

**Title:** Children's necessities: trends over time in perceptions and ownership

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**Abstract:** Child poverty remains high on the UK political agenda. This paper informs these debates by examining trends over time in perceptions of child necessities, rates of child poverty, and parental behaviours. Results indicate high levels of stability between 1999 and 2012 in public perceptions of child necessities, stable or increasing rates of child poverty, and similarities in the profile of child poverty vulnerability. In both 1999 and 2012 findings show that the majority of parents prioritise children's needs, posing a challenge for Coalition rhetoric, and suggesting that a focus on structural rather than individual causes of poverty may be needed.

**Key words:** Child poverty, child deprivation; socially perceived necessities

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## **Background**

### *Policy context*

Since the then Prime Minister Tony Blair's 1999 commitment to end child poverty by 2020 (Blair, 1999), there has been a great deal of policy and academic attention to the issue. Under New Labour, child poverty<sup>i</sup>, which had more than doubled since the 1980s, was reduced from 3.4 million in 1998/99 to 2.3 million in 2010/11, under a regime of policies which included improved provision for families with children in terms of benefits, education, health, and pre-school child care availability and affordability. Since then, successive governments have reaffirmed their commitment to the Child Poverty Act (which came into force in 2010), but a lack of progress to date, together with austerity measures implemented by the Coalition government following the global economic crisis, have resulted in a great deal of scepticism over whether the goals outlined in the Act will be met (for example Brewer et al, 2011; Dickens, 2011).

Initially, austerity was presented as a set of measures necessary in order to solve the sovereign debt crisis, precipitated by the bailing out of banks following unsustainable post-deregulation lending practices (Levitas, 2012). The Coalition announced that they would cut the deficit by £81 billion by 2014, but that "we're all in it together" (Cameron, 2009) and that fairness would be at the heart of their strategy. However, hints of a more ideological motivation were already evident in Prime Minister David Cameron's address, in which he referenced a "need to confront Britain's culture of irresponsibility", which he attributed (at least in part) to Labour's "big government bureaucracy" and "money-draining, responsibility-sapping nonsense" (ibid). Thus despite the central role of unsustainable banking practices in the onset of the crisis, the 'irresponsible' poor, encouraged by Labour policies to "live off the hard work of others" (op cit), were to be the target of cuts. The decision to take 85% of savings from public spending cuts (rather than increases in taxation), then, was announced in a series of budget statements. Amongst the areas in which public spending was to be cut were benefits for children and families (in addition to cuts in public services, although these were largely devolved to local authorities).

Amongst the fields in which the Coalition intended to cut public spending was child poverty mitigation, framed as an opportunity for families to take greater financial responsibility for themselves. In the context of the failure to meet the 2010 targets to halve child poverty, Labour MP Frank Field<sup>ii</sup> was appointed to lead an independent review on poverty and life chances (see Field, 2010). The controversial findings of this review (see e.g. UNICEF, nd; Sharma and Cundy, 2011) prompted the Coalition to initiate a consultation on how child poverty is measured in the UK (DWP, 2012). The stated purposes of this review were to

address perceived shortcomings in the Child Poverty Act measures of child poverty (see below), and to develop a multidimensional measure of child poverty which “must reflect what it means to grow up experiencing deep disadvantage” (DWP, 2012: 1). In effect, the approach outlined in the Child Poverty Consultation reflected a shift from a focus on income in the Child Poverty Act, towards a focus on parental behaviours and skills (for example, parental worklessness, addiction and financial management). The use of income as a measure of poverty has been criticised by key Coalition ministers, for example the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, MP Iain Duncan Smith’s (2011), comments that income thresholds result in ‘poverty plus a pound’ approaches which fail to consider actual living standards, and that increased income does not lead to increased well-being.

