

Devolution and Child Poverty Policies

A Four Nations Perspective

Martin Rogers
November 2019

Contents

	Preface	3
1.0	Introduction	4
2.0	Overview	5
2.1	Definitions	5
2.2	Numbers and trends	5
2.2.1	Absolute low income and absolute poverty	5
2.2.2	Evolution of poverty measures	7
3.0	Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty	8
3.1	The Child Poverty Act	8
3.2	England	9
3.3	Wales	9
3.4	Scotland	10
3.5	Northern Ireland	11
4.0	Analysing poverty figures and policies	12
4.1	UK figures	12
4.2	England	13
4.3	Wales	15
4.4	Scotland	16
4.5	Northern Ireland	17
5.0	Discussion	19
6.0	Conclusion	20
7.0	Bibliography	21

Preface

The British Academy has undertaken a programme of work that seeks to re-frame debates around childhood in both the public and policy spaces and break down academic, policy and professional silos in order to explore new conceptualisations of children in policymaking.

The purpose of the policy case studies is to explore differences in approaches to policymaking around childhood taken by the governments of the four UK nations over the past 30 years.

The subjects of the case studies (Young People Leaving Care and Child Poverty) have been selected because they exemplify some of the differences in the drivers of policy development across the four UK nations. These differences are variously reflected in legislation, policy statements, and in approaches to practice.

The Childhood Poverty Case Study seeks to summarise the policy priorities of the four UK nations for this group of young people, review outcomes for which data is publicly available, and discuss a number of areas where policy differences can be identified.

More information on the Childhood programme can be found at www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

1.0 Introduction

This case study explores the key policy differences between the four nations in relation to poverty policies (policy mapping) and the impact these different policies have had on child poverty outcomes (policy analysis). It outlines the policy and legislative framework in each nation, presents figures for each and notes the challenge of assessing the causal impact of these policies.

As the greatest cause of child poverty is living in a household in poverty, the concepts of poverty and child poverty are often taken together throughout this piece. The most common measure of poverty is Households Below Average Income which measures the number of households with equivalised income below 60 per cent of the median (For more information see (Department for Work and Pensions, 2018).

The devolved nations of the UK have varied degrees of freedom over policy areas that can impact poverty (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 5). Scotland has the most freedom over social security and fiscal policy while Wales has the least power to diverge from the UK default. Overall, the policy area with the greatest impact on poverty is the economy, powers over which are largely reserved (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 8). However, several things which impact poverty over the longer term are devolved such as early years provision, schooling, adult skills, housing and public health (McCormick, 2013).

Exploring the approaches that devolved nations have taken to the issue of child poverty highlights different conceptions of poverty and the different policy responses of each nation. There are many, equally valid, definitions of poverty utilised by the different nations of the UK. These include absolute and relative poverty, relative and absolute low income, persistent poverty and other, wider measures which look longer term at things like educational attainment. Policies to prevent or cure poverty will then reflect the chosen measure and the predominant definition in any one place and at any one time. This is a political choice. The definition of poverty used is significant because policy is largely driven by what is measured (Stewart & Roberts, 2018, p. 18). Evidence as to the causal impact of policies on poverty can be inconclusive and must be treated with caution (McCormick, 2013).

Overall, child poverty rates fell in the UK nations prior to the economic crash of 2008 but have since worsened (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014, p. 13). While government policies can be impactful, other factors such as the global economy matter greatly and are beyond the control of governments (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 58). One of the most important impacts on child poverty rates over recent years has been cuts to benefits, some of which are devolved and some not (Portes & Reed, 2018, p. 18). These cuts have disproportionately impacted households with children (Portes & Reed, 2018, p. 24).

The Child Poverty Act 2010 requires ministers in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland to publish Child Poverty Strategies and progress reports (Kennedy, 2014). Wales enacted legislation on this previously (Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010).

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

2.0 Overview

2.1 Definitions

There is no single definition of poverty and the different policy approaches to tackling poverty reflect this. The most common poverty measures upon which governments have based their policies are relative or absolute, with the former dominant. Absolute poverty is defined as a lack of basic resources such as food and water (Mack, 2017). Relative poverty measures those living in households with income below 60% of the median. Some relative measures benchmark against a certain year (McGuinness, Booth, & Francis-Devine, 2019, p. 3). Another definition, absolute low income, measures those in poverty against 60% of income in a given year adjusted for inflation. This last measure then allows comparison over time.

Poverty can be measured before or after housing costs and different devolved nations have taken different approaches to this. Scotland, for example, refers explicitly to the numbers in poverty both before and after housing costs in its outputs such as 'Every child, every chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022' (Scottish Government, 2018). Wales' Child Poverty Strategy includes a measure of children living in relative income poverty after housing costs (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 36) but Scotland is otherwise unique in referring to housing costs. The impact of housing costs, and the wider costs of living, can make a significant on poverty, as can specific measures to address them such as tax credits and social security payments which are devolved to different extents in different territories (Johnson, 2019).

Housing costs and the cost of living are particularly high in London. Looking at people of all ages before and after housing costs, the rate of poverty in London before housing costs is 14%, the tenth highest UK region. After housing costs London has the highest rate of poverty in the UK at 28%. For children, 17% live in households in relative poverty before housing costs in London, but 37% after housing costs (McGuinness, Booth, & Francis-Devine, 2019, p. 34).

