

Britain: Report highlights widespread child poverty

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On its election in 1997, the Labour government made a public commitment to end child poverty within 20 years, halving it within 10 years and reducing it by at least a quarter by 2004.

A recently released report, *Britain's Poorest Children: severe & persistent poverty and social exclusion*, commissioned by the charity Save the Children, sheds new light on the extent and severity of poverty amongst children in Britain.

The survey covers England, Scotland and Wales. It was not able to obtain figures for Northern Ireland. The researchers also concede that they would have liked greater numbers involved in the survey in some areas. Children in care, hospices and rented accommodation, and those whose families frequently move have not been incorporated into the survey. The study admits this will mean the absence from the report of the "circumstances of some of the most deprived and excluded children in Britain."

Despite these limitations, and the polite diplomatic language used to describe various "anti-poverty" initiatives, the report's findings are a devastating indictment of the government's six-and-a-half-year record on child poverty.

The report makes clear from the outset that its main area of investigation is hardly acknowledged by the government, let alone tackled: "[A] number of [government] targets have been established and indicators of progress are being reviewed annually. However, tackling severe child poverty does not feature in these targets or indicators. In fact, although there is now a wealth of information about child poverty in Britain, very little is known about either the extent of severe child poverty or the children who are affected."

Three categories were defined and used through the report: "not poor," "non-severely poor" and "severely poor." The following measures were used to gauge which category the surveyed children fitted into:

- * The child's own deprivation—the child going without one or more necessities because they could not be afforded
- * The deprivation of the parent—the parents going without two or more necessities because they could not be afforded
- * The income poverty of their household—the household having an income of below 40 percent of median income (an amount, before the deduction of housing costs, equivalent to £107.59)

Children were defined as being in severe poverty if they fell into all three categories and classed in non-severe poverty if they met one or two of the categories.

Using these measures, the survey found that 8 percent of British

children (numbering approximately 1 million) were severely poor and 37 percent were non-severely poor. In other words, 45 percent of Britain's children are poor.

The study pointed out the ambiguity in the government's own figures indicating a modest "reduction" in child poverty during the period that largely corresponded to its first term. The government report, *Households Below Average Income*, stated that child poverty (measured as children in households with an equivalised income below 60 percent of the median) fell slightly from 25 percent in 1996-1997 to 21 percent in 2001-2002 (Government Department of Work and Pensions, 2003). But, as the report points out, "...independent research has suggested that, following the government's reforms, some children, particularly the poorest, will have experienced decreases in income: 'nearly one in six children in the bottom decile are worse off as a result of the reforms' (Sunderland, 2001, p.4)."

This is a recurring, if seldom openly stated, theme that underlies much of the reports' statistics—that the government's policies have condemned the poorest children in society to even worse deprivation, while having little or no significant effect on a slightly less poor layer that has nevertheless been used to massage the official poverty figures.

The report noted that a much higher degree of "social exclusion" (one of the government's favourite buzz words during the first term) and other societal problems were linked to child poverty of all forms. These problems were particularly acute amongst what it defined as severely poor children.

Severely poor children:

- * showed a much higher rate of being unable to afford to participate in children's social activities (the average non-participation rate was 25 percent).
- * were more likely to be excluded from local services—either because they could not be afforded or accessed.
- * were more likely to experience problems with their local area (with 35 percent encountering difficulties, along with 21 percent of non-severely poor children).

The second part of the report measured the rate of "persistent poverty" amongst children. For consistency, severe and non-severe poverty thresholds were defined as 29 percent and 59 percent of weekly median household income, respectively. Household income figures used were those before deduction of housing costs, but housing costs will have a significantly further negative effect, especially in many parts of the south of the country and London.

Between 1991 and 1999, children were analysed over various five-year periods, and once again it was calculated whether they were in severe, non-severe or no poverty.

Persistent poverty was defined as occurring when children experienced poverty (severe or non-severe) in three of the five years of the study. This was found to affect 29 percent of children.

Children in persistent and severe poverty:

- * appeared more likely to have strained relationships with their parents; being the least likely to talk to their parents about things that mattered to them, or to be happy with their families.

- * received the least amounts of pocket money and earned the least when working in part-time jobs.

- * were most likely to be insecure about their appearance and their lives as a whole.

Amongst children in persistent and severe poverty, the findings revealed what the report called “two distinct groups” as defined by their “work and benefit characteristics”.

“The first group were those whose financial situation appeared relatively stable, although very bleak. This group included children who had lived in workless households for all of the five-year period and who were also most likely to have spent all five years dependent on benefits as a main income source, further increasing their chances of persistent and severe poverty.

“The second group were those who experienced income volatility, i.e., two or more income transitions between work/other income and benefit income as their main source of income. Children whose households underwent two or more transitions were much more likely to be in persistent and severe poverty than children who did not experience these transitions. As these children experiencing multiple changes in their main source of income must also have spent one year in receipt of benefits, it is likely that their actual chances of experiencing persistent and severe poverty were compounded further.”

In short, some of those households that have been forced to take occasional low-wage temporary employment did less well than those permanently on benefits.

Although children in severe poverty were more likely to be in households with no employed adults (82 percent were in households with no workers, compared to 24 percent of children in non-severe poverty), the report found that a fifth of these children were in households where adults were working. Half of these parents were in part-time work. Also, three quarters of children in non-severe poverty were in households with workers, two fifths with two or more workers. This, the report suggested, illustrates “that work does not necessarily prevent poverty, severe or otherwise.”

The study incorporated a list that was compiled of items that adult respondents felt were the highest ranking necessities for their children. For the most part, the list contained the most basic items such as three meals a day and a carpeted bedroom. Amongst the items the poor lacked were the following:

- * three meals a day (8 percent).
- * fresh fruit and vegetables daily (21 percent).
- * meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent twice daily (31 percent).
- * a warm waterproof coat (13 percent).
- * new properly fitted shoes (17 percent).

- * some new, not all second-hand, clothes (24 percent).

- * construction toys (30 percent)

- * educational games (32 percent).

- * garden to play in (21 percent).

Severely poor children were also most likely to have parents lacking important items. Among these children, there were the highest levels of deprivation for their parents of:

- * fresh fruit and vegetables daily (34 percent).

- * warm waterproof coat (41 percent).

- * two pairs of all-weather shoes (39 percent).

- * outfit for special occasions (40 percent).

- * undamaged furniture (76 percent).

- * insurance of contents of dwelling (60 percent).

- * regular savings (£10 a month) for rainy day or retirement (89 percent).

In addition, there were high levels of parental deprivation among housing-related items that would be particularly difficult or expensive to resolve in the cases of all affected children (e.g., a damp-free home, decent state of dwelling decoration).

Parents of children classed as severely poor were more likely to lack household items that children will also require (e.g., television, bedding, washing machine, medicines). As the report concluded, “[I]t appears that children poor on all three measures had parents who were sacrificing their own health and personal well-being by cutting back on food and clothing for the sake of the child, rather than on household items which would affect both parents and children.”

The above findings support a body of previous research that confirms that parents must generally fall into very high levels of deprivation before they allow it to affect their children.

The report also dealt with a number of other areas such as child poverty being more prevalent amidst the most populated area; ethnic minority children being over-represented in the poverty figures; and the prevalence of money lenders and loan-sharks in areas inhabited by the poorest families.



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