

The Everyday Costs of Poverty in Childhood: A Review of Qualitative Research Exploring the Lives and Experiences of Low-Income Children in the UK

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This review of 10 years of qualitative research with disadvantaged children in the UK shows that despite some gaps in the knowledge base, there is now a substantive body of evidence exploring children's lives and experiences from their own perspectives. The review reveals that poverty penetrates deep into the heart of childhood, permeating every facet of children's lives from economic and material disadvantage, through the structuring and limiting of social relationships and social participation to the most personal often hidden aspects of disadvantage associated with shame, sadness and the fear of social difference and marginalisation. © 2010 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2010 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Introduction

The passing of the Child Poverty Act in 2010 is an important milestone in the policy drive towards fulfilling the Labour administration's pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020. A key piece of legislation it binds future administrations of whatever hue into a sustained commitment to address child poverty. However, the success of future government's strategies for low-income children will lie in ensuring that policies and services targeted at improving children's lives really do address the lived experience of poverty for children. Without a good understanding of how poverty and disadvantage are experienced, interpreted and mediated by disadvantaged children, there is the possibility that policies will falter or fail to constructively address the social, material and personal impacts of poverty in childhood. It is therefore vital to engage with low-income children and take account of their views in the development of policies and the commissioning of services (Ridge, 2002; Wager and others, 2010).

With this in mind, the Child Poverty Unit¹ (CPU) commissioned a critical summary of evidence from qualitative research carried out in the UK with low-income children and parents over a 10-year period from 1998 to 2008 (Ridge, 2009). The study addressed a gap in policy awareness about the lived experience of childhood poverty and informed the CPU's plans for engaging with children to develop a 'vision of 2020', 'exploring what a world in which child poverty has been eradicated could or should look like' (Ridge, 2009, p. 7). This research

review draws on that study (for previous reviews designed for different purposes, see Attree, 2006; Attree and Redmond, 2008). In particular, this review considers the following issues:

- What are the key areas of concern identified by low-income children?
- How does poverty impact on children's lives in their homes, neighbourhoods and at school?
- How does poverty affect children's relationships with their peers, their families and other adults such as teachers?
- What does the research evidence tell us about how children negotiate, mediate and cope with the everyday challenges of poverty?
- Whose voices are missing from the evidence base and what methodological issues were raised by the review?

Methodological approach

Qualitative, subjective research with low-income children has been slow to develop, with much of the policy evidence about children tending to be informed by large surveys and birth cohort studies. However, there is now a growing body of research in this field drawing on different theoretical and methodological approaches and embracing a wide range of techniques and practices. Such research presents many ethical and methodological challenges, not least in relation to the sensitivities of researching a stigmatised social issue like poverty (see e.g. Sime, 2008). The concept of children's 'voice' in research can also be problematic and there is a growing critical body of work that questions how meaningful research engagement with children can be in different settings and circumstances (see Lundy, 2007). Therefore, research with low-income children and young people needs to be particularly sensitive, reflective, meaningful and methodologically sound. Furthermore, qualitative research presents particular challenges when producing research evidence that can be utilised within policy. However, children experiencing poverty are highly likely to be the target of policy interventions to eradicate child poverty and qualitative research has a key role to play in ensuring that the views of children and young people are incorporated in the development of well-informed, appropriately targeted policy and practice. To this end, research in this field needs to be particularly robust and rigorous if it is to impact on the formulation of policies for children.

The CPU review was not a systematic review, which is arguably best suited to synthesising results on specific topics or questions from studies using specified methodologies and populations. Given the time constraints this was not possible, and some studies that provided valuable evidence were not specifically about poverty or disadvantage, and others that did focus directly on poverty did not contain the kind of first person evidence that was being sought. Therefore, the approach to identifying criteria for including or excluding studies was necessarily pragmatic and iterative. The review process entailed extensive searches of citation databases and endeavoured to draw out research findings from a range of published research studies, and research carried out with children by academic and non-academic sources. There were a wide range of methods used in the research covered by the review, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, group work, case studies, participatory workshops and action research.

