

Child poverty and deprivation

Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 survey



Introduction

Poverty is bad for children. It can have a negative effect on educational attainment, health, behaviour and social adjustment in childhood, and have long-term adverse consequences in adulthood. Long durations of poverty put children at particular risk of poorer outcomes. Child poverty is therefore a source of great policy interest, and its elimination is the subject of legislation across the UK.

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has been collecting information on family income and other aspects of material deprivation and financial circumstances from the outset. For each child, an income poverty indicator has been created for every survey they participated in. These indicators can be combined to show

whether a child was at risk of poverty at any particular age or repeatedly. They can also be linked to other information about children's material circumstances and wellbeing to reveal more about their experience of being poor.

This briefing paper summarises experiences of poverty among 13,187 children who participated in the MCS Age 11 survey. It describes:

- how many times since birth the MCS children have been classified as income poor
- what characteristics were associated with a higher risk of poverty
- whether material deprivation was greater among those who were persistently poor
- whether poor children reported lower wellbeing than other children.

MCS Age 11 survey

The Millennium Cohort Study's (MCS) survey of 11-year-olds took place between January 2012 and February 2013. Trained fieldworkers conducted 13,287 interviews with the children and their parents/guardians. Data from this survey and previous MCS surveys are available to download from the UK Data Service.

Key findings

- More than half of the MCS children were living in poor families in at least one of the five MCS surveys to date.
- Around 17 per cent are persistently poor, that is they have been poor at four or five MCS surveys.
- Children who are persistently poor also face more material deprivation and have lower subjective wellbeing.
- The risk of poverty varies by family characteristics. In particular, children in workless households and those living in Northern Ireland and Wales are more likely to be poor at age 11 and to be persistently poor.

Findings

Patterns of poverty

By age 11 fewer than half (47%) of the MCS children had never been touched by income poverty¹. On the other hand, around one in six (17%) had been poor in at least four of the five MCS surveys that have taken place so far. We regard these 17 per cent of children as being persistently poor. The full pattern of poverty by age 11 is shown in Figure 1.

Characteristics of persistently poor children

Children living in Wales and Northern Ireland were more likely to be persistently poor than those living in England and Scotland (21% and 19% compared to 16% and 13%). Children were also at a higher risk of persistent poverty than their peers if they lived in a workless family (50%), a lone parent family (30%), had a disabled parent (26%), were themselves disabled (22%), or were of any minority ethnicity² except Indian, with rates ranging from 20 per cent for Mixed-ethnicity groups, to 56 per cent for Pakistani and Bangladeshi children.

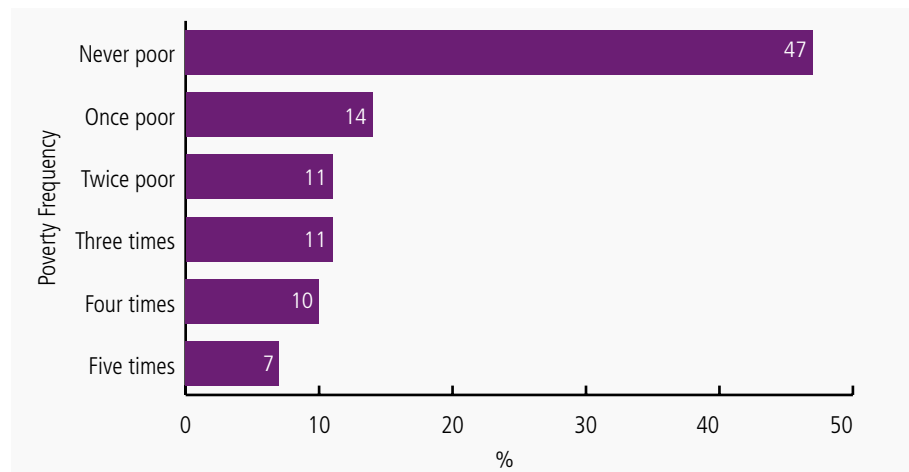
When taking account of all these characteristics together, the picture changes somewhat. For example, lone parent families are more likely to be workless, and it is this that puts them at a higher risk of persistent poverty. Similarly, disability is associated with poverty because of the impact it can have on employment.

However, after considering other family characteristics, children in Wales and Northern Ireland were still more likely to be living in persistently poor families at age 11. Those from minority ethnic groups were also more likely to be persistently poor than White children, even after accounting for whether one or both parents were employed.

