SPECIAL REPORT

BROWN'S BRITAIN

Two years ago, Gordon Brown denounced child poverty as 'a scar on the nation's soul'. He believes that the government has fulfilled its promises to alleviate the problem. But we spoke to Browns living in poverty in Britain who beg to differ. Christine Toomey investigates. Photographs: Ann Doherty

Think of child poverty. What images come to mind? A child in the Third World, barefoot, belly distended, begging bowl in hand?

Now pull your focus closer to home. A child on a sink estate? Not wanting for basic food or clothing, perhaps. But deprived of the sort of childhood the majority of children born in Britain can expect. Not dying or hungry. Not really poor then?

Three years ago, Tony Blair delivered a rousing speech at Toynbee Hall in east London about his "historic mission" to eradicate child poverty in Britain within a generation. "The child born on a rundown housing estate should have the same chance to be as healthy and well-educated as the child born in the leafy suburbs," the prime minister said. A "quiet revolution" was underway; an extra £6 billion was being spent on children during his first term in office.

Two years ago, Gordon Brown stepped up to a podium in Newcastle to denounce child poverty as a "scar on the nation's soul". More than 1m children had already been taken out of poverty since new Labour came to power, the chancellor claimed. (Though official figures later revealed the →

REUTERS

A mother and her child in Handsworth, Birmingham, an area where child poverty has increased

number was less than half that.) "Today we pledge to take the second million children out of poverty by 2004-5," Brown said, promising to "cut child poverty in half by 2010".

Stirring words. Arguably the most radical set of pledges since the founding of the welfare state. But what do they mean? Even the government is now quietly admitting it does not know. Away from the public glare and polished podiums, a wide range of experts and child-welfare organisations have, in recent months, been asked by the government how they would define child poverty; where they would draw the breadline for children living in Britain today. A new measure is sought. The goal posts are about to be moved.

A harsh reality has hit home. The promise to eradicate child poverty as currently defined – those living in households below the low-income threshold set at 60% of net median income, after housing costs, adjusted for the size of family – stands virtually no hope of being fulfilled in the present political climate. Despite caricatures of Tony Blair as Robin Hood when he spoke in September of "redistributing power, wealth and opportunity", the goal of eradicating child poverty would take a massive redistribution of wealth and the introduction of a welfare system more generous than any currently on offer in the European Union. Neither is on the cards.

The reason this goal is so elusive is clear. If the poverty line is drawn as a percentage of median income, it is a moving target: as average incomes go up, the poverty line rises; if they fall, it falls too. As a crude measure of inequality, it says very little about how the lives of children in the most disadvantaged families are changing.

Few dispute that poverty is relative. Compared with a starving child in Africa, few children in Britain could be considered poor. But compare the life of a child in one of our leafy suburbs with the daily grind of one whose family constantly struggles to make ends meet – and they are not just on sink estates – and few would argue that the latter is not impoverished. Poverty is a measure of the extent to which a child is prevented from participating in the society in which he or she lives. It is not just about income. It is about health, housing, disrupted family life, fear of crime, access to decent services, education and job prospects.

Many argue that the cost of a basic "basket of goods and services" should be drawn up as a better way of defining a poverty line below which nobody should be expected to live: an approach adopted, to some extent, in the US and Ireland. The "basket" cost would be regularly updated. Expectations change. In the 1920s, when Joseph Roundtree undertook his pioneering work on poverty in York, families on the breadline were defined as those who could "never afford a penny for a railway fare or omnibus, never purchase a newspaper or pay postage for a letter". Two decades later, when William Beveridge founded the welfare state, a minimum income was that which would cover "food, clothing, fuel, rent, light and household sundries". The most recent "breadline Britain" report, from 2000, lists "socially perceived necessities" as two meals a day, fresh fruit and vegetables, the ability to save at least £10 a month for rainy days or retirement and to visit friends and family in hospital, the means to celebrate on special occasions such as Christmas, and to take a holiday away from home once a year. For children, a waterproof winter coat, properly fitting shoes and a dictionary were also deemed necessary.

THE PROMISE TO ERADICATE CHILD POVERTY HAS NO HOPE OF BEING FULFILLED IN THE PRESENT POLITICAL CLIMATE

The government is now considering defining child poverty by a combination of both low income and a set of such indicators to produce a new "headline figure". New targets might then be set and initiatives launched to tackle the problems of those it prefers to call "socially excluded" rather than poor. A report on the government's consultation with experts in the field of child poverty is due to be published next month. Fudge on its original goal of eradication could follow.

