



UNIVERSITY
of York

The York Policy Engine

GETTING THE CHILD POVERTY STRATEGY RIGHT

KEY LESSONS FROM
RESEARCH EVIDENCE
FOR AN EFFECTIVE,
AMBITIOUS APPROACH

A report by the University of York
Cost of Living Research Group

Acknowledgements

The report draws together key findings from a wide range of projects involving members of the University of York Cost of Living Research Group and was prepared by The York Policy Engine on behalf of the University of York Cost of Living Research Group. We are grateful for additional support from Ruth Patrick and Kate Andersen (University of York), Sophie Howes and Tom Lee (Child Poverty Action Group) and Kitty Stewart and Aaron Reeves (London School of Economics) in preparing the report.

The research and researchers involved in the underlying research have been funded by a number of different sources, including the University of York's Research England Policy Support Fund which has supported the work of The York Policy Engine and the University of York Cost of Living Research Group.

Changing Realities is a partnership between the University of York and Child Poverty Action Group. The Changing Realities research project is funded by the Robertson Trust. Between July 2022 and December 2023, Changing Realities received core funding from the Ayr Financial Fairness Trust. The Social Security for Families in a Devolved UK project (Safety Nets) is a major new study funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Benefit Changes and Larger Families project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change (WelCond) was funded by the ESRC (grant number ES/K002163/2).

Child of the North is a collaboration between the Northern Health Science Alliance, part-funded by Research England, and academics from the Northern NIHR Applied Research Collaborations (ARCs; North East and North Cumbria [reference NIHR200173], Greater Manchester [reference NIHR200174], North West Coast [reference NIHR200182], Yorkshire and Humber [reference NIHR200166]) and the NIHR School of Public Health Research [reference PD-SPH-2015], UK Prevention Research Partnership Collaboration, ActEarly [reference MR/S037527/1] and the Medical Research Council (MRC) [reference MR/P008577/1].

We are grateful to everyone who has made the underlying research the report draws on possible. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the funders highlighted above.

Finally, this report is only possible because of the people who gave up their time to be involved in the research projects it draws on, including parents who shared their everyday experiences of the social security system, local government staff and voluntary sector providers. We are very grateful to each of them for making this research possible.

FOREWORD FROM CHANGING REALITIES PARTICIPANT

I hope you agree with me that the rising inequality and child poverty in the world's sixth-largest economy is an utter disgrace and a source of profound shame to us all.

We need the Labour Government to recognise that people on benefits are barely surviving and significant reform is required. This group needs help and support, not more cuts. As this report makes clear, child poverty experts agree that lifting the two-child limit is a simple solution, which would lift millions of children out of poverty overnight.

Austerity strategies and cost-saving reforms for those worst off would stifle the creativity and futures of an entire generation, clever and curious working-class children will grow up in despair, not hope or aspiration. Investing in reducing the causes of poverty instead will have positive outcomes for health, education and society. Everyone would be better off; this is the type of genuine change that's needed.

For the politicians reading this, ask yourself: how will you support paid and unpaid carers, working families, and disabled people? What you implement now will keep generations of people either trapped in a cycle of misery and hopelessness, or allow them to live in dignity. Make that happen and everyone will be better off.

I'm part of Changing Realities - a collaboration between one hundred parents and carers living on a low income across the UK, with the Universities of York and Salford and CPAG.

We urge you to listen to and work with

people who have lived experience of poverty and expert knowledge of its effects. Please take our recommendations seriously and consider them in good faith; this report has all the facts and detail required for you to make humane and fair changes to the benefit system and significantly reduce child poverty.

Zahida is a Glasgow based mum, living with long-term disability, surviving on PIP



**CHANGING
REALITIES**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

60 Second Summary

The new government has committed to developing an ambitious child poverty strategy. While the Blair and Brown governments made progress in reducing child poverty, public spending on children has fallen – and child poverty risen – over the past decade.

An ambitious strategy needs to confront this reality. The social security system, which is the most effective policy tool in the fight against child poverty, needs significant investment after a decade of cuts. Reforms introduced in the 2010s have undermined the efficacy of social security, particularly the two-child limit and the benefit cap, but child benefit has lost value and reach too. Investing in social security requires these changes to be reversed, but that is just the start.

Around 7 in 10 children living in poverty live with at least one parent or guardian in work. A strong decent work agenda can play an important role in addressing child poverty, but reforms to Universal Credit are required too. Employment support needs to move from a punitive, harmful and counterproductive sanctions focused approach to a more supportive and collaborative model.

Strengthened social security and decent work can provide the foundations for an all-embracing child poverty strategy that works across a broad range of policy areas, including co-ordinated improvements to childcare, housing, education and services for children and families. Place-based and whole systems approaches can help unpack the interactions between multiple policy interventions and support the development of co-ordinated approaches.

Development of the child poverty strategy provides an opportunity to broaden the range of voices feeding into policy-making and to strengthen the evidence base. The government must ensure those with lived experiences of life on a low income are included in the development of the strategy. They should work with existing communities – like Changing Realities – to facilitate this. Greater collaboration between policy-makers and the research community can also help strengthen the evidence base informing the strategy during both its development and implementation phases. Social security should be reframed as a force for good; and as a key pillar of a socially just society.

