**Rhetoric and Reality: Children’s and families’ experiences of poverty**

**Evidence for the visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty to the UK**

Gill Main

University of Leeds

School of Education

**Context**

This submission is concerned with the self-reported experiences of children and families in poverty in the UK. Families in poverty are a prominent feature in UK policy and media, but rarely have the opportunity to have their own voices heard, influence the ways that they are presented, or shape the interventions which are purportedly designed to help them. Children in particular have been largely invisible in both the academic study of poverty, and in policy responses to child poverty. This is problematic because we know from other fields of research (specifically the social studies of childhood) that parents and other adults are imperfect reporters on their children’s lives, and that children are active agents in promoting their own and others’ well-being.

Anti-poverty policy in the UK adopts a clearly *individualistic* explanation of poverty: individuals and families in poverty are positioned as lacking the necessary aspirations, motivations, skills, and attitudes to escape their situation. This is reflected in policy agendas such as the Troubled Families Programme which aims to ‘turn around’ the lives of families in poverty via behavioural interventions; increasingly harsh benefit sanction regimes which aim to change the behaviours and attitudes of people claiming social security (even those who are claiming in-work benefits); and rhetoric which draws on tropes like ‘three generations of worklessness’ and ‘cultures of poverty’ to position the causes of poverty within families rather than wider society. In sum, the combination of policy action and rhetoric is based on an assumption that families in poverty are ‘different’ – and worse – than better off families; interventions seek to change motivations and aspirations, rather than societal structures.

The research findings presented here come from the ESRC-funded ‘Fair Shares and Families’ study[[1]](#footnote-1) (FSAF), which was designed to prioritise the reports of families and children themselves, and to test the veracity of the current policy approach. The study drew on mixed methods, comprising an in-depth qualitative study with eight families and a three-wave panel survey representative of children aged 10-17 in England. Several shortcomings in the ways that poverty is defined and measured are identified, and the impact of poverty on children and families is noted, especially where this relates to extreme poverty and rights violations.

**Section A: General questions on the definition, measurement and impact of poverty**

***A1: Definitions of poverty***

The current UK government draws on ‘definitions’ of poverty which are based on relative and anchored (termed ‘absolute’) household income. These are in reality measures of poverty, and are discussed in more detail below. For the purposes of the research presented here, poverty was defined as *relative* in nature, drawing on Townsend’s definition of poverty as lacking the material and social resources needed to participate in society [1]. However, noting the critique from scholars within the capability approach [2], *ends* as well as *means* were considered important in the definition of poverty. That is, we were concerned not only with access to resources but also with factors which facilitate or inhibit children’s and families’ capacity to translate these into a life they have reason to value – i.e. the impact of poverty and access to resources on *well-being*, and whether group and individual differences impact the nature and level of resources which are necessary to achieve a satisfactory standard of living. The state’s conceptualisation of poverty in relation to these considerations is currently unclear, and does not appear to reflect a concern with poverty *in all its dimensions* [3].

**A2: The measurement of poverty**

Having recently repealed the 2010 Child Poverty Act via the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act, the UK government is no longer legally committed to child poverty reduction. However, statistics on poverty rates based on the 2010 Act measures continue to be produced as part of the Household Below Average Income series. These include a suite of measures covering low household income (both relative and anchored), combined low income and material deprivation, and persistent poverty (low income over a prolonged period). These represented an impressive suite of measures, and the emphasis placed on household income is clearly justified by the wealth of evidence demonstrating the importance of money for child outcomes [4]. However, the emphasis on the household as the unit of measurement (if not always of analysis), and of a single household reference person as respondent, are problematic.

Reliance on household as a unit of measurement ignores a wealth of evidence (summarised by Bennett [5]) that ‘household’ resources are not necessarily equitably shared between or controlled by different adult household members, with women frequently losing out to men and being more likely than men to prioritise spending on children. It assumes that individuals can be easily assigned to a single household – something which is increasingly problematic especially for children who may move between multiple households following parental separation and re-partnering [6], and young people who may experience long periods of residential transience as they finish education and move into the labour market [7]. Finally, it assumes that the incomes inputted into a household are entirely allocated to, and are the only source of resources for, that household. FSAF research findings present a strong challenge to this last assumption – children and families reported diverse networks of stakeholders in their material well-being who both contributed to and consumed ‘household’ resources, including (among many others) grandparents who were often both providers and consumers of care, and peer groups who often acted as gatekeepers to resources and experiences. This has serious implications for the extent to which families can translate household income into decent living standards. Lacking close family and friend networks with the capacity to provide support in the form of material and social resources can mediate the ability of parents to access opportunities such as paid work, and push families into poverty even when their income is theoretically adequate. Poverty measurement and interventions could reasonably include consideration of people’s access to such networks, and the extent to which they contribute and consume ‘household’ resources. Additional social security provision is indicated for people who lack them.