2.2 Numbers and trends

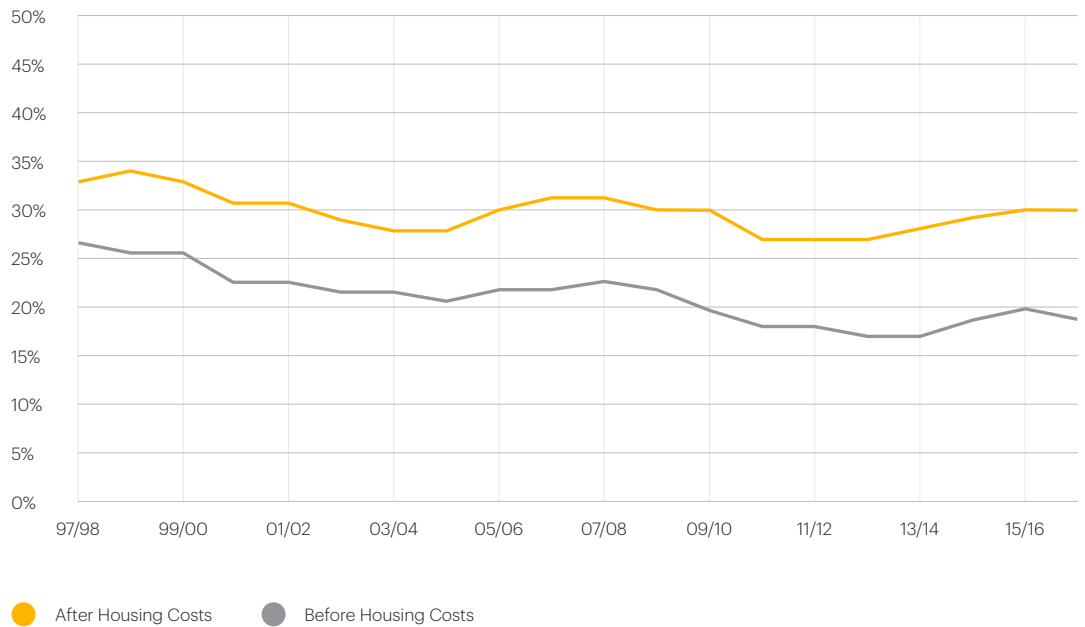
2.2.1 Absolute low income and absolute poverty

Across the UK around 2.2 million children were in absolute low income before housing costs in 2016/17, around 200,000 down on the previous year. This was around 16% of all children. Approximately 3.5 million children were in absolute poverty after housing costs, also down 200,000 from the previous year. This figure is then around 26% of all children (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019).

Chronology

- Introduction
- Overview
- Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty
- Analysing poverty figures and policies
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography

**% of children in relative low income
Great Britain (1997/98–2001/02) and UK (2002/03–)**



**% of children in absolute low income
Great Britain (1997/98–2001/02) and UK (2002/03–)**



Source: Poverty in the UK: statistics. (McGuinness, Booth, & Francis-Devine, 2019, p. 11)

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

2.2.2 Evolution of poverty measures

The conception of poverty in all UK nations has evolved and become broader. This is reflected in the evolution of the measurement and policies to address poverty which no longer focus just on income. Scotland is an outlier in this regard as it has statutory income targets. The government of England prioritises reducing worklessness (a household where no one is in work) and improving educational attainment, Wales the persistent lack of necessities while Northern Ireland's Strategy contains no single definition. Wales, like England, targets worklessness and educational outcomes.

As the definition of poverty varies between the UK nations, so do the policies which have been implemented to attempt to remedy poverty. Scotland has a statutory income poverty target while Northern Ireland focuses primarily on wider economic growth. England and Wales have taken more mixed, balanced approaches.

The only constant across the devolved nations, with the exception of England, is a more generous social security regime relative to the UK baseline. Where Scotland and Northern Ireland can diverge their social security policy they have done so, taking steps to mitigate the so-called Bedroom Tax for example. In a broader sense, all UK nations are moving towards preventative policies such as a focus on early years (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014, p. 14).

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

Analysing poverty figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

3.0 Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

3.1 The Child Poverty Act

In 2003 the UK introduced three child poverty indicators. These were made law in the Child Poverty Act 2010 which defined child poverty as a child being in a household where “its equivalised net income for the financial year is less than 60% of median equivalised net household income for the financial year.” (HM Government, 2010). The (2003, p. 6) indicators were:

- Absolute low income
- Relative low income
- Material deprivation and low income combined

Poverty was said to be falling when “all three indicators are moving in the right direction” (Department for Work and Pensions, 2003, p. 6). The (2010) Act introduced four targets which the government was required to meet in England:

- **Relative low income** – that less than 10% of children live in households with below 60% of median equivalised net household income
- **Combined low income and material deprivation** – that less than 5% of children live in households below 70% of median equivalised net household income
- **Absolute low income** – that less than 5% of children live in households with income below a set amount
- **Persistent poverty** – that children do not remain in poverty for three years or more.

The 2010 Act established a Child Poverty Commission. In 2012 the Commission became the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission and in 2016 the Social Mobility Commission. The Commission’s responsibilities now only cover social mobility so the focus on child poverty has been downgraded.