Recommendations for policy change

1

Reinvest in social security for families with children, restoring its role as the key pillar in the fight against child poverty

2

Replace the punitive system of employment support rooted in sanctions with a system rooted in support and collaboration

3

Use place-based and whole systems approaches to strengthen the impact of wider services on child poverty

Recommendations for evidence making

1

Ensure those with lived experience of life on a low income have a strong and wide-reaching voice in development of the child poverty strategy

2

Invest in and support essential statistical data sources, including restoring UK participation in major European surveys

3

Foster greater collaboration between policy-makers and the research community in developing a strong evidence base on child poverty

Key facts and figures

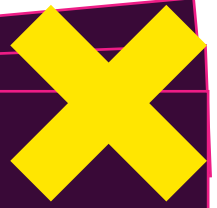
4.3m

children living in poverty

650,000

more children living in poverty than in 2013/14

£10
£10
£10



Around

7 in 10

children living in poverty live with at least one parent or guardian who is working



↓ 1/3

Public spending on family benefits fell by one-third – from 3.6% GDP to 2.4% – between 2013 and 2019. The UK was only OECD country to significantly reduce public spending per child during this period. Spending on those aged 0-5 was 7% lower in 2019 than in 2013

300,000

Abolishing the two-child limit now would lift 300,000 children out of poverty and mean 700,000 more children living in less deep poverty

88%

Of households affected by the benefit cap include children and 71% are lone parent families



20%

Child Benefit has lost around 20% of its value since 2010

600,000

Increasing the value of Child Benefit by £20 per child a week would lift around 600,000 children out of poverty

40%

Child poverty after housing costs reached 40% or higher in 76 parliamentary constituencies, these are areas disproportionately affected by the two-child limit

↓ 1/3

34% of the reduction in child poverty before housing costs under the last Labour Government arose from the tax credit programme

RISING POVERTY, FALLING SPENDING

Labour's 2024 manifesto promised an "ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty"¹ and a new ministerial taskforce on child poverty has been established to develop it². This represents a welcome change in outlook after the previous government de-emphasised income-based child poverty and repealed key dimensions of the Child Poverty Act 2010 in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016³.

The 1997-2010 Labour governments made progress, albeit uneven, in reducing child poverty⁴. However, the social, economic and policy landscape has shifted in the last decade. **650,000 more children are living in poverty than in 2013/14 and 4.3 million in total**⁵.

Similarly, while public spending on family benefits increased significantly during the Blair-Brown era, it fell sharply before the pandemic, from **3.6% GDP in 2013 to 2.4% in 2019**. Cross-national analysis of public spending profiles by age shows the UK was a significant outlier during this period, **the only OECD country to significantly reduce public spending per child**, including a particularly steep reduction in spending on those aged 0-5 which was 7% lower in 2019 than in 2013⁶.

Strengthen social security for families

An ambitious strategy needs to confront the reality that **increased public spending will be a necessary condition** for achieving significant reductions in child poverty, particularly through **restoring the value and coverage of social security benefits for families with children**. Social security needs to be recast as a force for good; and as a necessary investment in children and their families.

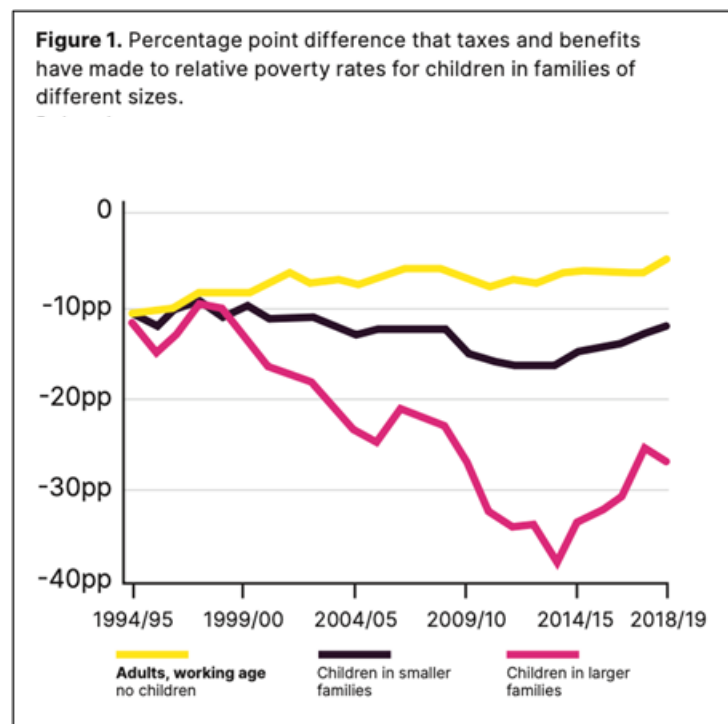
The broken link between need and entitlement

Households with children have **higher needs**, facing higher costs for food, clothing, housing, transport and childcare. While ensuring decent and well-paid work, reducing the costs of housing and childcare, enhancing education and providing free school meals can all play an important role in reducing child poverty, **none are as effective as social security in redistributing income to meet these additional needs**⁷.

However, recent reforms to social security for families with children starkly reduced support for those with the greatest needs. Notably, the two-child limit and the benefit cap policies, both introduced in the 2010s, **break the historic link between assessed need and entitlement to support**, restricting access to key means tested social security benefits⁸.

Both policies disproportionately affect households with higher living costs, particularly **larger families** and households living in **private rented** properties, and disproportionately affect households that are less able to increase their income through employment, particu-

-ly **single parent households and families with younger children**⁹.



