



Evidence submission to the Child Poverty Taskforce

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1. Introduction

We have been conducting academic research with migrant families subject to the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) immigration condition for the last six years. This submission draws specially on three research studies we have undertaken at University College London (UCL), funded by the British Academy, ESRC, and NordForsk – the Norwegian research council.

The ‘no recourse to public funds’ rule is specified in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and prohibits most migrants from accessing mainstream welfare benefits, social housing, and other forms of support tied to benefits, such as Healthy Start vouchers and extended childcare services. Around 3.6 million people with time-limited ‘leave to remain’ are likely to be subject to NRPF in the UKⁱ, while a further approximately 674,000 undocumented people have NRPF by default.ⁱⁱ

2. The impact of the ‘no recourse to public funds’ rule

The NRPF condition has consistently been shown to produce destitution and homelessness amongst those already socio-economically marginalised, with particularly negative impacts on families with insecure immigration status.ⁱⁱⁱ Amongst these, single mothers from former colonial countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica and Pakistan) and their children are often the hardest hit, as our research demonstrates.^{iv} However, in families with two parents, even in cases where one parent is a British citizen or has indefinite leave to remain, the NRPF condition can make it impossible to ‘make ends meet’. Many such parents cannot work because of their immigration status or because they have limited access to childcare due to unaffordability of unsubsidised childcare and limited family networks to turn to. Those who can work are often in low-paid, insecure employment.

The levels of poverty that we have encountered amongst our research participants have been extreme, with families living in very poor and often unsafe conditions, unable to afford sufficient food for themselves, and without the means to meet other essential needs. For example, one family in our research – a mother and three teenage sons – had been sleeping in a single room for over seven years. Children experienced difficulties completing homework, often having to work in cramped and busy quarters, use small smartphones to complete online work, or study while hungry and tired. They also spoke about feeling isolated from their peers, often unable to participate in school trips or extra-curricular activities due to their lack of affordability. Other families in our studies talked about being trapped in abusive relationships and experiencing extreme exploitation and street homelessness.^v We have found that NRPF enforces long-term destitution and debt on these families, with detrimental effects on family life and health and wellbeing.^{vi} The NRPF condition significantly undermines families’ rights to family and private life and the best interests of the children in such families.

Our current research, which has been ongoing since 2023, has highlighted further inequalities faced by children in families with NRPF who have disabilities. Such children are unable to access support equivalent to their peers, since their parents are unable to claim disability-related benefits such as Disability Living Allowance. This has severe impacts on their health and well-being, leaving them

without essential support and making their families more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. For example, one young person in our research who is blind has no support outside of school hours nor can his mother afford specialist equipment at home to adapt their accommodation to his needs. Similarly, another mother in our research, who has an autistic child with significant support needs in communication and daily living skills, described the negative impact of not being able to afford sensory toys or adequate food on her child's development. In such cases, support is reserved for the school setting and families struggle out of school hours, particularly during weekends or school holidays. Local holiday playschemes are commonly reserved for children in receipt of benefits or support tied to benefits such as benefits-related free school meals and are therefore inaccessible to children in families with NRPF. Without the financial means to take public transport, parents with NRPF experiencing poverty are sometimes unable to even take their children to local parks, which may not be within walking distance of their homes. As such, children in these families will often spend the entire school holidays at home.

3. The 10-year route to settlement

The 10-year family migration route to settlement, introduced in 2012, requires that families make four separate applications for temporary status ('limited leave to remain') over 10 years, which is usually subject to NRPF, before they can apply for permanent residence. This route replaced a shorter pathway to settlement, which families had previously been able to access by making applications outside of the immigration rules. Under this previous pathway, families applying for leave to remain on the basis of Article 8 (ECHR) – often in cases where a child was British or had been resident in the UK for at least seven years – had been granted discretionary leave to remain (DLR). This provided them with access to the welfare system where necessary and enabled them to apply for permanent residence after they had accrued six years of DLR.

The current 10-year route is stringent and punitive.^{vii} Each application for leave to remain costs £1321 per family member^{viii}, with additional fees to cover the immigration health surcharge for the period of 30 months leave.^{ix} These costs present considerable difficulties for families. Many of our research participants experienced significant levels of stress for the entire duration of their grants of leave as a result of the pressures to save money for the next application, while others took out unpayable loans to cover the costs. Although parents or carers can make applications for a 'Change of Conditions', under which they request to have the NRPF condition lifted, such applications are often slow and onerously bureaucratic, thereby not offering an adequate safeguard against destitution.^x Additionally, since applicants have to prove they are destitute to be eligible for a change of conditions, some parents fear that making the request could jeopardise their application for leave to remain. In one of our studies, several mothers who were in paid employment whilst subject to NRPF were struggling to make ends meet but could not request the NRPF condition to be lifted since proving destitution would mean leaving their jobs and becoming homeless.

