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CLS Briefings



Following lives from birth and through the adult years

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The Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) is an ESRC Resource Centre based at the Institute of Education, University of London. CLS is responsible for three of Britain's birth cohort studies:

- 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS)
- 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)
- Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

The studies involve multiple surveys of large numbers of individuals from birth and throughout their lives. Over the years they have collected detailed information on education and employment, family and parenting, physical and mental health, and social attitudes. Because they are longitudinal studies following the same groups of people throughout their lives, they show how histories of health, wealth, education,

family and employment are interwoven for individuals, vary between them and affect outcomes and achievements in later life. Through comparing the different generations in the three cohorts, we can chart social change and start to untangle the reasons behind it. Findings from the studies have contributed to debates and enquiries in a wide range of policy areas over the last half-century.

The aim of CLS Briefings is to provide examples of findings from the three cohort studies. Although the findings they include are not exhaustive, they give an idea of the work that has been carried out and the scope of the studies for future research. Data from the 1958, 1970 and Millennium cohorts is available free of charge from the UK Data Archive (www.data-archive.ac.uk), which is administered by the Economic and Social Data Service, University of Essex.

The intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and advantage

This briefing paper provides examples of research from the 1958 and 1970 birth cohort studies that illustrate how multiple disadvantage and advantage are transmitted through the generations. In addition to research around the social exclusion agenda that was the driving force of Labour's Sure Start programme for pre-school children of deprived families, the paper considers the characteristics of children from poor backgrounds who go on to escape disadvantage in adulthood. Researchers who are interested in undertaking further work in this area should refer to the table on page 4, which summarises some of the relevant questions asked of cohort members and their families.

The 1958 and 1970 birth cohort studies are ideal for studying the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and advantage since both include detailed information on the characteristics and behaviour of the cohort member's family of origin, such as parental income, and on all sources of income received by cohort members and their partners. Furthermore, the richness and breadth of the data make it possible to investigate the role that factors such as parental interest play in enabling those from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in later life.

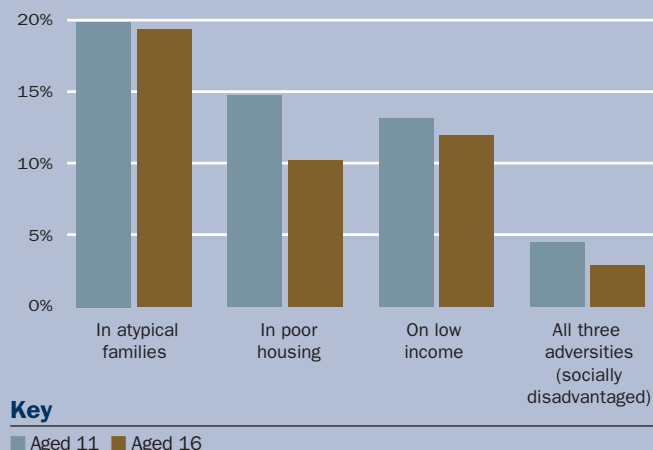
Disadvantage in childhood

A considerable amount of research has been carried out on childhood disadvantage using cohort study data following Sir Keith Joseph's defining 1972 speech on the persistence of poverty in relatively affluent post-war Britain. Then Secretary of

State for Social Services, his speech concerned the apparent tendency for poverty to be concentrated in particular families, and speculated on the mechanisms associated with its transmission.

Using data from the 1958 cohort Essen and Wedge (1982) identified children who were socially disadvantaged in terms of poor housing, low income and an atypical family situation (one parent/large family) at the ages of eleven and sixteen.

Figure 1: Proportion of Children aged 11 and 16 with each adversity, and multiply disadvantaged



Source: Source: Essen and Wedge (1982) Table 4.6, page 25

As shown in Figure 1, they found that many of those in adversity at age eleven were experiencing similar circumstances at sixteen. While both poor housing and low income were less common among 16-year-olds than among 11-year-olds the proportion living in atypical families remained much the same. Their work also highlighted that a high proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds exhibited characteristics such as poor educational attainment and behaviour likely to lead to later social disadvantage.

The Cycle of Deprivation

“I am hopeful that it will be possible to mount studies that will give us a better understanding of the nature of the ‘cycle of deprivation’ and of the dynamics of poverty...These first years are crucial: the roots of much deprivation go back to infancy.”
 Extract of speech given by Sir Keith Joseph at the Pre-school Playgroups Association Conference, 29th June 1972

Every Child Matters: Change for Children

“The evidence shows clearly that educational achievement is the most effective way to improve outcomes for poor children and break cycles of deprivation.”
 Department for Education and Skills, 2004