As this heated debate on defining poverty continues in the corridors of Whitehall, the halls

We all had our little dreams. But that seems too risky now. I'd like to be a social worker. Work with kids. Help them. I've done a lot of that."

Lauren is one of an estimated 150,000 children between 16 and 17 not in education, training or work, but too young to qualify for job-seekers' allowance. The government line on these teenagers is "tough cheddar", according to one researcher into child poverty. Their day-to-day reality, and that of the millions of other children in Britain whose families struggle financially, is light years away from any academic argument about how child poverty should be defined.

"Many of the measures the government has introduced to pull children like this and hundreds of thousands of others out of poverty are passing them by," says Camila Batmanghelidjh, the founder of Kids Company. "The trouble is that Gordon Brown and other government ministers are looking at the problems these children face through middle-class eyes. They do not understand how bad it is for many of these kids. The programmes and projects they fund have in mind a particular kind of child who's much closer to their own childhood. They do not pay attention to what these kids' lives are really like. If they did, they would devise a far more supportive structure for them. It is all very well for the government to set targets on poverty or for getting "x" number of children back into school, reach one of these targets, adjust its figures and declare its job done. But if a drug dealer comes along, points a gun at a kid's head and tells them he wants them back on the streets dealing, these neat targets fall apart."

Lauren's experience is extreme. It is not representative of the sorts of problems faced by most children suffering hardship in this country today. But nor is the experience of any one child. No single story typifies what life is like for the 3.9m children living below the breadline in Britain. Child poverty has many faces.

No child should be reduced to a statistic, although many feel they are. But the following figures might surprise you. They paint a picture of childhood poverty rather different from the one drawn by the American political scientist Charles Murray in his depiction of a criminal and violent "underclass". Most children in low-income households (55%) live with both parents; 1,750,000 live in households where one or more parent works. Many have a disabled parent or are disabled themselves – 55% of Britain's 360,000 disabled children live below the poverty line. One-fifth have one or more parents from an ethnic minority. Millions live in neighbourhoods blighted by urban decay – areas with high child-poverty rates including Glasgow, London, Liverpool, Manchester, the northeast, the Midlands, parts of Wales and Northern Ireland. But many live in remote rural areas. Few parts of the British Isles are immune.

BROWN'S BRITAIN

Betty Brown, 36, with her daughter, Julie, 14, and youngest son, John Paul, 13, from Short Strand, Belfast. Her eldest son, Joseph, 18, also lives at home

"When I was at school I wanted to be an air hostess. I was good at the tests. But most of us just left. I did a course in care assisting and worked in an old people's home. I met John at a community-centre dance. We moved in here and had married life for 16 years. He worked in a scrap yard, and we were poor but we were happy. My husband worked hard for all of us before he got made redundant. He is dyslexic and got a woman to come and teach him to read and write so he could pass his lorry-driver's tests and get a better job. But unemployment was quite high at the time.

"John left me two years ago, to go to England. It broke my heart. I blame the fact there was no work. Julie was crying in her bedroom one night and said, 'Mummy, he did not just leave because of the work, he didn't love us.' I explained to her how a man can get when there is no work. I survive now on £112 income support plus £27 family allowance. I get £42 housing benefit. I don't get any other help except for school-meal tokens, and free dentist and doctor's prescriptions. I don't think my kids care that they have to go and show the tokens for dinner.

"I would like to get a job now but I can't get one that would pay better than the benefits, so I feel stuck on the dole. I took a loan out from the dole a year ago and I am still paying back £20 a week. It was to redecorate the house as the wallpaper was peeling in the kids' bedrooms. There was some left over and we spent it on clothes for the kids. It breaks my heart sometimes when my youngest will say, 'I want a pair of football boots,' and I say he can't have them. Then I save and save, and he gets them three months later or not at all.

"I feel that my kids can have a better life than me. Education is the way out of the poverty trap. They are at a good school, St Joseph's, with teachers who really care about them. A lot of my hope is in my youngest, John Paul; that he will go to university. I hope Joseph can settle and I hope Julie can get somewhere with her singing – she practises in her bedroom every night.

"I think Blair and Gordon Brown don't care. I think he thinks, 'Well, their parents will give them money for their house.' But the poor have nothing to give. It takes away dreams and hope."

