

11. Child poverty

Fewer children in poverty: is it a public priority?

The coalition government has maintained Labour’s target to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and has identified a number of key causes, including family breakdown. Do this target and diagnosis reflect public priorities and views?

Most people accept child poverty in Britain exists and do not expect it to fall. There is disagreement about why children live in poverty, although the most popular explanations support the government’s view.

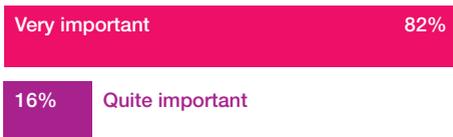
51%
 think child poverty will increase in the next 10 years.



Four in ten (43%) say there is “some” child poverty in Britain; another third (36%) think there is “quite a lot”. Around half (51%) think **child poverty will increase in the decade ahead.**

Among the **many reasons given for child poverty**, the most frequently cited are parents having drug and alcohol problems (75%), parents not wanting to work (63%), family breakdown (56%), lack of education among parents (51%) and parents being out of work for a long time (50%).

An overwhelming majority support action to reduce child poverty, with most people seeing this as a task for central and local government.



Eight in ten (82%) consider it “**very important**” to reduce child poverty in Britain, while another 16% think it is “quite important”.



Eight in ten (79%) say central government should be **responsible for reducing child poverty**. But large minorities say people living in poverty including parents (46%) or their friends and relatives (32%) should be responsible.

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Reducing child poverty has been a prominent government concern for more than a decade. Yet little is known about the public's attitudes to poverty specifically as it affects children. This includes people's views regarding the level of child poverty, what causes it and the extent to which eliminating it should be a government priority. Using answers to questions developed for the 2009 *British Social Attitudes* survey we are able to fill a notable gap in existing evidence.

During its 13 years in power the Labour government maintained a strong focus on reducing child poverty in Britain, encapsulated in Tony Blair's pledge in March 1999 to "eradicate" it by 2020. This commitment was accompanied by intermediate targets. Using the relative measurement of children in households with less than 60 per cent of median income before housing costs, the government's aim was to reduce the level of child poverty by a quarter by 2004/05 and a half by 2010/11. Although the first of these was missed by a considerable margin,¹ Labour went on to establish four separate targets for reducing child poverty by 2020/21 in the Child Poverty Act 2010. The legislation received cross-party support and a focus on child poverty has been maintained by the Coalition, whose 'Programme for Government' included a commitment to the 2020 target (Cabinet Office, 2010).

The development of reduction strategies has led to considerable debate about the causes of child poverty and how it should be measured. The Coalition has argued that Labour's targets, based on relative household income, are "poor proxies for achieving the eradication of child poverty" (House of Lords, 2010). An independent review that the new government commissioned from the Labour MP Frank Field called for a new index of children's 'life chance' measurements (Field, 2010). The Coalition has, meanwhile, placed its emphasis on tackling family breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, limited education and skills, debt and worklessness as perceived causes of child poverty (Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions, 2011).

The *British Social Attitudes* survey has regularly measured attitudes to poverty, but specific questions on child poverty were included for the first time in 2009. We begin by presenting up-to-date data on public attitudes to poverty in general; an important context in which to understand attitudes to child poverty in particular. Turning to child poverty, we examine the public's assessment of the current levels of child poverty, how this has changed and how it might change in the future. We then look at the public's understanding of the causes of child poverty and, finally, consider whether reducing child poverty is a priority for the British public and how far people think the responsibility lies with government. We conclude by assessing how far the current government's approach mirrors public perceptions and priorities in the period just before they came to power and the implications of this.

Attitudes to poverty

The public holds mixed views about the level of poverty in Britain and what causes it. That much is already apparent from responses to questions that the *British Social Attitudes* survey includes about the extent of poverty.

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Respondents are regularly asked a sequence of questions to gain their perceptions of the level of poverty in Britain and how it is changing:

*Some people say there is very little **real** poverty in Britain today. Others say there is quite a lot. Which comes closest to **your** view, that there is very little real poverty in Britain, or, that there is quite a lot?*

Over the last ten years, do you think that poverty in Britain has been increasing, decreasing or staying at about the same level?

*And over the **next** ten years, do you think that poverty in Britain will increase, decrease, or, stay at about the same level?*

Looking at the responses in Table 11.1 we can see that in 2009 almost six in ten consider there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain, while just under four in ten say there is “very little”. Almost half think poverty has increased in the last ten years, while around one in three maintain it has stayed at the same level. Little more than one in ten think poverty has decreased over the previous decade. Looking ahead ten years, people take similar stances – with 56 per cent expecting poverty to increase, 29 per cent to remain the same and 11 per cent to decline. The survey also asks:

Why do you think there are people who live in need?

