**British Academy provocation paper**

**CHILD POVERTY: WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?**

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Since the 19th century poverty has always been understood as a lack of resources – mainly income. Although Ian Duncan Smith, having abandoned the Child Poverty Act and its targets, sought to replace income measures with indicators of worklessness, debt, etc (DWP 2012), national statistics on income-based poverty have continued to be published. Even the right-wing Legatum Institute’s Social Metrics Commission (2018) recently reaffirmed income (after housing costs) as their favoured measure of poverty.

But household income alone has many weaknesses as an indicator of child poverty: the thresholds and the equivalence scales used to adjust income to household size are arbitrary and there are problems with the underreporting of benefit income (Resolution Foundation 2018). Low income is only an indirect indicator of poverty with, perhaps surprisingly, quite limited overlap with child deprivation (Main and Bradshaw 2017).

This is partly why Townsend (1979) pioneered the use of a deprivation measure based on the number of items and activities that households lacked, and Mack and Lansley (1984) established them as items that more than half the population thought were necessary. That approach has been extended to items and activities more relevant to children in three Poverty and Social Exclusion surveys (Gordon and Pantazis 1997, Gordon et al 2000, Dermot and Main 2017, Bramley and Bailey 2017). They have been adopted into the official *Household below average income survey* measures and by Eurostat in the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) (Guio et al 2018). But the judgements about whether they are necessities and whether children lack them are still made my adults.

Recent years have seen an expansion of the measurement of child poverty beyond income and deprivation to encompass other domains of well-being, including mental and physical health, educational attainment and participation, housing and environmental conditions, child behaviours and subjective well-being (Bradshaw, Hoelscher and Richardson 2007). Also, the notion of social exclusion emerged in the UK in the 1990s and has been operationalised in research but has not really lasted in official statistics (Bailey, Fahmy and Bradshaw 2017, Crous and Bradshaw 2017).

In all this research on child poverty there continues to be a lacuna – the voices of children are missing. Almost all the surveys of poverty have taken the household as the unit of analysis and the adults as respondents.

There are surveys of children. Understanding Society formerly the British Household Panel Survey has a youth questionnaire completed by 10-15year olds which has been used to assess child well-being, but not yet child poverty and deprivation (Bradshaw and Keung 2011). The WHO sponsored Health Behaviour of School Aged Children is undertaken every four years in many countries and is based on a school-based survey of 11, 13 and 15year olds and has contributed to comparative studies of child well-being, as has the OECD PISA survey of 15year olds every three years, but neither really focuses on poverty and deprivation.

Following their Good Childhood Inquiry, the Children’s Society launched annual Good Childhood Reports (starting in 2012) partly based on a survey of children in England aged 8, 10, 12 and 14. Main and Pople (2011) undertook qualitative research with children to establish a list of items and activities that they considered necessities. This was developed into a child deprivation index and has been employed in subsequent surveys. The Children’s Society questionnaire was then utilised in the Children’s Worlds project (<http://www.isciweb.org/>) now in its fourth wave in 35 countries throughout the world (Rees 2018). It has demonstrated that children as young as eight are capable of answering questions to assess their material well-being.

Why should we want to ask children about their material well-being and why cannot we rely on parents’ reports? Children have rights. We are enjoined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to listen to children and take their views into account. The UN sustainable Development Goals, accepted by the UK, have clear targets for child poverty reduction. Certainly since Ridge’s (2002) pioneering study talking to children about poverty, we know that children are sensitive to their comparative material status, ashamed of what they do not have, feel deprived if they cannot invite their friends round or participate in leisure or school activities and, most critical of all, they do their level best to hide these feelings from their parents and to not ask for things that they know their parents cannot afford. Main and Mahoney (2018) included child and parent questions on economising and found that children living in low income and deprived families were much more likely to report economising including hiding needs from parents. Further we know from the work of Main and Mahoney (2018) and Lau (2019), who have interviewed both children and their parents about their perceptions of necessities, that they assess assets and activities slightly differently.

In these studies that have covered both parents’ and children’s perceptions of poverty, there is a large group where the perceptions coincide – either both children and parents agree that they are poor or agree that they are not poor. But there are two other groups who do not agree – a small minority, where on the basis of parental reports of household income they are not poor, nevertheless the children feel deprived. Then a larger group where the household is clearly poor, but the children don’t feel poor. Some of this latter group may be explained by ‘adaptive preferences’ – children adapting to their circumstances, but there is also evidence that parents, particularly mothers, protect their children from deprivation by going short themselves. The former group may be the result of money management practices within the family (mean parents not sharing resources), which may affect women as well as children Pahl (1989).

The lesson of this is that we certainly need information on income and deprivation from parents, but we also need the views of children. Indeed, Main and Bradshaw (2012) have shown that there is a closer association between children’s views of their material circumstances and their subjective well-being than between household income and their subjective well-being.

We do not collect information from children about their material circumstances in the main Office for National Statistics surveys in the UK including the Family Resources Survey, the Integrated Households Survey or the Living Costs and Food survey. Nor does the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) include questions for children. Any of these surveys could easily include a module for children following the methods tried and tested in the Understand Society survey. That survey should also include questions to children on their living standards.

Since the 2008 crisis child poverty policy in the UK has gone backwards (except, arguably, in Scotland (Bradshaw and Bennett 2018)). Since 2010 £40 billion has been taken out of the working age social security budget. Families with children and poor families with children have suffered the largest reduction in their living standards. Their cash benefits have been frozen and cut. The two-child limit and the benefit cap has been introduced and these together with the limits to rent covered by housing benefit and the bedroom tax have all contributed to the undermining of the safety net. Now the roll-out of Universal Credit is likely to enhance that hardship despite some mitigation of some of its effects in the 2018 budget. This is happening, despite the fact that two generators of child poverty – unemployment and low wages have been comparatively absent recently. Real wages at the bottom end of the distribution have been improving in real terms thanks to increases in the Minimum Wage. Unemployment is at a record low. However much of the increase in employment, especially in families with children has been part-time and self-employed. So, the main driver of poverty in the last ten years has been cuts to benefits and services (Portes and Reed 2018).

Child poverty rates are now increasing and will continue to increase on present policies. Recent work by Bradshaw and Keung (2018) show that poverty gaps (the gap between the incomes of those below the poverty threshold and the poverty threshold) have been growing, even before the increase in poverty rates. The enhanced sanctions regime in social security is driving more people to food banks.

Lack of money affects child outcomes (Cooper and Stewart 2017). Many outcomes are already deteriorating: infant mortality increased in the last two years for the first time since 1984, child homelessness is rising rapidly, so are the numbers of children in care, and both child mental health and child subjective well-being are falling (Bradshaw 2017).

In this context a greater understanding of poverty from the perspective of the child must be a research priority. We need to be monitoring the impact of these cuts on children. Civil society is already making a contribution – for example the recent study of the impact of the two-child limit on the families and children effected by a coalition of NGOs and the Church of England (Child Poverty Action Group 2019). But we could also do with more effort from the academic community, the Office for National Statistics and the government.

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