The UK government uses a wider conception of poverty than income alone. In part, this development was due to criticisms of income-based measures as economic downturn causes an improvement in the poverty figures (Brown, 2016, p. 6). As a result, the 2011 UK Child Poverty Strategy aimed to tackle broader causes of poverty such as worklessness. With the Welfare Reform Act 2012 the coalition government codified a focus on the “root causes” of poverty, including unemployment, substance abuse, low earnings and educational failure (Brown, 2016, p. 4). In June 2014 the government published its second and last Child Poverty Strategy, covering the period 2014–2017, with a focus on employment and earnings, living standards and ending the cycle of poverty through educational attainment. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 removed “the measures and targets” in the Child Poverty Act 2010, as well as the “other duties and provisions.” They were replaced with a duty to report on “measures of worklessness and educational attainment.” This reflects a desire to move towards a broader measure of poverty and away from purely, or primarily, income measures.

Chronology

- Introduction
- Overview
- Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty
- Analysing poverty figures and policies
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography

3.2 England

As most of the policies relevant to children are devolved, the UK government acts as the de facto government of England. The incoming Labour government in 1997 spoke of eliminating child poverty in the context of reducing welfare dependency and worklessness, addressing educational disadvantage, implementing a minimum wage and reducing long-term unemployment, especially among the young. This indicates the range of possible aspects of policy and a government with a broad conception of poverty. All these elements are seen to impact on child poverty either directly, such as via low income in the households in which children live, or indirectly via educational attainment or youth employment. Not long after the 1997 election a Social Exclusion Unit was established to attempt to tackle multiple disadvantages, especially where the causes crossed into the remits of different departments. This consolidated a multi-faceted approach to poverty at the heart of government (Glennerster, Hills, Piachaud, & Webb, 2004). 1999 saw the publication of *Opportunity for All*, the government's first annual progress report on poverty and social exclusion which also took a multi-faceted approach.

3.3 Wales

The Welsh government has made the clearest institutional commitment to tackling poverty of the four jurisdictions with two ministerial posts including responsibility for poverty within their briefs. These have since been changed and the 'coordination of measures to mitigate child poverty' now sits with the Minister for Housing and Local Government (Welsh Government).

Wales has defined poverty differently to the UK government. The 2011 and 2015 Child Poverty Strategies define child poverty as a long-term lack of basic resources such as food and reasonable accommodation (Welsh Assembly, 2016, p. 4). The 2015 Child Poverty Strategy highlighted five key areas for tackling poverty: welfare reform, the cost of childcare, food poverty, in work poverty and housing and regeneration. The 2016 Progress report benchmarks against indicators such as worklessness and skills.

The Welsh government has couched its approach to child poverty in terms of children's rights, citing UNCRC articles 26 and 27 (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 13). Wales's Tackling Poverty Action Plan set out the conceptualisation of poverty as being about wider wellbeing, not only income (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 13). This is reflected in Wales's more holistic approach to poverty (Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, 2017). Its programmes are often centred on places and prevention while the 2015 Strategy emphasised better policy coordination and economic growth (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 10). Wales anti-poverty measures include Communities First and Flying Start (approximately equivalent to Sure Start). The strategic objectives of the 2011 and 2015 Child Poverty Strategies (4 and 5 were added in 2015) for Wales reflect the 'policy levers' at the Welsh government's disposal (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 12). They are:

- 1) To reduce the number of families living in workless households.
- 2) To increase the skills of parents and young people living in low-income households.
- 3) To reduce the inequalities in health, education and economic outcomes by targeting the poorest.
- 4) To create a strong economy.
- 5) Action on debt and income, on the poverty premium and on welfare reform.

The rationale behind these measures, in addition to them reflecting the powers that

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

the government has, is that “tackling poverty is as much about improving children’s wellbeing as it is about addressing income poverty” (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 13). The strategy sets out that child poverty results from parental poverty and adds a wider focus on wellbeing. The 2015 Strategy added a commitment to a strong economy and action on income, the poverty premium and welfare reform.

3.4 Scotland

Scotland has more devolved powers than any other UK nation, including over areas such as social security. In its conception of poverty, the Scottish government states “more than anything else, poverty is about income” (Scottish Government, 2016). To that end the government has set statutory income-based targets and reintroduced the targets the UK government abolished (Scottish Government, 2016).

The Scottish Child Poverty Strategy aims to tackle child poverty in two ways: 1) maximise household resources (i.e. income) 2) improve wellbeing and life chances (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014, p. 19). Mitigation is central to the Strategy, but it also includes measures aimed at prevention (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 44). The Strategy and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22 focus on short-term action on income and the cost of living and longer-term preventative measures around quality of life (Scottish Government, 2018). The Plan includes an income supplement to be paid directly to families with low incomes (BBC, 2019).

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets out four targets to be achieved by 2030. The targets state that by 2030, of children living in Scottish households:

- less than 10% should be living in relative poverty
- less than 5% should be living in absolute poverty
- less than 5% should be living with combined low income and material deprivation
- less than 5% should be living in persistent poverty

A key tenet of Scotland’s approach to poverty is around mitigating the impacts of UK government social security changes including the bedroom tax (Scottish Government, 2017) and other benefits (Stephens & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 34) and rent controls to address the cost of living (Whitehead, 2019).

Scotland’s National Performance Framework includes measures of success which cover both poverty (Scottish Government, 2016) and inequality (Scottish Government, 2018). Scotland also has a Poverty and Inequality Commission which advises and scrutinises ministers (Poverty and Inequality Commission). In 2019 the Commission raised concerns that the government was set to miss its targets (Brooks, 2019).

