

The Impact of Poverty on Children and Young People's Use of Services

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This article describes a qualitative study exploring the impact of poverty on children's access to and use of services, which took a comparative approach to gather the views of children from more and less affluent households. Findings suggest affordability and related factors including limited mobility constrained service use for less affluent children, resulting in cumulative missed opportunities. However, extended family, friends and agencies facilitated service access, mitigating the impact of poverty on service use to some extent. Research implications include the importance of listening to and taking account of the views of children from lower income families in service planning. © 2009 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2009 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction

This article draws on the findings of a qualitative study undertaken with children aged 10 to 14 years to explore the extent and nature of the impact of poverty on children and young people's perceptions of, access to and use of services.

The impact of poverty on children's lives has been of increasing interest in recent years, not least in response to concerns regarding high rates of child poverty in the UK when compared with other European countries (Bradshaw, 2002). Since 1997, UK Government policy has been committed to substantial reductions in child poverty reflecting wider EU level commitments to combat social exclusion (Department for Work and Pensions, 2006; Walker, 1999). In Scotland, where this research took place, the devolved administration has also established initiatives to promote social inclusion and address child poverty (Scottish Executive, 1999).

Much of the research undertaken on child poverty has focused on a quantitative examination of the issue, usefully documenting the extent and distribution of childhood poverty (Brad-

shaw, 2002; Kemp and others, 2002). However, there is a growing body of qualitative research evidence (e.g. Middleton and others, 1994; Ridge, 2002), including several studies that have sought to gain an understanding of child poverty as '*grounded in the realities of children's everyday lives and experiences*' (Ridge, 2006, p. 23). A recent systematic review of nine such studies not only highlighted the value of a child-centred perspective but also pointed to the need for further research to address the concern that children's experiences currently '*remain marginal to evidence-informed policy*.' (Attree, 2004, p. 686).

This article draws on research designed to contribute to the qualitative evidence base that focused on a comparatively neglected aspect, namely the impact of poverty on children and young people's use of and experiences of services (Wager and others, 2007). There has been increasing awareness of the inter-relationships between poverty and adults' access to services, with poverty being associated with, and in turn reinforced by, poor access to services (Gordon and others, 2000). The problems faced by children from lower income households in accessing services have been less researched. Rather, previous studies incorporating children's perspectives have tended to focus on specific services, such as health, education and social work, or particular groups of children (Hallett and Prout, 2003; Hill and Tisdall, 1997), with little research evidence about how children engage with services and how poverty affects this.

The study presented here, therefore, aimed to provide a perspective on the lives of children and young people affected by poverty in Scotland, by comparing the experiences of those living in poverty in accessing and using services with those living in more economically advantaged circumstances. It focused on how children engage with services in the context of their everyday lives and how poverty influences their use and non-use of these services. This article concentrates on the impact of family income on service use, together with the role of relatives, friends and other services in facilitating children's access to and use of services. Other aspects of the study, including the influence of location and age, are considered elsewhere (Hill and Wager, 2009; Wager and others, 2007).

The research study

The study focused on children aged 10 to 14 years. This period of middle childhood is a broad phase when children are still in many ways reliant on adults, yet growing in independence (Borland and others, 1998). Recruitment of children for the study was primarily via schools. Children were invited to take part from age-relevant classes (10/11 year olds and 13/14 year olds) in primary and secondary schools. Community-based settings, such as youth groups and children's rights projects, were also approached, to maximise opportunities for participation (Sime, 2008) because gatekeepers within such agencies were usually able to be more proactive than teachers in obtaining parental consent and providing support to participate in the study for children who may otherwise not have taken part. Members of the research team met with gatekeepers and where possible with the children, prior to distributing project information designed for both children and their parents. All children who participated did so after completion of a joint consent form by both themselves and a parent or carer (Sime, 2008; Wager and others, 2007).

A cluster of indicators at both the household and neighbourhood level was used to determine the relative affluence of the child's household. A question about free school meal uptake was included on the consent form and contextual data gathered during interviews such as whether

parents were in employment. The relative deprivation of areas in which the children lived was ascertained using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and a geo-demographic tool for classifying postcodes according to socioeconomic indicators (Wager and others, 2007).

