

# BROADCAST



# Behind the Scenes: Britain's Hidden Homeless Kids, C4

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Our Dispatches doc on childhood poverty could have been the impossible commission but a simple email changed everything, says Jezza Neumann

## Britain's Hidden Homeless Kids, C4

**Production company** True Vision

**Commissioner** Louisa Compton

**Length** 1 x 60 minutes

**TX** 8pm, Monday 25 October

**Executive producer** Brian Woods

**Director** Jezza Neumann

**Producer** Carla Grande

**Post-house** True Vision; Fifty Fifty

In late 2019, my Dispatches film *Growing Up Poor: Britain's Breadline Kids* aired in the UK on Channel 4. The film sparked a national conversation about child poverty in the press in the lead up to the 2019 General Election. Even before it transmitted it became part of the national discussion.

Across Facebook and Twitter, the film has reached 53.1 million views - making it the most viewed Channel 4 Dispatches episode on digital ever. PBS's *Frontline* and C4's Dispatches co-commissioned me to do the same in the US so I then spent the first lockdown making *American Nightmare: Trump's Breadline Kids* (See Broadcast October 2020).

After airing C4's head of news and current affairs and sport Louisa Compton, who had commissioned the previous two films, asked if I would be open to making another one in the UK as it was becoming clear that during lockdown things were getting a whole lot worse for many families, especially for those already struggling before the pandemic.

At the time I thought to myself: "Really? Another one so soon?" But the more I looked into it, the more it seemed there was another story to be told. There was, however, one major caveat that really made the task ahead seem almost impossible: in 2019, the film I set out to make was from one class or one street in the UK.

Finding families with articulate kids who are prepared to bare all their on national television is hard enough when you have the whole of the UK to cast from but for some strange reason it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Needless to say, we didn't achieve that goal but luckily for us Courtney, Rose, Danielle and their siblings captured the hearts and minds of the nation and I was off the hook...pew. Well, we were until January 2021 when the caveat Louisa laid before me was that this time this film absolutely had to be from one class - not even one year group or one school, nope, one class.

Clearly, I'd either had too much beer the night before or too much coffee in the morning but I said that was fine. The film was commissioned but for TX in October 2021 and suddenly the enormity of what I'd taken on began to dawn on me.

Under 'normal' circumstances this would be near on impossible, so with a lockdown in place and schools closed to all but the most vulnerable my greatest fear was coming to fruition: the impossible commission.

### **The impossible becomes possible**

But then as I sat there with my triple G&T thinking, "How on earth will we ever get access to schools, to then get access to kids, to then film something meaningful in the time we have?"



An email arrived that was to change everything and suddenly the impossible seemed possible.

In 2011, my first film on child poverty in the UK aired on BBC1 and amongst other things it highlighted how families really struggle in the six-week holiday as there are no free school meals during that time.

A viewer, Rachel Warwick, saw the film and decided to do something about it and social organisation Make Lunch was born. A simple premise it quickly became a national organisation.



Rachel has stayed in contact since then. As I sat there with the last remaining drops of my triple G&T, an email arrived from her asking whether I'd consider making a film in Luton as it had been really badly hit by Covid-19 and the closure of the airport to all but essential travel.

Rachel introduced me to Jane Malcolm of Level Trust, who worked with nearly every primary school in Luton. Luckily, she loved my films and was prepared to vouch for me. I brought in Carla Grande as my producer as she has experience in working with vulnerable people and also shoots brilliantly.

We then needed a couple of researchers to work with us. I felt it was important that we gave back to

Luton and supported the local community so we looked to find local people who'd never worked in TV before but wanted a break. We employed Sadiqul Choudhury, who'd been working in the charity sector and Charity Muiruri, who'd been working in theatre, and so our team was born.

The next challenge was how to work within the Covid-19 restrictions.

The problem with a film like this is that many families struggling with poverty will be vulnerable in one way or another and it's much easier for a gate keeper, such as a school or a social worker to say 'no' than to take the risk of saying 'yes'. It's therefore really important that we can build a level of trust in these meetings which is best done face to face.

#### **My tricks of the trade - Jezza Neumann**

- A Hippychick hipseat makes an awesome camera support when filming handheld at waist height
- Always follow the 3 golden rules of television: Eat when you can, Sleep when you can, and Pee when you can
- Always carry an energy bar in your bag, makes the perfect filler if you have to skip a meal and will stop you getting hangry
- If you're working in a hot climate and using a wall AC keep your kit in the bathroom with the door closed so that it stays acclimatised and your lens won't be covered in a damp fog.

With Covid-19 everything had to be done via a meeting app, which made the process tricky and much slower. It's so much harder to read people through screens and gain trust but it was the only way we could talk to schools and pastoral care teams who we then relied on to talk to parents.

Thanks to Jane, we did managed to bring several schools onboard and we slowly started to meet families. The problem we now faced was that we had two or three families who were open to the idea of the film but they were all in different schools. I knew that wasn't going to cut it with Louisa this time around and then another defining moment happened.

I had just finished talking to a family and I was sat in my car about to head to London when Amelia Whitehouse, the head of Farley Junior Academy, called. For the next 30 minutes I was grilled, no holding back. Amelia wasn't taking any prisoners. Her primary focus in everything she does in the school are the children and she was going to make darn sure they always came first.

At the end of the grilling, she opened the doors of her school to us. The staff were phenomenal. We met some amazing kids and inspirational families and somehow managed to find three boys in one class whose parents were all happy to let us into their lives - and the impossible became possible.

The only real worry for me from then on was the little voice in the back of my head telling me very clearly that, if our film had even a hint of poverty porn Amelia would have me banned from Luton for life... or worse.



**How (not) to film breaktime with primary school-aged children during Covid**

## Carla Grande Producer

It's a given that beautifully crafted shots are the click-bait to a film, but it's the gold dust sync that really takes you inside a contributor's way of thinking - and keeps you watching. When it comes to filming with kids, these golden soundbites are nano-seconds long, so we knew we couldn't take our chances with just two mics.

If only this were a drama, the principal children would all be playing together like the angels they are, everyone mic'd up and children always in sight, but this is far from the reality of filming in a class of 30 children with Covid restrictions in place.

More often than not this means one shooter armed with two mics on the FS5, two on the Zoom External Recorder (bye bye, soundie dreams, hello double headphones), Go-pros on harnesses, an Osmo for good measure and some mic belts (kids move like squirrels).

We arrive at least 20 minutes before break time starts to deal with a queue of very tricky negotiations, such as who was going to wear the mic and the Go-pros that day. Kids have a shockingly good memory as to who's worn what, when and how many times - I swear kept a secret tally table. Once they are rigged, the countdown starts - let the 30 minutes of playtime magic (or drama) commence.

But don't blink. One moment they are playing in front of you and the next, one of the mic'd up kids has run off, another one is now playing with a non-ID kid and the third one has worked out how to playback on the Go-pro and just wants to watch back his maths class. Great. five minutes of breaktime left and no usable actuality - this happened 90% of the time.

Suddenly, the sound of a heart to heart chat on friendships comes in range, but where are they? Using the Go-pro app on my phone, I can see what he's seeing. Bingo. I stand afar on the long lens capturing the end of this chat, knowing that the start is on the Go-pro (I hope).

The bell goes. You retrieve the Go-pro praying that they haven't broken their sacred oath about pressing buttons, and changed it to timelapse. Phew, it's there. Tomorrow will be another day on the gold dust search.

Miraculously, no mics were hurt in the making of this production. Can't say the same for the Go-pros...