The framing of the Coalition’s approach, then, described as enabling people to “take responsibility for their own lives and reach their full potential” (DWP, 2012: 11), reflects a rejection of the idea that poverty is a result of structural inequities, and an embracing of individual explanations which cast poor people as lacking the adequate motivation (as opposed to the adequate resources) to provide for themselves without government intervention. A further issue with the Consultation was the use of public opinion data to (mis)inform how poverty should be measured. For example, family stability, alcohol and drug addictions, and worklessness were found in a DWP poll to be seen by much of the population as important indicators of whether a child is growing up in poverty (DWP, 2013). As Bailey and Tomlinson (nd) note, this conflates causes of poverty with the existence of poverty - even if these were valid *causes or effects* of poverty, this does not mean they *are* poverty. It also conflates opinion and values with fact - that people *think* family breakdown and drug abuse are indicators of poverty, does not mean that they *are* indicators of poverty. The tone of Bailey and Tomlinson’s response reflects a generally highly critical reaction to the Consultation, including for the reasons outlined above (see for example Bradshaw, 2013; Veit-Wilson, 2013). This criticism is supported in the 2014 Households Below Average Income report finding that the majority of poor children do not live in workless households (Carr et al, 2014). Nevertheless, the Child Poverty Strategy for 2014-17 (DWP, 2014), released in June 2014, maintains a focus on worklessness and parental skills and attitudes.

A central message in the Coalition’s approach to child poverty, then, is that parental attitudes and skills, more than income, are drivers in the impoverishment of children. Unwise budgeting which prioritises parents’ wants over children’s needs, rather than insufficient income to achieve either, is seen as the cause of children living in impoverished circumstances – perhaps most starkly demonstrated by prominent Conservative politicians’ claims that the rise in the use of food banks is a result of poor people spending money on items such as alcohol and cigarettes rather than on food (Panorama: 2014; BBC: 2013).

Such views are supported by media portrayals of changes in attitudes to necessities resulting in overly generous assessments of minimum material living standards – such as Malone’s (2014) claim that greed, rather than poverty, has grown over the past 30 years. However, little concrete evidence exists in support of this position. Indeed, Gordon et al (2013) note that their analysis of the 2012 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey revealed that in 93% of households where children are deprived of consensually agreed food necessities, at least one adult regularly skimps on their own food intake in order that the needs of others in the household can be better met. One method for testing the veracity of the Coalition’s position is the consensual approach to poverty measurement, which provides data on perceptions of children’s material needs, and which draws on indicators of deprivation (both for adults and for children living in respondent households). These allow for an examination of whether attitudes towards necessities have become more generous over time (which may be an indication that definitions of poverty are changing); whether parents appear to be prioritising their own material needs over those of their children; and, if so, whether the problem appears to be increasing in severity. The use of deprivation in measuring poverty is detailed next.

#### *The use of deprivation in poverty measurement*

Since Townsend’s (1979) *Poverty in the United Kingdom* study, deprivation indicators have become an important element in poverty measurement, not least in the development of consensual poverty measures as pioneered by Mack and Lansley (1985) and refined in subsequent studies (e.g. Gordon and Pantazis, 1997; Gordon et al, 2000); including most recently in the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (for early results, see Gordon et al, 2013) which is the largest-scale survey of poverty in the UK to date. Partly as a result of these developments, since 2004/5, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has incorporated the use of deprivation indicators into the Family Resources Survey (FRS), on which the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) series, the source of official UK poverty statistics, is based. These indicators now form part of the official child poverty measures established in the 2010 Child Poverty Act. Reducing deprivation is part of the 2020 EU Poverty and Social Exclusion targets, and on this basis selected indicators of deprivation are included in the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Standards Survey (EU-SILC), in addition to a more detailed 2009 module on this topic (see Guio, Marlier and Gordon, 2012).

In the UK context, deprivation has tended to be used in combination with low income, reflected in the official child poverty measures, comprising:

- Relative low income (equivalised household income lower than 60% of the national median)
- Absolute low income (equivalised household income lower than 60% of the median in 2010/11, adjusted for prices)
- Combined low income and material deprivation (equivalised household income lower than 70% of the national median, and experiencing material deprivation based on a prevalence-weighted score derived from household- and child-level deprivation indicators)
- Severe poverty (equivalised household income lower than 50% of the national median and experiencing material deprivation).

