

Poverty and children's wellbeing at 14 years old

It is well established that children who live in low-income families have poorer than average cognitive and emotional development, educational attainment and physical health.¹ Less is known about the possible cumulative impacts of persistent poverty during childhood on later outcomes, particularly in adolescence,² and the links between other forms of poverty and child wellbeing. Gwyther Rees addresses these gaps.

THIS ARTICLE presents new analysis relating to young people aged around 14 years old in the UK using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). This covers a large and representative sample of children born early in the new millennium and has gathered information from parents, teachers and children at various points throughout childhood. It offers a unique contemporary and detailed view of child development in the UK in the early part of the twenty-first century. The article asks two questions: To what extent do experiences of poverty throughout childhood explain variations in adolescent wellbeing? And how can

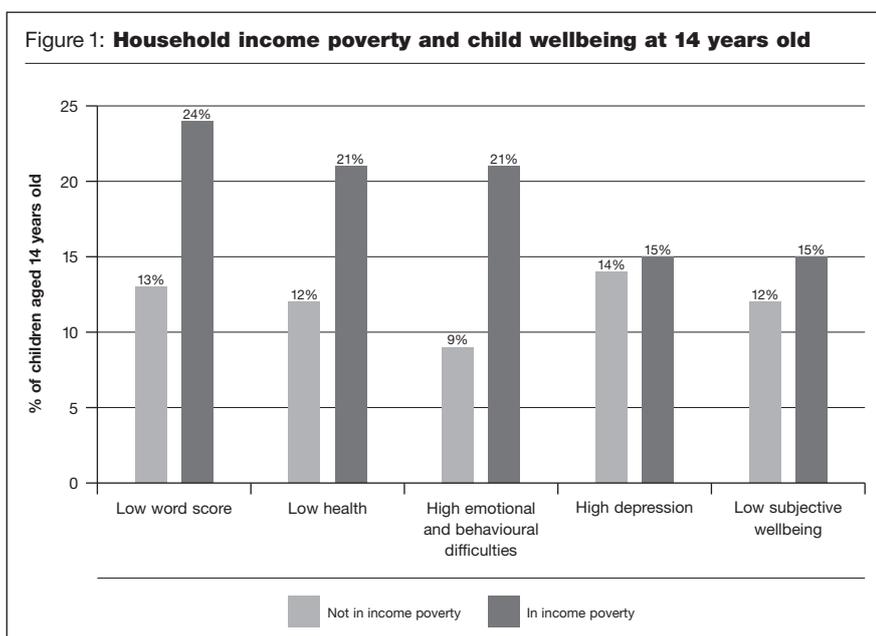
alternative measures of poverty enhance our understanding of the links between poverty and wellbeing during adolescence?

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a broad concept that incorporates a range of aspects of people's lives and may be measured through both objective and subjective indicators. The analysis here focuses on several important aspects of wellbeing during adolescence, for which data is available in the MCS when children were aged 14 years old. The five aspects and the measures used are as follows:

1. Cognitive development: a test of word recognition generating a score from 0 to 20 correct answers. Here, a score of less than five correct words was defined as 'low'.
2. Physical health: the child's rating of her/his physical health on a five-point scale from 'poor' to 'excellent'. The focus here is on the percentage of children who rated their health as 'poor' or 'fair'.
3. Emotional and behavioural difficulties: the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' (answered by parents) that generates a score from 0 to 40 based on 20 questions. A threshold of over 16 points was used to indicate emotional and behavioural difficulties.
4. Depressive symptoms: the 'Moods and Feelings Questionnaire' (answered by children) that generates a score from 0 to 26 based on 13 questions. A threshold of more than 12 points was used as an indicator of depression.
5. Subjective wellbeing: four questions answered by children about their happiness with family, friends, school and appearance, creating a score from 0 to 24, where a higher score indicates higher wellbeing. Low subjective wellbeing was defined as a score of 12 or less.

