

Trying to get by: children and young people talk about poverty

THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson was concerned that the voices of children and young people have been missing from strategies aimed at eradicating child poverty in this country. She wanted to provide young people with the best opportunity to share their views and experiences of poverty and deprivation. The development of the government's first national Child Poverty Strategy earlier this year was such an opportunity, giving a chance for the views of children and young people on this issue to be gathered and heard.¹ By understanding the impact of poverty from the perspective of the child, it is hoped that future policy and practice will address the poor outcomes and negative experiences faced by many children and young people today.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner captured the views and concerns of children and young people in qualitative research carried out on its behalf by the National Foundation for Educational Research.² A total of 73 children and young people from some of the country's most deprived areas were asked what they understood about poverty, what it really means to them and how it impacts on their lives. They had some straightforward but powerful things to say about poverty and what could be done to address it.

With the aim of including as many children and young people with direct experience of poverty as possible, consultations with children and young people were held in five locations across England. For the most part, consultations were held in areas of high deprivation, identified using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). This index ranks local authorities according to the proportion of children under



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Politicians and campaigners talk a lot about child poverty, and all three main political parties have signed up to its eradication by 2020. But what does poverty mean for the children and young people themselves? Why are their voices missing from the current debate? In this article, Kerry Martin and Ruth Hart discuss the findings from a qualitative research project that reports on what children and young people have to say about the impact that poverty has on their lives.

the age of 16 who live in low-income households in an area. Four areas were selected from the 10 most deprived authorities in England (as ranked in the IDACI): Liverpool, Birmingham, and the London Boroughs of Islington and Newham. A contrasting authority was also selected: North Yorkshire, which scored relatively low on the IDACI, but is known to have pockets of deprivation, one of which – the district of Selby – was targeted for the consultation.

Discussion groups were held between November 2010 and January 2011. A total of 73 young people between the ages of 10 and 20 took part, with an average age of 14–17 years. The participants came from a wide range of backgrounds. Many young people revealed that they, or their families, were in receipt of free school meals, education maintenance allowance and/or other benefits. These indicators of low income suggest that participants are likely to fit commonly used definitions of poverty. However, despite focusing the consultations on areas with a high proportion of low-income households, there was inevitably some variation in young people's personal circumstances. The size and composition of the sample means any generalisation of findings should be made with caution.

Children and young people contributing to the study did not use the terms 'poverty' or 'poor' to describe their own circumstances, but instead used words like 'struggling' or 'having a low income'. They had a varying degrees of awareness of their own disadvantages. When young people were asked about what they thought it was like to live in poverty, they typically referred to very extreme circumstances, including homelessness and famine. Often young people felt that those living in poverty were people in other parts of the world:

I thought poverty was in other countries abroad, like the adverts on the telly... People would say that people on council estates are in poverty, but really they're not when you think about it because there are worse people, aren't there?

In the research, children and young people defined poverty in terms of inequalities, and specifically talked about inequity in terms of access to social experiences and material circumstances throughout childhood, adolescence and early adult life. Children and young people told us they could be disadvantaged by a lack of basic equipment, such as pens and books. In some schools, teachers did not

appear to understand the financial hardships they faced. Young people believed that, increasingly, there is an expectation from their teachers and schools that pupils will have access to a computer and the internet at home. Young people without such resources felt at a considerable disadvantage to their peers:

Schools are becoming computer-orientated, and it can be a problem if you haven't got that access, or you've got very limited access.

Children and young people who are poor are accustomed to going without possessions and the range of opportunities taken for granted by their peers. Those we spoke to mentioned going without things that others in society might take for granted, like branded clothing, trips to the cinema, holidays and entertaining friends at home.

There was an acknowledgement that children and young people who are poor are treated differently. Young people linked material poverty to social exclusion. Financially disadvantaged young people often miss out on experiences because of the cost of activities. Young people describe, for example, how those who are poor become excluded from some social networks and discussions because they are unable to experience the same opportunities. Limited access to technology also means that young people can feel socially isolated, because they have fewer ways of communicating with their peers outside school. As a result, developing and maintaining friendships was said to be difficult for those who struggle financially.

Bullying and social exclusion

Young people also made strong links between being poor and being bullied. They described how social aggression, like isolation by peers and cruel gossiping as a result of being poor, can affect their wellbeing:

If you're in poverty, or you don't have much money and you're just trying to get by, you suffer mentally, because you get bullied, unless you're strong enough to shrug it off.

Young people spoke about the shame associated with being poor and not wanting to let others know about their circumstances. They were particularly concerned about their peers knowing they were entitled to free school meals, about admitting to not having enough money to pay for extra-curricular activities and being singled out by others on non-uniform days. They were embarrassed to ask for help and reluctant

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to receive it when it was offered – even when the offer came from their own friends:

When I was at secondary school, I think that I was able to get free school meals or something, but I didn't want to have that status; I didn't want to be the one, 'oh, her family can't afford to whatever'. So I told my mum to stop it and I paid for my own meals and obviously it got tougher for my mum.

Young people are aware they are living in difficult economic times and recognise this is making life harder for many people. Children and young people worry about the impact of poverty on their family. They have a clear understanding of the pressures and guilt that parents face when they cannot afford to purchase material things and spend money on social activities. Children and young people also spoke at length about their parents 'doing their best' and working hard to mediate the effects of child poverty:

My mum works seven days a week... [she] starts at, like, eight o'clock in the morning and comes home at, like, seven [pm].

Children and young people were particularly concerned about the growing number of families being pushed into poverty and how they will cope:

If you have lived in a family that has always been poor, then you will be strong. But at the minute, with redundancies and stuff, if you had a lot of money and then you are suddenly poor it would cause a lot more damage. It would be harder for people.

