

SECTION: ANALYSIS P14

STRAP: SOCIAL CARE

HEAD: Children's experiences of NRPF

STAND: Latest research reveals impact of no recourse to public funds on children in migrant families

PIC BYLINE: Eve Dickson, Senior Research Fellow, and Professor Rachel Rosen, UCL

"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," 13-year-old Isaac explained, highlighting the destitution faced by families such as his, who are affected by the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) immigration condition.

Although Isaac has never left the UK, the NRPF restriction on his mother's visa prevents the family from accessing social housing and most welfare benefits. Destitution is one of the most common terms associated with "no recourse to public funds", yet it seems unlikely that the government's Child Poverty Taskforce will make any recommendations for this group of children.

New research by UCL sheds light on migrant families' experiences of NRPF and offers important insights from children themselves.

[crosshead] Council support

Often the only government support available to families in this situation is from local authorities under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. For cash-strapped local authorities, lack of funding to cover the costs of supporting families with NRPF is a key issue. With families' needs being compounded by immigration restrictions, section 17 support is generally seen by local government as a form of "cost-shunting" to them.

Advocacy organisations, meanwhile, have long complained about inadequate support and a tendency among local authorities to focus on parents' credibility rather than the needs of children. As one advocate recently told us, children and their carers are still being left to sleep in parks, while those in receipt of support often struggle to make liveable lives in sub-standard conditions.

Isaac shared a room with his mother in an overcrowded shared house provided by social services. Without a desk and living in a noisy environment, everyday tasks such as doing homework became arduous.

For Shanice, a 16-year-old who had been sharing a room, and often a bed, with her mother for her whole life, the psychological weight of not being able to be alone in her room was taking its toll. Yet she preferred to keep this to herself and act as though "everything's fine". Asking for help, she continued, "makes me feel like I'm really poor", something that seemed almost harder to bear than the conditions of destitution itself. Similarly, 13-year-old Miriam told us, "I don't really talk to people about my problems. I just keep it to myself", explaining that rather than seeking assistance from teachers, she did homework in the school's computer room during lunch or on the family's mobile phone.

[crosshead] Sharing experiences

The research identified a central tension for young people between speaking out about the issues they were facing and keeping things to themselves. Letting the school know what was going on could, on the one hand, open potential avenues of support, but, on the other, could risk their parents being blamed for not being able to meet their essential needs, or, as in Shanice's case, leave them feeling worse about themselves.

For example, 18-year-old Kevin described having to settle with what is “thrown at you” from charities and social services, highlighting the ways in which aid often does little to address the conditions that have produced suffering and may exacerbate feelings of passivity and lack of control. These are issues that practitioners should be sensitive to, and which signal the importance of making space for children to speak out without fear that they or their families will be punished, as well as the need to work towards systemic change so that families do not have to experience destitution.

Conscious of their families’ situation, children tended to focus on minimising their needs or “making do”. As Miriam said: “It’s really difficult for me and [my brother] Luke especially because [mum] thinks of us first before she does herself.” She described having to “manage for now” when “the only shoes I have are trainers that [are] broken”, as well as meals at which her mother would forgo her portion to give more food to the children.

[crosshead] Involving children

Although children were actively involved in supporting their families – from taking on domestic labour at home to assisting parents to navigate Home Office or local government processes – they seemed to be rarely engaged in meaningful ways in assessments conducted by local authorities under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, despite these assessments being undertaken to determine if they are in need.

Some children we spoke to had never had direct contact with the social worker who had assessed their family. Others struggled to make their needs heard in a way that translated into support, something echoed by a recent High Court judgment quashing an assessment of a family by Coventry City Council. The 15-year-old claimant, whose family was being supported under section 17, gave vivid descriptions of the ways in which poverty affected her sense of self, friendships, and family relationships.

Although the local authority was aware of the psychological impact not being able to attend activities with friends was having on her, the assessment ruled out the possibility of additional support being provided to the family through an incorrect and inflexible interpretation of the law.

Like the research, the judge’s decision to quash the assessment is a reminder to local authorities of the need to conduct flexible assessments that are sensitive to children’s needs as opposed to fixing support to certain rates.

- *Migrant mothers and children making lives in the shadows* from <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526189271/>