Three fieldwork locations were chosen to ensure representation of urban and rural settings, and a range of socioeconomic circumstances: *City Estate*, a peripheral city housing estate with high levels of deprivation; *Accessible Town*, a medium sized town with areas of both affluence and deprivation; and *Remote Town/Rural*, a coastal area distant from any major urban centre, also with areas of affluence and deprivation.

The two-stage data collection design comprised initial focus groups followed by individual interviews with the same children. The group discussions familiarised children with the study and explored what is meant by the term 'services'. The discussions covered the children's general perceptions of all services used by children and young people in their local area. Use was made of a range of activities including vignettes, locality maps, cue cards and 'spider diagrams' to promote discussion of the issues. The groups were arranged with children known to one another and of a similar age.

Interviews explored individual experiences and perceptions of services. To achieve greater depth, the researchers decided to concentrate on three types of service that seemed most salient in children's lives, on the basis that they had evoked most attention and interest in the group discussions. These turned out to be leisure, retail and health. This article focuses on the first two: leisure and retail services. Children's comments in relation to health were rarely linked to financial considerations (although there can be travel and other costs) reflecting the long-standing commitment of the NHS to providing health care free at the point of delivery, and so have not been specifically included in this article (see Wager and others, 2007 for the full findings). Leisure services are important not purely for their recreational value, but because they can provide opportunities to learn practical and social skills and develop social capital (Seaman and others, 2006). Use of retail services denotes access to goods and markers of social acceptability, which are widely seen as indicators of inclusion, with non-access signifying poverty (Mack and Lansley, 1985).

Between the focus groups and interviews, children were asked to take photographs of services in their local area using a disposable camera provided. Photographs were used as a prompt for discussion during interviews to facilitate the generation of rich data grounded in their own experiences of services.

Focus group and interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative analysis software package NVivo (QSR NVivo 2.0 developed by QSR International Ltd, Doncaster, Victoria 3108 Australia). An important part of the analytic process involved research team members reading transcripts and discussing key emergent themes, leading to the development of a thematic framework for coding transcripts.

In total, 56 children took part in the research. Eight focus groups were held with 49 individuals within the two separate age groups. Three young people opted out of the research after participating in focus groups. An additional seven were recruited directly to the interview phase, resulting in fifty-three individual interviews. Thirty-two interviewees were in the younger age range (10 and 11 years) and twenty-one from the older age range (13 and 14 years). Table 1 provides a summary of individual interviewees by case study area and relative affluence.

Table 1: Summary of individual interviewees by case study area and relative affluence

Case study area	More affluent	Less affluent
City Estate	–	11
Accessible Town	8	9
Remote Town/Rural	15	10
<i>Total interviewees</i>	23	30

Significantly, more girls than boys took part in the study, particularly in individual interviews (37 girls; 16 boys). This reflected difficulties the research team experienced in recruiting boys and in sustaining their involvement over the fieldwork stages, despite concerted efforts.

Findings

Service affordability

Children's accounts emphasised service affordability as one of the key influences on their service access and use, with a range of costs impacting on service use including both *direct* and *indirect* costs. Direct costs mainly related to entrance and membership fees, while indirect costs included travel, equipment, uniform and refreshment costs.

There was a marked contrast between children from more and less affluent households in terms of their use of services resulting from cost concerns. Overall, the data revealed a pattern of more limited engagement with organised activities for children/young people from lower income households in contrast with their more affluent peers. This often meant lower frequency of use of such services, but for some children and young people, this meant refraining altogether from organised activities they knew their more affluent peers enjoyed, reflecting the findings of previous research (e.g. Livingstone, 2002; Ridge, 2002). Less affluent young people across all three case study areas described spending their leisure time in less supervised, cost-free ways, such as playing outside or hanging out on the street, rather than engaging with organised services. For example, many young people from the City Estate case study area seldom participated in any formal leisure services, spending their free time instead in street spaces, grassy areas, disused or waste grounds and derelict buildings. As a result, not only were these young people missing out on the potential benefits associated with taking part in leisure services but also their safety could be at some risk, either because of physical hazards in such spaces (e.g. dangerous building structures) or because of other people. There were particular worries associated with drug users who used these spaces or of territorialism which created 'no go' areas (cf. Kintrea and others, 2008). Frequent unsupervised play among children in deprived neighbourhoods contributes to the much higher rates of pedestrian accidents they experience (White and others, 2000).

