

Severe Poverty: A Severe Problem? The extent and meaning of severe child poverty in Britain

Laura Adelman

Sue Middleton

Karl Ashworth

Reducing the proportion of children in poverty is high on the policy agendas of the British Government and other industrialised countries, for example Germany and Ireland. The success that the Labour Government in Britain has had so far in reducing child poverty has been tempered by evidence that there are some children, the most severely poor, who are worse off following the Government's reforms. This raises concerns that, whilst those closest to the poverty line are being moved out of poverty, those furthest away are being left behind.

In the rare cases that severe poverty has been measured, the most common method of analysis has been the use of poverty gaps – that is, the difference between the income poverty line and the income of the individual/household/child below it. The main limitation of such a measure is its heavy reliance on income and therefore the well-documented inadequacies that income measures of poverty incorporate. A survey undertaken in 1999, the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain, provides a unique opportunity to measure severe child poverty in an alternative way, using a number of measures including income poverty, child deprivation and parental deprivation.

The paper will suggest which of the possible permutations of these three measures can best be used to define severe child poverty, and describe the characteristics of children in severe poverty. It will also explore the overlaps between severe poverty and a number of dimensions of social exclusion in childhood.

Using such a definition of severe poverty is important for policy because it provides an insight into the lives of children at 'the bottom of the pile', whose circumstances are not usually visible.