



**Submission to the London Assembly's
Health and Environment Committee
into Food Poverty in London**

November 2012

INTRODUCTION

Kids Company is a children's charity providing some 36,000 children and young people with access to practical and emotional services. We empower thousands of vulnerable children to overcome the devastating effects of poverty, neglect and abuse and are driven to provide these services by the lack of statutory opportunities for vulnerable children to self-refer, the lack of holistic services and the lack of any opportunities for emotional re-attachment. Our ethnically diverse clients range in age from birth to 26 years old and come from all 33 local authority areas throughout London.

Kids Company works to return children to safer childhoods; this begins with providing the basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing. To alleviate hunger, ensure adequate ongoing nutrition and facilitate successful engagement, Kids Company offers up to three meals a day and/or food vouchers. Children eat at the dining table together with the staff and this affords them a family experience which they are often lacking. Many of the children who come to Kids Company are hungry and have reported to us that there is often not enough food for them at home.

"Kids Company has been operating at street level for 16 years. Under repeated governments the circumstances of the most vulnerable don't seem to have changed. 97% of children and young people self-refer to our provisions. They present with complex needs across health, social care and education. Their primary challenge is the absence of a functioning adult in their lives who can organise and reach out to services on their behalf. In the last two years we have seen an escalation of children presenting with requests for food as well as other basic resources, such as housing and bedding.

These children's needs are repeatedly being addressed under single-initiative interventions, whereas what they need is a holistic approach addressing their complex problems under one roof. Kids Company hopes that political leadership will emerge, genuinely prioritising the needs of the most marginalised children. The riots of summer 2011 were not a surprise. It was very telling that as much food was stolen from shops as consumer goods. When young people are running around carrying sacks of rice on their shoulders instead of trainers there is a message of desperation intended for society.

If the numbers of the marginalised grow, without meaningful help reaching them, our communities will experience a profound challenge to the current equilibrium."

- **Camila Batmanghelidjh, Kids Company Founder and Chief Executive**

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR RISK FACTORS FOR FOOD POVERTY?

Historically, Kids Company has supported extremely vulnerable children who have been severely maltreated, enduring neglect, abuse and poverty. The risk factors for such children are generally driven by parental difficulties such as mental illness, alcohol and substance dependency, involvement in crime, inter-generational unemployment and parents who have grown up in care, or who have been maltreatment themselves. Peer factors multiply the risk factors when they too have experienced failures of care and parental dysfunction. Whilst factors such as these will always affect a minority of children in the population, Kids Company has experienced a 233% increase in self-referrals this year compared to last (from 30 self-referrals per week last year to 70 per week on average this year). In most cases, children are coming to us because they are hungry.

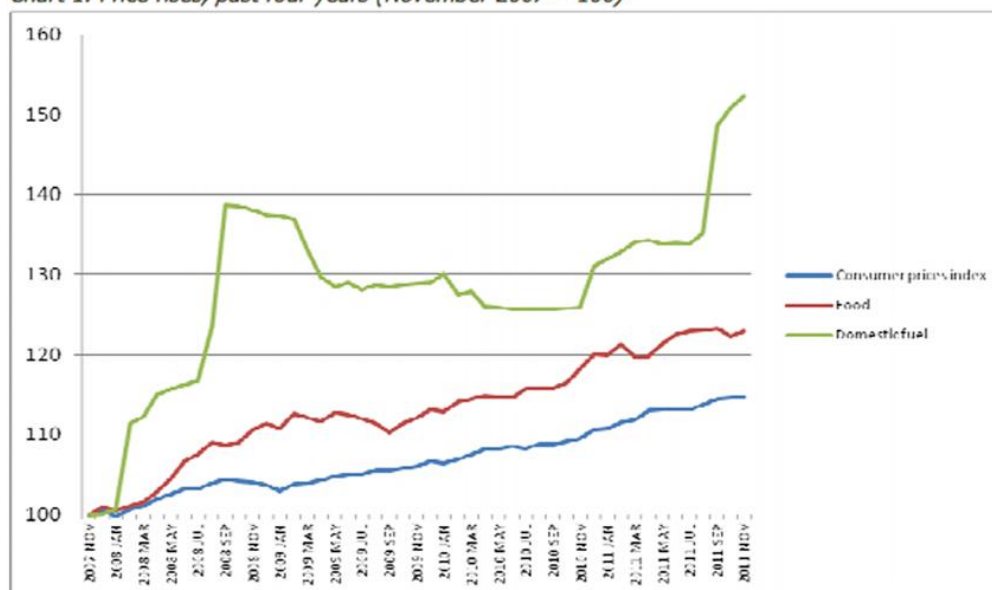
A nutritional survey of children at Kids Company found that:

- 64% reported being hungry because there is no food in their house
- 50% go to bed feeling hungry
- 33% rely on being given money to eat from a takeaway
- 85% rely on Kids Company for their main meal of the day

(Dr R.Gow, Institute of Psychiatry, for Kids Company, 2011)

The main driver of this increase appears to be upward inflationary pressures (food, energy etc) set against static or decreasing wages and benefits.

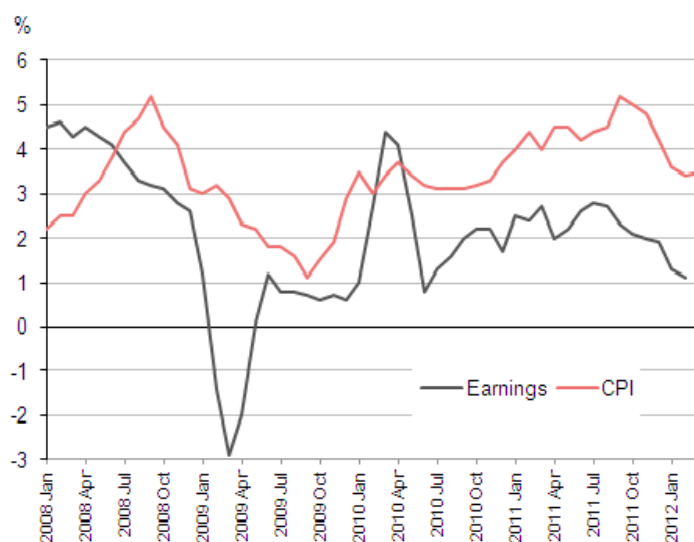
Chart 1: Price rises, past four years (November 2007 = 100)



Source: National Statistics

According to figures compiled by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, food prices in the UK have risen by 27% since 2007, double the EU average, with “no evidence yet of a return to a downward trend in real terms” (DEFRA stats, 2011).

Average earnings have been growing more slowly than price inflation for much of the past four years. The chart below from the ONS demonstrates how for average earners there has been a fall in real earnings with a persistent gap opening between growth in prices and earnings.



Earnings relative to Consumer Prices Index (O.N.S Q1, 2012)

Kids Company is experiencing a growing number of children needing our services whose parent or parents, despite being in work, earn low or minimum wages that are insufficient to sustain their family. A small, yet significant number of children at Kids Company have mothers who, because they have no recourse to public funds, have resorted to the sex industry to support their children. Such work is hazardous both to mother and child, rarely providing a sustainable income and frequently involving exploitation and abuse to the mother.

The increasing gap between average incomes and food prices disproportionately affects the poor. Kids Company is extremely concerned about the effect of the transition to the Universal Credit system starting in April 2013 in relation to children and young people. We expect to see serious consequences to children and young people resulting from the cap in housing benefit plus the proposed age threshold on housing benefit. Small decreases in welfare payments, coupled with increases in housing and fuel costs, could have disastrous consequences for those already struggling to afford basic levels of nutrition.

A further risk factor is the impact that youth unemployment is having on families comprised of multiple children. Such families are disproportionately affected as the oldest struggle to become financially independent whilst continuing to utilise resources from the family. Youth unemployment currently stands at 1million young people aged 16-24 (Parliamentary Briefing Note, 2012).

In short, new groups of children are now either at increased risk or are being directly affected by an increase in child poverty (See Appendix 1, Head Teacher interviews).