The two-child limit and rising poverty

There has been a sharp decline in the effectiveness of taxes and benefits in reducing the relative poverty rates for children in larger families since 2014/15 (Fig 1), underlining that the two-child limit and benefit cap policies have **directly contributed to rising levels of poverty for children in larger families**.

The two-child limit **lacks fairness** because it arbitrarily removes benefit entitlement from some children¹⁰. It has disproportionately affected families with younger children, placing larger families with **children under three at a statistically significant higher risk of poverty** than their peers in larger families with older children since its introduction¹¹, undermining investment in early childhood. A leading child poverty expert has described it as 'the worst social security policy ever'¹².

As the two-child limit only applies to children born after 6th April 2017 its impact increases every day it remains in place, meaning **things will only get worse** unless it is scrapped¹³, creating a rising level of child-poverty that all other interventions will need to fight against. Abolishing the two-child limit now would **lift 300,000 children out of poverty** and 700,000 children from less deep poverty at a cost of £1.7 billion, making it the **most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty**¹⁴.

The benefit cap matters too

In placing a ceiling on the total level of payment households can receive, the benefit cap affects households with the highest level of need, meaning

the **benefit cap primarily affects families with children** and lone parent families in particular. Of the 78,000 households capped at February 2024, **88% included children and 71% were lone parent families**¹⁵. The most common household type affected is a lone-parent family with three children¹⁶.

"One of my children has been wearing trainers that she's not actually allowed to wear at school because I can't afford her a new pair of school shoes...so things like not being able to wear the school uniform properly is affecting her wanting to go to school... my child's going to school and getting picked on cos she can't wear the right school shoes because I don't have £10."

Benefit Changes and Larger Families project participant Jessica, single mum, four children, entitlement restricted by the benefit cap and two-child limit¹⁷

A key justification for the benefit cap was the belief it would save money by encouraging households in receipt of benefits with high housing costs to move to cheaper properties. This assumption does not reflect the reality of a housing market where **the number of households affected by the benefit cap exceeds the number of affordable private rental properties across the country**¹⁸. Affected households have little realistic prospect of finding cheaper accommodation that would allow them to escape the benefit cap, meaning tens of thousands of households with children are **'capped and trapped'** by the policy, **reducing their disposable income to destitution levels** by failing to reflect their true housing costs¹⁹.

The two-child limit and benefit cap intersect in challenging and problematic ways; if the two-child limit were to be removed, but the benefit cap remain, many families would find themselves capped for the first time, while some, already capped, would not receive a penny more in support as a result of the removal of the two-child limit.

" Sometimes I go to sleep with them [her children] cos it's getting so cold now, our house is getting cold, especially downstairs, and of course now because of electric and gas bills going up I'm using candles a lot."

Benefit Changes and Larger Families project participant Lucy, coupled mum with three children, entitlement restricted by the benefit cap and two-child limit.²⁰

Child Benefit has lost value

Child Benefit was once the core family focused social security benefit, its universalist approach providing a simple and effective form of support for all households with children to reflect the increased costs they face. As successive governments have focused their attention on means-tested benefits, the important role Child Benefit can play in addressing child poverty has been lost²¹.

A range of policy changes have altered its status and

value in recent years. Successive cuts mean **Child Benefit has lost around 20% of its value since 2010** and the **universal principle was lost** when higher rate tax payers' eligibility was removed in 2013²².

A revived Child Benefit can play an important role in tackling child poverty, not least because families above the threshold for means-tested benefits, but still struggling financially, will receive it. **Increasing the value of Child Benefit by £20 per child a week would lift around 600,000 children out of poverty** at a cost of around £12 billion per year²³.

With its complex rules and conditions, Universal Credit often fails to provide a stable income stream families can rely on, a direct contrast to the clear and simple design of Child Benefit. Restoring the status and value of Child Benefit would help bring the **security and predictability** a fully functioning social security system should offer²⁴.

Universal Credit needs reforms

As the main means-tested benefit for working age households, Universal Credit is a central 'lever' in the current social security system. Removing the two-child limit and benefit cap will improve its efficacy in alleviating child poverty, but other **significant weaknesses in Universal Credit** that contribute to child poverty will need to be addressed too.

Universal Credit design features that make it harder for low-income families with children to make ends meet include²⁵:

- The **five-week wait for Universal Credit** which can leave families without income or force them into **debt and future hardship** by seeking advance payments that are deducted from subsequent Universal Credit payments;
- **The range and scale of deductions to Universal Credit payments** which can be applied to a range of debts, including to third parties, **affecting almost half of households in receipt of Universal Credit**;
- **A failure to reflect true housing costs in Universal Credit payments** for private renters, Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates set at levels that leave hundreds of thousands of households with a shortfall of income against costs, while for social renters the **Spare Room Subsidy (aka bedroom tax)** reduces payments to a similarly large number of households.

The adequacy of, and uprating rules for, Universal Credit also require review. A **statutory duty to uprate all benefits and thresholds by the higher of prices or earnings** would help avoid a repeat of the declining value of key benefits for working age households witnessed since the 2010s²⁶.

"Sanctions, the five-week wait, an 'any job will do' approach and a sense of being 'on my own' with work coaches merely doing a job and not providing personalised support. How can we make people's lives better if children, disabled people, and families feel they are being punished?"

Caroline, a participant in the Changing Realities project.²⁷

Decent Work, Decent Welfare

Labour's manifesto acknowledged that 'For too many people a job does not offer the route out of poverty it should' and committed to 'making work pay' through a New Deal for Working People that will strengthen employment rights and 'make sure the minimum wage is a genuine living wage'²⁸.