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

3.5 Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has the least explicit approach to addressing poverty but has focused on the economy (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 40). The 2016 Child Poverty Strategy lists economic growth as the Executive's number one priority (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016, p. 10). The Northern Ireland Programmes of Government (2008–2011 and 2011–2015) make economic growth and development central to poverty alleviation (Northern Ireland Executive, 2008, p. 7). The 2011–2015 Programme emphasises the focus on economic growth which is 'Priority One' while poverty comes under 'Priority Two' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2012).

Poverty comes under the briefs of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister which leads on specific child poverty reduction targets (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 40). The main anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland is Lifetime Opportunities (2006) with the aim to end child poverty and work towards ending social exclusion by 2020 (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 40). Interventions in Northern Ireland tend to be targeted and specific though the Child Poverty Strategy includes a measurement framework about underlying issues (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 38). Northern Ireland has the power to vary benefits and has mitigated policies such as the benefit cap (Horgan, 2012).

In March 2016 Northern Ireland published its Child Poverty Strategy which considers a variety of aspects of poverty. The Strategy builds on the 2012 Child Poverty Outcomes Framework in an attempt to make the Strategy better coordinated and more focused on results by committing the government to producing a 'Poverty Outcomes Model' to assess which interventions are most effective in tackling poverty (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016, p. 8).

Northern Ireland has several programmes which touch on child poverty including Delivering Social Change which focuses on cross-cutting programmes and their integration (Northern Ireland Executive). Other programmes relevant to child poverty focus on the cost of living including the Fuel Poverty Strategy (2011) and the Programme for Government commitment to affordable childcare (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 42).

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

Analysing poverty figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

4.0

Analysing poverty figures and policies

4.1 UK Figures

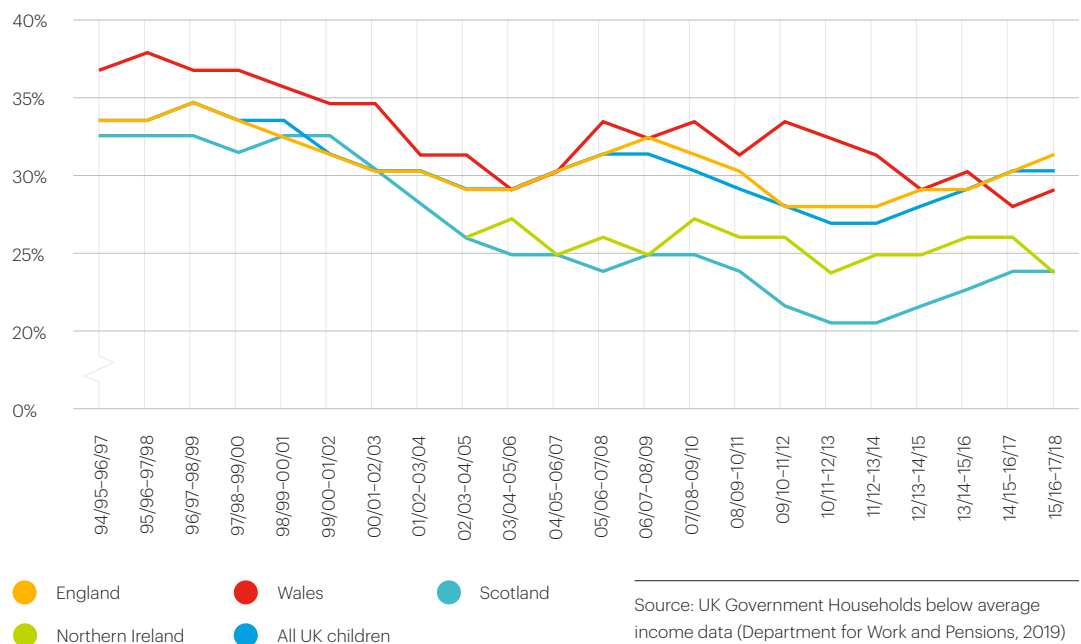
The chart below shows the number of children, in millions, living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income. The figures are after housing costs on a 3-year average. The after-housing costs measure is used because housing costs can cause financial hardship.

	11/12–13/14	12/13–14/15	13/14–15/16	14/15–16/17	15/16–17/18
England	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.5	3.6
Wales	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Scotland	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Northern Ireland	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
All children (millions)	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.1

Source: UK Government Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019)

The most recent available data indicate that around one third of all UK children live in households in relative poverty. Wales has historically had the highest rate of child poverty, with Scotland having the lowest (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019).