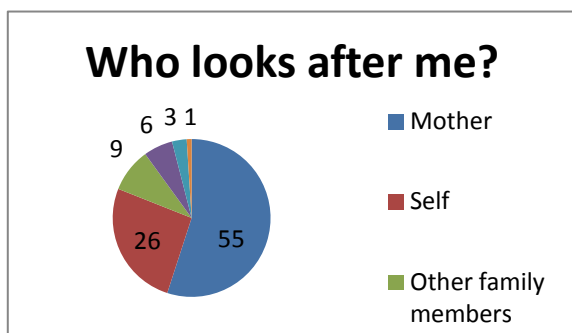
Data from a recent evaluative research study at Kids Company undertaken by Dr Saul Hillman (Anna Freud Centre) exploring the presenting needs of a random sample of 354 high-risk Kids Company clients reveals the compounding risk factors affecting the children Kids Company supports (Dr S Hillman, Anna Freud Centre & Dr L Wainwright Portsmouth University, 2012).

Almost a third of respondents (31%) did not have access to all these essential household items that are taken for granted by the wider community but often lacking in disadvantaged populations:

- 20% did not have a bed.
- 18% did not have blankets.
- 14% did not have a pillow.
- 10% did not have a towel.

Young people were also asked whether they possessed specific items of clothing.

- 38% did not own school clothes.
- 34% did not own shirts.
- 27% did not own a jumper.
- 20% did not own a jacket.
- 18% did not own underwear.
- 16% did not own socks.



The majority of clients reported being looked after by only their mother (55%), with 26% saying that they looked after themselves. Other options included being looked after by other family members (not a parent or sibling: 8%), by both parents (6%), by fathers only (3%) or by siblings (1.3%).

Care status of Kids Company clients

Many of the young people surveyed had additional demands. Almost half (49%) were responsible for the care of someone else, including parents and siblings.

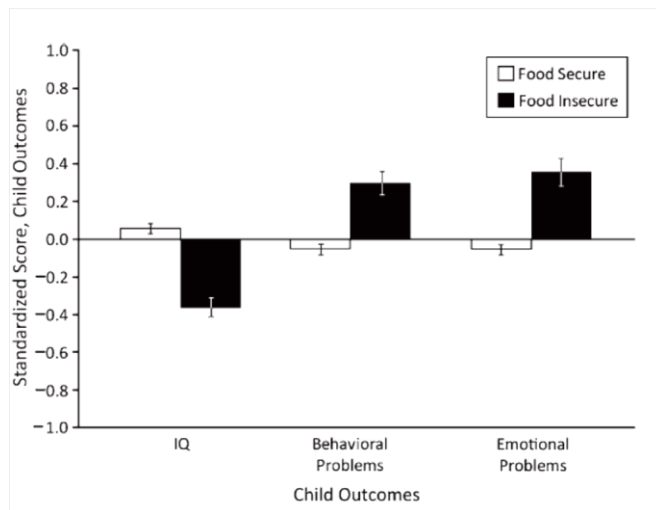
These high levels of material deprivation and deficits of care are matched by extremely high levels of trauma symptoms amongst children who attend Kids Company. Ongoing research with University College London highlights the consequences of adversity amongst this vulnerable population.

Compared to controls, Kids Company clients tested had:

- **2.2 times the level of anxiety**
- **1.8 times the level of depression**
- **2.2 times the level of anger**
- **3.3 times the level of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms**
- **3.7 times the level of dissociation**

(Cecil, preliminary research findings, Embargoed until publication: not for public release, 2012)

The effects of poor nutrition, food poverty and hunger on the development of these symptoms in relation to resilience require urgent investigation. Such research could help to characterise and identify children who are most at risk so that cost-effective intervention strategies can be implemented. Previous research has already demonstrated that food insecurity correlates with lower IQ, behavioural problems and emotional problems.



Mental health, at age 12, of United Kingdom children always food secure and ever food insecure during ages 7–10, Environmental Risk Longitudinal Twin Study, 1999–2000. Food insecurity refers to material hardship related to food, including hunger. Error bars indicate 61 standard error; $P < 0.001$ for all comparisons. (Reprinted from Belsky et al, 2010.)

Earlier this year, Kids Company surveyed head teachers and Pastoral care staff anonymously at 21 London Schools (Kids Company Schools Survey, 2012). We asked seven questions about the impact of hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity on their pupils. The findings are a serious cause for concern and reflect the growing trend of childhood food poverty.