Some of the more imaginative and innovative messages that emerged from these types of studies were particularly valuable, especially where children had been able to freely

articulate their experiences and concerns in an empowering environment. However, it was also the case that some of the research and engagement activities that were assessed were not suitable for this review for a variety of reasons including where they were considered too methodologically weak to contribute to the knowledge base of the review. Further details of the methodological approach adopted can be found in the full report (Ridge, 2009).²

The following sections summarise the findings from the review to highlight the key messages that can be drawn from listening to children's accounts of their lives and the challenges, demands and pressures that poverty places upon them on a regular basis.

The impact of poverty in childhood – economic and material deprivation

Poverty and deprivation are underpinned by economic insecurity and a lack of access to material resources; evidence from the studies reviewed showed that low-income children have a keen understanding of how poverty impacts on their lives and the social and material uncertainty that low income brings to everyday life (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Ridge, 2002; Ridge and Millar, 2008; Roker, 1998).

Children's accounts of the economic and material affects of poverty highlighted three main areas of pressure: adequacy of income; a deficiency of material resources; and a lack of key material and symbolic markers of social inclusion in childhood such as branded goods and trainers. For children 'not having enough money' – created considerable material, social and familial tensions. Constrained access to material goods and childhood possessions, toys, bikes, games and appropriate clothing was a common experience. However, going without was not restricted to toys and leisure goods – some children were also going without food, bedding, towels and other essential everyday items. Poverty, particularly poverty sustained over time, meant that children were not only unable to keep up with the purchases and possessions of their peers but also often unable to replace lost, stolen or broken items. Having appropriate clothes and trainers was also an important concern for children. Wearing the 'right' trainers conferred popularity and 'coolness', and were seen by children in one study to have a protective effect in relation to bullying (Elliot and Leonard, 2004). As a result, low-income children were struggling particularly hard to get the 'right' trainers and by doing so thereby disguise the reality of their economic situation at home.

Poverty and social relationships

Disadvantaged children, like any other children, are keen to make friends, take part in events and shared activities and belong to the social groups to which they aspire. However, these essential and formative social interactions are severely tested and often undermined by the ways in which poverty can structure and restrict everyday childhood experiences and interactions. As a result low-income children experienced considerable anxiety, unhappiness and social insecurity in relation to their friendships and their social participation (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Ridge, 2002, 2007; Roker, 1998).

Making and sustaining friends is important to children, and studies such as Morrow's (2001) show that secure social networks and good friendships confer a high degree of social security and social connection; they also foster children's sense of well-being and belonging. However, making and sustaining friendships require access to economic resources that are often in short supply in low-income families.

As childhood becomes increasingly commodified, low-income children's opportunities for social interaction and participation in accepted social activities becomes increasingly difficult. Children's narratives reveal a catalogue of disadvantage and barriers to participation including a lack of affordable and adequate transport and poor or expensive leisure service provision. These experiences of exclusion are further heightened by a lack of access through the costs associated with participation including entry costs, uniform or equipment costs and refreshments. These social barriers are exacerbated by a lack of affordable and accessible out-of-school provision (see below).

Personal

Fears about being left out or marginalised pervaded children's accounts. Poverty in childhood extracts a high emotional toll on children trying to 'fit in' and 'join in' with their peers. Children's inner fears and their experiences of feeling humiliated, sad and shamed are often hidden and they are rarely asked about their thoughts and feelings. However, sensitively conducted studies have revealed the deep emotional costs that hardship can bring to children's lives (see among others Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Hooper and others, 2007; Ridge, 2002, 2007; Seaman and others, 2006). Children in Hooper and others' (2007, p. 59) study described how poverty made them feel anxious, sad, frustrated and angry. Poverty brings both uncertainty and insecurity, and it can penetrate deep into social and interpersonal relationships, sapping self-esteem and undermining children's confidence. Mapped onto children's anxieties about being different, bullied and isolated was an acute awareness that their more affluent peers were enjoying opportunities and activities that were not open to them.

