Implement community safety strategies, such as more street lighting, Neighbourhood Watches, and improving resident-police relationships.

# The Commissioner's priorities for reform [1]

## Foundational reform

- Children and families worry about money and the level of financial support available through the current benefit rates. Ultimately, families need more money in their pockets.
- The office will be calling for investment in social security, including scrapping the two-child limit.

## Whole society mission to break the links between background and opportunities is required

- Children must grow up in communities that are safe, supportive and aspirational. That will require **strong local leadership across public services**.
- **Schools** must be equipped to better recognise and respond to the pressures students face.
- The **National Youth Strategy** must prioritise empowering children from low-income households to pursue their aspirations, through the delivery of high quality, locally available youth services.
- Children must feel safe in their local communities. **The Safer Streets Mission** should prioritise safety for children by taking their experiences and perspectives into account.
- Families with children must be prioritised for **safe and suitable accommodation**, limiting the use of temporary accommodation.
- All children should have a plan, linked to their unique ID, set out a new digital **Children's Plan**.

# The Commissioner's priorities for reform [2]

**Recommendation:** No child or family should be housed in B&B type accommodation for over six weeks, including one which is owned or managed by a local housing authority. The legal loophole in the Homelessness Suitability of Accommodation 2003 Order should be closed

**Recommendation:** No child should ever be placed alongside other single adults, this poses a safeguarding risk to children and must be avoided. The Homelessness Code of Guidance should be updated to outline that local authorities must consider the potential safeguarding risks certain forms of temporary accommodation poses to children.

**Recommendation:** The government should update the Code of Guidance to require local authorities to notify the host authority before they make an out-of-area placement.

# Conclusion

- Children don't talk about 'poverty' - instead they talk how it feels growing up on a low income and the impact it has on the things they care about: their families, learning, having fun, feeling safe.
- As you have heard, this includes shocking examples of experiences children have had - including living with rats, mould, hunger, as well as day-to-day disadvantage, and the hidden impact on children's aspirations
- Breaking the link between a child's background and opportunity will require a whole government approach
- Report published in July and follow up event next week



# Q&A



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