

# Children in poverty due to UK government's 'dysfunctional system'

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A new report by the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford highlights the consequences of what it calls the UK's 'dysfunctional system' of dealing with the children of certain groups of migrants, such as people on visas and over-stayers.

It finds that changes by central government to immigration and welfare benefits under the 'no recourse to public funds' policy have left [local authorities](#) with a duty of care to safeguard children when their parents

are precluded from working or accessing benefits. Thousands of children, many of them British citizens, have been found to be in need of services due to destitution under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, says the report.

Central government determines who may access mainstream [welfare benefits](#), but local authorities have to intervene to provide a safety net for some children whose parents have been excluded. The researchers found that an estimated 3,391 such families and 5,900 children were supported under local authorities' Section 17 Children Act 1989 duties in 2012/3. Whilst local authorities have a statutory duty to protect children in these circumstances, they receive no central government funding to account for this specific cost. The researchers also discovered that subsistence rates for some families being supported under Section 17 were found to be extremely low – sometimes just over £1 per person, per day.

The report says most of the families had some form of lawful status or were awaiting decisions from the Home Office on immigration claims. It highlights the poverty in which many of these children and families live for prolonged periods whilst receiving this support, and significant local disparities in the provision of care for vulnerable children. It also demonstrates that while some local authorities gave priority to the needs of children, others gave greater weight to the immigration status and credibility of parents in determining eligibility for support. Local authorities are 'caught between that duty to safeguard children and their inability to resolve the underlying cause of the child's destitution' as they must wait for the Home Office to resolve cases through granting of status or removal from the UK.

The research, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, was based on a survey of 137 Children's Services departments in England and Wales, a survey of 105 voluntary sector organisations and 92 interviews in eight local

authority research sites. The survey showed that sometimes a child's parents had to wait years for their immigration status to be resolved: 7% received Section 17 support for three or more years,

The report concludes that it is the length of time for which local authorities have to provide support, the inadequate level of support provided, the communication difficulties between the two tiers of government and the need to resolve the cases of those who have not or cannot be removed, that need to be addressed.

Jonathan Price, co-author of the report, said: 'Even after they have started receiving Section 17 support, some children face long periods living on subsistence rates that are well below those deemed minimal for any other category of people in the UK. This raises real concerns about the long-term impact of poverty on these children.'

Examples in the report include a number of mothers who are separated from their British partner and are attempting to raise their child but are unable to either work or claim benefits because of their [immigration status](#). It adds that the situation of destitution had sometimes led to exploitative relationships for some mothers because they had to rely on men for accommodation. Some parents were engaging in informal work which entailed risks, such as sex work.

Price added: 'Local authorities step in because these are vulnerable people. We found that prior to receiving local authority support, [children](#) and families were living highly precarious lives and were sometimes subject to exploitation. Domestic violence was an element in many referrals.'

The report, 'Safeguarding Children from Destitution: Local authority responses to families with no recourse to public funds', by Jonathan Price and Sarah Spencer.

Provided by Oxford University

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