The low-income threshold for a lone parent with two children aged 13 and 14 is an estimated £180

The real face of child poverty in Britain is often anonymous, forced behind closed doors by stigma, embarrassment and isolation. In a society where most of our lives are on an upward trend, many of those whose lives are not don't want to talk about it. Many families struggling on low incomes contacted for this article did not want to discuss the difficulties they are having. They see their straitened circumstances as a mark of failure. Betty Brown (see panel above) feels a double sense of failure. "I feel I've failed because I couldn't keep a hold of my husband and I have failed to provide for my children in the way that my mother and father provided for us," says the 36-year-old, who is bringing up her children alone in a dingy terraced house in Belfast. Betty's husband left to find work in England after he lost his job as a lorry driver two years ago. "At first he phoned and sent money home for the kids. But gradually it lessened, and the calls stopped. Then a call came out of the blue saying, 'I've found a better life here, I'm not coming back.' It broke my heart. I turned to drink, I'm afraid. It started with a drink after I'd put the kids to bed and then got worse and worse. I felt like I was a failure in life." ⟶

'GORDON BROWN AND OTHER MINISTERS LOOK AT THESE CHILDREN'S PROBLEMS THROUGH MIDDLE-CLASS EYES'

The estate where they live is blighted by burnt-out cars and damage caused by petrol bombs thrown across the so-called "peace line" that runs the length of the street, separating her Catholic neighbourhood from the Protestant community across the road. But Betty's house is much more dilapidated than her neighbours' homes. When we visit, part of her kitchen roof has collapsed, water runs down the walls, and damp plaster lies in heaps on the floor, though this is later fixed by the council. "A lot of my neighbours have work and they have the best for their kids. It makes mine feel bad. They feel ashamed, I think. That's the worst thing, knowing they're going through that," says Betty, a slight woman with a fragile, childlike face.

"Everything's a struggle. It's just surviving, not living. Nothing has changed since Labour came to power. The rich are still rich and the poor are still poorer. I feel like a fly caught in a web." Her teenage daughter, Julie, vows she will never have children. "I don't want to live like Mum, to live the life she has had. Always sad."

Part of the reason many feel ashamed to admit they are in dire straits is the tough government rhetoric regarding benefits claimants: Blair's promise to put an end to the "something-for-nothing welfare state", and the former work and pensions secretary Alistair Darling's much vaunted "benefit-fraud crackdown".

"The government is very keen to appear tough. But it contradicts itself, alienates those it says it is trying to help and feeds into stereotypes about what it means to be poor," says Martin Barnes, the director of the Child Poverty Action Group. He says benefit fraud for the year ending April 2001

Millions live in areas blighted by urban decay

was estimated between £2 billion and £3 billion, compared with the £4 billion-plus in benefits that went unclaimed.

Fear of being teased and bullied is also a problem. Many children are extremely self-conscious about being labelled poor by their peer group. About 300,000 a day fail to claim their entitlement to free school dinners, partly out of fear of being ridiculed by other children. Some schools still operate a system where those entitled to free meals have to stand in a different queue or give in different tokens.

Graeme Brown of the End Child Poverty Coalition, an umbrella organisation for 12 leading charities, says there are many issues around the way we see the poor and those who claim benefits. "The idea that it is all about feckless individuals and bad parents doesn't wash. There are bad parents among the middle and upper classes, too."

The main plank of the government policy towards poverty has been its Welfare to Work programme and New Deals for various groups. Low-paid work, shored up by a minimum wage, and in-work benefits have been seen as the best way to tackle the problem. The flagship benefits aimed at making work pay for low-income families with children have been the working families' tax credit, launched three years ago, the children's tax credit and the childcare tax credit. But the method of claiming these benefits and the conditions that apply to them have been so complicated and tortuous that a great number of families they were designed to help have been left baffled: 40% of those eligible for the working families' tax credit, for instance, have failed to claim it. In acknowledgement of this, the working families' and children's tax credits will be scrapped next spring, to be replaced with a new integrated working tax credit and child tax credit, supposedly not only simpler to understand and available to more parents, but which will be paid directly to a child's carer. And 250,000 more child-care places will be provided in the next four years.

But critics claim that the working families' tax credit and, they fear, the new integrated working

BROWN'S BRITAIN

Lavinia Brown, 28, lives with her boyfriend, Gordon Munnings, 47, and their daughter, Rhiannon Simone, 3, in Ipswich

"I used to work in a chocolate factory before my baby was born. I worked meat-packing and on the Co-op checkout. But I've been unemployed for a while now. Gordon has been on the sick for a long time through mental problems. He was in drug rehab for a while. But he's okay now.