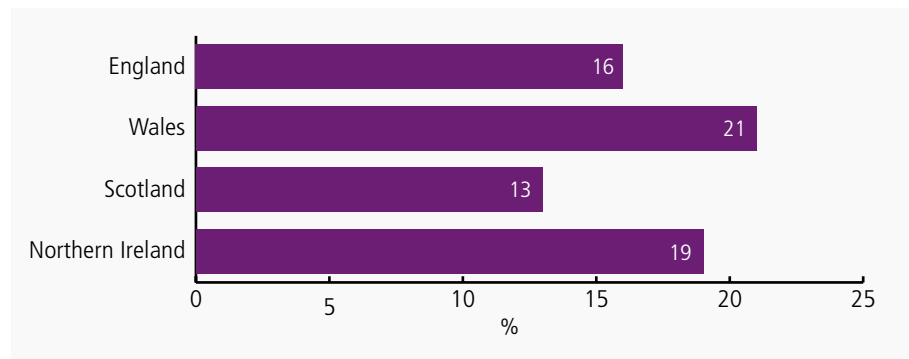
Material deprivation

Direct measures of material deprivation can give better insight into the circumstances of child poverty. At age 11, MCS collected a sub-set of the measures that the UK government uses for monitoring child poverty and progress towards targets to reduce it. For each measure the parent was asked if they or their child spend money on a particular item or activity, and if not whether that is because they can't afford to or don't want to. Based on the number of items and

► **Figure 1: Poverty across the five surveys of MCS**



► **Figure 2: Persistent poverty by country**



activities they can't afford, a score is given between 0 and 100. We can then compare the deprivation scores of different children.

A majority of MCS children were not deprived on any measures and had a score of 0. The average deprivation score among the MCS children overall was 15. However, among children who were persistently poor, the average score was significantly higher at 27. Deprivation scores also varied by family characteristics, even among those who were persistently poor. For example, persistently poor children in Scotland had lower deprivation scores, on average, than persistently poor children in England (21 compared to 28). Similarly, children living in single-parent families who were persistently poor had a higher average deprivation score (30) than children in persistently poor families with two parents (24).

Questions asked to measure deprivation in the MCS Age 11 survey

- Do you have a small amount of money to spend on yourself weekly, not on the family?
- Do you and [MCS child's name] have a holiday once a year, not staying with relatives?
- Do you have celebrations on special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas or other religious festivals?
- Does [MCS child's name] have friends around for tea or a snack once a fortnight?
- Do you replace or repair major electrical goods such as a refrigerator or a washing machine, when broken?

¹ The MCS uses a standard indicator of 'poverty' – income (adjusted for household size) that is below 60 per cent of the national median.

² In this briefing paper we employ Census categories, e.g. White, Mixed, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi used by the Office for National Statistics. Black Caribbean and Black African are included in a single category, Black groups.