These are welcome commitments. **Around 7 in 10 children living in poverty live with at least one parent or guardian who is working**²⁹, meaning promoting decent work needs to be a key component of a comprehensive child poverty strategy³⁰. Better paid and more secure jobs, and measures to support more people into such jobs, can boost the incomes of many families with children and reduce their reliance on means-tested benefits³¹.

However, it is vital that the new strategy **does not repeat the mistake of previous governments that have simplistically 'prescribed work as the best way out of poverty'**³². In addition to acknowledging the role social security has to play in supporting the additional costs families with children face, **an evidence-based strategy needs to grapple with the complex interactions between work and welfare** in order to create a system that genuinely opens up sustainable and quality employment opportunities for parents³³.

From sanctions to support

The largest and longest study of welfare conditionality in the UK concluded '**Benefit sanctions do little to enhance people's motivation to prepare for, seek, or enter paid work**', noting instead that 'They routinely trigger profoundly **negative personal, financial, health and behavioural outcomes** and push some people away from collectivised welfare provisions'³⁴. Yet, such an approach is at the heart of the current Universal Credit system, which leaves many families with children on low incomes at **risk of punitive sanctions** that push them further into poverty.

This model also **significantly weakens employment support** services provided by Jobcentre Plus because 'interactions between claimants and advisers [are] **underpinned by the threat of the loss of social security income**'³⁵. Key studies of welfare conditionality have underlined that the **provision of meaningful support is more effective than sanctions in sustaining positive changes in paid employment**³⁶.

Moving towards a more **support focused model** will require significant changes to current policy and practice. In addition to ending the application of counterproductive sanctions, and an **ineffective 'any job' model** that drives people towards unsustainable work, it will mean **rethinking the role of work coaches**, whose **high caseloads** restrict the depth of support they can offer, typically a fortnightly appointment of just 10 minutes for each person they support, limiting their ability to develop collaborative relationships grounded in trust and genuine communication that a support focused model requires³⁷.

Trust in the Universal Credit system could also be repaired by **improving communication in ways that embed principles of reciprocity and compassion**. Just as the social security system expects things from claimants in return for financial support, so too can claimants have expectations of how they encounter that system. At a minimum, this must include **creating a right to reply** within the Universal Credit journal and making sure that all claimants can expect to receive a response to an issue they raise within a set timeframe³⁸.

"Not being able to afford the cost of heating and electricity to cook healthy meals has also had a big effect on my mental health, feeling that I am not able to care for my daughter in a way that I should be able to. There are also the appointments that I miss to try to get help as I simply don't have the money to pay for travel as the hospital I would need to get to is not within walking distance. I would not say at the moment that I have any sort of meaningful life largely being at home struggling to keep warm and eating very basic foods.

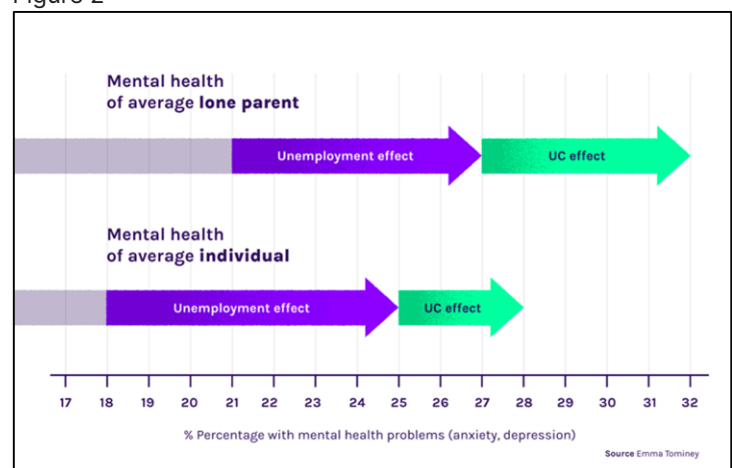
Erik, lone parent, Changing Realities project participant.³⁹

Blunt tools are causing harm

The **Changing Realities** project, which works with families on a low-income to capture everyday lived experience, has highlighted the **often-stressful nature of interactions with the Universal Credit system**⁴⁰.

Quantitative analysis reinforces these concerns⁴¹. Using longitudinal data covering nearly 50,000 households observed across 10 years, and exploiting the staggered roll-out of Universal Credit over this period, researchers examined the impact on mental health of moving into unemployment for those claiming Universal Credit compared to those claiming legacy benefits. They **found the mental health of those receiving Universal Credit was worse than for those claiming the old legacy benefits** and, significantly, that the **negative mental health effect is largest for lone parents**, for whom mental

Figure 2



health problems increased by 5 percentage points more compared to legacy benefits⁴². The analysis highlighted **reductions in benefit income** and the **strict job search** rules as key in explaining the adverse impact of Universal Credit⁴³.

A punitive approach to incentivising work also informed creation of the **Benefit Cap**. Detailed quantitative analysis drawing on data from 500,000 individuals showed that **while it increased employment for some it also pushed others out of the labour market altogether**⁴⁴. This reflected that **the Benefit Cap increased economic inactivity because it harmed mental health** and that some of those affected were eligible to move to disability-related benefits that are exempt from the cap.

Differential work incentives

Though designed to boost work incentives and leave claimants better off in work, the design and operation of Universal Credit mean it fails to do so in many cases.