Children's experiences of poverty in the home

Poverty also has an impact on well-being and relationships within the home. Low-income children were negotiating complex family terrains where their parent's capacities to manage and sustain family life on inadequate incomes was stressful and generated anxiety. Often family needs were in tension with their own social and material needs and desires. These were clearly fuelled in part by their awareness of the advantages and opportunities enjoyed by their more affluent peers; therefore children were torn between the social and personal imperatives of needing and wanting more and collective familial needs to moderate and constrain their demands.

Relationships with parents and other family members were also under pressure. Research revealed empathy and understanding among children regarding the financial pressures generated through low income on their parent's lives (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Willow, 2001). Parents' feelings about poverty were variously described as sad, angry and frustrated, and children were sensitive to the possibility that parents might feel lonely and ashamed. Even quite young children were concerned about their families' circumstances and the stresses and strains that poverty could bring. Hooper and others (2007), in a wide ranging study focusing on family relationships, revealed that when family pressures were associated with poverty children were hiding their needs, and that where parents were stressed children were also likely to be stressed. There was evidence that some children were experiencing conflict within their homes and the pressures of poverty could create tensions between children and parents. However, this was not the case overall and other research studies showed that although children were concerned that parents might argue about money, a lack of money could bring families together. Support from family members especially mothers was

identified as vital by children; however, relationships of support with fathers and stepfathers were not accorded the same status when children had a problem or were worried. Grandparents were also often key sources of sustenance and support, especially where there was conflict within families, or in lone parent households (Millar and Ridge, 2009; Ridge and Millar, 2008; Walker and others, 2008).

Children's care and labour within the home

Poverty placed particular demands on children who were in families in long-term receipt of benefits due to sickness and disability. Findings from a range of studies reveal the essential roles children and young people play in helping to sustain their families through caring support (Becker and Becker, 2008; Bibby and Becker, 2000; Dearden and Becker, 2005). Caring tasks ranged from domestic work like cooking and cleaning through to emotional care and support including managing medications, and for some intimate and personal care. Young carers live complex lives and these were often further compromised by the additional burden imposed by negotiating poverty and disadvantage. The financial costs of disability and sickness meant that some young carers were extremely anxious about not having enough money for their family's needs – including food, with some revealing that they went hungry to try and ensure that they could manage. Becker and Becker (2008) found that children and young people who were bearing the heaviest caring responsibilities were the least likely to be participating in leisure activities. The double impact of caring responsibilities and financial disadvantage had the effect of compounding the young carer's social exclusion.

Poverty in working families

There is still little research in this area that engages with children in low-income working families. What there is mainly drawn from a longitudinal study of the experiences of children in lone-mother, low-income working families (Millar and Ridge, 2009; Ridge, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2008)? The study focused on families where mothers had moved into low-income employment following a period out of work receiving benefits. This entailed a considerable change in children's lives, often resulting in children taking on an increased range of responsibilities and chores to help sustain employment and family life. Children whose mothers had moved into stable employment felt that they were better off in general and they had experienced an increase in opportunities for participation in leisure activities and clubs, although this was from a low base. However, despite the advantages identified by these children, there were also indications that there were some costs involved, with children expressing anxieties about the pressures of employment on their mother's health and well-being. For some children, there were also ongoing concerns about debt and inadequacy of income even in work. For children whose mothers had been unable to sustain secure employment and/or had experienced moves in and out of employment, the resulting financial insecurity was particularly difficult for children to cope with. Overall, the fear of a return to unemployment and poverty was an ongoing anxiety for most of the children in the study.