% of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income



Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

Analysing poverty figures and policies

Discussion

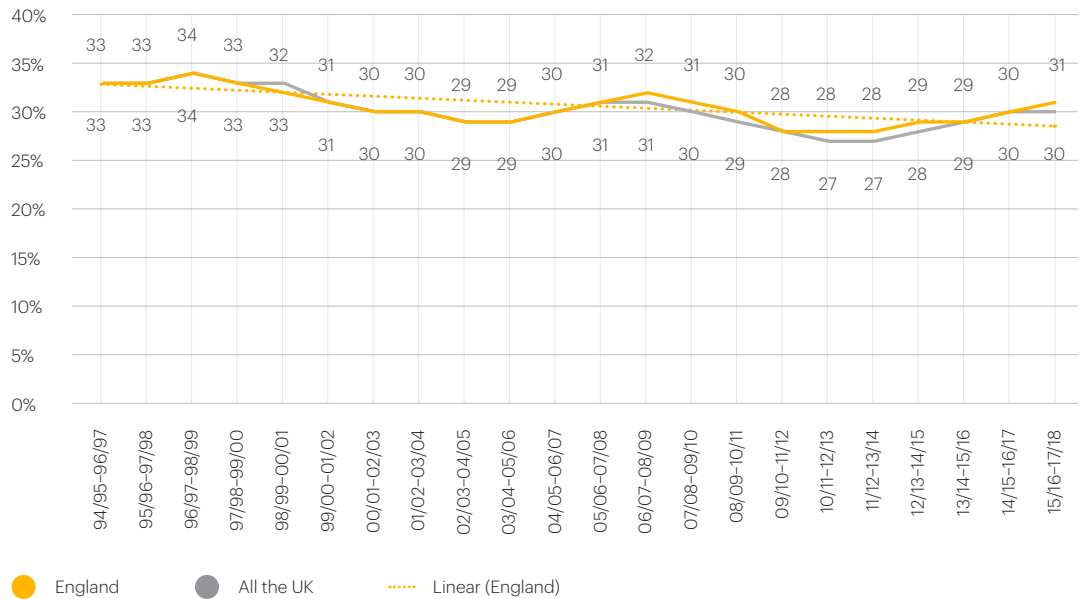
Conclusion

Bibliography

4.2 England

England has tended to be most similar to the overall UK figures, reflecting its size relative to the UK and the lack of a separate, devolved government.

% of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income



Source: UK Government Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019)

Overall, the child poverty figures in England have stayed consistently within the range of around 28% to 34% with a gradual improvement which was reversed around the time of the 2008 financial crisis.

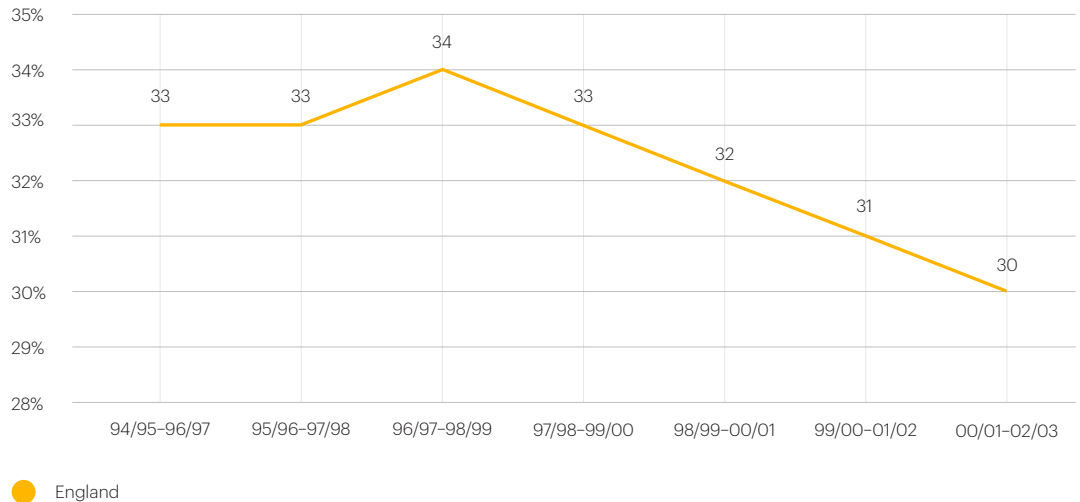
The rate of child poverty clearly reduced in the years after the turn of the millennium, but overall the picture is mixed. The various initiatives of the UK government have a varied record of success. The trendline across nearly two decades of data is very slightly downwards.

In 1999 UK Prime Minister Tony Blair promised to eliminate child poverty in a generation. The target was relative poverty, set at 60% of current median income. The initial measures focused on targeted interventions such as tax and benefits among a suite of measures including Child Tax Credits (Brewer, 2012; BBC, 1999; The Campaign to End Child Poverty, 2011). The Labour government's generous and focused treatment of families with children in the tax and benefit system saw significant rises in the amount of benefits paid. Child Benefit for the first child grew by a quarter in real terms and Income Support for families with children grew by at least a fifth (Glennister, Hills, Piachaud, & Webb, 2004, p. 112). There was a clear improvement (see chart below) in the numbers of children in households in relative poverty over these years, indicating the success of tackling poverty through the social security system. Other research also highlights the impact on children of changes to social security levels (Portes & Reed, 2018, p. 16).

Chronology

- Introduction
- Overview
- Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty
- Analysing poverty figures and policies
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography

% of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income



Source: UK Government Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019)

The UK government's UK Child Poverty Strategies and Welfare Reform Acts placed a greater importance on drivers of poverty including unemployment and educational attainment. The UK unemployment rate is currently at less than 4%, the lowest for nearly fifty years (Office for National Statistics, 2019). But poverty rates for all types of working families have risen in the last five years (Longfield, 2018). The fact that working parents are more likely to be in poverty than non-working parents demonstrates that work is not the best route out of poverty and that children would likely benefit from targeted income enhancements.