Universal Credit is withdrawn at steep rate, typically a **benefit withdrawal of 55p for each pound earned**, higher still for some larger families with high housing costs who can face a **tax-benefit withdrawal rate as high as 69 percent**. Those with childcare needs face further disincentives because the **high costs of childcare are only partially covered by Universal Credit**⁴⁵.

“When I found myself searching for work, I did not feel in any way supported by the job centre ... During appointments, my allocated job coach would briefly scan my online job search journal and ask if I’d been successful in obtaining any job interviews. There was seemingly little interest in actually helping me to find a job: even when I enquired about suitable roles available, I was told to search online and complete the journal.

“I managed to find a job. [...] Sanctions are a constant threat. I work 24 hours per week, and new guidelines entail I must work at least 30. I will have to find the extra hours somehow. The alternative is to find another job, but this job was already difficult to come by and my employers have already made allowances for my hours due to childcare.”

Aurora, single parent with two children, Changing Realities project participant.⁴⁶

Families need security, not sticking plaster fixes

An effective child poverty strategy needs to recognise the importance of providing support on which people can rely on in times of need. Over the past five years, we have seen a rapid rise in short-term, emergency payments, and funds – such as the Household Support Fund – that represent ‘sticking plaster’ solutions to wider problems of benefit inadequacy and are provided on a temporary basis,

and subject to last-minute renewal⁴⁷.

Security is a vital precursor to enabling people to progress in their lives; to support their children; and to enter and move on in work. The social security system should support households to feel secure; but too often, recent interventions have embedded insecurity – as if by design. This is best rectified by a wide-ranging review of benefit adequacy, and by a move to making longer-term spending commitments (for example, with regard to a local welfare crisis settlement).

Pulling all available levers

The government’s new ministerial taskforce on child poverty ‘will explore how we can use all the available levers we have across government to create an ambitious strategy’⁴⁸. This reflects calls from experts for ‘an all-embracing child poverty strategy across a broad range of policy areas’, building on **the foundations social security and decent work provide** through co-ordinated improvements to **childcare, housing, education and services for children and families**⁴⁹.

Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study data has shown that **those in the lowest quintile for household income during early childhood were, at age 17, nearly 13 times more likely to have four or more adverse health and social outcomes** (psychological distress, poor health, obesity, smoking, weak academic attainment) than those who were in the highest income quintile during early childhood. This points to the need for **‘whole system approaches to tackling multiple childhood inequalities’**. Addressing poverty is a necessary condition for addressing multiple adolescent adversities but not a sufficient one, and there is a need to combine income redistribution with ‘in-kind educational and childcare services, reduction of social discrimination and stigma, and other cross-sectoral actions’⁵⁰.

Place-based approaches

The **Child of the North** project has underlined the need to view child poverty through a spatial inequality lens, highlighting that **children in the north of England are more likely to live in poverty and more likely to be living in food insecure homes than those in the rest of England**⁵¹.

Child poverty after housing costs reached **45% or higher in 7% of parliamentary constituencies in the north in 2020/21**, compared to 4% in the rest of England, and the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber were found to be the **areas ‘most vulnerable’ to rising living costs across England**; households in the north are more likely to fall into fuel poverty than in the rest of England⁵².

Reflecting these trends and pressures, a recent **Child of the North** report recommended government **“ensure that there is a joined-up and place-based approach within national government to address child poverty”**⁵³.

Whole systems approaches can be particularly useful in helping to understand how best to respond to variations in policy outcomes by place (See Box 1).

Box 1: Confronting Policy Complexity: The ActEarly Collaboratory

Understanding the **complex interactions** between different policy interventions is a major challenge the Child Poverty Strategy will need to confront. **Whole systems** approaches can help unpack these complexities. Such approaches emphasise the 'emergent properties' of complex systems, where multiple factors interact to shape outcomes in ways that may vary from place-to-place.

The **ActEarly city collaboratory approach** programme explores changes early in childhood that can improve health and opportunities for children growing up in places with high levels of child poverty⁵⁴, combining whole system analysis with coproduction techniques that bring together citizens, research experts, practitioners and policy makers to develop and test policy interventions that can improve children's lives.

Examination of the **interactions between housing and neighbourhood environments in shaping child wellbeing in Bradford and Tower Hamlets**⁵⁵ highlighted numerous interacting inequalities affecting child wellbeing that could be partially addressed by **improvements to the quality of housing and neighbourhood spaces**, including some relatively minor investments in housing repairs services and the physical environment in local areas, and stressed the value of designing such interventions in ways that empower local communities to 'take ownership' of place.

Systems mapping of interacting influences on **primary school children's diets**, including social determinants such as economic inequality, helped identify 'leverage points' where the system might be influenced. The work **highlighted the value of 'whole school' approaches to food that engage all stakeholders over the whole school day**, including embedding food and diet into children's learning, and underscored the advantages of this approach over simpler policies that focus on a single dimension such as improving the quality of school meals⁵⁶. Key findings from the research informed a connects-food toolkit⁵⁷.

also serve as a 'policy laboratory', allowing different policy responses to be tested and evaluated. However, too often there has been a tendency to '**devolve and forget**', failing to either explore or learn lessons from the policy differences that devolution has facilitated⁵⁹.