Housing and homelessness

Housing is a critical issue for low-income children who are highly vulnerable to experiencing poor quality, inadequate, unfit and unstable housing conditions. A wide range of studies revealed significant concerns (including Harker, 2006; Mustafa, 2004; Robinson, 2002). Homes were often described by children as damp, cold, run down, dirty, in some cases

rat-infested and overcrowded. Studies such as Rice's (2006), which engaged with 7- to 11-year-olds living in poor housing, shows that unfit conditions and overcrowding had an effect not only on children's health and well-being, but also on their social lives. Anxiety about overcrowding and poor conditions affected sleeping, studying and playing with friends. Overlaying the physical and social impact was also a high emotional cost related to anxieties about stigma and extra difficulties making and sustaining friendships. Lack of warmth and freezing conditions in winter mean that children got cold, and had difficulties in sleeping and experienced poor health. Friends were reluctant to come and stay in poor-quality and cold conditions, and lack of space coupled with a lack of affordable transport affected the nature of friendships, restricting opportunities for participation and inhibiting the everyday reciprocal exchanges of shared lifts and favours between families that make up a key part of childhood.

Homelessness brings social and emotional upheaval and loss, with children experiencing displacement from schools, neighbourhoods and friends. Temporary accommodation could make children feel embarrassed, restricted and socially insecure (Nettleton, 2001). Children's narratives expose the significant impact of losing a home both within the family and on a personal social level. Losing a home meant losing touch with friends and making new friends became harder each time children had to move. Trying to stay at the same school was critically important but ultimately a struggle for many children for whom long and tiring journeys were often unsustainable due to the costs of fuel and fares. Repeated moves brought extreme stress and anxiety and, for some, vulnerability to bullying and poor mental health.

The neighbourhood

Studies that engaged with children from different social backgrounds to explore their freedoms, safety and use of public space found that, for low-income children, opportunities to use and enjoy public space and street play were an essential compensation for the restrictions and lack of space in many homes (see Sutton, 2008; Sutton and others, 2007). Public space is private space for children, and shopping areas, streets, wild areas, woods and ruins are all important. However, public space was depicted as degraded and hostile by many disadvantaged children. Their accounts of neighbourhood spaces show that impoverished neighbourhoods present children with severe challenges (see Elsey, 2004; Meek, 2008; Seaman and others, 2006; Sutton, 2008; Sutton and others, 2007; Wager and others, 2007; Walker and others, 2008). Urban neighbourhoods in particular were seen as dirty, unsafe and unwelcoming by children, who had to negotiate broken glass, dog mess, discarded needles and generally hazardous and degraded environments.

A further problem identified by children was aggression and hostility by adults and gangs. In a study by Butler (2005), disadvantaged children aged between 6- and 11-years-old expressed considerable concern and anxiety about their neighbourhoods. They experienced them as 'scary places' and many had either experienced or witnessed aggression, drunkenness and harassment by adults or gangs of older youths. This was a major concern for children who felt very aggrieved about offensive behaviour by adults in their communities.

Experiences of neighbourhoods can also vary according to age, gender and ethnicity. For example, Morrow's (2001) study of neighbourhood experiences found that girls were more likely to feel unsafe than boys and that children from ethnic minority groups had experienced disturbing incidents of racial harassment. Age was also an issue with younger children

feeling that they lacked safe space to play and older young people missing out on places to meet and socialise. Staying safe in problematic local neighbourhoods was challenging for children and some were clearly resigned to being bullied and harassed. Others had a range of strategies for keeping themselves safe; these included staying together in groups for protection, although this could prove problematic when adults or other peers interpreted this behaviour as threatening (Seaman and others, 2006).

Low-income rural childhoods

Low-income children and young people in rural areas identify a rather different set of challenges to those expressed by children in degraded urban spaces. Although rural areas might be characterised as desirable space, evidence from children shows that in reality low-income rural children are often restricted from entering and enjoying many rural spaces. Poverty in rural areas is often experienced in the midst of affluence and can be a highly stigmatised experience and children report being isolated and excluded within their local environments. Rural space is limited and children can be in competition for space with adults whilst also experiencing difficulties getting out of rural villages and towns due to inadequate and costly transport. In addition, a chronic lack of accessible leisure opportunities meant that children were increasingly visible and could come into conflict with adults resulting in increased surveillance and censure (Meek, 2008; Ridge, 2002, 2007; Sweeney, 2008).