- The majority of respondents (88%) think poor nutrition is having an impact on the children in their school.
- Over two thirds (69%) said they were either very (42%) or extremely (27%) concerned about children’s levels of nutrition in their school.
- The majority (82%) said poor nutrition is affecting their pupils’ ability to concentrate.
- Over three quarters (79%) said poor nutrition is contributing to children’s negative behaviours.
- Staff at over half the schools surveyed are concerned that most of their students are malnourished.
- 40% think that over half their students are affected by hunger.
- Staff at nearly half of these schools think that the majority of their students are experiencing food insecurity

Kids Company provides emotional and practical support services in 40 London schools. Head teachers have disclosed that they don’t want to admit publicly that they have problems with children’s nutrition for fear of being labelled by prospective parents as a “poor school”. It is our recommendation that the committee, if possible, hears evidence from head teachers privately and anonymously so that full and frank disclosures can be made to help reveal the truth about food poverty in London. (See Appendix 1 – Head Teacher interviews.)

Schools are expected to provide 190 days of education per year (DfE, 2012), meaning that with 100% attendance a child spends just over half (52%) of their time at school. The Government recognises that many children live in circumstances where there isn’t enough money in the household to provide an adequate school lunch for a child and entitles such children to free school lunches. Whilst such provision is literally a lifeline for many children it is anomalous that the very same children who are recognised as requiring nutritional support in school are left without any such support for nearly half their school-aged lives. It is Kids Company’s experience that some children dread the approach of school holidays because they know that their one reliable source of food is going to be closed and

that they will have to fend for themselves as best they can. This is a serious problem and one that needs urgent investigation.

Providing food is one of the most important social functions of a family. We recommend to the commission that the extent to which diet and nutrition is affected by family poverty and breakdown be urgently investigated. Many researchers believe that it would be very beneficial to conduct a double-blind trial in a community setting so as to better understand the impact that poor nutrition is having on the poorest children. This is important in order both to re-evaluate government policies and to highlight how children living in poverty can be harmed or seriously disadvantaged by an inadequate diet. A failure to understand and act on poor childhood nutrition negates any educational potential offered by progressive policies or approaches.

HOW CAN WE DETERMINE THE NUMBER OF LONDONERS THAT ARE EXPERIENCING FOOD POVERTY?

Kids Company is primarily concerned with the health and well-being of children and, as such, has drawn attention to the fact that no official channel exists to monitor or measure the prevalence of food poverty/food insecurity as it affects children. There have been several recent surveys (Guardian Teacher Survey 2012; Princes Trust & TES survey 2012; Kellogs/Opinion Matters 2012, Local Authority Catering Association / ParentPay) asking teachers and parents about their experiences encountering childhood food poverty. All have produced alarming reports. The most recent survey by the Local Authority Catering Association completed by 12,000 parents, released on 5th Nov 2012 found that 6.2% of parents reported children leaving home without breakfast.

To better understand the prevalence of food poverty in London we are currently in discussion with Janet Cade, Professor of Nutritional Epidemiology and Public Health at the University of Leeds, and her department. They have unique data in the form of daily food diaries, collected from a large number of primary school-aged children in London during 2010 and 2011. This data has not yet been analysed in respect of under-nutrition or malnutrition. We think that the best way to assess the prevalence of food poverty in children is to ask the children themselves, preferably away from parental influence (many parents will not openly admit that they cannot provide adequate nutrition for their children). Such research must be undertaken in the poverty hot-spots where micro socio-economic factors prevail that tend to be missed or smoothed out by large-scale sampling.

Joe, 19: “When I first came to Kids Company about ten years ago I was really skinny. You could have blown me away. My main problem was that I could hardly eat anything – my stomach was so shrunken, my ribs were sticking out. I could barely manage half a sandwich, I was so used to having hardly any food.

It took about eight months for me to eat what I should be eating. But I got to have a full meal every day. Coming here made me so happy because I was a lot less stressed, it’s a big family, a family I never had. I had stability for the first time. I was able to learn better. I was able to do a lot of things better because I wasn’t tired all the time.

It gave me the will just to get out of bed. I didn’t have to sit around or sleep all day. The only time I was getting up before was to hustle food. “

HOW CAN THE MAYOR USE HIS STRATEGIC POWERS TO HELP ADDRESS FOOD POVERTY?