While income from work has stagnated, the same is true of income from social security benefits. The Children's Commissioner for England has highlighted the negative impact of social security reforms, especially Universal Credit causing children to go hungry (The Children's Commissioner's Office, 2019). Over 93% of households impacted by the benefit cap are families with children, while the value of child benefit in real terms is decreasing, down 17% from 2009/10 to 2019/20. The Commissioner's figures show an increase in the number of children 'experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity' from 1,898,209 in (2015) to 1,959,431 (2017), an increase of over 60,000 in two years.

While the government's conception of poverty has become broader and with a shift to prevention, spending on preventative measures such as Sure Start has been cut by over 60% from 2009-10 and 2016-17. Instead, the budget has increasingly been spent on reactive measures (The Children's Commissioner's Office, 2018).

Chronology

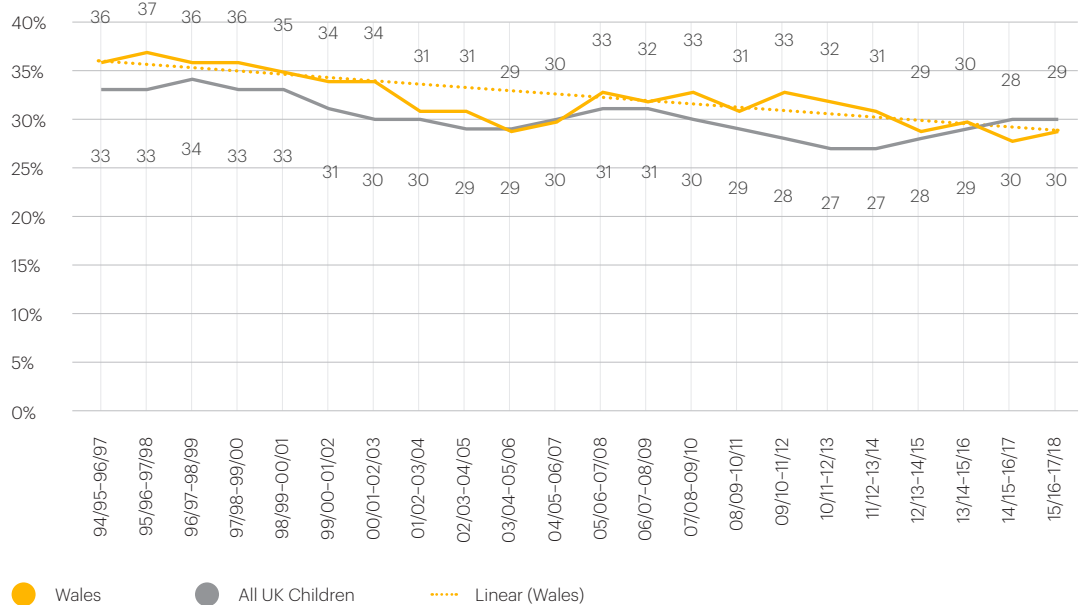
- Introduction
- Overview
- Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty
- Analysing poverty figures and policies
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography

4.3 Wales

Wales has historically had a higher figure for child poverty than the rest of the UK. This figure has tended to be significantly higher than the UK average, though with a reduction recently. The trendline for the available data is in a downward direction but it has, until recently, remained above the UK average.

The wider poverty indicators that the Welsh government committed itself to in its Child Poverty Strategies, such as worklessness and adult skills, have improved over recent years (Barnard, 2018). The Welsh government has also committed itself to a wider conception of poverty including material deprivation, as in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Under this measure 7% of parents have children (under 16) who are materially deprived in the most recent figures (Office of National Statistics, 2019, p. 2).

% of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income



Source: UK Government Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019)

The decision to abolish the post of Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty was criticised by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, as was the decision of the Welsh government to abandon its poverty-specific action plan (The Bevan Foundation, 2019). Oxfam also criticised the dispersal of responsibility for child poverty across government (Pollock, 2019).

The Children’s Commissioner for Wales noted with concern the lack of a child poverty action plan and the abolition of the target to eradicate child poverty (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2018, p. 5). The Commissioner has expressed concern that Welsh children are not able to enjoy their rights due to poverty (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2019, p. 5).

Chronology

- Introduction
- Overview
- Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty
- Analysing poverty figures and policies
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography

The Welsh government previously committed to ending child poverty by 2020, including via their 2015 Child Poverty Strategy for Wales. However, nearly a third of children in Wales remain in poverty, a situation that has not significantly improved in recent years. Wales’s commitment to ending child poverty is ambitious, especially given the relatively limited powers that the Welsh government has in the areas relevant to child poverty (Evans, 2019).

The Commissioner cites work showing the impact of social security in noting their concern that current policies are worsening child poverty in Wales (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2019, p. 5). There are specific issues around Universal Credit, especially given the two-child limit for payments.

