



Hearing the voices of low-income children: what can children tell us that can help to shape better policies to improve their lives

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Children's Experiences with Poverty and Social Exclusion -
Challenges for Research and Policies

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Children identify three main areas where poverty is affecting their lives:

- Economic and material concerns
- Social costs
 - Friendships
 - participation
- School life and school inclusion





The research study

Qualitative, longitudinal study of low-income working family life.
Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

Sample 50 low-income lone mother families

- 50 mothers
- 61 children aged between 8-15 years
- 2 waves of interviews, third wave commissioned for summer 2007

Aim study

- The main aims of the project are to examine the impact of paid work, and for some job loss, on family life and living standards over time; and to explore whether and how these families, mothers and children negotiate the everyday challenges of sustaining low-income employment over time.

First interviews explored mothers entry into the labour market following period on Income Support (lowest form of social assistance in UK).





Policy Context

- Increasing rates maternal employment
- Activation programmes - especially lone parents
- Rising child poverty

UK Policy Context

- children as:
 - passive family members
 - burdens - obstacles to employment
- Government policy to eradicate child poverty
- Policy target 70% lone mothers in employment
- Key policy assumption in UK – work is the best way out of poverty for children in lone parent families

‘those children’s best chance of a better future is for their parents to find routes into work’

Tony Blair, 2002





Children's reflections of life prior to their mother's entering the labour market

- Key elements of childhood social exclusion identified by children
 - Economic, material and social concerns
 - Disadvantages at school
 - Fears about stigma and exclusion





Following their mother's move into labour market

Where mothers had moved into relatively stable employment children generally felt more secure financially

- Economic benefits
 - Increases in spending, material goods, treats
- Social benefits
 - Increased social activity - from low base
 - Opportunities for wider social networks
- BUT – Some concerns about mother's well-being





Children whose mothers unable to secure stable employment and/or left labour market

- Renewed fears about social exclusion and difference
- Financially insecure
- Uncertain about value of employment
- The impact of repeated moves in and out of the labour market on children's well-being is still little known or understood





Children's experiences of maternal employment mediated by key factors

- Age, income and security, family time and family practices, childcare, and perceptions of maternal well-being
- Not discrete elements overlap and intersect with each other
- Reveals complexity of children's lives and experiences
- Highlights positive and negative dimensions of change





How children negotiated and managed change in their lives

- Previous experience of poverty key factor
- Strong incentives to sustain families in their ‘project of work’
- Children engaged in a complex range of caring and coping strategies
- Strategies often concealed and unacknowledged
- May have far reaching implications for children’s lives and well-being





Challenges for policy

- Children identify issues and concerns that adults may not notice or value
- They try to manage and mediate the experience of poverty and other changes in family life - like maternal employment
- Previous experiences of poverty are significant – the fear of a return to poverty may affect children's behaviour
- Policies can have an intended and/or unintended impact on children's lives
- Low-income children may absorb some of the negative costs of policies e.g. welfare-to-work policies
- Without an informed awareness of the social and economic pressures that low-income children experience, policies formulated to address poverty and exclusion may fail the very children that they seek to help.