As is evident in these measures, direct measures of poverty are only used in combination with the less direct measure of income. Additionally, in relation to child poverty specifically, the methodology by which child deprivation is calculated draws primarily on household-level, rather than child-level, deprivation indicators (Bailey, forthcoming). Research concerned with child poverty to date has tended to focus on deprivation in combination with low income, and available data has not been used to trace changes over time in child deprivation based on indicators specifically relating to children themselves, rather than their households.

The aims of this article are therefore to trace changes in attitudes to what children need over time; to examine whether rates of child poverty and risk factors increasing the likelihood of children being poor have remained similar over time; and to begin to examine intra-household distributions between adults and children using deprivation indicators to assess how resources are distributed (something that is not possible using household income). In doing so, this paper aims to address two main research questions:

1. Have attitudes towards child necessities in the UK changed between 1999 and 2012, and if so what are the key changes?
2. What if any trends are evident in child deprivation rates, in risk factors for child deprivation, and in intra-household sharing between adults and children?

## **Data and methods**

To answer these questions, we draw heavily on Lloyd's (2006) analysis of the 1999 PSE data, as a point of comparison. This article draws primarily on the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (PSE2012), as described elsewhere in this volume (Fahmy, 2014). Adults reported on whether they felt items and activities were necessities for children in the omnibus survey, and in households containing children one adult (usually the main carer) reported on children's possession of items or activities and reasons for any items or activities

lacking in the mainstage survey. Here, results are presented based both on individual items and activities, and based on a child deprivation index created based on these items and activities. The details of how this index was calculated are available in Main and Bradshaw (forthcoming)<sup>iii</sup>.

It must be noted that not all items and activities included in the PSE2012 were applicable to all ages of children. In cases where items and activities are only relevant for sub-age-groups of children, children were only treated as deprived of the item or activity if the responding adult reported that children did not have/do the item/activity because they could not afford it, and if the child was within the relevant age group<sup>iv</sup>. Children themselves were not included as respondents in the PSE survey; instead, adults (specifically the main carer of the children) were asked to answer on behalf of children in their household. Adults were asked to consider children in their household as deprived of an item or activity if any child in their household lacked it through not being able to afford it – that is, responses were the same for all children in a household. Differences between children within households may therefore arise as a result of the method by which the child deprivation index was constructed (see above regarding age adjustments), but data collection methods preclude an accurate examination of differences between children within a household.

Whilst the main focus of this article is on the PSE2012 surveys, we include some analysis of child deprivation based on the Family Resources Survey, as described above, by drawing on child- and benefit-unit data files. This provides additional context for the examination of trends in child deprivation over time.

### **Perceptions of children's necessities**

As noted above, Coalition rhetoric may suggest that under New Labour, perceptions of what children need had increased due to overly generous provision and unrealistic expectations. To examine this, we draw on comparisons between omnibus surveys associated with the two Poverty and Social Exclusion Surveys conducted in 1999 and 2012 in which people were asked to indicate whether they felt a wide range of child items and activities were necessities or desirable but not necessary. Results are shown in Table 1. There is a fairly high level of stability for most items. Based on confidence intervals<sup>v</sup>, there are significant differences for 11 of the 20 comparable items and activities (shaded in grey). However, no pattern is evident in the direction of these differences; for four items, a higher proportion saw them as a necessity in 2012, whilst for the remaining seven a higher proportion saw them as a necessity in 1999.

TABLE 1 HERE

In addition, four items were included in the 1990 Breadline Britain survey and the 1983 Poor Britain survey. These can be used to examine trends over a longer period, shown in Figure 1. The proportion viewing three meals a day as a necessity has increased, more sharply between 1983 and 1990, but also steadily since. However, the proportion of adults viewing outdoor leisure equipment, separate bedrooms, and friends to tea as necessities for children has decreased since 1990. In the case of separate bedrooms these are now seen as necessary by a smaller proportion of the population than in 1983; and having friends to tea has gone below the threshold of a socially perceived necessity for the first time since 1983.