- Commission urgently needed research to accurately measure the prevalence of food poverty amongst school-aged children and their parents/guardians. This should be comparative in design to better understand and measure the gap between those for whom adequate nutrition is not a problem and those who are really struggling with no real prospect of improvement.
- Ensure that such research is undertaken by independent academics, utilising food diaries and structured questionnaires, and targeting the poorest wards in London; the poverty hot spots where we know the most disadvantaged are living.
- Explore ways in which companies can be incentivised to reduce food waste through recycling via FARESHARE.
- Commission an economic cost/benefit analysis to better understand the social impact of food recycling and reducing food waste by re-distributing to the poorest members in society.
- Explore ways of utilising the dormant and latent resources presented in under-used school kitchens to create supper clubs in the most deprived areas. These could be sponsored by business and empower community members to collectively help themselves.
- Create official channels in deprived schools where hungry children can report to designated staff members who can distribute basic food packs on an as-needed basis. It is Kids Company's experience that children are more than capable of making their needs known when a safe and reliable opportunity to resolve a problem is offered to them with care and dignity.
- Provide immediate emergency nutritional measures for schools facing the toughest challenges in educating disadvantaged pupils. As well as funding breakfast clubs, the Mayor should consider directly funding a nutritious "food bar" for children who cannot afford breakfast clubs, who have parents who cannot get them to school early or even on time. A food bar can be healthy, high in calories, quickly consumed in class and would provide immediate and long-lasting relief for a hungry child who has probably not eaten substantially in nearly 24 hours, since the previous day's school lunch. Such a bar could be sourced in quantity for around 20p per bar and provide upwards of 400 calories in a reasonably nutritionally balanced package. It is Kids Company's experience that children enduring poverty are generally more than capable of making their needs known if the opportunity to alleviate those needs is within their reach, therefore we would expect it to be a quick and simple procedure for a teacher to offer children who haven't had breakfast such a bar, with minimal disruption to their existing classroom routine. It would be reasonable to expect that such a solution would have immediate educational, emotional and behavioural benefits.

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Head Teacher Interviews

Kids Company’s resident journalist interviewed two head teachers about the nutritional status of children in their primary schools. These are excerpts from the interviews.

“There is a point where as a teacher you start to get worried about a child.... We have got some who make you think ‘crikey, what are they surviving on?’ They look underweight. It’s a problem with particular families. It’s usually the same ones. It’s one indicator that there is something wrong. Sometimes the children say they haven’t had anything to eat. We usually feed them if they haven’t.

When we first introduced fruit to the reception class it was clear they weren’t used to having it because a lot of them had stomach problems. We figured they probably hadn’t been eating enough fruit.”

Head teacher, Primary School in Wandsworth, 2012

“We know through general discussion with the children there are a significantly high proportion who don’t have breakfast. I would say 50 per cent. Equally though, we have those children who say ‘yes, I had breakfast’. We say ‘what did you have?’ And the answer is biscuits. Crisps. With some of our children we know the only meal they have is the one they have with us at lunchtime. Last year we tried to open our breakfast club for families in need. But it’s not something we can support indefinitely in the current climate. We charge £5 for a cooked breakfast and childcare, per day. We used to be able to provide free places through this cost, but we can’t do that anymore because more and more families can’t afford to pay the £5. That is down to the fact that a number of them have lost their jobs or are moving to part-time hours. Or the mix of part-time work and benefits doesn’t work for them. They may as well be on benefits. There is such a need for more food. We would certainly like to be able to offer all of our children the opportunity to have breakfast. When we do give them a cooked breakfast, we can see the difference it makes to our children.

I know children who look hungry and malnourished. Who are short for their years. One girl I know of says her nan doesn’t wake up in time to make her breakfast. It depends on what time she wakes up as to when she gets into school. If she wakes up and wants to get out of the house, she just leaves. She doesn’t think about what’s in the kitchen. And sometimes you talk to her and you realise she has been a few days without food at home.”

Head teacher, Primary School in Lambeth, 2012

Case Studies

These stories offer a disturbing insight into the suffering caused by lack of regular food and good nutrition. They also show how simple steps of providing food vouchers and regular meals help our children and their families take massive strides towards improving their lives.

A TEENAGER STARVES AFTER FAMILY SPIRALS INTO POVERTY FOLLOWING MURDER

When she was 19 years old Kerry regularly went without food so that her eight-year-old brother Jacob could eat. Her sacrifice led to migraines, light-headedness, irritability and a distended stomach. And while his sister went without food, Jacob's diet mainly consisted of £1 chicken and chips, depriving him of the necessary nutrients to develop and grow. Like many children who come to us, although he had food in his belly, he was suffering from malnutrition.

