50 years of child poverty (research) in the UK

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The Fifth Peter Townsend Memorial Conference
Fifty Years of UK Poverty Research - What Have We Learned?
University of Bristol
5 November 2018
In 1968 (50 years ago!) John Gau made two films for BBC Panorama on poverty.

Then

- Long term trends in child poverty
- The importance of resources
- The value of deprivation
- Other developments
- The case for a comparative perspective
- The disaster facing us now.
56 years of child poverty
1961-2017 <60% median (IFS)
Resources

- Critical to Townsend’s conceptualisation of poverty – initially income
- *Poor and Poorest* (1965) and Government *Low Income Statistics* based on % SB scale rates
- Under Mrs Thatcher LIS abandoned for relative income measure (HBAI)
- This understandings under threat twice in the last 50 years
  - “End of the road for poverty” John Moore 1980s
  - IDS abolished child poverty targets in 2010
  - IDS DWP Consultation on measures of child poverty 2012
- All the more remarkable that Social Metrics Commission (2018) have reaffirmed income and AHC as their preferred indicator
- But income alone has many weaknesses – thresholds and equivalence scales arbitrary and underreporting of benefit income - Resolution Foundation
- Indirect measure with limited overlap with deprivation
Deprivation

- Pioneered by Peter Townsend in *Poverty in the UK* (1979)
- Developed as socially perceived necessities by Mack and Lansley in *Poor Britain* (1980)
- Then in three Poverty and Social Exclusion studies (Peter was involved in two) and in combination with low income as consistent/PSE poverty
- Adopted by DWP in HBAI
- And by Gill Main as an index asked of children
- And by Marlier, Gordon and Guio for Eurostat
Other developments in child poverty research in the last 50 years

- Much more evidence on the outcomes of child poverty (for example Cooper and Stewart 2017)
- Better spatial analysis: Index of Child Deprivation (IDACI) - at small area level
- Budget standards and Minimum Income standards (Living Wage and the Cost of a Child series)
- Better access to microdata: FRS, HBAI, MCS, BHPS/US, EU SILC.
- The notion of Social exclusion. Has not lasted.
- Research on child well-being: Children’s Society, ONS, UNICEF, OECD.
- Multivariate analysis of risk
Comparative child poverty rates
Eurostat database 2017 or latest
Present disaster

- £37 billion per year taken out of social security spending since 2010/11
- Losses mainly concentrated on families with children
**Long-run impact of key benefit changes since May 2015**

Mean annual net household income, 2017-18 prices

- £100
- £300
- £500
- £700
- £900
- £1,100

**Net equivalised household income decile**

- 1st (poorest)
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th
- 6th
- 7th
- 8th
- 9th
- 10th (richest)

**Notes:** Analysis uses March 2017 OBR assumptions, under UC system assumed to be fully in place. Not included are the benefit cap, the social housing rent reduction or ESA WRAG cuts. The impact of work allowance cuts are modelled contingent on the benefit freeze already being in place.

Source: RF analysis using the IPPR tax-benefit model
Children have been uniquely targeted by austerity

Cash impact of reforms to taxes and transfer payments, 20/21 tax year, (Portes and Reed)
Present disaster

- £37 billion per year taken out of social security spending since 2010/11
- Losses mainly concentrated on children
- Poverty rates and poverty gaps both increasing despite low unemployment and low rising minimum wages
Risk of poverty rates and IFS projections to 2021
Absolute poverty gaps £ per week.
Households with children
Present disaster

- £37 billion per year taken out of social security spending since 2010/11
- Losses mainly concentrated on children
- Poverty rates and poverty gaps both increasing rapidly
  - Many outcomes already deteriorating: infant mortality, child homelessness, children in care, child mental health, child subjective well-being...
- Much more to come
Concluding thoughts

- We have had some influence in the late 1970s.
- Possibly we held the pass in the 1980s.
- And influenced Gordon Brown’s huge achievements from 1999-2010.

But in recent years despite a great deal of effort:
- Policy has been going backwards.
- Some evidence of changes in attitudes in the BSA.
- None in government.

Is the opposition focussed on child poverty?
On research

We need a new Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey

We need to stay in the EU SILC survey and Eurostat

The Family Resources Survey needs to interview children

HBAI needs to add the Social Metrics Foundation measure including publishing poverty gap data.