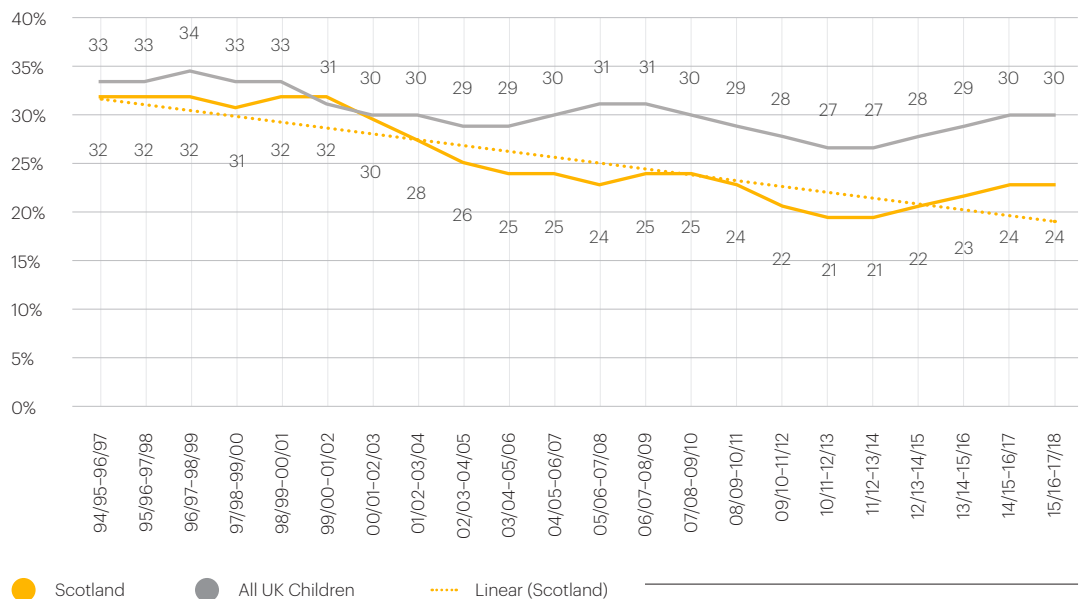
4.4 Scotland

Scotland has been the UK nation with the lowest levels of child poverty. Around one quarter of children in Scotland remain in poverty but there has been a significant improvement in child poverty rates since the turn of the century.

Scotland can be considered the success story of recent years with regards to child poverty, justifying one of the claims underpinning devolution which was that a devolved parliament would allow Scotland to be more progressive (Stephens & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 7). While Scottish levels of child poverty were similar to the UK average around the turn of the millennium, there has been a significant improvement in that time, though the figures for more recent years indicate a worsening of the position.

Both the Poverty & Inequality Commission and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) have raised concerns that recent improvements in child poverty rates are in danger of being reversed. Indeed, the Commission reports that absolute poverty, low income, material deprivation and persistent poverty have worsened and will continue to in the future (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2019, p. 4). While the Scottish government has set a statutory target, the CPAG has raised concerns around the cost of living as well as income, pointing to concerns around employment income, social security income, the cost of childcare and financial barriers to education such as food (Child Poverty Action Group).

% of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income



Source: UK Government Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019)

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

Scotland's policy of low council tax and universal benefits has, however, been criticised as regressive and poorly targeted (Lodge, Henderson, & Davies, 2015, p. 46). The Children's Commissioner there has welcomed the introduction of the £10 per week Scottish Child Payment but called for measures such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Children to be incorporated into Scottish law.

Professor Glen Bramley produced a report for the Poverty and Inequality Commission which set out the policies and scenarios which appear to offer the biggest gains in reducing child poverty. These are (Bramley):

- Raising economic growth, employment rates and workforce participation
- Reversing 2015 cuts in Universal Credit and raising personal allowances significantly
- Increasing work allowances in Universal Credit and reducing the taper
- A greatly enhanced, more flexible childcare offer.

The report finishes with a call for an increase in the generosity of Universal Credit and childcare (Bramley).

4.5 Northern Ireland

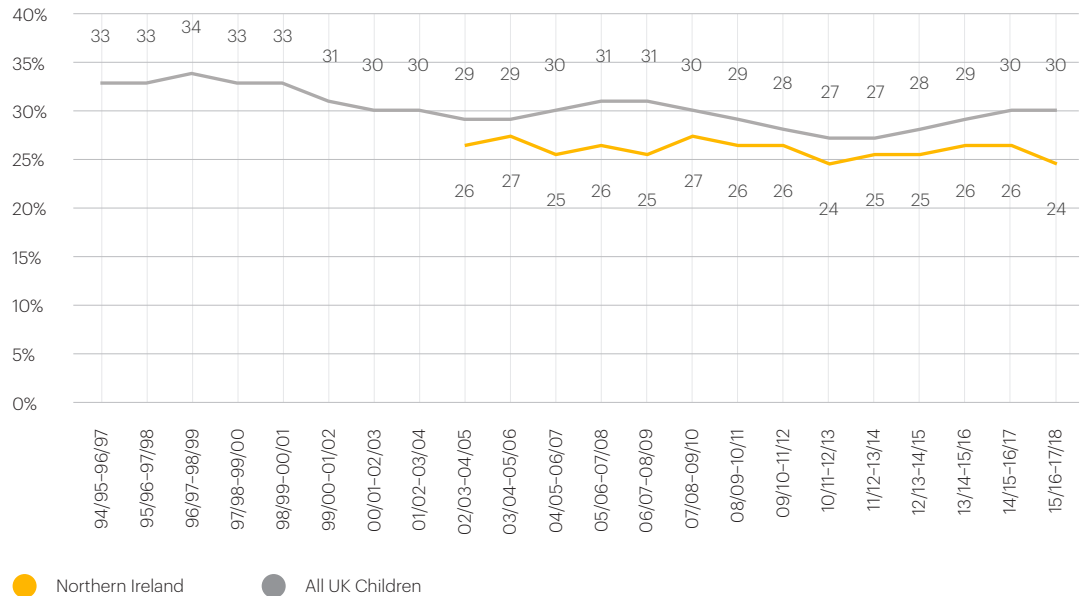
Northern Ireland has tended to have a lower level of child poverty than the rest of the UK and can in many ways vie with Scotland for the position of the most successful regarding child poverty. The proportion of children in poverty in Northern Ireland has been consistently below the UK average where data is available but there has not been a significant drop in the proportion in poverty across the time covered by the available data, the rate has stayed between the bounds of 24% to 27%.