Predicting disadvantage in later life

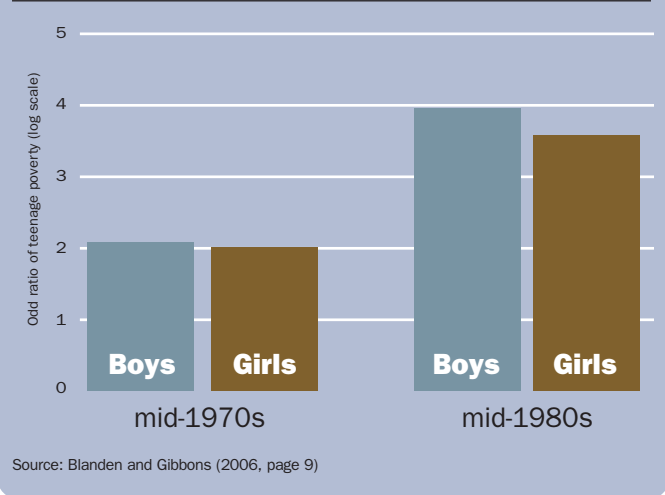
Hobcraft (1998) used data from the 1958 cohort to explore the transmission of social exclusion across generations and across the life-course. He identified childhood poverty, family disruption, contact with the police, educational test scores and father’s interest in schooling as the five most powerful and consistent predictors of disadvantage in later life. Educational test scores were revealed to be an especially powerful predictor of later educational outcomes.

Hobcraft’s research revealed that father’s interest in schooling is a powerful predictor of a range of states associated with adult disadvantage, including having no qualifications at age 33, low income, social housing and receipt of state benefits. Men whose father had showed little interest in their schooling were more than four times more likely to have no qualifications at age 33 than those whose father had been very interested (odds ratio 4.34: 1). For the equivalent group of women the odds of having no qualifications by age 33 were similar, if less strong (odds 3.71: 1). Father’s interest in schooling seems to play an especially important role for girls. For female cohort members, having a father who was disinterested in their schooling significantly increased the odds of becoming a teenage mother (1.61: 1), giving birth outside marriage (2.24: 1) and having a high malaise score (1.58: 1), when compared with the control group whose father had been very interested in their schooling.

Some of Hobcraft’s most important findings concern the intergenerational transmission of social exclusion. One of the examples he cites is the transmission of housing disadvantage. Cohort members whose parents had rented local authority accommodation were significantly more likely to be living in social housing as adults, compared with those whose parents had been owner occupiers (odds 2.45: 1 for men; odds 1.83: 1 for women).

Sigle-Rushton (2004) used data from the 1970 cohort to explore the childhood factors that are most strongly associated with adult social exclusion, as reflected by a wide range of outcome measures. Academic test scores (from a variety of

Figure 2: How teenage poverty affects the odds of being poor in adulthood (age 30-33)



tests administered at ages five, ten and sixteen) and parental housing tenure were the strongest and most consistent correlates of adult disadvantage. For men with at least one set of academic test scores in the bottom quartile during childhood, the odds of having no qualifications at age 30 are nearly ten times that of men who had two scores in the top quartile. Like Hobcraft, Sigle-Rushton (2004) found some evidence of the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and of the continuity of disadvantage over time. For example, compared with owner occupiers, cohort members recorded living in local authority housing at least once during childhood are between three and five times more likely to be in social housing at age 30.

Blanden and Gibbons (2006) investigated the persistence of poverty from the teenage years to the early thirties and beyond using data collected at age 16 for both cohorts, and at age 30 (for the 1970 cohort), 33 and 42 (for the cohort born in 1958). Cohort members or their families were estimated as living in poverty if their income fell below the poverty line, defined as 60% of the median family income.

Figure 2 summarises how teenage poverty affects the odds of being poor for adults in their early thirties. The persistence of poverty is similar for men and women who were teenagers in the 1970s, with an odds ratio of about 2 in each case. However, the odds ratios for those who were teenagers in the 1980s are considerably higher, especially for men, who are almost four times as likely to be living in poverty in their early thirties if they had been poor teenagers. This illustrates how the persistence of poverty into the early thirties has increased over time, with teenage poverty having a greater impact on later outcomes for those who were teenagers in the 1980s, compared with teenagers in the 1970s. Using data for the 1958 cohort, the researchers were also able to show that the odds of being poor in early middle-age (age 42) were doubled for those adults who had been poor teenagers.

Escape from disadvantage

Why is it that some children grow up to be competent adults in spite of adverse experiences, while others from similar backgrounds do not? Cohort study data have been used for several research projects designed to identify the protective factors that can modify the effects of socio-economic disadvantage and strengthen an individual's resilience in the face of adversity.

Pilling (1990) used a sub-sample of the 1958 cohort who were socially disadvantaged at seven, eleven and/or sixteen years of age, to identify the factors associated with escaping disadvantage. Her research compared those who appeared to be doing well, in terms of educational and vocational qualifications obtained by the age of 23, with the rest of the disadvantaged group. Social disadvantage in the earlier years of childhood was particularly significant in explaining the differences between the "educational achievers" and the comparison group. She also found that those who had "escaped disadvantage" were more likely than the comparison group to get on with their parents, to have had a stimulating home background and to have had a father who played a supportive role in their education.