He still has extensive problems with his teeth and gums due to lack of vitamins, minerals and iron in his earlier childhood. It was the murder of the oldest son Steven, a diligent college student, that triggered this family's decline into shocking poverty. As they struggled to cope with their grief, circumstances changed and they found themselves having to get by with very little money. Suddenly feeding the children and providing basic necessities became a huge challenge. In the year-and-a-half that Kids Company has been working with this family, we have provided them with the practical and emotional support to help them survive and heal emotionally – from food vouchers to therapy. Now the family are able to buy nutritious food and have regular meals, Kerry's mood has stabilised, she is physically healthier and she is planning her future. Her younger brother is also doing well and forming positive friendships. There are many children who suffer the effects of malnutrition, and what may seem like a small gesture, such as weekly food vouchers, can have a lasting positive impact.

A FIVE-YEAR-OLD COMES TO KIDS COMPANY SUFFERING FROM RICKETS

Pam was suffering from rickets when her mother brought her to Kids Company. A common result of famine or starvation in developing countries, rickets is a disease that has not been prevalent in this country since the 19th century. It is caused by lack of vitamin D and the sunlight that converts it into an active state. It leads to a softening of the bones and potentially fractures and deformity and it hindered Pam's ability to move and grow properly – when she first came to our attention at 17 months old she couldn't walk.

Pam was diagnosed with rickets after her mother Sharon referred herself, her older daughter Judy and her baby, Pam, to our Arches II Centre. Sharon was relying on a family member for food and she would often skip meals so her older daughter could eat.

Pam was still being breastfed and had not yet been introduced to solid foods because her mother could not afford to buy it. But Sharon was malnourished too, so there was little nutritional value in her milk. Before Sharon came to Kids Company she was battling to stay in the country and living off a tiny weekly budget, as she was not eligible to claim benefits. The three of them were living with another family of three in a damp, cramped third-floor flat in a chaotic tower block.

The children and their mother lived in the small bedroom while the other family occupied the tiny sitting room, and rising tensions would erupt in arguments. When Sharon first came to Kids Company she was given very practical support in the form of food vouchers and a bus pass. This meant she could take Judy on the eight-mile journey to and from school with a packed lunch and there was food on the table for both children. Judy soon won an award for 100 per cent attendance – a testament to her mother's commitment to her education. Our nursing therapists have helped Sharon introduce Pam to solid foods, they have encouraged Sharon to have her chronic eczema treated and helped Judy with her special educational needs.

Judy is attending a small art class at our therapy centre, the Heart Yard, where it is hoped she will start to process her life experiences. Kids Company have helped Sharon resolve her immigration and housing situations and she is now supporting her children through her work as a cleaner. With our help, she has become

confident in using the internet and phones and dealing with officials on her own, so she can bring more stability into her families lives. The children having been getting more fresh air and exercise and no longer have to worry about where their next meal is coming from.

MATTHEW, 20, SEVERELY UNDERWEIGHT AND MALNOURISHED

He said: "Coming here made me so happy because I was able to learn better. I was able to do a lot of things better because I wasn't tired and hungry all the time. I never understood anything at school because I was so tired, but here, because of the food I was getting, my brain was like a sponge. Within about two days I knew every bone and muscle in the body. I know about blood circulation, lactic acid. I passed everything [Kids Company's Path to Life syllabus] so quickly. I was shocked."

HOMELESS SINCE 13 AND FORCED TO RUMMAGE IN SKIPS FOR FOOD

Since the age of 13, Amy had been sleeping on friends' sofas and in parks, in squats and on buses and trains. She would often rummage around in skips to feed herself and her cat as she used her benefits money to travel to college and pay for her lunch while she was there. She is determined to go to university to study English and comes to a Kids Company centre every Wednesday and Friday. She says the £20 weekly food vouchers we give her have made a huge difference to her life. She has even started to cook, after we gave her pans and a hob.

All names have been changed to protect our children's safety. The stories of their lives emerged within the context of long-standing trusted relationships with our staff. Our in-house journalist has conducted interviews with children and full transcripts are available.