Figure 1: **Household income poverty and child wellbeing at 14 years old**



Histories of poverty and child wellbeing

The MCS contains an indicator of household income poverty – defined as below 60 per cent of median income in the UK.³ The difference in wellbeing between children in and out of income poverty at 14 years old is illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1: **Histories of poverty and child wellbeing at 14 years old**

	% of children	<5 words %	Low health %	Emotional and behavioural difficulties %	Depression %	Low subjective wellbeing %
No poverty	49	10.5	9.8	5.3	11.6	9.1
One-off	13	14.7	15.3	8.6	13.2	13.3
Intermittent	21	16.5	17.7	15.4	18.8	15.4
Persistent	17	24.0	19.2	19.8	15.0	15.4

Children living in households in income poverty at 14 years old were more than twice as likely as other children to have emotional and behavioural difficulties; and close to twice as likely to have a low word test score and low health. The gap in subjective wellbeing is smaller, although still statistically significant. There was no evidence of a significant difference in depression scores according to household income poverty. It is possible to go further and look at the link between histories of income poverty and these measures of child wellbeing at 14 years old. This is only possible for around 9,000 children for whom complete information on household income poverty is available for all six waves of the MCS.⁴ This means that the sample is not representative of the child population. For example, poverty data was more often missing for children from poorer backgrounds. But the findings are still important in demonstrating the possible impact of persistent poverty.

Just under half (49 per cent) of children had not been in income poverty at any of the six sweeps of MCS data collection. Around 13 per cent had experienced poverty at one sweep and the remaining children had experienced two instances (8 per cent), three instances (7 per cent), four instances (7 per cent), five instances (7 per cent) and six instances (10 per cent). To simplify the presentation, four categories have been created – none, one, intermittent (two to four) and persistent (five to six). Table 1 shows

the percentages in each group (second column) and also the variations in wellbeing across groups (in the remaining five columns).

There is a clear pattern here of lower wellbeing in terms of cognitive abilities, physical health and emotional and behavioural difficulties among children with more extensive histories of poverty. Children who had experienced persistent income poverty were almost four times more likely than those who had never experienced poverty to have emotional and behavioural difficulties, more than twice as likely to have a low score on the word test, and twice as likely to have low physical health. The relationship of poverty with depression and subjective wellbeing appears less strong, and children in persistent poverty had a lower risk of depression than children in intermittent poverty. This is an important pattern that could be explored further. However, children with any (even one) experience of poverty had a higher risk of depression and low subjective wellbeing than those who had not experienced poverty.

Multi-dimensional poverty and child wellbeing

Poverty can be defined on the basis of criteria other than income, and alternative approaches can offer a greater insight into children's experience of poverty.⁵ The second part of the analysis looks at two other measures that have been used in previous analysis of the MCS.⁶ The first

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Table 2: **Multi-dimensional poverty and wellbeing when children were 14 years old**

	% of children	<5 words correct %	Low health %	Emotional and behavioural difficulties %	High depression %	Low subjective wellbeing %
Income poverty	30	23.8	21.0	20.8	14.9	15.1
Materially deprived	23	20.7	20.4	21.6	18.1	16.1
Financial strain	11	19.9	20.4	22.6	19.2	15.4
None of the above	57	13.0	11.1	7.1	12.6	10.5
One of the above	25	19.3	19.1	16.4	16.0	15.4
More than one	18	23.6	21.6	24.6	17.5	16.0
All children	100	16.5	14.9	12.5	14.2	12.6

is household material deprivation based on the extent to which families were unable to spend money on more than one of five common items and experiences.⁷ The second is family financial strain, based on the main parent saying that they were finding it quite or very difficult to manage financially. Taking a multi-dimensional approach may be helpful in capturing the dynamic nature of household poverty.⁸

The second column of Table 2 shows the percentage of children defined as in poverty based on each measure, and also the percentage which experienced more than one form of poverty. The last five columns of the table show the percentage of children having low wellbeing in five different aspects within each poverty group. Compared to children not in poverty, children in any of the three forms of poverty had significantly lower wellbeing across almost all of the five aspects. The exception was that income poverty was not linked to a higher likelihood of the child being depressed. However, material deprivation and family financial strain were linked with the risk of depression. It is also notable that the score on the word test appears more strongly linked with income poverty than material deprivation or financial strain. These varying patterns indicate the value of taking a multi-dimensional approach to poverty measurement.

