When three young photographers set out to document the growing crisis in Britain’s inner cities in the 1970s, they achieved a body of work so insightful that its relevance is undiminished in the new millennium. To mark the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Survival Programmes*, the British Library is preparing to launch the *Survival Programmes Archive* next year as a resource for a new generation.

At the project’s inception in 1974, Chris Steele-Perkins was squatting in Belfast and Paul Trevor in Liverpool while Nick Battye was sleeping on friends’ floors. Over the next five years they collaborated under the name Exit, seeking out the country’s most impoverished neighbourhoods, meeting the residents and listening as they grappled with issues of race, religion, class and justice. Many of the stories of grinding unemployment, of wifebeating, and of the desperation that led to prostitution were harrowing. Yet the abiding mood of the resulting body of work was not one of pity but of outrage. In linking the causes of poverty to their crippling effects through image and text, *Survival Programmes* presented a unique achievement as a brutally honest document of the times. In looking at it again, its potency will resonate in every housing estate, every tower block, and every failing school that has not become a relic of a bygone age but stands as sorry testament to how little things have changed.

Mrs Stenson (a resident of St Hilda’s estate, she is in her twenties and lives with her husband, who works on the buses, and their young son): I mean, I’m not a snob or anything but I like to think I’m a bit better than some of the folks around here. And I really don’t want to bring him up round here. You see, we applied for a transfer last summer. We were told, “Oh no, you’ve got to wait till you’ve lived in a council property two years.” Well, that two years was up on the 1st of January.

The first thing that got me when we lived round here was the little three-and-four-year-old kids cursing and swearing. “You effin’ this, you effin’ that.” I said, “Hey, watch it!” He says, “Eff off missis, who d’you think you are?” I thought, “Blimey, we’re here! We’re in among it all, aren’t we?”

(...)

Exit: So what do you do most of the time?

Mrs Stenson: Nothing. I get up in the morning. Do the housework. Go to town. Come back. Get his lunch. Sit and watch television all day and night … That’s it, my week. Every day’s the same. Do the washing, do the ironing, clean the windows, it’s just all housework. We never go out. Never. The only time I go out is when we’re on holiday, when we go down home. My husband sometimes calls in for a drink on his way home, but he won’t go for a drink on this estate, he calls at a pub in town. As for bringing anybody home, he wouldn’t.

Exit: And your husband’s working seven days a week?

Mrs Stenson: Yeah. You see he pays maintenance to his two children from his first marriage as well. So … he works seven days a week. I say on average he works about thirteen to fourteen hours a day, apart from when he should be having a day off. And if he’s working that day, which he always does, he only works eight hours.
**Middlesbrough**

**WRITTEN OFF**

*Teacher (from St Hilda’s Primary School, Middlesbrough):*  
The future for most of these kids is the future of all the kids in this area – they’re written off. They’re written off from the time they were born … Our educational aim is to achieve a basic standard of literacy, that’s the bloody great goal out there. And if you’re getting a reading-age approaching ten when they leave [secondary school], you think, ‘Well, I’m getting somewhere.’ But these kids, in terms of traditional achievement at school, will get nothing at all – they will regress. By the end of the fourth year their reading age will have gone back to eight and a half. They can actually leave secondary school as remedial cases. They go backwards, so really the future’s nothing for them, not socially or politically or any other way.

---

**Brixton**

**A TALE**

*Exit:* Can you say something about the attitudes of the white people to you when you first came over to this country?  
*Blossom Gonzales:* (42, born in Jamaica. She is separated from her husband and lives with her three children in a council flat on the Edmundsbury Estate, Brixton) Well, I think they were rather disgusting. (Laughs) I was working at Brixton Hill, Display Craft, and usually they don’t take coloured workers but I think the law came in then; they had to take on coloureds, so they took my friend and myself on. And they gave us a really hard time, you know. They wanted to know if we lived in tree-tops, if we were living in mud huts and so on. So this woman asked me one day, you know, where’s my tail? What do I do with it? I was so mad with her by this time I said to her, “If you’re coming to the toilet with me I’ll show you?” (Laughs) And she was so stupid that she actually followed me in, and so I made to put trousers down as to say, “You!” you know, “Really!” And then she realised I didn’t really have a tail and I was mad. So she apologised. So that’s one of my experiences.

*Exit:* Mmm. What do you think causes it all?  
*Blossom:* Ah, the whites think they’re a superior race. (Laughs)
Mrs Sephton (Mr and Mrs Sephton and her husband have been married for thirty eight years and are now pensioners living in a new tower block in Lozells. Mrs Sephton works as a volunteer in the local Community Transport charity shop):

I get on with them all right, you know, all of them. It’s just the odd ones, lately … since all this mugging and all this snatching of bags. But it’s mainly Jamaicans that are doing that. It’s very rare you find the Indian people into trouble. Once or twice I think they’ve caught a couple of white people but it’s very rare.

Mr Sephton: I think that’s arisen because they’ve become unemployed and they must think it’s an easy way of getting some money. Immigrants come in this country …

Mrs Sephton: They get everything, don’t they really? Everything they can have.

Mr Sephton: Go to the Social Security and get their supplementary benefit, can’t they?

Mrs Sephton: Well, this is it, you see. They haven’t even to be here twelve months, they haven’t to be here twelve hours, and they’ll give ’em some money to carry on with. I mean we couldn’t get it in another country, could we? This is a really silly country. It is really a silly country for giving out money …

(...)

Mind, I think whatever happens here, this is the best country in the world. England, definitely, I really do. I think it’s the finest country in the world. I haven’t been anywhere else, but the way things are, they let everybody come in and welcome people in, don’t they? I mean, we can’t go to other countries and be accepted the same, can we? They are all accepted here, aren’t they, more or less?