FIGURE 1 HERE

In terms of our first research question, then, we find no evidence that there has been a systematic increase in expectations around what children should have. Increases in the proportion thinking some items are necessities (for example a computer and internet) can be explained by rapid technological changes over the time period, resulting in even young children using computers with internet for school work (see Holloway et al, 2013). But these are also matched with items and activities – such as school trips and holidays – which are seen as necessities by smaller proportions of the population. On the whole, differences are very minor and the direction and meanings of changes are not always clear, perhaps suggesting ‘noise’ in the data rather than meaningful changes over time. Given that expectations around what children need appear to have remained remarkably stable between 1999 and 2012 (and, tentatively, even over the longer term), this would suggest that measures of child deprivation are capturing the same underlying construct as they have previously been – that is, deprivation of socially perceived necessities, rather than, as some commentators believe, greed.

### **Child deprivation and intra-household sharing**

Moving to our second research question, then, we answer this in three parts: firstly, we examine the prevalence of child deprivation over time in relation to individual items and activities, and in relation to overall deprivation rates; secondly, we examine risk factors for deprivation to see whether these have changed over time, and; finally, we examine evidence on intra-household sharing to see whether parents appear to prioritise their own needs, and if so whether there is evidence of this being a new or worsening problem.

#### ***Trends in child deprivation***

##### *Individual items and activities*

Table 2 draws on the PSE 1999 and 2012 data to show the proportions of children lacking comparable items and activities in 1999 and 2012, through an inability to afford them. Overall, very similar levels of deprivation of individual items and activities are evident. Items and activities where differences in the overall proportions are significant are shaded, and in almost all cases fractionally higher proportions are lacking these in 2012 compared to 1999. Analysis was also performed based on children who lacked first at least one and then at least two of the list of necessities. Similarly, the proportion of children lacking one or more and two or more necessities overall who lack each specific item and activity are broadly similar in 2012 compared to 1999. Overall, there is no clear trend based on individual items as to whether deprivation is increasing or decreasing, either overall or when comparing rates amongst everyone to rates amongst only the deprived.

#### TABLE 2 HERE

As noted above, some of the individual children's items and activities identified as necessities in the 1999 PSE survey were incorporated into the Family Resources Survey, contributing to the combined low income and material deprivation child poverty measure. For these items and activities, it is possible to monitor prevalence of ownership from 2004-2012, allowing for a closer monitoring of trends<sup>vi</sup>. On the whole, the proportion of children lacking items and activities in the FRS because their families could not afford them has remained stable over the eight years, in most cases with between five to ten per cent of children lacking them. Results are shown in Figure 2.

#### FIGURE 2 HERE

Based on individual items, then, there again appears to be a great deal of stability over time, this time in the proportion of children experiencing deprivation. There is a small tendency towards increased levels of deprivation, but this is not consistent across all items and activities, and is not large enough to draw wider conclusions. However, small changes in individual items may translate into larger changes in overall deprivation rates, examined next.

#### *Overall deprivation*

Analysis of the PSE data revealed very steep increases in the numbers of children lacking one or more, and two or more, items and activities. In 2012, 47% of children lacked one or more items or activities, compared to 34% in 1999; and 31% of children lacked two or more in 2012 compared to 18% in 1999. In terms of overall poverty rates, then, the relatively small changes in the proportions of children lacking individual items included in the PSE



surveys in 1999 compared to 2012 do indeed mask larger changes in the proportion of children deprived<sup>vii</sup>.