"Things are getting a bit better for me and him and our babe because there's a Sure Start programme in our area. Gordon's learning to read and write, after 30-odd years, and doing a bit of gardening work, and I have been on an assertiveness course and computer course. I'm training to become a volunteer when Sure Start opens a cafe and nursery here.

"We were moved into a two-bedroomed house 18 months ago. Our old place was on an estate full of burnt-out cars and gangs. There are still a lot of gangs around here. They're not bad kids, just mostly kids who are bored. If you're living on a low budget, there isn't much around here for the kids to do.

"We get our rent and council tax paid, and we get £299.90 a fortnight from social services – income support, including sick benefit – and £15.50 a week child benefit. This totals £165.45 a week. We spend between £40 and £50 a week on food. I try to buy fresh fruit and veg because it's healthier, but processed food is cheaper. My mum helps us out when she can. She buys most of my clothes for me. We're still paying off a loan from the Social Fund for a cooker in the place we lived before. We owe about £1,300 to catalogues for clothes, a television and a garden swing that we're paying off at £50 a week. Telephone is £30 a month, and travel to my mum's is about £5 a week.

"The last time I had a holiday was 15 years ago, a week in Great Yarmouth with my grandad. Gordon has never had a holiday. We find it pretty hard to cope. We haven't been out as a couple for about four years. We just want Rhiannon to have a better life than ours."

The low-income threshold for a couple with a three-year-old child is an estimated £192

'NOTHING HAS CHANGED SINCE LABOUR CAME TO POWER. THE RICH ARE STILL RICH, AND THE POOR ARE POORER'

and child tax credits, can act as a trap to keep parents in low-paid, part-time work. This is the problem faced by Izlynne Brown (see panel, page 67), a 23-year-old nursery worker who is bringing up her son alone in the Handsworth district of Birmingham in the Midlands – one of the few areas of the country where child poverty has increased in recent years. "I was on income support receiving £85 a week for the first 11 months after Ruhmico was born," she says. "Those were tough times. We got nothing from the father. I was struggling for everything – travel, food and general things for the baby, like nappies, clothes and blankets. It was difficult to budget." She went back to work two years ago. "The problem is that I can't really work more hours because the increased income wouldn't cover my losses in benefits. I had to turn down a full-time job at the nursery because it wasn't worth it."

The government argues that 9% of lone parents have worked longer hours since the introduction of the working families' tax credit. But they also say that under the new system of integrated child tax credits, families will be able to earn up to £2,500 a year more than at present before they start losing out on benefits.

For those families where no adult works, levels of income support have also been increased. This still leaves basic levels of income support substantially below the definition of the poverty line. The typical level of means-tested benefits for a lone parent with three children aged 3, 13 and 14 from April this year is £177.60, while the low-income threshold stands at £210. For a couple with a child of three, income support would ⟶

their situation has become extremely dire," says Nicholas Bond of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, a charity that provides financial assistance to farmers and which has seen a tenfold increase in requests for help in the past three years. "They'll often work two or three jobs to make ends meet. And many in great hardship do not claim benefits to which they are entitled.

Andrew Brown and his wife, Christine, run Lathbank Farm in Cumbria, a 150-acre holding for sheep and beef cattle that has been in Andrew's family for generations. They have three sons aged four, seven and nine. Five years ago they were still able to make a good living from their farm. But now it runs at a loss. So Christine has started working a 30-hour week in a factory, while her husband tends to the farm six hours a day, early in the morning and late at night, and works full-time as a builder in between. "We keep our heads above water this way. But Gordon Brown should come and live with us for a week to understand what it means to struggle," says Andrew. "The government can make all the promises it likes on child poverty, but it will not wipe it out the way it is going."

Graham Browne and his wife, Wendy, who run Stonehouse Farm in East Sussex, have two sons aged 7 and 11 (see panel left). "We have brought our children up to believe that if you can't afford something, you don't have it. There are certain things we would like to do for them and we can't, but we don't dwell on it," says Graham. The government's low-income threshold for a family with two children is £234. "We have to survive on less than that. When things got really bad I phoned the benefits office in Hastings and asked if we were entitled to any help. I was told I might qualify for working families' tax credit. But this demands information on your previous six weeks' earnings. When you're self-employed, especially in this business, that is very hard to tell. So I just gave up on the idea. I can confidently say that there is ➳

nothing that this government has been doing over the past five years that has helped us." Labour has barely dented the inequality created during the Thatcher years. It actually widened during Labour's first three years in office; the share of total income received by the bottom 10% on the income scale fell from 3.1% to 2.9%, while the share for those in the top 10% bracket rose from 27% to 29%. This has made Britain one of the most unequal of all industrialised societies, and means more children live in poverty here than in almost any other European country.