Young people from lower income households also described more erratic patterns of service use in contrast with the more regular attendance they associated with their more affluent peers' use of the same services. One 10-year-old girl growing up in a small village (Remote Town/Rural) described how she attended the local youth club irregularly,

depending on whether or not her mother could afford the fifty pence entrance fee that week. This example illustrates that it was not only commercial leisure services but also community-based clubs and activities that posed affordability barriers for children from lower income households.

Whereas the majority of young people portrayed shopping as at least partly prompted by social considerations and often involving travel to multiple outlet locations, some participants in low income households stated that their purchases were confined to necessities from local shops or occasionally supermarkets.

There was also evidence that constrained affordability led to privileging cheaper services over others, for instance borrowing books from the library or visiting second hand shops, rather than purchasing new products. This included making use of cheaper home-based alternatives to external services perceived as too expensive, such as watching films at home rather than making trips to the cinema.

More positively, children from lower income households highlighted the value to them of services free at the point of delivery. Examples were free internet access at public libraries and free swimming. Indeed, some study participants from lower income households indicated that they rarely used services that were not free. The impact of direct charges becoming imposed when services had previously been provided free of charge could be considerable, as illustrated by a young girl discussing the impact of a reduction in access to free swimming locally:

The swimming was keeping some of the children off the streets, which was a good thing because when children are on the streets they can't find anything to do, so then they do things that they shouldn't be doing. [...] Not many children are going swimming because their mums can't afford to give them £1 every time.

[Girl, 11 years, Remote Town/Rural, deprived area, lower income household]

Less affluent young people's accounts pointed to the constraints on their service use resulting from indirect costs entailed in equipment, clothes or materials required to participate in certain activities, despite free entry or on top of entrance charges. This is exemplified in the quote below regarding a young woman's participation in school dance classes:

Like for the dancing in school you need to buy your costumes, because they don't give you what you need.

[Girl, 13 years, City Estate, deprived area, lower income household]

Another young girl described not having inflatable armbands, noting that if her parents could afford to buy her some this would '*make it better for swimming*' (10 years, Accessible Town, deprived area, lower income household). Such indirect costs could prohibit service use, even when entry itself was free.

Importantly, it was the *cumulative* impact of direct costs of accessing services combined with the indirect costs such as transport or food, which were frequently emphasised by young

people from lower income households, but rarely by those in families with a comfortable income. One particularly striking example was given by a 10-year old girl living in a deprived rural area. She had been unable to learn to swim because her mother could not afford to take her and her siblings to the swimming pool. The cost of transport to the nearest pool, at a distance of some 20 miles away, on top of entrance costs for the whole family was prohibitive. Her school did not provide swimming lessons until the last year in primary and thus there were no alternative forms of provision for her to learn to swim. This unaffordability deprived her not only of leisure but also the development of skills, fitness and safety (in an area close to the sea and rivers).

Limited mobility associated with lack of affordable transport was a key feature of the experiences of young people from lower income households. They were frequently constrained to using services located locally. Moreover, local services in the areas they lived in were frequently limited in range, scope and quality. For example, many young people living in the City Estate perceived there to be very few leisure facilities available locally: there was no cinema, no theatre, few youth clubs or other organised activities and few places to meet friends. Not only was provision limited, but a combination of poor environmental conditions in the local neighbourhood resulting from vandalism, rubbish and graffiti and a range of problems related to feeling unsafe in the locality further contributed to young people's limited engagement with leisure services.

Coping with limited resources

Less affluent young people tended to be more conscious of service costs and their implications for service use than those from more affluent households. For some, this included an awareness of their parents going without, in order that they as children could benefit. A young woman described her mother's strategies to meet the needs of the children in her household:

Well, my mum takes me [shopping] ... well she gets money like the last Wednesday of the month, so she takes me out one Wednesday and then my big brother and then my big cousin, because my big cousin lives with me. She doesn't really buy anything for herself, but we always say 'get this for yourself, get that for yourself', but she always says 'no, what about you?'