Looking in more detail but over a shorter period of time, FRS data was then used to trace trends in child deprivation rates using the reduced index. Following the PSE rather than the HBAI child deprivation methodology, items were aggregated into a scale denoting the number of items which children lacked as a result of their family being unable to afford them. Figure 3 shows the proportions of children lacking none, one, two, and three or more HBAI items and activities. It is evident that deprivation rates have remained relatively stable over the eight year period for which data are available. A very slight decrease in the number of children lacking no items and activities (from around 59% at its peak, to around 56% at its trough) matched by a similar increase in the number of children lacking one item or activity (from 21% at its trough to 25% at its peak).

### FIGURE 3

Child deprivation rates, then, have increased substantially according to the PSE surveys but have remained relatively stable based on the FRS indicators. One reason for this discrepancy may be that the drop was between 1999 and 2004, so before it could be picked up by the FRS data. However, another explanation is that the FRS draws on a more limited and constant set of indicators which are not subject to ongoing review and testing<sup>1</sup>, whilst the PSE surveys incorporate the inclusion and detailed testing of new and existing items.

#### *Characteristics of deprived children*

Are different types of children at higher risk of poverty in 2012 compared to 1999? A major pillar of the Coalition approach to welfare was a promise to make work pay, and to provide incentives for people, especially parents, to take up flexible and non-traditional kinds of work to reduce dependency. This would be expected to translate into less deprivation in households where more people work, and where more hours are worked. This is not borne out by the proportions of children deprived of necessities according to the employment status of adult household members. In both 1999 and 2012, the group with the greatest risk of experiencing poverty is those in households with no workers. However, in 1999 those in households with one part-time and one full-time worker were at the lowest risk of poverty, whereas this has shifted to those in households with two or more full-time workers in 2012, and indeed those with one full-time and one part-time worker in 2012 are at a greater or comparable risk of poverty to those in households with only one full-time worker. Across

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<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted that there has been some review and change to the items, notably McKay's (2011) work.

other socio-economic factors, risk factors remain similar. Children living in lone adult households, and those in older childhood, remain at greater risk, as do those living in households with three or more children in the household, those living in households with an adult experiencing a long-standing illness, non-white children, and children living in rented accommodation (whether social or private). Results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 HERE

#### *Intra-household distributions*

The final part of our second research question concerns intra-household distributions. We note above that Coalition rhetoric suggests that parents in poverty are less adequate parents, with poor financial management skills and tendencies to prioritise their own wants and needs over those of their children. The PSE 1999 and 2012 surveys offer some insights on this explanation of child poverty. In addition to the child-related items and activities presented above, adults in both surveys were asked about ownership of items and activities for themselves and for the household generally. In five cases (as shown in Table 4, below), adult items are comparable to child items, allowing us to examine how adult ownership relates to child ownership for these items, in households containing both adults and children. Following Lloyd's (2006) methodology, we compared adult and child deprivation, with adults in a household treated as deprived if at least one adult in the household lacked each item or activity. It is therefore possible to classify respondent households on the basis of whether adult and child members lack these items separately, as shown in Table 4.

The largest group of children for each item and activity live in congruous non-deprived situations (i.e. where neither adults nor children lack these items). However, rather than the converse (i.e. congruous deprived), the next largest group in almost all cases is in fact children living in an incongruous protected situation (i.e. where adults but not children lack these items). The only exception to this is a week's holiday annually, where children are somewhat more likely to live in congruous deprived situations than incongruous protected situations. The third largest groups for all other items are in congruous deprived situations (i.e. where both adults and children lack the specified items). Only a tiny minority of children on any comparable indicator live in incongruous and exposed situations where they lack items which are enjoyed by (one or more) adult household members. This supports the common finding across qualitative and quantitative studies that adults living in poverty make efforts to protect children from the worst impacts of poverty, often through sacrificing their own needs (see Ridge, 2002; Middleton et al, 1997; Gordon et al, 2013). It therefore poses a strong challenge to the position that parents prioritise limited resources in their own favour. Indeed, the proportion of adults in households with children behaving in this manner was too

small to reliably estimate in many cases. Furthermore, there is little evidence of change in these patterns over time.