Public services

Transport plays a vital role in contemporary childhood enabling participation in leisure and out-of-school activities, enabling access to friends and proving the means by which most children are able to travel beyond the immediate confines of their homes and neighbourhoods. In general, children's access to private transport is heavily mediated by adults, and this is also the case for low-income children, although the costs of running a car is prohibitive for most families and children's social needs may not be priorities for families trying to manage on a restricted budget (Ridge, 2002, 2007). Public transport plays a highly significant role for children whose parents cannot afford to run a private car. However, children's narratives reveal that public transport can be expensive, inflexible and inadequate, it can also make them feel unsafe (Sweeney, 2008; Wager and others, 2007). In rural areas, transport can be particularly problematic exacerbating rural isolation and effectively containing young people within their immediate localities.

Leisure opportunities

Formal provision of leisure activities can play a key role in providing space and opportunities for participation for low-income children. When public and private space was available and not compromised, children had less motivation to use formal activities but when space was restricted, leisure services were of critical importance. However, children face a range of barriers in accessing good quality services. Wager and others (2007) studied the take-up and use of formal service provision by disadvantaged children in Scotland and found that barriers to access included poorly located services, inadequate transport, a lack of provision and badly designed and/or costly services that did not cater for children's needs. The perceived safety of locations, staff attitudes to low-income children and the timing of services were also issues identified as problematic by children. These factors effectively excluded low-income children from whatever services there were. Extra support for low-income children,

for example from the Children's Fund, was highly valued by children and research by Pinnock and Evans (2008) showed that Children's Fund workers developing individually tailored support for children created important additions opening up opportunities for participation. However, services were often time-limited and children were unhappy about the perceived arbitrary removal of support as they got older.

Impact of poverty at school

School is a primary area of public service provision for children, and one of the service areas that has the potential to make a significant contribution to the well-being of children experiencing disadvantage. Research evidence shows that although children's experiences of school are diverse, and some children reported good experiences at school, the great majority of children revealed that poverty was having a corrosive and damaging impact on their school careers (see Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Horgan, 2009; Ridge, 2002; Walker and others, 2008). Their accounts expose a series of concerns that cumulatively can have a significant and harmful effect on children's everyday lives at school. First, lack of economic and material resources effectively constrained children from obtaining many of the items that are increasingly expected at school. Second, they were under pressure to purchase course work materials, books, revision guides and material for assessed coursework. Third, they found it difficult to ensure that they had appropriate school uniforms. A lack of expected items could also lead to disciplinary action and conflict with the school. The harmful economic and material effects of poverty within school was further aggravated for children by institutional provision, for example free school meals, where the process of delivery was identified as highly stigmatised and embarrassing.

Some children in deprived areas felt that although school potentially represented an opportunity for them to escape from poverty, the reality was that they felt poorly served by their schools, with some identifying teacher's attitudes towards them as discriminatory (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007). This was reflected in other studies where children linked disadvantage to poor relationships with teachers especially in relation to being shouted at. They also expressed a sense of being badly taught and generally undervalued and disregarded because of their disadvantage (ATD Fourth World, 2000; Horgan, 2007a,b; Sutton and others, 2007). Relationships between low-income parents and schools were complex, with some children valuing parents involvement in school parents evening and others feeling that their parents were only ever involved with school when they were in trouble of some kind.

The pervasive effects of poverty within school meant that children's secure social integration within school was threatened, and children's narratives of school life were often infused with anxiety, uncertainty and a sense of unfairness. Of particular concern was their fear of being seen as different and vulnerable to bullying and isolation. A key reason given for non-attendance was children's fear of being bullied. Potentially problematic social relationships were exacerbated by exclusion within schools, especially from opportunities for participation. Going on school trips and other social activities were particularly limited. Participating in school trips was highly valued by children, and often linked to curriculum study. Children going without school trips were sometimes experiencing a double disadvantage as their families were often unable to afford a family holiday either. In some cases, children and young people were making a judgement that the school trips or activities were too expensive for their family's to afford and therefore did not even ask their parents whether they could go, effectively excluding themselves from the events (Ridge, 2002). School could also be

particularly challenging for children in marginalised communities and research with Gypsy and Traveller children exposed the harsh realities of trying to fit into school life when you are perceived as 'different' (Lloyd and Stead, 2001; Ureche and Franks, 2007).

