Public attitudes to child poverty

During the recent economic downturn, we have seen public attitudes towards benefit recipients harden. But are attitudes towards child poverty behaving in a similar manner or is the public becoming more sympathetic?

And given a widespread programme of government cuts and media coverage of the fact that the government will inevitably miss its target to eradicate child poverty by 2020, how are perceptions of the prevalence of child poverty affected? Liz Clery looks to the British Social Attitudes survey for answers.

Introduction
The British Social Attitudes survey has asked the public many of the same questions about topics such as welfare and poverty over its 30-year life, allowing us to explore how attitudes have changed and whether they tend to respond in particular ways in periods of economic hardship and government reform.

Recent analysis of the survey data has shown that, on certain measures, attitudes to benefit recipients have become more sympathetic since 2011. Taking a longer term view, however, such views are markedly less widespread than they have been in previous times of economic hardship, most notably in the recession of the early 1990s. As well as historically responding to economic circumstances, there is considerable evidence that public attitudes to welfare can also change in line with the government policy and rhetoric of the day. Most markedly, from the mid-1990s, we have witnessed a long-term decline in sympathetic attitudes towards benefit recipients, particularly among Labour Party supporters, reflecting the changing rhetoric and agenda adopted by that party in government.1

Focusing on recent change, we see that the proportion of the public holding the view that unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work rose from 51 per cent in 2011 to 62 per cent in 2012, while the view that cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people’s lives increased from 42 per cent to 47 per cent over the same year-long period. Similarly, 34 per cent of the public in 2012 supported extra spending on welfare benefits, compared with 28 per cent in 2011.2 These changes can potentially be explained as a reaction to the discussion and early implementation of government welfare reform, along with the experience of a continued period of economic hardship.

But what about attitudes to child poverty? As we only started asking the public about their attitudes to child poverty in 2009 (though we have been measuring attitudes to poverty in general since the mid-1980s), we do not have a comparable time series to analyse long-term trends in attitudes. However, using data collected in 2012, we can examine whether, in the short term, members of the public are becoming more or less sympathetic.

Current, past and future outlook for child poverty
In 2009, we asked respondents for the first time how much child poverty exists in Britain, how this has changed in the last 10 years and how it is likely to change over the coming decade. We repeated these questions in the 2012 survey and the answers provided by respondents in the two years are presented in Figure 1.

While there is a widespread recognition, in both years, that child poverty exists in Britain today, the public are slightly more likely to express this viewpoint now than in 2009 – notably in terms of there being ‘quite a lot’ of child poverty. While 36 per cent believed this to be the case in 2009, 39 per cent expressed this view in 2012. While public expectations for the past and future trajectory of child poverty have always been, on balance, negative, this was more markedly the case in 2012 than it had been three years earlier.
For instance, thinking of the last 10 years, 52 per cent of respondents in 2012 thought that child poverty had increased, compared with 46 per cent who thought this in 2009. And, despite the widely publicised 2020 target, more than half think that child poverty will increase over the next 10 years (54 per cent, up from 51 per cent in 2009).

These developments reflect long-term trends in attitudes to poverty in general, with perceptions of its current level and expectations of its trajectory over the previous and next 10 years consistently becoming more negative in times of economic hardship. In the 2009–2012 period, it may also be that perceptions of the levels of child poverty and how these might change were also influenced by government cuts and welfare reform, which have been widely reported as having negative impacts on the poor, including children.

**Causes of child poverty**

However, the fact that the public are slightly more likely to recognise the existence of child poverty and to expect it to increase over the next decade compared to three years ago does not automatically mean that they have become more sympathetic to those who experience this phenomenon. To explore whether this is the case, we can examine perceptions of the causes of child poverty, and the extent to which this is viewed as resulting from the individual actions, aspirations or characteristics of those in poverty or from broader societal factors, over which individuals and families in poverty have little control.

In 2012, as in 2009 and 2011, we asked respondents to identify all the causes of child poverty, from a pre-defined list, and to indicate which they thought was its main cause. In Figure 2 below, we present the proportions of the public who identified each cause of child poverty in 2012. In previous analyses of this question, we categorised these reasons, with each being defined as either a ‘societal’ explanation for poverty (depicted in pale grey in Figure 2) or an explanation relating to parents’ and families’ own behaviour, aspirations and characteristics (depicted in dark grey). Societal explanations encapsulate inequality in society, the welfare,
Public attitudes to child poverty

From Figure 3, we can see that the public in 2012 recognised that child poverty has multiple causes, but were more likely to identify those relating to parents’ and families’ own behaviour, characteristics and aspirations, than those relating to wider society. While the most popular cause of child poverty identified – that ‘their parents suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse or other addictions’ – was selected by almost three-quarters of the public (73 per cent), the most common ‘societal’ explanation identified was that ‘they live in a poor quality area’ (selected by 42 per cent). Indeed, no societal explanation for child poverty was identified by more than half of the public, whereas this was the case for the three most commonly identified causes relating to parents’ and families’ characteristics, behaviour and aspirations.

When we consider change since 2009, we find that the proportions of the public identifying each cause of child poverty were remarkably similar in 2009, 2011 and 2012. Between 2009 and 2012, we only see a significant increase or decline in relation to five of the 15 causes of child poverty asked about. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note, as shown in Figure 3, that it is the societal explanations for child poverty that have tended to become more popular, while those relating to parents’ and families’ aspirations, characteristics and behaviour have tended to decline in popularity over the past three years. Most markedly, the proportion citing ‘family breakdown or loss of a family member’ as a cause of child poverty declined from 56 per cent in 2009 to 49 per cent in 2012, while the less common view that child poverty is caused by inequality in society increased from 25 per cent to 30 per cent over the same period. It may therefore be that experience of government cuts, welfare reform and economic hardship, as well as a sense that child poverty is more prevalent than was previously thought to be the case, contribute to a view that child poverty is caused by factors operating beyond the level of the individual parent or family.

Conclusion

Public perceptions of the levels of child poverty in Britain and its causes have remained relatively stable during the three years in which we have been collecting data on this topic. There appears to be a prevailing view that considerable levels of child poverty exist and that these are likely to increase or to remain at the same level over the coming decade. The public tend to explain child poverty on the basis of parents’ and families’ characteristics, aspirations and behaviour, with societal explanations being less popular.

Yet, there are some signs that attitudes to child poverty are responding to a time of economic hardship, government cuts and welfare reform, in a similar way to attitudes to welfare more generally. The public are slightly more likely to perceive child poverty and to express a negative view about its trajectory over the next 10 years than they were three years ago, while any changes in perceptions of its causes point in the direction of increasing support for a societal explanation, and less for those associated with the characteristics and behaviour of parents and families. In the coming years, it will be interesting to monitor long-term trends in attitudes to child poverty and to consider how these relate to emerging government targets and policy and economic circumstances.

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