Not only is child poverty more widespread than it was 20 years ago, it is also deeper. The latest Department for Work and Pensions report, Households Below Average Income, shows that 1.75m children live in households where either one or more of their parents works, but where the income falls £50 a week or more below the 2000-1 poverty line. A further 750,000 children, neither of whose parents work, live in households where the net income is £50 below the poverty line; for nearly half of them the income is £100 a week below. This has led to calls for spending to be targeted more accurately on those most in need.

"Pulling large numbers of families with children from just below to just above the poverty line might make the figures look better, but it does little to improve the lives of those at the very bottom of the pile," says Graeme Brown of the End Child Poverty Coalition. "What we need to look at very closely is those in persistent poverty for long periods of time. Much less thought appears to have been given to this."

Graeme Brown believes much of the problem lies in the government's lack of a cohesive strategy. "If you are being charitable, you could say it was a brave move to say you are going to abolish child poverty without having any idea how you are going to achieve it. But there is no overall strategy for this flagship domestic-policy declaration. You have foot-and-mouth disease, and a national strategy is put in place. Yet there is nobody in government who has overall responsibility for child poverty. It is quite staggering."

What co-ordination there is exists mainly through the work of the interdepartmental Children and Young People's Unit, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Children's Fund. These fund specific programmes, such as those to reduce teenage pregnancies and rough-sleeping, and run out-of-school activities and advice services with schemes such as Sure Start for the families of pre-school children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. While some criticise Sure Start for providing little more than localised "sticking plaster", the programme has been praised for the practical support it provides for families in need, from advice on early learning and health, to providing toys for toddlers to play with. Among those who believe they have benefited are Lavinia Brown and Gordon Munnings, and their three-year-old daughter, Rhiannon Simone (see panel, page 62). "Sure Start has helped me get into things I would have been too nervous to try before," says Lavinia, 28, from Ipswich. But the couple's underlying problems remain. They struggle by with an income below the poverty line and are saddled with debt.

The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux has new cases of problem debt worth more than £1.2 billion each year. Most people with debt problems are on an income of less than the national average. Experts on child poverty say half of all parents on income support are paying off loans to the Social Fund, which issues loans rather than grants for emergency needs, such as housing repairs or a new cooker, for those reliant on social security. They believe a reform of the Social Fund and better financial advice for struggling families is fundamental to tackling the problems of those living below the breadline.

The back-pedalling the government was forced to do after Gordon Brown's claim, prior to the previous general election, that 1.2m children had been lifted out of poverty in Labour's first term, did its campaign on child poverty great harm. Closer examination of the figures showed the real reduction was closer to 500,000. Alistair Darling tried to explain away the discrepancy by claiming: "What we said was that if we had remained with the policies we inherited [from the Tories] there would be more than 1m extra children in poverty." But the damage was done. What reduction had been achieved was seen by critics as a consequence of a buoyant economy and falling unemployment as much as the chancellor's redistributive fiscal policies.

Scenting blood, as the weaknesses of Labour's strategy on child poverty are slowly exposed, the Tories have begun to speak out on the subject as part of their efforts to rebrand ⟶

NOT ONLY IS CHILD POVERTY MORE WIDESPREAD NOW THAN IT WAS SOME 20 YEARS AGO – IT IS ALSO DEEPER

BROWN'S BRITAIN

Izlynne Brown, 23, and her son, Ruhmico, 3, live in Handsworth, Birmingham

"I left college at 16 and did what I had always wanted to do: work with children. I got a job at a local nursery. But then I became pregnant. I couldn't return to work straight away, so was on income support receiving £85 a week for about 11 months while I was looking after my son. I returned to work just before Ruhmico turned one because I didn't want to throw everything away just because I'd had a baby. It's very good for me because it also gives me a break from looking after him on the two days a week that I don't work. And I feel happier because I'm more independent.

