

## Exhibition

Everything and the kitchen sink

Addressing an American audience, I quoted childhood poverty figures from UNICEF that show 29% of children in the USA grow up in poverty, more like Mexico than the Nordic countries at 9–11%. Somewhat overwrought, I declared: Republican, Democrat, I couldn't care less. This is our children we are talking about. Is there a politician in the land who would say they didn't care about children? A voice called out: you'd be surprised. Setting the cynic aside for the moment, no politician would claim to be in favour of children being denied life chances because of accident of their birth. From all sides, we hear ringing declarations of equality of opportunity.

These politicians should get out more. Failing that, a visit to *Bedrooms of London* could be salutary. It is an exhibition, created in partnership with the charity The Childhood Trust [\[ok to move this here?\]](#), of photographs and text showing how children at the bottom end of the social scale are living now in London, UK. Appropriately, the exhibition is at the Foundling Museum in London, next to the children's charity Coram—an institution that grew out of the Foundling Hospital, established by Thomas Coram in 1739 “for the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children”.

When we think of 18th-century poverty we perhaps think of the drawings of William Hogarth, an early supporter of the Foundling Hospital. Then, about one in four babies died in the first year of life. Even by 1901, infant mortality in England was 150 per 1000 livebirths. The kind of destitution that led to such a toll of early death has gone from our lives in England, although it remains a reality for many in low income countries. In 2016, infant mortality in the most deprived 10% of areas of England was under 6 per 1000 livebirths; 2.6 in the most affluent.

Poverty now takes a different form. Relative poverty may perhaps sound like an abstraction. The evidence from *Bedrooms of London* is that relative poverty can be absolutely bad for children. At first glance the pictures, by photographer Katie Wilson, look lovely. Stunning quality images full of the colours we associate with childhood. That glow fades quickly. A mother and two children in a small bedroom that has to house the fridge because of a shared kitchen. A mother and baby living in a kitchen—their room has everything including the kitchen sink. A two-bedroom flat with three teenagers and a 9-year old in one bedroom, mum and dad in the other. A mother and her partner sleeping in the living room, three children in the one bedroom. And so the images haunt.

Complementing the images is text from interviews with these families by Isabella Walker. It is the children's voices that are heartbreaking. “Please, Papa is hurting you.” “Mama, my friends have toys and gardens.” “My friends do it [go to gymnastics class], why can't I?” “My dad hits my mum.” Their mothers' voices convey clear messages. “I thought about killing myself, but I could never do that to my children.” “We pay the rent and we buy the food. But they might have to wait for new shoes.” “I'm scared, but I miss being a family. I'm disappointed. I don't know what I did wrong to suffer like this.” There are also glimmers of hope: “To know that somebody, somewhere, is making something available for you to be happy. My feeling welcome in this country has been all through charities”.

What comes through strongly from this exhibition is the intertwining of poverty and housing. Lack of affordable housing causes poverty; poverty means inability to pay market rents. A clear illustration comes from the figures on poverty in a companion report for the exhibition from The Childhood Trust. Childhood poverty is defined as living in a household at less than 60% median income. Before housing costs are considered, 17% of children in London are in poverty. After housing costs, the figure rises to 37%. Housing in London has become unaffordable for large

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swathes of the population, not just the poor and unemployed. The Childhood Trust quotes figures from the UK charity Shelter that a third of the population are one paycheque away from losing their home. Homelessness does not equate to sleeping rough. Rough sleeping is an obvious and shameful scourge of our cities, but you count as homeless, according to Shelter, if, through lack of choice, you are staying with friends or family; staying in a hostel, night shelter, or bed and breakfast; squatting (because you have no legal right to stay); at risk of violence or abuse in your home; living in poor conditions that affect your health. Each of these circumstances is illustrated in *Bedrooms of London*. And each, singly, and collectively, is bad for children's development, wellbeing, and subsequent health. For example, a combination of poverty and poor quality housing increases the risk of fuel poverty which, in turn, means facing the unpleasant choice: to heat or eat. The Marmot Review team, now the Institute of Health Equity, produced a report on fuel poverty. It showed that growing up in a cold home is bad for children's mental health and hinders academic performance.

Housing is also a food issue. At an event organised by the Food Foundation, I interviewed a 12-year-old girl and her single mother. I said to them that only 18% of people in England eat as many as one meal a day at a table and asked them about their experience. The girl replied: "I have friends of all sorts. The posh ones sit down together with their family for a meal every night. Others may not have a table and just sit on the floor and eat what's going". Her mother described the experience of going shopping to buy a packet of dry pasta, and a can of tomatoes to feed her family. Eat healthily? The Food Foundation has calculated that for a family in the poorest 10% of the household income distribution to follow Public Health England's healthy eating advice, they would have to spend 74% of the household income on food. They can pay rent or they can eat healthily. They cannot do both. Or, in some cases, do either.

After I produced my 2010 review of health inequalities, *Fair Society Healthy Lives*, I have often been asked what the one thing is I would recommend. My response: it's rarely one thing. Implement all six of my recommendations. That said, if one were seeking to identify one policy that led to the present housing crisis in London it would be former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's right-to-buy policy, which has been continued by successive governments. Sell off council housing to create a property owning democracy, and forbid local councils from replenishing the supply of social housing. Certainly, it worked to diminish the supply of social housing. In the 1980s in London, the private rental sector was tiny and around 35% of London's population were in social housing. Now, the social rental sector houses 23% of London's population, and private rentals make up 28%. This matters. Consistently the quality of housing is worse in the private rental sector.

Living in insecure, low quality, overcrowded accommodation in areas of deprivation damages children, and damages parents who try to do what they can in these difficult circumstances. Added to the shortage of affordable housing and cuts to local government funding in the UK, there has been a combination of caps to housing benefits, the bedroom tax, restrictions of the welfare budget and tax credits, problems with Universal Credit. The effect, by making child poverty worse, is to contribute to the likelihood of children growing up in conditions that will damage their life chances. What we are seeing is increasing inequality of opportunity in action. To quote from the Childhood Trust Report: "Whereas a general consensus has been reached on the importance of universal access to education and healthcare, we are yet to award housing a similar status. The critical suffering of children that we have encountered consistently throughout the Bedrooms of London project indicates that this approach is completely misguided. Rather, we need to begin to recognise that a safe, comfortable home is absolutely

fundamental to ensuring equality of opportunity and the wider health and wellbeing of the communities children are raised in.”

In case one were tempted toward the shoddy thinking that the poor are the architects of their own misfortune here, from *Bedrooms for London*, is one mother’s view: “Nobody falls into this on purpose, because your whole life is going to be a trap. A trap. And then you will see yourself living a life you never thought you would.”

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**Commented [MM2]:** If it will fit on the page. It would be good to have this as a paragraph break. It makes clear that it is me talking not the Childhood Trust. It is a separate point from the preceding one.