Because they have been unlucky?

Because of laziness or lack of willpower?

Because of injustice in our society?

It's an inevitable part of modern life?

Looking again at Table 11.1 we see there is no overriding explanation that people accept as the answer to this. While almost four in ten view living in need as inevitable in modern life, slightly less than three in ten attribute it to laziness or a lack of willpower. Around two in ten point to injustice in society while slightly more than one in ten think people live in need because they have been unlucky.

6 in 10

say there is “quite a lot”
of poverty in Britain

Table 11.1 Perceptions of poverty, 1986–2009

	86	89	94	00	03	06	09
Perceived levels of poverty in Britain today							
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very little	41	34	28	35	41	45	39
Quite a lot	55	63	71	62	55	52	58
Over the last 10 years ...							
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
...poverty has increased	51	50	67	36	35	32	48
...poverty has decreased	15	16	6	20	19	23	14
...poverty has stayed the same	30	31	24	38	39	39	34
Over the next 10 years ...							
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
...poverty will increase	44	44	54	41	46	44	56
...poverty will decrease	12	16	10	18	13	16	11
...poverty will stay the same	36	34	32	35	33	35	29
Why do people live in need?							
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Unlucky	11	11	15	15	13	10	12
Laziness/lack of willpower	19	19	15	23	28	27	26
Injustice in society	25	29	29	21	19	21	19
Inevitable in modern life	37	34	33	34	32	34	38
<i>Base</i>	1548	1516	1167	3426	3272	3240	2267

Table 11.1 also shows long-term trends. Looking at these in the 2008 *British Social Attitudes* report, Taylor-Gooby and Martin concluded that the share of the population who think poverty is prevalent in Britain increased until the mid-1990s, then fell back. The same was true of the proportion who thought poverty had increased over the previous decade. However, the proportion who expected it to increase or diminish in the next 10 years showed much less fluctuation (Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008). The data for 2009 shown in Table 11.1 reveal significant changes in all these trends. The 58 per cent of respondents who say there is “quite a lot” of poverty is six percentage points higher than in 2006 and reverses a downward trend that began in 1994. Likewise, 48 per cent say poverty has increased in the past decade – an increase of 16 percentage points since 2006. In addition, the future outlook is less positive than at any time since the survey began, with a majority (56 per cent) believing poverty will increase in the next 10 years – a 12 percentage point increase since 2006.

It is worth noting that the surveys for 1994 and 2009 were both conducted at, or close to, a time of economic recession when the public could be expected to show heightened public awareness of economic hardship. This may go some way to explain people’s pessimism about poverty. Yet despite a more negative outlook concerning

current and future levels of poverty, people's perceptions about the causes of "living in need" have remained relatively stable over two decades. There has, however, been a seven percentage point increase since 1986 in the proportion who blame "laziness or a lack of willpower". The proportion who cite "injustice in our society" has, conversely, declined by six percentage points over the same period.

Attitudes to child poverty

One reason for asking specific questions on child poverty in 2009 was to discover how far the public views child poverty in the same way as general poverty, or whether they hold different perceptions and expectations.² The data presented in Table 11.2 show that the responses regarding child poverty are, in fact, very similar to those regarding poverty in general. Most people – around four in five – think there is a considerable amount of child poverty in Britain. This is made up of 36 per cent who think there is "quite a lot" and 43 per cent who say there is "some" child poverty. Less than one in five think there is "very little" or no child poverty.

Our respondents were presented with more detailed answer categories for child poverty than for poverty in general and this means the replies are not directly comparable. However, people's assessments of how child poverty levels have changed in the past, and are likely to change in the future, are almost identical to those in relation to poverty overall. Almost half think that child poverty has increased over the last 10 years and around half think it will increase during the next ten years. Little more than one in 10 respondents in each case think that child poverty has decreased in the last 10 years or will decrease in the decade ahead.

Table 11.2 Perceptions of child poverty, 2009

Perceived levels of child poverty in Britain today	%
None/very little	18
Some	43
Quite a lot	36
Over the last 10 years ...	%
...child poverty has increased	46
...child poverty has decreased	12
...child poverty has stayed the same	35
Over the next 10 years ...	%
...child poverty will increase	51
...child poverty will decrease	14
...child poverty will stay the same	29
<i>Base</i>	3421

Although the public's views about the likelihood of child poverty being reduced are clearly more negative than those expressed by government policy makers, they are not necessarily more realistic. Statistics for 2009/10 showed that 20 per cent of children were living in UK households with less than 60 per cent of median net disposable income, before taking account of housing costs – the main measurement of child poverty adopted by Labour. This represented a fall of two percentage points since 2008/09 and six percentage points since 1998/09 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011). On this definition, at least, it seems that most people assess recent trends in the level of child poverty incorrectly.