This is a major **lost opportunity**, not least because there are significant examples of social security reforms that address some of the key weaknesses in Westminster policy identified above. For instance, in **Northern Ireland** there has been **mitigation of the benefit cap** for much of the period since it was introduced, while in Scotland the introduction of the **Scottish Child Payment** provides a top-up to a number of key means-tested benefits such as Universal Credit and its payments are made per child, regardless of family size. Our analysis suggests that, **last year, a typical out-of-work couple with four children would have received £22,000 in York compared to £32,000 in Belfast and £37,000 in Glasgow**⁶⁰.

The child poverty strategy will need to engage with questions around devolution of social security therefore, including the size and shape of local welfare services and what additional powers might be devolved to regional mayors to help them in fighting child poverty⁶¹.

"It seems to me policies are being developed within government by people who have little to no experience of the harsh reality many face."

Caroline, Changing Realities project participant.⁶²

Voices, Narratives and Evidence

As development of the Child Poverty Strategy gathers pace, important questions about evidence gaps and whose voices need to be heard will increasingly come to the fore. Some relatively low-cost actions could help address some of these issues.

The child poverty taskforce has already made a welcome commitment to **hearing directly from those with lived experience of life on a low income**⁶³; key research studies have underlined the value of such an approach, but also underlined the risks of a minimal participatory model that focuses merely on 'case studies' and provided tool kits to support more expansive approaches⁶⁴. The Changing Realities project involves more than 100 parents and carers on a low-income from across the UK working together with academics at the universities of York and Salford, and the Child Poverty Action Group, to document life on a low income. Changing Realities also convenes the 'Involvement Network', a network of organisations pioneering the involvement of those with lived experiences of poverty and social security receipt in policy, research and campaigning. The new government should draw on these existing networks and groups in developing their lived experiences work and strategies.

Devolution

Over the past decade **devolution has quietly changed the UK's social security system**⁵⁸. As well as providing a platform for developing and implementing place-based responses to child poverty that captures varying needs, devolution can

There have been significant advances in open data and data science over the past decade or so, but some backwards steps too. Notably, harmonised European statistics once played an important role in allowing **child poverty trends in the UK to be benchmarked against the performance of European peers and in facilitating cross-national research**, but UK data in the Eurostat Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) have not been updated since 2018 due to Brexit⁶⁵.

Sustained, widespread and structured collaboration between policy-makers and the research community can help ensure a strong body of evidence informs the strategy as it is developed and implemented. Child poverty does not directly feature in the DWP's last Areas of Research Interest (ARI) statement⁶⁶. There are opportunities for stronger collaboration and independent scrutiny that a refocused ARI statement could help facilitate.

More widely, there is a pressing need to recast social security as a force for good, and to develop new, positive narratives about 'welfare' that emphasise its role as an investment in individuals and families; and as a key element of our welfare state, which can provide support to all of us across the life cycle. Shifting the narrative on welfare will also help address stigma; which all too often shapes people's

experiences of social security in very negative ways; and can drive under-claiming of key benefits, and so increase poverty risks. Developing a new narrative on 'welfare' requires political leadership; and will be most effective if done collaboratively with those with lived experiences of poverty and social security receipt.

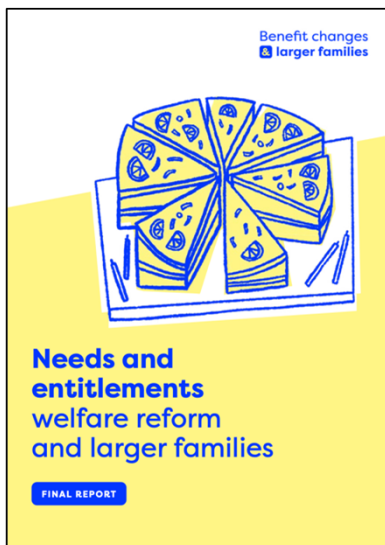
Changing Child Poverty

There is an urgent need to reduce the historically high rates of child poverty, and to turn the corner on what has been a dismal decade for the nation's poorest families. Existing research evidence provides a compelling case for investing in social security as the key foundation for an effective anti-poverty strategy. Government should draw on this evidence base in its strategy development, and work directly with those with lived experiences of poverty to make change happen; change which is desperately needed.