Strategies for coping

It is clear from the review that poverty imposes a harsh penalty on children's lives, constraining their social engagement and penetrating deep into the emotional heartland of their personal and family life. Yet children were clearly not passively enduring the effects of poverty, and many were actively adopting a range of strategies to mediate and negotiate the impact of disadvantage on their lives. These coping strategies included contributing in cash and in kind to family life, moderating their needs and concealing the effects of poverty from their friends and families. Each of these strategies was potentially costly for children themselves (see Backett-Milburn and others, 2003; Hooper and others, 2007; Ridge, 2002, 2006).

Contributing to family budgets through employment

Employment was a key strategy for children who had little access to autonomous income through other sources such as pocket money. Giving and lending parents money was evident in a range of studies where children were trying to ease economic pressure by helping out financially and/or paying for their own clothes and activities. Where employment was available (and in depressed areas it was not always the case), low-income children were keen to work as it represented an opportunity to keep up with peers and enjoy some elements of economic autonomy and social inclusion (Mizen and others, 2001). However, there is evidence that the demands of employment could be in conflict with the expectations and imperatives of school work. For those trying to do well at school, this presented a particular challenge when trying to balance their needs for income with their aspirations for the future.

Moderating needs and managing expectations

Moderating needs and containing expectations was a more covert strategy of support, and suppression of need and reducing demands for clothing, activities and school events was often hidden from parents. Concealments were also evident from findings with children in low-income working families where despite employment – and often as a response to inadequate waged income – some children were still carefully managing their needs and expectations to avoid putting stress and financial pressure on their mothers (Ridge, 2006).

Key lessons from the review

Until relatively recently, there was little qualitative evidence relating to the impact of poverty on the everyday lives of low-income and disadvantaged children. Their lives and experiences were especially marginalised and their voices remained unheard and largely disregarded. This review of 10 years of qualitative research with disadvantaged children in the UK shows that despite some gaps in the knowledge base, there is now a substantive body of evidence that reveals the impact of poverty in childhood from the perspective of children themselves.

There are key gaps in the evidence base, particularly in relation to the experiences of children from different ethnic minority groups, disadvantaged disabled children, and those in

marginalised groups such as refugee and asylum seeking children. There is also still a limited amount of research that explores childhood poverty through the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. This would draw out the ways in which social divisions (e.g. age, gender and ethnicity) and social processes can interact in a multitude of different ways and on different levels to create conditions of multiple disadvantages.

Nevertheless, this evidence base provides clear, consistent and largely unequivocal evidence about the pervasive and damaging effects of childhood poverty to policy-makers, service providers and professionals who work with low-income children, young people and their families. The studies reviewed here have shown that the impact of deprivation and hardship is felt in all areas of children's lives from the economic, social and relational constraints that poverty brings in its wake, to the deeply painful and damaging aspects of poverty that children strive to mediate, contain and often hide. The personal and relational aspects of poverty can bring stigma, shame, sadness and the fear of being identified or isolated for being different. These are severe burdens to carry in childhood. Deprivation and disadvantaged clearly permeates every area of children's lives, in the home, in their neighbourhoods, at school and in their social worlds.

The social repercussions of poverty are often overlooked and easily disregarded, especially when policy concerns are focused on other perhaps more tangible concerns such as children's economic welfare, their school attendance and performance, and their health and well-being. Yet the social and relational effects of poverty are clearly fundamentally important issues for low-income children themselves. Furthermore, the evidence also shows that children are active and resourceful, and they seek to manage and mediate the highly corrosive effects of poverty where and when they can. These strategies of survival involve mediation and moderation, concealment of needs, employment and attempts to gain some autonomous control of income and resources. However, these strategies of survival are not without tensions and costs for children themselves.

Notes

- 1 Created in 2007 to take forward the child poverty strategy to eradicate child poverty.
- 2 This review is indebted to a wide range of literature that is not necessarily cited here but can be found in the main report.

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