



The impact of government policy on social exclusion among children 0–13 and their families:

A review of the literature for the Social Exclusion Unit
in the Breaking the Cycle series

Summary

Introduction

1. In summer 2003, the Social Exclusion Unit commissioned a review of the literature about the impact of Government policy on social exclusion among children and families. The project is one of four reviews commissioned by the Social Exclusion Unit to help assess the impact of policy across all life stages. This review was carried out by a team at the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Oxford.
2. The aim of the review was to draw together evidence to assess the overall impact of government policies and initiatives on children aged 0–13 and families in, or at risk of, social exclusion over the last ten years (concentrating on the period since 1997).
3. Nine policy areas known to be associated with a risk of social exclusion for children of this age and their families were examined. These include: poor living standards; poor living conditions; lack of access to quality early years provision; poor educational access and achievement; poor health; disabled children and children with special educational needs; vulnerable families, children in need and child protection; access to justice; and discrimination.

Government policies

4. The Government's policies on social exclusion should be seen in the context of its ambitious target to end child poverty and its commitment to tackling discrimination and promoting equal opportunities. The government has invested heavily in this age group, with public spending per child growing by almost 20% in real terms between 1996–97 and 2001–02, and spending on children is likely to have become more 'pro-poor' since 1997. The strategy to tackle social exclusion, set out in 1997, comprised prevention; reintegration of those already excluded; and delivery of minimum standards of services. A focus on children and young people was central to the strategy.
5. Government policies for families and for children at risk were described first in the Green Paper *Supporting Families*, which noted that the state had a legitimate interest in ensuring that the next generation was given the best start in life and outlined how this might be done; a range of initiatives followed. Second, the Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, following the Victoria Climbié Inquiry, recognized that child protection could not be separated from policies to improve children's lives as a whole, and is leading to radical reform of children's services.

Key findings

The conclusion from this review is that the government has made progress in all nine policy areas examined.

6. Living standards

- Child poverty has fallen, to 3.6 million (approximately 28%) by 2002–03. Increases in employment (including via the New Deals) and in benefit/tax credit levels have been the main reasons. By 2001, the UK had improved its relative position within the European Union child poverty league.
- Severe hardship decreased significantly among working families after 1999, and was also reduced amongst out-of-work families. Improvements in families' incomes have been spent on their children.
- Financial support for children has increased, especially for low-income families, and in particular for younger children. Policies for lone parents seem to be working particularly well together as a package.
- There is a developing focus on sustainability of jobs and progression in work.
- Security of income issues include stability as well as adequacy, and delivery mechanisms are important to low-income families. Groups of particular concern include some ethnic minority groups and large families.
- Some policies are too recent to have been fully evaluated and we may need more focus on the impact on children in future evaluations.
- The Child Poverty Review will be an impetus to further policy development, to help sustain and further develop the strategy to tackle child poverty.

7. Living conditions

- Considerable progress has been made on reducing the numbers of families with children in bed and breakfast accommodation. 830 households with dependent children or expectant mothers were in bed and breakfast accommodation at the end of March 2004 (12% of all households in bed and breakfast), compared with 4,800 in March 2003 (40% of all households). But the overall number of homeless households with children has been steadily increasing in recent years.
- There has been progress in improving the physical condition of housing for households with children. Between 1996 and 2001 the proportion of social housing classed as decent rose from 46% to 62% (non-decent properties falling from 2.1 million to around 1.6 million).
- The number of fuel-poor vulnerable households, including those with children, has been sharply reduced. Further progress may be difficult without considerable additional funding.
- It is hard to say whether area-based initiatives have been effective in tackling social exclusion among children, but there is clear evidence that initiatives focusing on public space (e.g. Home Zones) can benefit children – such zones were found to cut child pedestrian accidents by 70%.

8. Early years provision

- The National Childcare Strategy launched in 1997 demonstrates government commitment to increased provision of high quality early years services as promoting social investment in children and tackling child poverty through mothers' access to the labour market.