Schoon and Parsons (2002) used sub-samples of cohort members at age five (BCS70) and seven (NCDS) to explore the protective factors that enable children to achieve competence and the long-term outcomes of this positive adaptation. For NCDS the protective factors included being female, being born to a mother with some extended education, having a father who helps with domestic tasks, and having parents who are involved with the child's education. In BCS70, having a mother with some extended education and a father who helps with household chores were also beneficial. Among socially disadvantaged children, those whose mother had some extended education were between 37 and 78 per cent more likely to develop individual competences than the group whose mother had left school at the minimum school leaving age (odds ratio 1.37: 1 for NCDS and 1.78: 1 for BCS70).

The researchers identified those children who showed above average competences despite experiencing socio-economic adversity as "resilient". Young people in similar circumstances but with lower competences are defined as "vulnerable". Their analysis of the long-term outcomes of early competence highlighted that in both cohorts resilient young people are less likely than vulnerable individuals to leave school with no qualifications, and more likely to obtain degree level qualifications. The employment experiences of resilient individuals in both cohorts are better than those who were deemed vulnerable. Furthermore, at age 26 resilient men are as successful in securing full-time employment as the group who were advantaged as children (93% versus 91% for NCDS and 88% versus 88% for BCS70).

Bucking the trend

Most recently, data from the 1970 birth cohort have been used to explore the characteristics of children from poor backgrounds that go on to "buck the trend" by escaping poverty as adults. Blanden (2006) found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who had been read to on a daily basis at age five and whose parents had been very interested in their child's education at age ten were less likely to be living in poverty at age 30. Her results also provide some evidence of the long-term importance of maternal support for girls from disadvantaged

backgrounds. Those whose mothers were only "moderately interested" in their education at age ten were 20 per cent less likely to have escaped poverty as adults, compared with the group whose mothers were "very interested".

This briefing paper summarizes some of the research that has been undertaken on the transmission of disadvantage and the protective factors that can modify the effects of this. In time, comparable data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) will provide scope for further research on the reproduction of disadvantage and advantage, and enable comparisons to be made with results from the older cohorts. Full references for all of the research featured here are listed under *Further reading*.

Further reading

Blanden, J. (2006) *Bucking the trend: What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed in later life?* Department for Work and Pensions Working Paper No.31, A report of research carried out by the Department of Economics, University of Surrey and the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics on behalf of DWP, Norwich: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Blanden, J. and Gibbons, S. (2006) *The persistence of poverty across generations: A view from two British cohorts*, Report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Bristol: Policy Press.

Essen, J., and Wedge, P. (1982) *Continuities in Childhood Disadvantage (SSRC/DHSS Studies in Deprivation and Disadvantage 6)*, London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Hobcraft, J. (1998) *Inter-generational and Life-Course Transmission of Social Exclusion: Influences of Childhood Poverty, Family Disruption and Contact with the Police*, CASE Paper 15, London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics.

Pilling, D. (1990) *Escape from disadvantage*, London: The Falmer Press.

Schoon, I. and Parsons, S. (2002) "Competence in the face of adversity: the impact of early family environment and long-term consequences", *Children and Society*, 16 (4), pp 260-272.

Sigle-Rushton, W. (2004) *Intergenerational and Life-Course Transmission of Social Exclusion in the 1970 British Cohort Study*, CASE paper 78, London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics.

More publications based on research in this area can be found by searching the CLS bibliographic database www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/bibliography

The information in this briefing paper was sourced and edited by Rosemary Creeser, CLS Research Officer.

A selection of variables on disadvantage that were asked of cohort members, their families and teachers

This list, together with variable names, is available online at www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/briefings

1958 National Child Development Study

QUESTION	AGE
Housing tenure	7, 11, 16
How many rooms are there in the accommodation?	7, 11, 16, 42
What is the number of persons per room?	11, 16
Does the cohort member receive free school meals? (Schools questionnaire)	11
How many people share the cohort member's bedroom?	11, 16
What is the father's weekly net pay?	16
What is the mother's weekly net pay?	16
What was the net pay per week for the cohort member's first job?	23
What was the net pay per week for the cohort member's second job?	23
What is the net pay per week for the cohort member's current job?	23
What was the last take home pay for the cohort member's current/most recent job?	33
What are the highest qualifications achieved by the cohort member since March 1981?	33
What type of qualification has the cohort member obtained since 1991?	42
Does the cohort member own or rent their home?	42

1970 British Cohort Study

QUESTION	AGE
Housing tenure	5, 10, 16
How many rooms are there in the accommodation?	5, 10, 16, 30
Does the cohort member share a bedroom?	5
Does the cohort member receive free school meals?	10
What is the total gross family income?	10
Did the cohort member receive free school meals last week?	16
How many share the same bedroom as the cohort member?	16
What is the combined income of parents per week/month?	16
How much does the cohort member's job pay?	16
What is the cohort member's take home net pay?	26, 30
What is the cohort member's corrected weekly pay?	26
What is the highest qualification held by the cohort member?	26
What is the highest academic qualification held by the cohort member?	26
What is the highest vocational qualification held by the cohort member?	26
What is the cohort member's partner net pay?	30
What type of qualifications has the cohort member obtained since April 1986?	30
What type of vocational qualifications has the cohort member obtained since April 1986?	30
Does the cohort member own or rent their home?	30

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