[Girl, 13 years, City Estate, deprived area, lower income household]

There was also evidence that young people modified their own activities and strategies in response to their awareness of their families' current financial situation, which included restraining requests to parents. Such findings illustrate children's agency in helping the family to manage financial pressures, reflecting findings from previous research (cf. Attree, 2004; Shropshire and Middleton, 1999). As one girl noted, she chose to go swimming only '*when I know my mum has got enough money*' (10 years, Remote Town/Rural, non-deprived area, lower income household). Young people also described methods they used to increase their personal financial resources, such as taking on part-time employment, common among the 13 and 14 year olds from less affluent households as a way of generating additional personal disposable income.

Trying to ensure that value for money was maximised was another such strategy, including hunting for bargains when out shopping or making price comparisons through

visiting several stores before making any spending decision. Indeed, many children from less affluent households were particularly knowledgeable about which stores were more or less expensive:

So [the music store] is cheaper, but there is also [another store], so I usually go and check them both and then buy from the shop that is cheaper, because they are very close to each other.

[Girl, 14 years, City Estate, deprived area, lower income household]

The study also revealed how children from lower income households sought to hide their inability to afford certain activities from their peers. For example, one 11-year-old who lived in a low income household (Accessible Town) described how he would go along to the cinema with friends, but would slip away without explanation if he could not afford the ticket.

Correspondingly, others realised that peers could be ashamed that they were unable to afford joining in a certain activity and pretended the reason was other than lack of money:

My friend doesn't go very many places with us and I actually feel sorry for her. She doesn't go as much places; she comes up with excuses, but I think it is because of that [not having money], which is a shame. But we try and get her to come.

[Girl, 13 years, Accessible Town, non-deprived area, higher income household]

A number of study participants from both higher and lower income households gave detailed accounts of how they perceived poverty impacting on service use. The following quote illustrates such an awareness of the impact of affordability on service use for different families, especially in terms of frequency of service use:

Child '...well, my mum doesn't even ... she can't really afford that much, that is why we don't go to the pictures a lot... [a friend], she doesn't get as much as me - she just likes to go out in the street with her pals and play football and all that, play kerbie and all that.'

Interviewer asks about young people who are better off.

Child 'Well, they could go to the pictures more often, or like go to clubs and stuff like that, swimming more and all that.'

[Boy, 10 years, Accessible Town, deprived area, lower income household]

Comparisons were also made between young people in terms of retail service use:

They [more affluent young people] would buy just the same, only that they wouldn't go to a cheap shop ... if you go to [high street store], it shows you have money, I think.

[Girl, 14 years, City Estate, deprived area, lower income household]

Another young boy (10 years, Accessible Town) expressed how delaying expenditure and going to cheaper retail outlets were features of his own retail use, while he thought that

young people from more affluent households would use 'dearer' (i.e. more expensive) shops.

The importance of extended family

The support provided by extended family members to young people to access services (aunts, uncles, grandparents and the like) was a strong theme for many study participants. Such support could mitigate within-household poverty by enabling young people from lower income households to access services that might otherwise be unavailable to them because of limited household resources.

Extended family were particularly significant in helping to cover direct and indirect costs, through taking young people to the cinema or shopping centre, as well as longer trips away including holidays. They were also important providers of personal income to young people, through either gifts of money for special occasions or financial contributions on a more regular basis. Relatives providing transport for trips both locally and further afield provided opportunities to children from lower income households that they may not otherwise have had.

While gifts of resources to young people from extended kin were apparent across the study sample, for young people from poorer households, these often covered more basic needs and therefore were of greater significance. This is illustrated in the following quote:

Child 'For [my] birthday I get about a £20 note from my auntie.'

Interviewer 'Oh right, and what would you spend that on?'

Child 'I would just buy it on clothes. I'm needing some clothes, that's what I dae [do]....'