- There has been an expansion of integrated early years services targeted at disadvantaged areas, such as Sure Start Local Programmes and Children’s Centres. These are major elements in the commitment to tackle social exclusion of children and families.
- There has been a major expansion in early education – free part-time places have been taken up by almost all four year olds and nearly 9 in 10 three year olds.
- There has also been a major expansion in childcare – places for over 1.6 million children have been created since 1997. This means one childcare place for every five children under eight in 2003, compared to one place for every nine children in 1997.
- Working parents’ demand for childcare is high; access, however, is variable. Childcare is sometimes less available in deprived areas where it is most needed to help parents into work, although this childcare gap may be narrowing nationally (but not in all areas). Problems with affordability (lack of free or cheap childcare) and appropriateness (lack of childcare at suitable times) are often given as reasons for parents not being able to take up paid employment.
- International evidence, for example from the US, supported by findings in the UK, suggests that high quality early years provision can have a positive impact on children’s educational achievement and long-term development, but evidence is still to come for the youngest age group.
- Barriers for service users include cost, lack of information, inflexibility and culturally inappropriate provision. Sustainability is a key issue, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

9. Educational access and achievement

- There have been substantial gains in overall attainment in education. However, the improvement appears to be stronger in the period up to 2000 or so. Part of this might be attributed to the rapid fall in unemployment over the same period.
- Some ethnic minority groups, for example Bangladeshis, appear to be making significant progress in performance, despite particularly high levels of disadvantage. However, other groups, such as disadvantaged pupils from Black Caribbean and White groups, seem to be making much less progress. Targeting behavioural problems can work, but highly disadvantaged pupils are subject to many external pressures that may lead to these patterns re-establishing themselves.
- Post-2000 educational expenditure at school level began to rise sharply. Disadvantaged areas may have shared disproportionately in this increase, though some programmes tend to favour less disadvantaged areas. Higher levels of education, with correspondingly higher expenditure levels, tend to have disproportionately larger numbers of pupils from advantaged areas.
- There is a mass of different programmes with overlapping purposes and targets. Programmes attempting to raise educational performance for disadvantaged groups and reduce behavioural problems can be effective but require a high level of sustained investment over time.
- Assessing the specific effects of these initiatives is compounded by the complexity of overlapping programmes. It is also too early to measure their impact.

10. Health

- Government initiatives to increase school sport and physical education have proved promising, but those most at risk of social exclusion may be those least able to afford, or to travel to, out-of-school sports and leisure clubs.

- There has been a reduction in child pedestrian casualties but also an increase in the number of children travelling by car to school.
- The Healthy Schools Initiative, combined with increases in sport within schools, has so far been accompanied by promotion of healthy options rather than further regulation of foodstuffs sold in schools.
- There are persistent inequalities in child health which have their origins at birth, such as low birth weight and infant mortality, and these are proving difficult to turn around.

11. Disabled children and children with special educational needs

- There is a lack of data about the prevalence of childhood disability and the circumstances of disabled children; the main source of data remains the 1989 OPCS survey.
- A number of positive changes to benefits/tax credits have occurred since 1999. However, improving the take-up of benefits, especially Disability Living Allowance, remains a challenge.
- There is a greater willingness to consult directly with disabled people – including children – and this is a positive trend.
- The single most important feature of the experience of families with disabled children remains poverty. Greater childcare costs and lower parental incomes are strongly associated with childhood disability.
- Extra benefits for families with more than one disabled child do not take into account the cumulative effects of care.
- While action on special educational needs has been considerable over the past decade, the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or special educational needs in all aspects of school life within mainstream schools continues to be an aspiration rather than a reality for most children.
- While a substantial number of economic, social and educational initiatives have either targeted or included disabled children in recent years, little hard information is available as to the extent of their impact; and, where such information is available, it is rarely underpinned by baseline data and measurable targets.

12. Vulnerable families, children in need, child protection

- Although the main evaluations of the major child initiatives are still to report, there is evidence that the Children's Fund and On Track have proved popular and are impacting on the lives of a large number of children and young people.
- Research has indicated the effectiveness of both early and later parent- and family-focused interventions for reducing criminal activity and antisocial behaviour. Education-focused projects may be more acceptable to parents.
- Family support services can suffer from 'negative impact' or stigma but generally agencies are making progress in engaging the 'hard to reach'.
- Responding to the needs of large numbers of children in need is putting great strain on local authorities. Availability of family support programmes in the community may reduce the numbers of children in need.
- Progress is being made in improving outcomes for children who are looked after, but educationally these children still lag a long way behind children in the general population.