Further, in many cases families will have the NRPF condition removed for only one grant of leave, with it being reapplied after a second grant of leave, resulting in repeated experiences of destitution.

Aside from the financial difficulties of the route, families in our research described other problems resulting from the temporary nature of their status, such as:

- Experiencing employment discrimination (e.g., not being hired because of the time-limited nature of their status, or being wrongly dismissed at the point that they were re-applying for leave to remain)
- Experiencing discrimination in the rental market
- Mental and physical health issues, resulting from stress and inadequate living conditions
- Becoming inadvertently undocumented due to a lack of good quality, freely accessible immigration advice and representation, and therefore having to re-start the route from scratch

In addition, the high financial costs and the complexity, length and uncertainty of the 10-year route puts significant pressure on couple relationships and family dynamics, creating conflict and stress, and in some cases contribute to relationship breakdowns.

Home Office (2020) data shows that the majority of those on the 10-year route are from Africa or Asia and in a recent sample review, most applicants were Nigerian, Ghanaian, Pakistani, Jamaican or Bangladeshi nationals.^{xi} Coming from Britain's former colonies, many of our participants speak about longstanding familial, educational, and economic connections to the UK. This data also indicates that the 10-year route disproportionately impacts racially minoritized communities.

4. Local authority support under section 17 of the Children Act 1989

In the absence of formal access to welfare provision, destitute families with NRPF may be supported with accommodation and low-level financial aid by local authorities under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Data recorded by the NRPF Network from across 78 local authorities in England and Scotland showed that, at the end of March 2024 1,563 families with NRPF (including 2,824 dependants) were being supported under this legislation.^{xii} However, the number of destitute families with NRPF is likely much higher as many families who try to access Section 17 support are erroneously turned away – something we have encountered repeatedly in our research with families.

Our research also shows that support provided under Section 17 is often inadequate, forcing families to go without essential living needs such as food, clothing, and educational equipment necessary for children's schooling. We found that accommodation is often overcrowded, with whole families having to share a small single room within a shared house, meaning inadequate access to kitchen and bathroom facilities, and no room for children to play or study, or to ensure privacy for all family members.^{xiii}

Section 17 support for families with NRPF comes out of local authorities' general budgets without additional funding from central government. With growing numbers of families with NRPF requiring Section 17 support, our research suggests this places pressures on local authorities already managing significant budget cuts. This limits the extent to which they are able to meet their obligations to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need as a result of the NRPF condition.^{xiv}

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.

5. Children's experiences^{xv}

For example, 13-year-old Isaac explained: "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 lived with his mother Destiny in a shared room when we met him. Destiny, originally from Nigeria, had legal status in the UK (Limited Leave to Remain) with NRPF, while Isaac was a British citizen. Isaac described his relief when his Head of Year teacher helped the family access food banks, so they didn't 'have to stress about food.' Yet even that relief was only partial, he explained.

'Worrying, that puts like dark scenarios in my mind and that. You start thinking about the worst-case scenario... And I thought like the worst-case scenario would be living on the streets, and I wouldn't really go to school ... That was a time where I felt like this could be like our downfall.'

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 explained, "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.

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.

Children in our research have also described being punished at school for their lack of resources. For example, one young person described being told he could not attend his school prom because of unpaid school meal debts, which his mother was unable to pay because of her immigration status and lack of access to support. The school did not allow packed lunches, so the family had no choice but to accrue debt. Others described receiving detentions for having the wrong school uniform, or being bullied by their peers because of their poverty.

Our research has identified a central tension for young people between speaking out about the issues they are facing and keeping things to themselves. Letting their schools 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 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 in the first place.

For many of the children who took part in our research, the UK is the only home they know. Many are citizens, or should be, but are struggling to prove this due to their father’s absence. Some children do not even know that they are undocumented until they seek student loans and home student fees in further and higher education. Leaving would be nonsensical, even if they feel that the state is doing everything it can to make life impossible and like they do not belong. As Isaac, put it, the government ‘only favours a certain type of people ... It doesn’t favour the whole of Britain.’ The situation is akin to ‘cheating you out of your country’, he explained, expressing both frustration and an unwavering sense of settlement as already existing even if not recognised.