[Girl, 10 years, Accessible Town, deprived area, lower income household]

These findings confirm previous research, as indicated by a review of qualitative evidence suggesting a 'softening' of the impact of poverty as a result of cash or gifts young people receive via extended family (Attree, 2004). A further important way in which family members provided support was through offering access to resources that could be used as alternatives to use of formal services. For example, enabling children to play in private gardens could reduce the wish to go elsewhere for recreation. This highlights the importance of informal spaces for young people as well as more formal services (see Wager and others, 2007).

Help in covering direct or indirect costs sometimes came from supportive individuals within the local community, such as neighbours or friends of parents. However, the study discussions indicated that often supportive networks within the local community were fairly limited and for a number of study respondents, their own supportive *adult* network did not exist beyond their extended family. In contrast, as the next section describes, peer-based friendships and networks were of prime importance for young people in negotiating their access to a range of services.

The importance of peer friendships

Previous research has shown that children from lower income households may experience particular difficulties in maintaining or extending their friendships as a result of financial constraints (Ridge, 2002) and, indeed, the present study showed how restrictions on retail and leisure activities noted above can negatively affect '*children's capacity to meet up with friends and widen social networks*' (Ridge, 2006, p. 28). However, there was also evidence of the positive ways in which peer relationships helped children living in lower income households to access services. In particular, children described how they or their parents could support their friends to access certain services by paying the associated costs or helping with transport and other arrangements:

If some, say, like one of my friends, if they're with me and my Mum ... and I had extra money I would give them it so that they could go.

[Girl, 10 years, City Estate, deprived area, lower income household]

There were also examples of reciprocity taking place between friends to support access provision:

[A friend] comes swimming once a week with me, and I usually pay for her to get in and that because I am like 'well, I will pay for it' so we can both pay for different things and that. She has helped me in the past, so I like to help her.

[Girl, 11 years, Remote Town/Rural, deprived area, lower income household]

However, while support from peers was often seen as facilitating access to a wider range of services, it could also be associated with fears of being stigmatised or viewed as somehow 'different':

If [my friend] offered me and she said 'I'll get the tickets' [to the cinema], I would say 'no, I'll get a ticket for myself and you get your own ticket', because I don't like getting money off people.

[Girl, 11 years, Remote Town/Rural, deprived area, lower income household]

The role of local agencies as intermediaries

Young people's comments showed that agencies and professionals in the voluntary and statutory sectors could also play an important mediation role enabling them to learn about or attend services they might otherwise not be able to afford.

Schools themselves had not been included by most of the children's groups when listing what they meant by 'services', perhaps because being at school was so much part of their everyday lives. On the other hand, when discussing other services, children often mentioned gaining knowledge or access through school. For example, after-school clubs and school-based extra-curricular activities (sports, music) were frequently highlighted. For some, particularly those from lower income households, school-based access formed the only opportunity for participating in such activities. Schools also provided young people with opportunities to

visit art galleries and theme parks. A number of young people from lower income households indicated they would be unable to participate in such activities otherwise because of cost. Schools were also an important point of access to health services such as school nurses, dentists and health clinics.

Service providers in a variety of settings were described as facilitating young people's engagement with a range of other local provision. The role of youth clubs and projects in providing information about local opportunities and encouraging attendance at other services featured strongly in children's accounts. Sometimes, these services were recreational, but in other instances, young people were assisted to gain personal or therapeutic support. Certain projects undertook this on a systematic basis, such as health drop in-clinics provided in youth clubs (Remote Town/Rural). In others, the mediation role appeared to be largely dependent on particular individuals working within a service or project.

Transformative opportunities

A strong theme emerging from the data was the importance for some children of professionals and agencies supporting them to engage with a range of other services, which could open up opportunities for developing skills, contacts and confidence, i.e. social capital. One example concerned an 11-year-old girl living in a lower income household in the City Estate, who rarely used any local services. Her social worker put her in contact with a befriending agency, which resulted in a volunteer taking her on weekly trips funded by the agency, to use facilities such as the cinema, shopping centre and leisure centre, within the local area and further afield. Such support provided the means of experiencing a broader range of activities including some beyond the immediate locale. These services may be described as transformative through a combination of creating opportunities which the children attending otherwise lacked to develop new skills and enhance social networks and tackling practical barriers to service use such as limited mobility and affordability. Such services were particularly significant for children from lower income households. They can be a base for resilience in the face of neighbourhood as well as financial disadvantage (cf. Seaman and others, 2006).