ENDNOTES

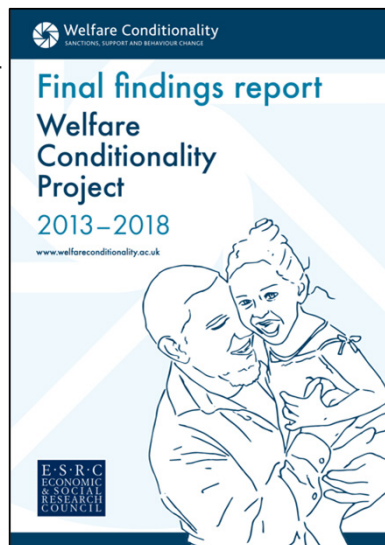
1. Labour Party (2024) Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024.
2. 10 Downing Street (2024) Press Release: Ministerial taskforce launched to kickstart work on child poverty strategy, 17th July 2024.
3. Patrick, R., Bennett, H., Hudson, J. and Simpson, M. (2024 - forthcoming) 'Tackling poverty across the UK; devolution, difference and discourse', IPPR Progressive Review.
4. Stewart, K., Millar, J., Marsh, A. and Bradshaw, J. (2023) Ending Child Poverty: Why and How. London: Child Poverty Action Group.
5. DWP (2024) 'Households Below Average Income, 2022/23: The Income Distribution Summary Tables', 21st March 2024,
6. Richardson, D., Harris, D., Hudson, J. and Mackinder, S. (2023) Too Little, Too Late: An assessment of public spending on children by age in 84 countries. Florence: UNICEF IRC.
7. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
8. The benefit cap limits the total amount a household can receive in benefits if they have no or low earnings. The two-child limit prevents families from receiving additional means-tested support for their third or subsequent children for children born since 6 April 2017.
9. Patrick, R., Andersen, K., Reader, M., Reeves, A. and Stewart, K. (2023) Needs and entitlements: welfare reform and larger families: Final Report. Benefit Changes & Larger Families/ Nuffield Foundation.
10. O'Neill, M. (2024) Is it fair to remove the two-child limit on benefits? The Fairness Foundation, 25th March 2024.
11. Chzhen, Y., & Bradshaw, J. (2024). The two-child limit and child poverty in the United Kingdom. International Journal of Social Welfare, 1-15.
12. Bradshaw, J. (2017) 'Why the two-child policy is the worst social security policy ever', Social Policy Association 50th Anniversary Blog Series. <http://www.social-policy.org.uk/50-for-50/two-child-policy/>
13. Child Poverty Action Group, Church of England, Benefit Changes & Larger Families and End Child Poverty (2024) Things will only get worse: why the two-child limit must go. CPAG: July 2024.
14. Child Poverty Action Group et al, Things will only get worse
15. DWP (2024) 'Benefit cap: number of households capped to February 2024', 18th June 2024
16. Fransham, M., Andersen, K., Patrick, R., Reeves, A. and Stewart, K. (2024) Capped and trapped (in the UK's housing market): how the benefit cap makes it almost impossible to find affordable housing, LSE CASE Paper CASE/234
17. Andersen, K., Redman, J., Stewart, K., & Patrick, R. (2024). 'It's the kids that suffer': Exploring how the UK's benefit cap and two-child limit harm children, Social Policy & Administration, 1-16
18. Fransham et al, Capped and trapped
19. Fransham et al, Capped and trapped
20. Patrick, R., Andersen, K., Stewart, K., Reeves, A. and Fransham, M, (2024) An impossible move? Households' experiences of trying to escape the Benefit Cap, LSE CASE Paper CASE/233
21. Child Poverty Action Group (2023) Money Well Spent: Why we should recognise and reinvest in child benefit, October 2023
22. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
23. CPAG's Autumn Statement Representation, 2024
24. Child Poverty Action Group, Money Well Spent
25. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty; Parkes, H., Wilkes, M., Patrick, R., Jordan, U., Kaufman, J. and Young, D. (2024) Snakes and ladders: Tackling precarity in social security and employment support, London: IPPR and Changing Realities.
26. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
27. Parkes et al, Snakes and ladders.
28. Labour Party (2024) Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024.
29. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
30. Stewart, K., Millar, J., Marsh, A. and Bradshaw, J. (2024) 'Ending Child Poverty: How it can be done', Poverty, 177, 7-10.
31. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
32. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
33. Parkes et al, Snakes and ladders.
34. Dwyer, P. (2018) Final Findings Report: The Welfare Conditionality Project 2013-2018. Report. University of York / WelCond
35. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
36. Dwyer, P. (2018) Final Findings Report: The Welfare Conditionality Project 2013-2018. Report. University of York / WelCond
37. Parkes et al, Snakes and ladders.
38. Power, M., Pybus, K., Jordan, U., Tominey, E., Kaufman, J., McHardy, F., Robertson, L. & Patrick, R. with Changing Realities participants (2023) Where's the Credit? Single Parents, Universal Credit and Mental Health. Changing Realities.
39. Power et al, Where's the credit?
40. Power et al, Where's the credit?
41. Brewer, M., Dang, T. and Tominey, E. (2022) Universal Credit: Welfare Reform and Mental Health, IZA DP No. 15178, March 2022
42. Power et al, Where's the credit?
43. Brewer et al, Universal Credit: Welfare Reform and Mental Health
44. Reeves, A., Fransham, M., Stewart, K., Reader, M., & Patrick, R. (2024). 'Capping welfare payments for workless families increases employment and economic inactivity: Evidence from the UK's benefit cap', International Journal of Social Welfare, 1-14.
45. Parkes et al, Snakes and ladders.
46. Parkes et al, Snakes and ladders.
47. Meers, J., Colliver, K., Hudson, J. & Lunt, N. (2024) "'Sticking plaster" support: The Household Support Fund and localised assistance in the UK welfare state', Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, 32(1), 26-46
48. 10 Downing Street, Press Release: Ministerial taskforce launched
49. Stewart et al, Ending Child Poverty
50. Villadsen, A., Asaria, M., Skarda, I., Ploubidis G., Williams, M., Brunner, E. and Cookson, R. (2023) 'Clustering of adverse health and educational outcomes in adolescence following early childhood disadvantage: population-based retrospective UK cohort study', Lancet Public Health, 8, 286-93.
51. Barnes, A., Pickett, K., Power, M. et al (2023) Child Poverty and the Cost of Living Crisis: A report prepared for the APPG Child of the North. NHSA/Child of the North APPG.
52. Barnes et al, Child Poverty and the Cost of Living Crisis
53. Barnes, A., Pickett, K., Power, M. et al (2023) Child Poverty and the Cost of Living Crisis: A report prepared for the APPG Child of the North. NHSA/Child of the North APPG.
54. Wright, J., Hayward, A., West, J., Pickett, K. et al. (2019) 'ActEarly: a City Collaboratory approach to early promotion of good health and wellbeing', Wellcome Open Research, 4:156.
55. Ucci M, Ortegon-Sanchez A, Mead NE, Godward C, Rahman A, Islam S, Pleace N, Albert A, Christie N. (2022) 'Exploring the Interactions between Housing and Neighbourhood Environments for Enhanced Child Wellbeing: The Lived Experience of Parents Living in Areas of High Child Poverty in England, UK', International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 19(19):125-63.
56. Bryant, M., Burton, W., O'Kane, N. et al. (2023) 'Understanding school food systems to support the development and implementation of food based policies and interventions', International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 20, 29
57. Patrick et al, Tackling poverty across the UK
58. Patrick et al, Tackling poverty across the UK
59. Bennett, H., Patrick, R. and Simpson, M. (2024) 'Social security in a devolved UK: realities, risks & opportunities for families', Centre on Constitutional Change, 29th May 2024
60. Patrick et al, Tackling poverty across the UK
61. Patrick et al, Tackling poverty across the UK
62. Parkes et al, Snakes and ladders.
63. DWP and DfE (2024) 'Press release: Child Poverty Taskforce kicks off urgent work to publish strategy in spring', 15th August 2024.
65. Bryant, M., Burton, W., O'Kane, N. et al. (2023) 'Understanding school food systems to support the development and implementation of food based policies and interventions', International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 20, 29
66. <http://www.connects-food.com>