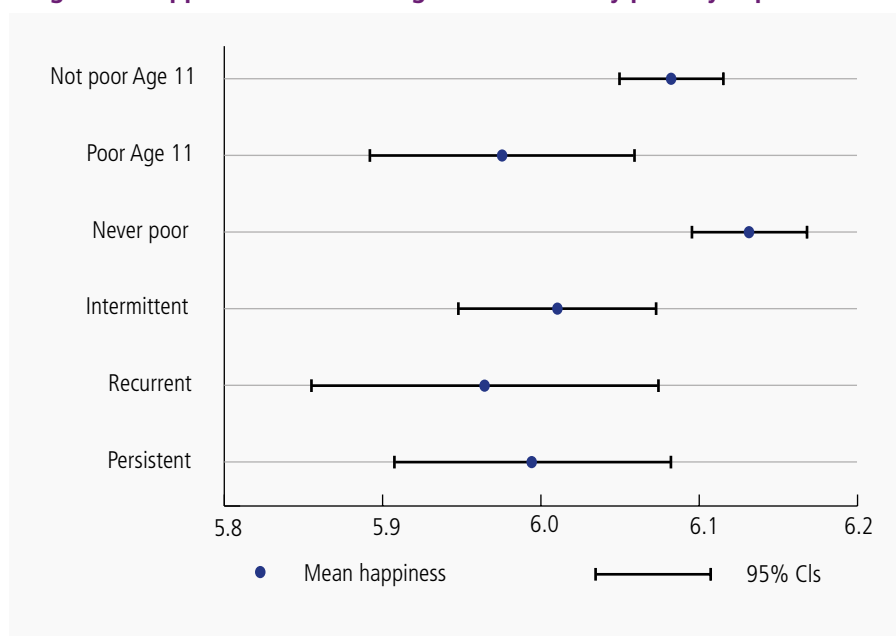
Child wellbeing and poverty

The importance of acknowledging how people evaluate their own situation, alongside more objective measures, has been recognised in the development and implementation of subjective wellbeing measures in government surveys. However, the subjective wellbeing of primary school-age children has received much less attention in surveys and official measures. While an increasing number of studies show the links between poverty and children's health, education and behaviour, it is important to ask whether children in persistently poor families themselves feel that they are in a worse situation than others.

The MCS children were asked how happy they were with their life overall, with answers ranging from a minimum of one (not at all happy) to a maximum of 7 (completely happy). Almost all the children in the study were 'very happy', with an average score of above 6 (nearly 6.1). The average rates across those with different experiences of poverty were very similar, as can be seen in Figure 3. However, children who were persistently poor had a slightly but significantly lower happiness rating of just under 6. While these figures show that most children are happy with their lives regardless of their financial circumstances, there may be some aspects of being poor that negatively affect their wellbeing.



► Figure 3: Happiness scores among MCS children by poverty experience



Conclusions

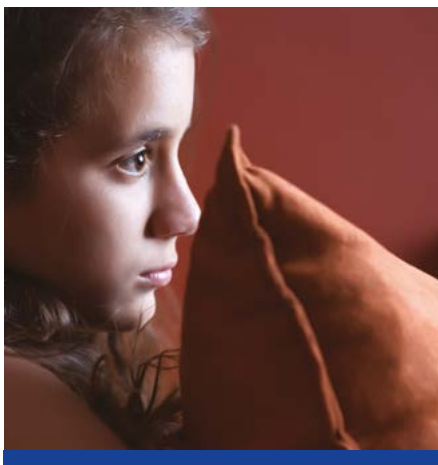
There is substantial variation in the extent to which the MCS children have faced the risk of poverty between ages 9 months and 11 years. While nearly half of them have never been touched by poverty, defined according to a relatively low income measure, one in six has been persistently poor.

Material deprivation measures can provide a more direct insight into how poverty is experienced. The majority of MCS children were not deprived by any of the five measures used in the Age 11 survey, but those in persistent poverty had much higher

levels of material deprivation than those who had never been poor. However, when looking across various family characteristics, there remained some differences, even among those in persistent poverty. For example, the material deprivation of single parents was higher than that of parents in persistent poverty who lived as a couple.

In relation to children's subjective wellbeing, even though MCS 11-year-olds are very happy with their lives in general, they are slightly less happy if they have been living in persistent poverty.





Future research

This briefing has highlighted initial findings on poverty and persistent poverty at age 11, and revealed how risks of long-term poverty are linked to material deprivation and wellbeing. However, there is a great deal more information in MCS about family income and financial circumstances such as wealth and debt, which researchers could use to refine the measure of families' economic position. Future research could also explore what factors protect families from the effects of poverty when they do have a low income, and investigate why material deprivation is less marked among some poor families than others.

As there is evidence to suggest that children in persistent poverty are slightly less happy than others, researchers could investigate whether this is due to material circumstances themselves, the stress that low income may cause to parents, or the ways other children treat poorer children, including the increased likelihood of being bullied. How far families manage to ensure their children's wellbeing even in the face of poverty is another important subject for further research.

In addition, research could explore the consequences of experiencing persistent poverty across a decade for children's current and subsequent educational attainment, health, wellbeing and social relationships.

About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study is following around 19,000 children born in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002. The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and government departments and is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, London.

The five surveys of cohort members conducted so far – at ages 9 months and 3, 5, 7 and 11 years – have built up a uniquely detailed portrait of the children of the new century. The study has collected information on diverse aspects of their lives, including behaviour, cognitive development, health, schooling, housing and parents' employment and education.

The MCS has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as breastfeeding, immunisation and child poverty. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

Further information

The material in this briefing has been drawn from Mostafa, T. and Platt, L. (2014) *Income and Poverty*. In Platt, L. (ed) *Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 Survey Initial Findings*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies. .

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