

Policy briefing: Poverty amongst children in families with ‘no recourse to public funds’

Estimates suggest that around 382,000 children affected by the ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) immigration condition in the UK are living in poverty.¹ NRPF prohibits most migrants from accessing mainstream welfare benefits, social housing, and support tied to benefits (e.g. Healthy Start vouchers). NRPF has consistently been shown to produce destitution amongst those already socio-economically marginalised and racially minoritised.² This briefing reports on children’s experiences, drawing on research with children affected by NRPF in England conducted at University College London.³

Inadequate housing

Children affected by NRPF are often housed in overcrowded and substandard accommodation. In many cases, whole families share a single small room, often within a shared house – even when accommodation is being provided by local authorities under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. This means inadequate access to kitchen and bathroom facilities, and no room for children to play or study, or to ensure privacy for all family members. One family in our research – a mother and three teenage sons, one of whom had a severe visual impairment – had been sleeping in a single room for over seven years. 18-year-old Kevin talked of the ‘whole family just cramped up in there’, describing how some of them had to sleep on the floor. 14-year-old Sarah described sharing a single room with just two beds with three of her siblings, explaining that ‘you can’t really have your own space, and be on a call with your friends if you want to.’ Young people also described the knock-on effects of overcrowding, such as being late for school:

‘It’s because, like, I’m in the same room as someone and, when you like, keep stuff, it gets messed up and you can’t really find it. It gets misplaced in the house so it’s hard to find things to get ready for class or school.’ *Sarah (14-years-old)*

Other children described rats, mould, lack of lighting and heating, and feeling unsafe:

‘Basically, the house we were living in wasn’t ready... the house wasn’t locked fully. So even if you locked it from the outside, you could just open it.’ *Kinglsey (11-years-old)*

Being housed by local authorities far away from schools and social networks was described as a major challenge by young people. 15-year-old Jacqueline described waking up at 3am every day because of how far she’d been moved away:

‘In the whole of London, they couldn’t find any place for us to live in, so they wanted to send us all the way outside to Kent. I just had my teddy bear and a blanket, and I had to leave my house to take a cab to Kent that night. During that time I don’t even know how I functioned... I was a Year 7 running on five hours of sleep... the first time when I came back, that’s when I fell asleep during the RS lesson... my friends were having all these hangouts in London and stuff but I wasn’t able to go because it would take me hours to get there...’

Despite being supported under section 17 and being told by the local authority that they would be reimbursed for the high costs of travelling to school, Jacqueline’s family were never reimbursed.



Food insecurity

Families with NRPF often struggle to afford food or access free school meals, with many schools confused about their eligibility.⁴ Children in our research spoke of not having enough food, skipping meals, and worrying about starvation:

‘I was worried that we didn’t really have food, if I was going to eat the right amount of food or if I was going to starve.’ *Isaac (13-years-old)*

Similarly, 13-year-old Miriam noted that her mother would often skip meals to provide more food for the children: ‘Cos normally we don’t have enough food for our... to eat. So, if there’s a little bit, she’ll give it to me and Luke... and then she just has tea or something.’

Lack of understanding of children’s experiences

Because of their family’s destitution, children experienced difficulties completing homework, often having to work in cramped and busy spaces, use small smartphones to complete online work, or study while hungry and tired. Some children had so far to travel to get to school that they had no time to do homework. Young people spoke of a lack of understanding in schools about their circumstances:

‘I’d tell them...I only have time to get home, change, eat something, and sleep, to have enough to be able to function the next day. They were still: “you should do your homework, da, da, da.” I wasn’t able to do any homework with all this other stuff... I’d wake up super early, take the bus, take the train, get on the bus, and then sometimes take another bus... [If I was late], I said there were problems, they were like, “Wake up earlier.”’ *Jacqueline (15-years-old)*

Others described being given detentions for being late, not completing homework, or not being allowed to participate in school activities, despite these issues resulting from their destitution. Many children spoke of the difficulties of speaking out about the issues their families were facing out of fear that their parents might be blamed or get into trouble because of their immigration status.

Emotional impacts

Children spoke about feeling isolated from their peers, excluded from school trips or extra-curricular activities due to lack of funds. Many described feelings of shame in relation to their circumstances, unable, for instance, to invite friends to their houses. Jacqueline described being teased by friends about the rats in her house: ‘the joke kind of dragged on for too long and made me feel embarrassed. They still joke about it now.’ Others spoke about feelings of embarrassment preventing them from seeking help:

‘Sometimes schools give the excuse of, oh, you should reach out to us for yourself, but...that’s also an internal battle... It’s a bit embarrassing...I don’t want to have to go up to you and ask you, “Oh, I need help, I want to do this.”’ *Sarah*



Precarity was described as a particular concern by several children, with issues around frequent moves mentioned, such as ‘losing friends... putting your education at risk’ (*Prince, 15-years-old*) and having to continually ‘rebuild...that kind of support system for yourself’ (*Ambri, 12-years-old*).

Conclusion

Children affected by NRPF are some of the most impoverished children in the UK. Our research suggests that not only is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child being severely neglected in the case of such children, but also that children affected by NRPF are effectively being punished for the poverty they are forced to endure.

Recommendations

1. End NRPF

We recommend that the NRPF rule be abolished, enabling migrant families to access the mainstream welfare system where needed, thereby ensuring the best interests of children in these families and allowing them and their parents to meaningfully exercise their rights to family and private life

2. Provide funding for local authorities to enable them to meet their statutory obligations under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and set minimum standards for provision

While the NRPF condition remains in place, local authorities should be adequately funded to provide accommodation and financial support to families with NRPF. Minimum standards should be introduced at a central government level to ensure that support for families is never below the support a family would receive were they entitled to the mainstream welfare system, though discretion to provide additional or extra support should remain where children’s needs require it. Minimum standards should include provisions to ensure that children are actively and meaningfully involved in decisions made about their lives, as well as guidance on ensuring support does not exacerbate children’s feelings of precarity (e.g. frequent moves or being moved far away from support networks).

3. Ensure all children have enough food and a safe home regardless of their immigration status

The government should ensure that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is upheld in the UK for all children, regardless of their or their parents’ immigration status. This includes making sure children have enough food to eat and a safe home (e.g. Article 27 on ‘the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development’.)

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¹ NRPF Partnership (2025). ‘Lifting children affected by No Recourse to Public Funds Restrictions out of Poverty’. London: Praxis

² Rosen R and Dickson E (2025). *Bordering Social Reproduction: Migrant Mothers and children making lives in the shadows*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

³ This research was conducted by Dr Eve Dickson and Professor Rachel Rosen. Methods included: participant observation; narrative and semi-structured interviews; arts-based methods; focus groups; and co-analysis workshops.

⁴ The Food Foundation (2022). *Immigration Policy and Food Insecurity in the UK*. London: The Food Foundation.