"I earn about £100 working three days a week and qualify for the working-family tax credit, which is worth £143 a week. Without it I wouldn't be able to work because the nursery costs for my son are £82 a week. I don't feel that he goes without anything and I have a positive outlook about our lives now. I'm not rich but I don't consider myself poor either. I think I'm on the borderline. I juggle the money I have quite well and I'm just about managing – it's easier than the first year after Ruhmico was born when I wasn't working. My rent and council tax is £49 a week, then I budget for £15 transport, £10 for electricity and £10 for gas. The rest goes on food and clothes.

"I worry about the future sometimes. What will happen when Ruhmico gets to be eight or nine? When kids are older they want more things. Right now I feel I am providing all he needs, which is important to me because when I was a child my mother, who had five children, never let us go without. But if I'm still in the position I'm in now when he's eight, I don't think I'd be able to give him what he needs.

"The problem is that I can't really work more hours because the increased income wouldn't cover my losses in benefits. I had to turn down a full-time job at the nursery because it wasn't worth it. What I would get from my tax credit would be less because I would have more wages coming in, then on top of that I would have been taxed more. Plus I'd have to pay more rent because my housing benefit allowance would go down. Just because I had more wages coming in wouldn't mean that I was better off."

The low-income threshold for a single parent with a three-year-old child is £119

Source: all calculations of benefits and low-income thresholds provided by the Institute of Fiscal Studies

IF A CHILD'S POTENTIAL IS WRECKED, THEN SOCIETY PAYS THE PRICE – IN MORE WAYS THAN THE PURELY FINANCIAL

the Conservatives as the "party of the vulnerable". After decades of denying poverty even existed here, the Tory leader, Iain Duncan Smith, followed in Blair's footsteps at Toynbee Hall in September by citing child poverty as one of the five "giant" modern social evils. But the Tory way of tackling it lies in stimulating enterprise to provide "ladders of opportunity" for the poor.

"Perceptions of poverty in this country are stuck in a time warp," says Martin Barnes of the Child Poverty Action Group. "It is not about children dying of starvation, or standing in the streets with no shoes on. There is material deprivation but it is of a different type. Outdated images are still applied to what it means to be poor today. Instead of outrage or urgency, there's widespread indifference and complacency." Camila Batmanghelidjh of Kids Company agrees. "We live ever more isolated existences in this country. Most people just try to enhance their own lives, get a better home or car. They see disadvantaged and vulnerable kids as a threat. But all that these kids, or any kid, wants is a future."

Viewed from abroad, Britain is seen as ambivalent towards children. Childhood is sentimentalised, and yet children here are viewed as a personal responsibility, more so than in many other countries. "Children are increasingly viewed by the government as ciphers for future economic prosperity," says Ruth Lister, professor of social policy at Loughborough University. "Expenditure on them is only justifiable where there is a demonstrable payoff."

Tony Blair states that "children are everybody's responsibility". But the underlying theme of much government rhetoric stresses the financial benefits to be had from investing in children: improve education in underprivileged areas and less money need be spent on tackling youth crime or coping with the dramatic increase in teenage pregnancies. Increase the income of poor families and they will be able to afford a better diet, fewer babies will be born underweight, and demands on the health service will decrease. Money spent on children is spoken of in terms of future financial pay-off. Such cost-benefit analysis pays little attention to what life is like for children living below the breadline in Britain today or the shame and stigma that child feels, or how hard it is to be struggling in a society where most people enjoy a comfortable life. Spend time with children like Lauren Brown and others at Kids Company, and this hits home hard. Most of them have long been discarded by their families and the community in which they live. They believe they are treated as nobodies, and branded "rubbish".

"We just show up as statistics somewhere," said one 17-year-old with a toddler in tow. "Nobody expects us to make anything of our lives. But I'm going to show them. I'm going to rise and shine."

The chances are she won't. She has nowhere to live. The night we met, arrangements were being made to secure her a place in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation, paid for by voluntary donations. The council will not provide her with anywhere to live. She has not been physically or sexually abused. She is not a priority case. Her hope and determination are striking. In a few more years they are likely to be gone.

The opportunity to make a difference to any child's life is time-limited. If potential is wrecked rather than realised, society does pay the price, but in more fundamental ways than the purely financial. "Children are 20% of our people but 100% our future," says Gordon Brown. For the sake of the Browns of Britain featured here and the millions more children struggling in difficult, often appalling, circumstances, the chancellor needs to demonstrate the courage of this conviction. This is not, after all, a government short of resources or political support. Why talk about attempts to improve the lives of children who are less well off as being a "quiet revolution"? Why not talk of it as a national priority? The reason: it will not be cheaper for everyone in the long run ■