However, it is entirely possible that sections of the public understand child poverty in different terms to government and define it in different ways. The way that attitudes vary by income adds weight to this theory. While 85 per cent of those in the highest income quartile think there is quite a lot or some child poverty in Britain, the same is true of 74 per cent of those with incomes in the lowest quartile. These figures suggest that people with higher incomes tend to locate the boundary between poverty and non-poverty at a higher point than those who are, themselves, living on relatively low incomes – perhaps because of different perceptions about what constitutes an acceptable standard of living.

A question included in the *British Social Attitudes* survey in 2001 and 2008 supports this view. It asks:

Of every 100 children under 16 in Britain, about how many do you think live in poverty?

As we can see in Figure 11.1 there is widespread disagreement about the answer. In 2001, more than three in ten (34 per cent) thought that this figure was below 20 per cent. Around one in five (21 per cent) placed it in the 20–29 per cent bracket – which was closest to the government's own figures. Four in ten respondents thought that over 30 but less than 50 per cent of children in Britain are living in poverty (41 per cent), while a considerable minority (18 per cent) believed the figure was 50 per cent or more.

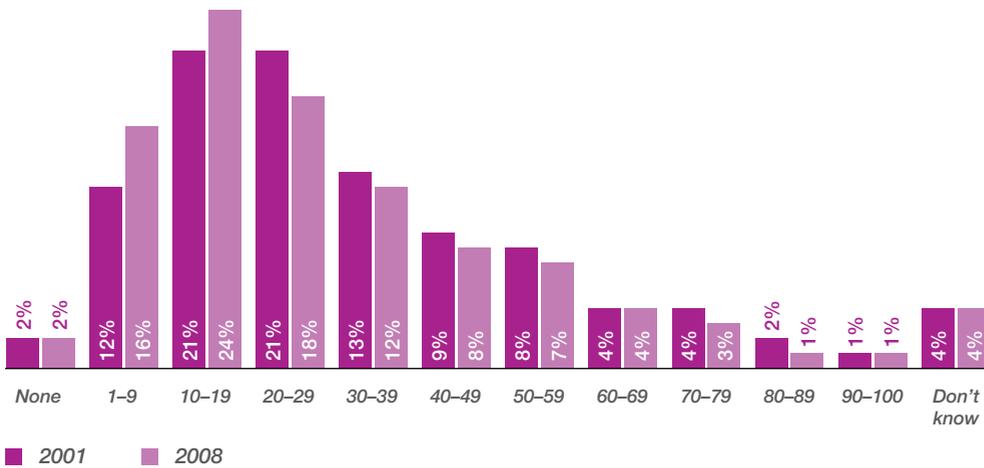
This suggests that a sizeable proportion of the public are more negative in their views about the extent of child poverty than the government. However, by 2008 assessments had become rather more optimistic with a larger minority (42 per cent) thinking that less than 20 per cent of children are in poverty.



A sizeable proportion of the public are more negative in their views about the extent of child poverty than the government



Figure 11.1 Perceptions of the proportions of children in Britain in poverty, 2001 and 2008



The data on which Figure 11.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

The causes of child poverty

To explore views on the causes of child poverty in Britain, we presented people with a list of possibilities and asked them to identify those they considered relevant, including what they viewed as the main reason. From Table 11.3, which shows the different reasons that were shown to respondents, it is apparent that no single factor is considered to cause child poverty. People, on average, select six different explanations from our list.

Nevertheless, more than half the respondents endorse four of the possible reasons for children living in poverty. Having parents who “suffer from alcohol, drug abuse or another addiction” is the most popular explanation, selected by three in four. Around two in three think having parents who “do not want to work” is a cause; while slightly more than a half in each case pointed to “family breakdown or loss of a family member” or the fact that “parents lack education”. These four explanations were, again, the most frequently chosen when respondents selected the main reason why children in Britain live in poverty. We saw earlier that views about why people in Britain are “living in need” are mixed. While the causes of child poverty considered here cannot be easily allocated to overriding categories (such as “injustice in our society” or “laziness or a lack of willpower”), the wide range and large number of responses selected by respondents indicate that the causes of child poverty are viewed as a combination of factors relating to parents, families and local areas, welfare policies and the structure of society as a whole. Interestingly, the four explanations most frequently chosen as the main reason why children in Britain live in poverty closely

4 in 5

there is near-universal support for reducing child poverty, with more than four in five saying it is “very important”

mirror four of the five key issues prioritised by the coalition government (see above). This suggests that while government assessments of the extent of child poverty may differ from the public's opinion, its rhetoric concerning causes has been broadly in line.