In terms of the reliance on single- or only adult respondents in the collection of data to measure poverty, the point above regarding gender differences in access to and control over ‘household’ resources is again pertinent – data collected from one adult may not accurately represent the experiences of all adults within a household. Similarly, collecting data from parents or carers regarding children’s access to resources is problematic. Evidence from FSAF as well as previous research [8] indicates that parents and children, while broadly similar in the resources they value and their reports on children’s access to these resources, differ in the priority that they accord certain types of resources and their interpretation of whether the resource is available to them personally. Specifically, both children and parents value resources relating to child health, education and development, but parent and child reports suggest that children place a much greater value than parents on the resources they identify as important to fitting in with peer groups, and enjoying their life during childhood. These latter types of resource were included in an index of child deprivation (the CDI) and were found to be important to children’s overall subjective well-being, and to avoiding negative experiences such as bullying and social exclusion [8]. Furthermore, children may actively hide their needs from parents and peers – see table 2 below for data on children pretending to their family that they did not need something, and pretending to their friends that they did not want to do something, in order to save family money.

In summary, the measurement of poverty should draw heavily on household income – but to understand the poverty experienced by individual household members it must draw on the perspectives of children as well as adults in determining which resources are important; and it must go beyond income to incorporate access to these resources, reported by the individual in question wherever practicably possible. Evidence generated by FSAF indicates that children of 10 and over are capable of providing high-quality quantitative data on these topics.

***Section E: Specific questions on child poverty***

**E26: Implications of child poverty for children’s rights**

Children’s *participation rights* (particularly as detailed in Article 12 of the UNCRC) are frequently disregarded in both studies of child poverty and in the development and implementation of anti-poverty policy. Given the status of Article 12 as an underlying principle by which the rest of the UNCRC should be interpreted, this is a critical omission which should be remedied as a priority. Evidence from FSAF as well as previous research [8], as noted above, indicates that children have the capacity to form complex views on these topics and to provide high quality information on these views and on their experiences of poverty – and thus the state is committed by the UNCRC to listening to and considering these views.

Attending to children’s participation rights highlights the link between child poverty and *protection rights*, especially in relation to Article 4 regarding adequate social provision and funding for families, and Article 19 regarding protection from all forms of violence, including mistreatment and mental violence. Specifically, the state has a responsibility to protect children and families from harmful societal narratives which are legitimised and perpetuated by the individualised approach to poverty detailed above and further discussed in the next section. Such protection is currently ineffective; shame and stigma are well established as common experiences for people in poverty, and as noted above, previous research has found that children in poverty are more likely to experience bullying by their peers [8]. FSAF found that social exclusion, including being made to feel embarrassed due to a lack of money, was common among children who were in low income households and deprived. Table 1 presents percentages of children being socially excluded and the odds of exclusion according to poverty status based on the FSAF Wave 3 survey. Low income and CDI deprivation were associated with increased odds of social exclusion on all of these measures, shown as odds ratios in table 1. Odds ratios can be interpreted as the chances of children in the specified category reporting exclusion compared to baseline odds of 1 for children who were not poor.

Findings underlines the point in the previous section regarding the importance of incorporating measures based on children’s own perspectives on their needs and reports in poverty measurement: household income is important, but child-perceived and reported deprivation is also an important predictor of social exclusion in the absence of low income. The combination of the two is even more damaging.

**Table 1: Child social exclusion by poverty status**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Stopped from doing something** | **Stopped from getting something** | **Made to feel embarrassed or small** |
| **% children** | | **50.3** | **64.5** | **35.3** |
| **Poverty status compared to non-poor children** | Low income, not deprived | 1.6\* | 1.2 NS | 1.0 NS |
| Deprived, not low income | 4.4\*\*\* | 5.7\*\*\* | 5.4\*\*\* |
| Low income and deprived | 6.7\*\*\* | 5.5\*\*\* | 6.7\*\*\* |

NS=not significant; \*=significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*=significant at the 0.01 level; \*\*\*=significant at the 0.0005 level; all models control for child age and gender.

Participation and protection rights form a basis for better understanding child poverty and protecting children from its effects. But the ultimate goal of poverty eradication can only be achieved through using the knowledge gained via child participation and protection to inform effective fulfilment of children’s *provision* *rights*. Specifically, Article 26 (the right to social security) and 27 (the right to an adequate standard of living) are key. FSAF revealed worrying trends in the things that parents and children are having to do in order to save money. We asked parents and children whether they had engaged in a range of behaviours over the past six months as a result of a lack of money. The percentage saying that they had done so at least once, and associations with poverty (odds ratios), are presented in table 2.