FURTHER READING



Needs and entitlements welfare reform and larger families
Final Report 2023

Authors
Ruth Patrick, Kate Andersen, Mary Reader, Aaron Reeves, and Kitty Stewart



Ending Welfare Conditionality Project: Final findings report 2018

Authors
Peter Dwyer et al



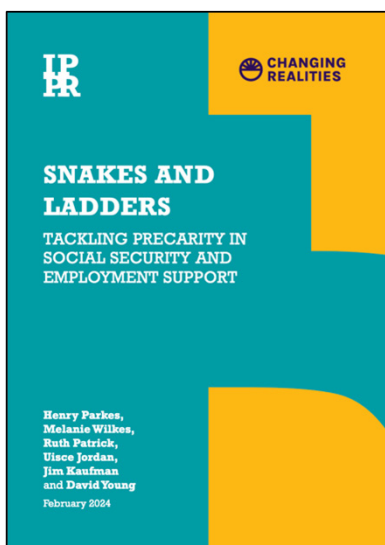
Ending child poverty: why and how
2023

Authors
Kitty Stewart, Jane Millar, Alan Marsh and Jonathan Bradshaw



Where's the Credit? - Single Parents, Universal Credit and Mental Health
2023

Authors
Maddy Power, Katie Pybus, Uisce Jordan, Emma Tominey, Jim Kaufman, Fiona McHardy, Laura Robertson, Ruth Patrick, Changing Realities participants



Snakes and ladders: Tackling precarity in social security and employment support
2024

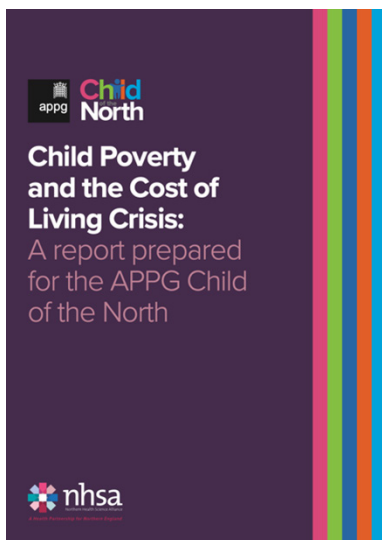
Authors
Henry Parkes, Melanie Wilkes, Ruth Patrick, Uisce Jordan, Jim Kaufman, David Young



Is it fair to remove the two-child limit on benefits?
2024

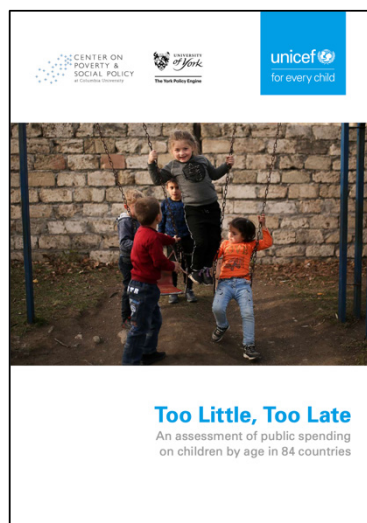
Authors
Martin O'Neill

FURTHER READING



Child Poverty and the Cost of Living Crisis: A report prepared for the APPG Child of the North
2023

Authors
Amy Barnes, Kate Pickett, Maddy Power, Carolyn Snell et al



Too Little, Too Late: An assessment of public spending on children by age in 84 countries
2023

Authors
Dominic Richardson, David Harris, John Hudson and Sophie Mackinder



How can local government protect and promote health and well-being during the cost of living crisis?
2022

Authors
Kate Pickett, Claire Cameron

MORE INFORMATION

Scan the QR code for more information about, and downloadable links to, key studies featured in this report that University of York researchers have contributed to.

To contact members of the University of York Cost of Living Research Group email typ@york.ac.uk

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13833343



Publication Date September 2024



UNIVERSITY
of York

The York Policy Engine