There is some progress on wider measures of poverty. The gap in educational attainment between rich and poor children is improving, though it remains high. Northern Ireland has introduced measures to reduce the impact of changes to social security (Barnard, Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018). Unemployment in Northern Ireland is at a record low so the government there may be having some success with its strategy of prioritising economic performance to reduce poverty (BBC News, 2019).

Chronology

- Introduction
- Overview
- Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty
- Analysing poverty figures and policies
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Bibliography

% of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income



Source: UK Government Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019)

The Children's Commissioner in Northern Ireland has also pointed to the impact of social security policy, especially Universal Credit (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2018). Under 40% of children in Poverty in Northern Ireland are in workless households (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People, 2017). Given that a child in Northern Ireland is more likely to be in poverty in a working household rather than a workless household, both wages and the cost of living must be considered. Action which addressed these issues would seem highly likely to succeed. There must therefore be some question as to whether the strategy of focusing on economic growth to alleviate poverty has succeeded, though the Children's Commissioner has called for children's material needs to be met by higher incomes so perhaps the focus on growth is not misguided (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People, 2017, p. 11).

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

Analysing poverty figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

5.0 Discussion

All the nations of the UK conceive of poverty in slightly different ways. For the UK and Northern Ireland governments, poverty is primarily a matter of economic performance. For Scotland, it is primarily about adequate income, and for Wales, it is long-term access to necessary resources. To some extent, the policies of each government reflect its conception of poverty. Scotland has implemented a statutory income target while Northern Ireland has focused primarily on economic growth. These have arguably been the two most successful nations at keeping the rate of child poverty low despite their disparate approaches.

Data on the persistence of poverty is only collected at the UK level. The most recent data indicate that just over 60% of children in poverty in 2016 remained in poverty in 2017, with 38% 'leaving' poverty (moving above the income threshold) (Office for National Statistics, 2019). These figures make the UK among the best in the EU for persistent poverty as the numbers experiencing it are below the EU average (Office of National Statistics, 2019). This indicates that there has been some success across the UK in terms of child poverty over the long term, which reflects the definition of the Welsh government.

There are many factors that affect child poverty, not all of which are controlled by devolved governments. The Resolution Foundation has identified that the recent increase in child poverty in Scotland is almost entirely due to the policies of the UK government (Brooks, Scottish government set to miss its child poverty targets, 2019). The Scottish Poverty and Inequality Commission also points to the impact that the economy and the UK government have on poverty figures (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2019, p. 4). Also, as the Commission notes, some interventions may impact on some measures of poverty but not others and may not deliver improvements at the necessary scale (Poverty and Inequality Commission, 2019, p. 6).

Wales has seen the proportion of children in poverty rise in 2017/18, the only UK nation to experience a worsening of the figures over the year in question (Pollock, 2019). Oxfam has highlighted the impact on child poverty of central government policies and the impact of institutional changes which mean that the poverty portfolio is split across various government ministers in Wales (Pollock, 2019).

Both the UK and Welsh government have prioritised work as a route out of poverty. However, rates of in-work poverty have increased. Across the UK as a whole, 70% of children in poverty are in households with at least one adult in work, largely due to the cost of living, especially housing (Richardson, 2019).

2. Persistent poverty is defined as experiencing relative low income both in the current year and at least two out of the three preceding years.

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

6.0 Conclusion

The nations of the UK have conceived of poverty in a variety of different ways and act on that basis, with some policies focused on child poverty directly and others indirectly. Overall, the conception of poverty, including child poverty, has broadened. Initially poverty was primarily seen as a lack of money, which is the position of the Scottish government. However, conceptions of poverty have developed. The UK government, under the 2010-2015 Coalition, changed the definition of poverty as it was critical of the relative income measure which showed the rate of poverty falling as the economy contracted.

As a result of broader conceptions of poverty, policies to combat it have diversified. UK governments now attempt to address poverty through action on skills and educational attainment and wider wellbeing as well as finances. However, several studies have highlighted the importance of finances, especially income from social security payments, in impacting the numbers in poverty.

UK Governments have taken many steps to combat the various aspects of child poverty. However, it is difficult to judge which has been the most effective. Scotland has a statutory poverty target and has a lower level of child poverty than the UK average. But Northern Ireland has no such target and prioritises economic growth which it explicitly links to poverty reduction, yet it also maintains a child poverty rate below the UK average. As such, certain measures may be associated with an improvement in the child poverty rate, but they cannot be said to cause differences in poverty rates. Rates of poverty may be impacted by factors over which governments have limited control, for example the improvement in figures prior to the 2008 financial crash and their subsequent deterioration.

2. Persistent poverty is defined as experiencing relative low income both in the current year and at least two out of the three preceding years.

Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

Analysing poverty figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

7.0 Bibliography

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Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK nations approaches to child poverty

Analysing poverty figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

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Chronology

Introduction

Overview

Mapping UK
nations approaches
to child poverty

Analysing poverty
figures and policies

Discussion

Conclusion

Bibliography

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