Children and young people spoke about just how wearing it is being poor, about the relentlessness of the effort to make ends meet. Many were clear that a lack of resources causes family stress and sometimes breakdown, and creates an inability for young people to get the material resources together to leave home when they are an older adolescent or young adult. Young people were not all negative in their views, however, and many spoke warmly of strong family and community relationships.

Experience of education

Sadly, children's experience of school can often be less positive if they come from a low-income family. Those from this research spoke of the likelihood of being priced out of housing in catchment areas and having their choice of schools heavily constrained. Achievement may be compromised by lack of equipment and inability to take part in extracurricular activities,

while bullying can cause children to disengage or physically withdraw from school and learning. This can result in them underachieving at school and limit their options in later life.

In addition to the disadvantages experienced at school, young people identified a number of ways in which poverty can impact on aspirations about, and access to, employment. First among these are the lack of opportunities and the increasingly competitive nature of the labour market. Age and lack of experience can place young applicants at a serious disadvantage. Competition for apprenticeships was said to be fierce and the poor financial return on low-skilled work was seen as a further problem.

I really want a job, and I'm kind of a bit trapped, because it's very hard to get a job.

Some young people living with their families see greater benefit from entering employment, and indeed, felt a responsibility to do so, even where there was a cost to them personally – for example, missing out on educational opportunities. Young people we spoke to saw increases in the cost of further and higher education as a deterrent to self-improvement and expected such increases to have a negative impact on aspirations. As a correlate to this, they predicted negative impacts for both individuals and the wider society:

It's only going to be the rich people that are going to be able to afford to go to university and get the better jobs, and the people that are in poverty are still going to be in poverty.

Young people made it clear to us that they were worried about becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty, citing the current high rates of unemployment, the prevalence of low-paid jobs and income freezes. They also mentioned that the cost of transport fares can make it difficult for them to get to college or work. The negative impact of changes to certain entitlements, like the education maintenance allowance, and increasing tuition fees were also a concern to them. They also mentioned how higher education is increasingly expected to become the preserve of the rich:

Young people are the hardest hit. They are going to end up stuck in a cycle of poverty because they can't get the education... they can't get the jobs... and it's just going to continue with generations of poverty because they can't escape from it, and... something must be done to stop that.

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Young people also expressed concern about the proposed cutbacks to youth services and provision, and argued for the continuation and extension of free access to facilities like youth and leisure centres.

We do not want the earth

What children and young people want from government and wider society is not the earth. They are deeply concerned about current and future financial, educational and employment climates. They do not want to be a lost generation, especially as being so would be no fault of their own. They want a sensitive and flexible benefits system, far wider access to free or subsidised travel for those who struggle to access either services or jobs without it, and socially conscious universities, companies and employers who will go the extra mile to provide greater, better publicised and funded opportunities for children and young people whose lives are hard. They also asked for help managing money and how to cope on a limited income through greater and more appropriate education on finance.

This research is not unique in its focus on children's and young people's portrayal of the experience of living in poverty.³ The findings of this study complement and reinforce those of previous research, in particular findings on the impact of poverty on social life, education and employment. Subtle differences in the composition of research samples, for example, by age and location, might explain the variation in emphasis given to different themes and issues. Children and families living in England are currently experiencing challenging economic times, with dramatic cuts in public spending. What perhaps makes this current work distinctive is that it was undertaken after a change of political leadership and at a time when the policy landscape was shifting rapidly. This context clearly fuelled the debates among the children and young people with whom we spoke. This led to a number of new issues being identified and others being spoken about with increasing emphasis – for example, the withdrawal of the education maintenance allowance, the raising of the cap on university tuition fees, and rising youth (age 16–24) unemployment.

We are pleased to report that this exercise has not been in vain and that the children's voices in this research are being listened to and acted on. Their views are included in the government's first national Child Poverty Strategy, which was published on 5 April 2011. Dr Maggie Atkinson also presented her research to delegates at the

Child Poverty Conference on 28 March. The Office of the Children's Commissioner will continue to draw on this study in its policy work throughout the next year, examining the links with child poverty and bullying, family relationships and educational experiences.

By adding to the evidence base with this report, the Children's Commissioner for England hopes that children's and young people's voices will have a greater presence in policy discussions and developments to eradicate child poverty in England. This will remain a firm focus for the Office of the Children's Commissioner during the coming months. ■

Kerry Martin and **Ruth Hart** are researchers at the National Foundation for Educational Research. They facilitated the children's and young people's discussion groups and worked with the Office of the Children's Commissioner in preparing the final report.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner commissioned the study on which this article is based. The full report, *Trying to get by: consulting with children and young people on child poverty* is available to download from www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_480.

- 1 The Child Poverty Strategy, *A New Approach to Child Poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families' lives*, was published on 5 April. It sets out the framework to tackle child poverty from 2011 to 2014 and a new approach for ending child poverty by 2020. See www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/laupdates/a0076802/publication-of-national-child-poverty-strategy
- 2 The Office of the Children's Commissioner's full report, *Trying to Get By: consulting with children and young people on child poverty*, is available to download from www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_480
- 3 Prior work by Save the Children, for example, includes: G Horgan, *Speaking Out Against Poverty: voices of children living in disadvantaged areas*, Save the Children, 2011; A Ark and J Nott, *Ending Child Poverty: making it happen. Report of consultation events with children and young people for the government Child Poverty Unit*, Save the Children, 2009; P Woodhead, and C Sexty, *Children and Young People Speak Out on Poverty: a report on a consultation with children and young people in England*, Save the Children, 2006; A Crowley and C Vulliamy, *Listen Up! Children and young people talk about poverty*, Save the Children, 2002