13. Access to justice

- Lack of access to justice carries a significant risk of social exclusion. Some problems for children may have been avoided if their parents had had appropriate and earlier help.
- An independent review of the Community Legal Service (CLS) in 2004 noted that, although progress was being made the CLS needed to clarify its role and strategy in tackling social exclusion.
- A report from the House of Commons Constitutional Affairs Select Committee in July noted the difficulties of recruiting solicitors and barristers for legal aid work. A survey of Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) views showed that support from publicly funded legal services in emergency situations such as housing eviction or domestic violence may be becoming less accessible, especially for those on low incomes.

14. Discrimination

- For children, the daily reality of discrimination is represented by ‘bullying’ behaviour by their peers. Following national government initiatives, most schools now have agreed anti-bullying procedures to follow, but reviews are needed to examine the relationship with curriculum development, support and training for teachers and working in partnership with parents.
- Results from the Home Office ‘Citizenship Survey’ in 2002 suggest that perceptions of racism had increased marginally in the last five years.
- In 2003, approximately 2,400 asylum-seeking unaccompanied children were being looked after at 31 March and 12,500 asylum-seeking children were receiving a service. Some ethnic minority groups, particularly some Asian groups, have done well educationally. Asylum-seeker children can inspire their classmates and teachers because of the seriousness with which they treat education.
- The low level of attainment in education, particularly amongst Black Caribbean boys, is worrying.

Policy messages

15. Sustaining progress: increasing the dose

- **Tackling child poverty must remain a priority.** Care is needed to ensure that policies do not cause gaps to increase between those at risk of social exclusion and children generally. Up-rating benefits/tax credits and the national minimum wage to ensure that those on low incomes benefit from general increases in living standards will continue to be important; more than this is needed if relative poverty is to be further decreased.
- **Further measures are needed to tackle inequalities,** particularly those that have their origins at birth but may also affect the rest of the lifecourse, such as low birthweight.
- **Further steps to tackle discrimination on racial grounds, including bullying,** are important both in themselves and as a signal of government intent.

16. Filling the gaps: improving delivery

- **Bringing services together.** The Children Bill will do much to bridge the gap between different services at local level, but more is needed. The findings suggest that there is a need to fully mainstream a strategy against social exclusion of children and families throughout government.

- **Reaching the hard to reach.** These include: *minority groups*, such as ethnic minority groups, travellers and asylum seekers; *the overlooked*, such as the learning disabled; and *the service resistant*, including the over-targeted or disaffected. A different perspective might see these groups as ‘hard to hear’ rather than ‘hard to reach’, and so might aspire to develop services which are ‘easy to use’.
- **Some parents and children need targeted help.** They may have been rendered depressed because of multi-faceted deprivation and disadvantage. Mental health services may help; but other people may benefit from mentors and advisors, who not only give them support but also help them to develop new competencies and confidence.
- **Increasing the take-up of opportunities.** This means removing barriers to take-up, which may include *lack of knowledge* amongst parents about relevant services and about their children’s education; *services which are felt to be inappropriate*, inaccessible and/or associated with stigma; *cultural factors* for some groups; and *rational choice*, such as not using child care because it is too expensive.

17. New approaches

- **Learning to hear.** Approaches which explore how ‘excluded’ people perceive their experiences and make decisions could be further explored.
- **More appropriate targets.** For some groups, for example, returning to work or training can be too great a leap; they need an intermediate stage which confirms their progress.
- **Tackling stigma and building trust.** A ‘step change’ in the delivery of services would prioritise building relationships of confidence and trust between providers and users.
- **Timing of interventions.** Adopting a ‘child-centred’ view implies that policies may need to be more nuanced by age group. And a preventative strategy needs to ensure that single people and childless couples of childbearing age, including young pregnant women, have adequate resources to give their babies a healthy start in life.

18. Gaps in knowledge

Finally, *the quality and availability of national data on children* could still be improved.

Conclusion

19. Much of government policy is about creating a better future for children. We need to remove the barriers that stand in their way and give them the skills, competence and confidence to achieve their goals. Children can only do this with the support of their parents; so in addition, we need to support their parents in this endeavour.

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