Table 11.3 Perceptions of reasons why children live in poverty in Britain, 2009

	A reason	Main reason
Reasons why children live in poverty in Britain	%	%
Their parents suffer from alcohol, drug abuse or other addiction	75	19
Their parents do not want to work	63	15
There has been a family breakdown or loss of a family member	56	10
Their parents lack education	51	10
Their parents' work doesn't pay enough	44	9
Their parents have been out of work for a long time	50	6
They live in a poor quality area	44	5
Because of inequalities in society	25	5
Social benefits for families with children are not high enough	19	4
There are too many children in the family	39	3
Their grand-parents were also poor – it has been passed down generations	21	3
They – or their parents – suffer from a long-term illness or disability	43	3
Their parents do not work enough hours	16	1
Their family suffers from discrimination	25	1
Their family cannot access affordable housing	31	1
Base	3421	3421

Items are ordered by the proportions of respondents who selected them as the main reason why some children in Britain live in poverty.

Reducing child poverty – a public priority?

In a further question, we asked people to say how important they thought it was to reduce child poverty in Britain. Table 11.4 shows there is near-universal support for reducing child poverty, with more than four in five saying it is “very important” and most others choosing “quite important”. By cross-comparing data we find that 93 per cent of those who think there is “quite a lot” of child poverty in Britain, view its reduction as “very important”, while even 66 per cent of those who feel there is “very little” child poverty say the same.

This suggests there should be strong public support for a national goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020. But to what extent do people feel it is the role of government to fulfil this task? Respondents were asked to say who they thought should be responsible for reducing child poverty in Britain. While it is apparent in Table 11.4 that people do not view one organisation as solely implicated, there is a wide consensus that it is a task for government. Almost four in five identify child poverty reduction as a central government responsibility (including Parliament and government departments) and six in ten think that local government is responsible. However, just under half think that those who live in poverty, including parents, hold a responsibility. Friends and relatives and charities are also cited, by around three in ten in each case.

As might be expected, there is evidence that people's perceptions of the causes of child poverty link to their views about who is responsible for its reduction. For example, the vast majority (86 per cent) of those who view inadequate social benefits as a cause also think government is responsible for reducing child poverty. People who feel that children are in poverty because their parents do not want to work are more likely than average to insist that people living in poverty, including parents, are responsible.

Table 11.4 Attitudes to importance of and responsibility for reducing child poverty, 2009

Attitudes to reducing child poverty

Importance of reducing child poverty in Britain		%
Very important		82
Quite important		16
Not very important		1
Not at all important		*
Groups responsible for reducing child poverty*		%
Central government (e.g. Parliament, government departments)		79
Local government (e.g. local councils)		60
People in poverty, including parents		46
Friends/relatives of people in poverty		32
Charities		28
<i>Base</i>		3421

Respondents had the option of identifying "all groups" as being responsible for reducing child poverty in Britain. Five per cent of respondents selected this option; for the purpose of this analysis, they have been assigned to each of the groups above.

** Respondents were allowed to select as many answers as they liked; as a result their answers add up to more than 100%.*

Conclusions

The responses to the new questions on child poverty provide a baseline for monitoring public attitudes as the 2020 deadline for eradicating child poverty approaches. We can see that in some ways the government's focus on child poverty reflects public thinking. People agree that child poverty exists in Britain, often to a substantial degree, and view action to reduce it as important and as a role for central government. The public also shares the government's view that child poverty has multiple causes, among which they tend to emphasise parental problems. There is, however, considerable – and arguably excessive – pessimism about likely progress in tackling child poverty. Despite a continuing government focus, public attitudes show little faith in past, current or future intervention to achieve a reduction.

Notes

1. Progress against the government's target to halve the number of children in poverty by 2010/11 will not be known until spring 2012. Current estimates suggest the target will be missed by a considerable margin. See for example Brewer *et al.* (2006).

2. To develop questions on child poverty for the *British Social Attitudes* survey, cognitive question testing was undertaken, to ascertain whether the questions being considered were meaningful and could easily be answered by the public. This exercise highlighted the fact that the public is able to consider and answer questions about child poverty as a concept distinct from that of general poverty (Blake *et al.*, 2009).

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Appendix

The data for Figure 11.1 are shown below:

	2001	2008
Proportion of children in Britain who live in poverty	%	%
None	2	2
1%–9%	12	16
10%–19%	21	24
20%–29%	21	18
30%–39%	13	12
40%–49%	9	8
50%–59%	8	7
60%–69%	4	4
70%–79%	4	3
80%–89%	2	1
90%–100%	1	1
Don't know	4	4
<i>Base</i>	3287	3364