TABLE 4 HERE

## **Discussion**

This article has provided some data tracking child necessities and deprivation over time in relation to perceptions of what children need, what children have and lack, how many children are deprived, and how resources are shared within households. The purpose of this analysis is to assess dominant narratives of child poverty in the UK which focus on individual explanations such as parental skills and priorities, rather than on structural explanations. The rationale provided for this shift has related to austerity measures in the UK, which have impacted families and children especially. Previous Labour policies were criticised on the grounds that they were too generous, encouraging unrealistic expectations and irresponsible behaviours, including welfare dependency (Cameron, 2009).

The analysis presented here challenges this rhetoric, finding no support for hypotheses that expectations around living standards are rising or that parents are acting irresponsibly in their allocation of household resources. Indeed, expectations around living standards and levels of ownership of specific items and activities have remained remarkably stable. Increases in the rate of child deprivation on the whole appear to reflect an increased risk across similar vulnerable groups to those identified in previous research (see especially Lloyd, 2006). Additionally, and in line with previous research (Ridge, 2002; Middleton et al, 1997; Gordon et al, 2013), we find no evidence that adults living in households with children lack financial management and prioritisation skills. Indeed, they are overwhelmingly likely to behave in ways which prioritise children's needs even when this means going without themselves. However, parents and other adults in children's households cannot provide resources from nowhere, and continuing pressures on and cuts in the incomes of poor families will inevitably result in increases in child poverty.

Whilst the Coalition may have gone further than any previous government in implementing measures which cut the role of the state in providing welfare and public services (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012), their agenda in relation to the rhetoric around child poverty and closely related issues (e.g. 'troubled' families, 'skivers vs. strivers') is not new. Marx and Engels' (1846) *lumenproletariat*; Lewis' (1965) '(sub-)cultures of poverty'; Joseph's (1972) 'cycles of poverty'; and Murray's (1984) 'underclass' all tap into similar recurring notions of a 'culture' amongst poor people which is responsible for their continuing impoverishment. This despite repeated research efforts finding no evidence of such a culture (e.g. Shildrick et al, 2012;

Berthoud, 1983, provides a critique of earlier efforts). This article complements such research findings. In the continued absence of evidence that deprivation arises as a result of individualised behaviours and sub-cultural practices, a policy approach which draws on structural explanations of poverty appears to be indicated.

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<sup>i</sup> Based on a relative low income measure – children living in households with an equivalised income below 60% of the median. See below for full details of the child poverty measures set out in the 2010 Child Poverty Act.

<sup>ii</sup> Frank Field is (at the time of writing) a long-standing Labour MP (currently therefore in opposition) whose ongoing interest in child poverty had helped inform the New Labour approach to the issue.

<sup>iii</sup> Data analysis was performed using SPSS's Complex Samples Plan commands, to account for stratification and clustering in the PSE 2012 survey samples.

<sup>iv</sup> Age-specific items and activities included: bedrooms (ages 10 and over); playgroup (ages under five); homework, computer and internet, pocket money, saving money, and school trips (ages five and over). Summary names detailed in table 1.

<sup>v</sup> Non-overlapping confidence intervals used to indicate a statistically significant difference.

<sup>vi</sup> Items included in the FRS comprise: garden, bedrooms, celebrations, leisure, holiday, hobby, snack, school trip, playgroup.

<sup>vii</sup> It should be noted that whilst the deprivation scales used here were created in the same manner, there are some differences in the indicators of deprivation used – for example, as noted above, a computer and internet was considered a necessity in 2012 and is therefore included in the index from 2012, whereas it was not considered a necessity in 1999 and is therefore omitted from that index. However, both indices were constructed to represent the underlying variable of deprivation, and variables were selected for inclusion in both years based on similar methodologies testing that they were good indicators of this; see Main and Bradshaw (forthcoming) and Gordon and Nandy (2012) for more detail on the method.