For each economising activity, parents were more likely to go without than children. Only stealing was not significantly associated with poverty for parents – showing that despite constrained circumstances parents are not breaking the law to meet their family’s needs. Worryingly high proportions of both children and parents are going without social and material needs - including basic needs like adequate clothing and food. This is a clear infringement of the provision rights of children, requiring urgent policy action. This point is developed further below.

**Table 2: Parent and child economising activities by poverty status**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **%** | **Low income, not deprived** | **Deprived, not low income** | **Low income and deprived** |
| **Missed out on social activities** | Parent | 69.0 | 2.7\*\*\* | 3.2\*\*\* | 6.3\*\*\* |
| Child | 34.4 | 1.1 NS | 3.1\*\*\* | 4.4\*\*\* |
| **Wore old, worn-out or poorly fitting clothes** | Parent | 62.8 | 2.6\*\*\* | 4.1\*\*\* | 8.1\*\*\* |
| Child | 41.0 | 1.1 NS | 4.4\*\*\* | 5.6\*\*\* |
| **Pretended to family not to need something** | Parent | 60.7 | 2.8\*\*\* | 3.1\*\*\* | 7.0\*\*\* |
| Child | 45.6 | 1.6\* | 3.6\*\*\* | 5.2\*\*\* |
| **Pretended to friends not to want to do something** | Parent | 68.7 | 2.3\*\*\* | 3.2\*\*\* | 5.5\*\*\* |
| Child | 50.0 | 1.0 NS | 4.0\*\*\* | 6.7\*\*\* |
| **Stolen something for self or family** | Parent | 13.1 | 1.1 NS | 1.4 NS | 1.4 NS |
| Child | 13.7 | 0.9 NS | 2.3\*\* | 3.4\*\*\* |
| **Not eaten, or not eaten enough, when hungry** | Parent | 50.0 | 2.8\*\*\* | 3.2\*\*\* | 7.9\*\*\* |
| Child | 23.9 | 1.2 NS | 3.8\*\*\* | 4.5\*\*\* |

NS=not significant; \*=significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*=significant at the 0.01 level; \*\*\*=significant at the 0.0005 level; all models control for child age and gender.

**E27: Causes of child poverty**

As noted above, current government policy promotes an individualised explanation of poverty and aims to change the motivations of the poor. However, this goes against a large body of research findings. FSAF adds further weight to this body of work, and introduces qualitative and quantitative data provided by children and families themselves. The study found no differences in motivations, aspirations, and interests based on socio-economic status – but as detailed above and in the project report [9], we did find strong differences in the resources available to families based on socio-economic status, and these related to child and family outcomes. Children in the UK are suffering disproportionately – they are more likely than any other age group to be in poverty, and this requires urgent policy attention [10]. The evidence presented above indicating that parents in poverty are going without important resources and are economising more than children is also vitally important – this and previous research [11, 12] demonstrates that parents in poverty prioritise the needs of their children. But parental sacrifice of basic needs is neither a long-term nor a desirable solution – instead, policy must prioritise providing adequate resources for families and children. Such policy would represent a reverse in the current approach to understanding and addressing poverty in the UK.

**Appendix: References**

1. Townsend, P. (1979) *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. London: Allen Lane and Penguin Books.

2. Sen, A. (1985) *Commodities and Capabilities*. Oxford: OUP.

3. See goal 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals – sustainabledevelopment.un.org.

4. Cooper, K. and Stewart, K. (2013) ‘Does Money Affect Children’s Outcomes? A systematic review’. Report for the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*. York: JRF.

5. Bennett, F. (2013) ‘Researching Within-Household Distribution: Overview, developments, debates, and methodological challenges’. In *Journal of Marriage and Family* vol.75 no.3 pp582-597.

6. Olah, L. S., Hobson, B. and Carlson, L. (2017) ‘Synthesis of Main Findings in the FamiliesAndSocieties Project’. FamiliesAndSocieties Working Paper Series no.77. Available online from http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WP77OlahHobsonCarlson2017.pdf.

7. Stone, J., Berrington, A. and Falkingham, J. (2011) ‘The changing determinants of UK young adults’ living arrangements’. In *Demographic Research* vol.25 no.20 pp629-666.

8. Main, G. (2013) *A Child-Derived Material Deprivation Index*. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of York September 2013.

9. Main, G. and Mahony, S. (In press) *Project report for the Fair Shares and Families Study*. London: The Children’s Society.

10. DWP (2018) *Households Below Average Income: An analysis of the UK income distribution: 1994/95-2016/17*. London: DWP.

11. Middleton, S., Ashworth, K. and Braithwaite, I. (1997) *Small Fortunes: Spending on children, childhood poverty and parental sacrifice*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

12. Main, G. and Bradshaw, J. (2018) ‘Improving Lives? Child poverty and social exclusion’. In Dermott, E. and Main, G. (2018) *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK – Volume 1: The nature and extent of the problem*. Bristol: Policy Press.

1. Grant number ES/N015916/1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)