This point is also illustrated in the lower half of the table which compares wellbeing for children living in no form of poverty, only one form and more than one form. Children who were defined as poor on more than one measure had the lowest wellbeing on all five aspects. The additional differences of living more than one type of poverty are particularly apparent for the word test and the risk of having emotional and behavioural difficulties. Children living in multiple poverty were almost twice as likely to have a low score on the word test as children not living in poverty, and over three times as likely to have emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Discussion

This article presents new analysis of very recent UK evidence of the links between poverty and low wellbeing at 14 years of age. Children living in income poverty at 14 years old have poorer wellbeing in several respects – cognitive abilities, physical health, and emotional and behavioural difficulties. While this is expected from previous research and sufficient reason to be concerned, the analysis goes on to show that making use of additional information – either on histories of poverty or non-income measures of poverty – highlights to an even greater extent the potential negative impact of poverty on children's lives.

First, any experience of income poverty (at six points during childhood) was associated with lower wellbeing at 14 years old on all five aspects of life considered here. Moreover, ongoing experiences of poverty appear to have a cumulative effect on several aspects of wellbeing. For example, children who had experienced persistent poverty (at least five out of six instances) were four times as likely to have emotional and behavioural difficulties as children who had not experienced poverty.

Alternative measures of household poverty, not based on income, when the child was 14 years old also provided important additional insights. Material deprivation and family financial strain were stronger predictors of children's depression than income poverty.

The analysis adds to the existing evidence on the potentially detrimental impact of poverty on children's present and future lives. It reinforces the need to take a detailed approach to analysing the impact of poverty, taking account of poverty histories and multi-dimensional definitions, in order to gain a full picture of the links between poverty and child wellbeing. ■

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- 1 K Cooper and K Stewart, *Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes? An update*, CASEpaper 2013, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017
- 2 A Dickerson and G Popli, 'The many dimensions of child poverty: evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study', *Fiscal Studies*, 39(2), 2018, pp265–98. There is some recent UK work looking at persistent poverty and wellbeing in early and middle childhood – see also J Holmes and K Kiernan, 'Persistent poverty and children's development in the early years of childhood', *Policy & Politics*, 41(1), 2013, pp19–42
- 3 This indicator is based on 'equivalised' income to take account of household size. For the purposes of this paper, an adjustment has been made to the calculation of equivalised income in the sixth sweep of the MCS so that it is more comparable with earlier sweeps.
- 4 The six MCS sweeps took place when children were nine months, and three, five, seven, 11 and 14 years old.
- 5 See, for example, an analysis of child-centred material deprivation measure in G Main, 'Child poverty and children's subjective wellbeing', *Child Indicators Research*, 7(3), 2014, pp451–72; Y Chzhen, D Gordon and S Handa, 'Measuring multi-dimensional child poverty in the era of the sustainable development goals', *Child Indicators Research*, 11(3), 2018, pp707–09, and associated articles.
- 6 J Bradshaw and J Holmes, *Family Poverty Assessed at Three Years Old*, Centre for Longitudinal Studies Working Paper 2008/7, August 2008, p18; J Bradshaw and J Holmes, 'Child poverty in the first five years of life', in K Hanson, H Joshi and S Dex (eds), *Children in the 21st Century: the first five years*, Policy Press, 2010, pp13–32
- 7 The items were: (a) A yearly holiday not staying with relatives (b) Celebrations on birthdays/religious festivals (c) The child having friends around for tea or a snack once a fortnight (d) Replacing/repairing major electrical goods when broken (e) The parent having money to spend on themselves rather than family. Families are counted as deprived if the main parent answered 'We would like to have this, but cannot' to more than one of these five items.
- 8 D Gordon, 'The concept and measurement of poverty', in C Pantazis, D Gordon and R Levitas (eds), *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, Policy Press, 2005