6. Recommendations for addressing child poverty amongst children in migrant families

- We recommend that the NRPF rule be abolished, which would enable 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.
- 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.
- The 10-year route to settlement is complicated and punitive and makes families on it considerably more precarious than their counterparts on the 5-year route. Yet, in most cases, these families will live the majority – if not the entirety – of their lives in the UK. Concerningly, the government’s 2025 white paper ‘Restoring control over the immigration system’ suggests that the 10-year route will be extended to other families. We recommend that

the 10-year route be abolished, with all families that apply on the basis of Article 8 rights being able to settle within a shorter period of time. In addition, immigration fees and the health surcharge should be significantly reduced and a more straightforward and generous policy should be introduced for fee waivers.

ⁱ McKinney CJ, Kennedy S, Gower M, and Sturge G (2025). No recourse to public funds: Research briefing. London: House of Commons Library. Available at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9790/CBP-9790.pdf> (accessed 24 July 2025)

ⁱⁱ Jolly A, Thomas S and Stanyer J (2020). London's children and young people who are not British citizens: A profile. London: Greater London Authority. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_londons_children_and_young_people_who_are_not_british_citizens.pdf (accessed 24 July 2025)

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosen R and Dickson E (2025). *Bordering Social Reproduction: Migrant Mothers and children making lives in the shadows*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Dexter Z, Capron L and Gregg L (2016). *Making Life Impossible: How the needs of destitute migrant children are going unmet*. London: The Children's Society; Price J and Spencer S (2015) *Safeguarding children from destitution: Local authority responses to families with 'no recourse to public funds'*. Oxford: Compass

^{iv} See also: O'Neill M, Erel U, Kaptani E, et al. (2019) Borders, risk and belonging: Challenges for arts-based research in understanding the lives of women asylum seekers and migrants 'at the borders of humanity'. *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 10(1): 129-147.

^v See also: Dudley RG (2017) Domestic abuse and women with 'no recourse to public funds': the state's role in shaping and reinforcing coercive control. *Families, Relationships and Societies* 6(2): 201-217

^{vi} Dickson E and Rosen R (2021) "Punishing those who do the wrong thing": Enforcing destitution and debt through the UK's family migration rules. *Critical Social Policy* 41(4): 545–565; Dickson E, Rosen R and Sorinmade K (2022) Hunger or indebtedness? Enforcing migrant destitution, racializing debt. In: *The Entangled Legacies of Empire: Race, Finance & Inequality*, edited by C. Bourne, P. Gilbert, M. Haiven and J. Montgomerie. Manchester: Manchester University Press

^{vii} Dickson E and Rosen R (2021) "Punishing those who do the wrong thing": Enforcing destitution and debt through the UK's family migration rules. *Critical Social Policy* 41(4): 545–565.

^{viii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visa-regulations-revised-table/home-office-immigration-and-nationality-fees-1-july-2025#other-applications-made-in-the-uk>

^{ix} The health surcharge is £1,035 per year for each adult and £776 per year for each child. <https://www.gov.uk/healthcare-immigration-application/how-much-pay>

^x Woolley, A. (2019) *Access Denied: The Cost of the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' Policy*. London: Unity Project

^{xi} Home Office (2020) Policy equality statement. London: Home Office. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/application-for-change-of-conditions-of-leave-to-allow-access-to-public-funds-if-your-circumstances-change/policy-equality-statement-pes> (Accessed 24 July 2025)

^{xii} NRPF Network (2024) Evidence and policy solutions: children in poverty within families that have no recourse to public funds and the role of local authorities in alleviating deep poverty and destitution. London: NRPF Network. Available at: <https://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/-/media/microsites/nrpf/documents/policy/evidence-submissions/child-poverty-strategy-submission.pdf?la=en&hash=1E89C00558CF894D35BB9E2578395B7C674AC15F> (Accessed 24 July 2025)

^{xiii} Dickson, E. and Rosen, R. (2023) Section 17 support for families with 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) in London. London: UCL Access at: https://solidarities.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/S17_Policy-Briefing.pdf

^{xiv} See also Price J and Spencer S (2015) *Safeguarding children from destitution: Local authority responses to families with 'no recourse to public funds'*. Oxford: Compass

^{xv} See also: Dickson E., and Rosen R. (2025) 'I was worried I was going to starve' - children's experiences of the NRPF system. London: Children and Young People Now. Available at: <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/content/analysis/i-was-worried-i-was-going-to-starve-childrens-experiences-of-the-nrpf-system/>; Rosen, R. and Dickson E. (2025) *Bordering social reproduction: Migrant mothers and children making lives in the shadows*. Available at: <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526189271/>; Dickson, E., 2019 *Not seen, not heard: Children's experiences of the hostile environment*. London: Project 17.