Conclusion and discussion

This study undertaken with children and young people concentrated on leisure, retail and health services as these were the three most salient to young people themselves, identified through focus groups. Only the first two of these were clearly affected by relative affluence and, therefore, have been the focus of this article.

The research illuminated how low household income often limits the use of services that children see as particularly important in their everyday lives. While direct service charges sometimes deterred service use by those in this study whose parents could not afford it, associated costs for travel, special clothes, equipment and so on were just as influential in determining service use, if not more so. With regard to leisure facilities, the consequences for less affluent children were opting out of activities that their more affluent peers engaged in or attending less frequently. Their shopping involved searching for cheaper items, buying less

and going less often than those with higher income parents. Overall, they made use of a smaller range of opportunities than those from more affluent households and were often confined to services provided within the local area. Difficulties in affording travel outside the home neighbourhood not only restricted exposure to different areas and experiences, but also reinforced the importance of the range of local provision and the significance of risks present in the neighbourhood (considered further in Wager and others, 2007).

The more restricted access to services experienced by children and young people in low-income families in comparison to their more affluent peers has implications not only for their current satisfaction, but also for their future development and prospects. Recreation and shopping may seem not so important when compared with basic needs for food, clothing, housing and so on. However, these are key activities undertaken in children's lives, usually along with family members or friends, which provide opportunities for the acquisition of skills, knowledge and social contacts. These are seen as vital elements of human and social capital in modern society. Activities such as sports, drama and dancing can play an important role in enhancing children's health, safety and self-confidence. Missing out or being able to attend only intermittently deprives children of such transformative opportunities.

Thus, the research has implications for our understanding of poverty and social exclusion with respect to children and young people. Both are concepts with varied interpretations, but broadly used to describe inter-connected problems related to low income, multi-dimensional disadvantage and marginalisation (e.g. Hills and others, 2002). Children's experiences highlighted the part played in this complex interaction by socially and geographically differentiated access to services, especially to those that are overtly recreational, but, in practice, multi-functional. Compared with more affluent children, many growing up in poorer households engaged less in activities providing opportunities to enhance skills, social contacts, health and safety.

For some children, social ties with relatives and peers moderated the opportunity barriers arising from low income, which facilitated greater social inclusion (cf. Tisdall and others, 2006). Help included not only providing money directly, but also involving children in spaces and activities that the parents could not afford to involve them in. Importantly, this study also revealed the supportive nature of peer friendships for accessing services, with evidence of children's opportunities being widened by friends including them in outings and activities otherwise beyond their affordability.

Of course, the most direct solution to the limitations imposed by family low income is for policies which increase financial resources. However, the study also signals other ways in which the impact of inequality may be moderated. In particular, there is a need for heightened awareness among service providers of the hidden costs of participating in a service and where appropriate, assistance with meeting them, whether in cash or in kind (e.g. transport, special clothing or equipment). Assistance with travel is vital across rural and urban areas, in order for young people to access opportunities beyond their immediate locale. Difficulties related to perceived lack of safety, particularly in deprived urban areas, as well as concerns about limited range, scope and quality of provision, also need to be addressed.

Schools, leisure centres and clubs can play a crucial part, first, by allowing use of their own premises and second, through acting as conduits to other provision. Indeed, a key message

arising from the research concerns those children who are only accessing a very few services, suggesting the need for awareness-raising about the role that statutory services can play in supporting children's engagement with a broader range of other provision. The study also highlights an important role for services in providing potentially transformative opportunities for young people from less affluent households through enabling their access to and involvement in services, which may in turn benefit young people through, for example, the development of new skills and the enhancement of social networks.

Last but not least, service providers and professionals need to listen carefully to what children have to say locally (cf. Cairns, 2006). They need to acquire detailed local understandings of which services are wanted and valued by children and what specific constraints occur in their areas. Within such an approach, it is vital to ensure the opportunity for children living in poverty to have a voice, in order that service provision may take account of the particular needs they may have in accessing and using services in their everyday lives.

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