

It doesn't happen here

The reality of child poverty in Northern Ireland

Barnardo's Northern Ireland

**CHILD
POVERTY
BRIEFING**

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GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

A young girl with dark hair is lying in bed, covered with a white blanket. She is looking up towards the camera with a worried or anxious expression. The background is a blurred room, possibly a hospital or a care home, with white walls and a clock visible in the distance.

‘I know the family unit here is not in a healthy way.’

Anna, single mother of two young daughters. Craigavon.

This report is a summary of a wider UK study (called *It doesn't happen here*), based on interviews with over 40 families with whom Barnardo's works.

Additional modelling carried out by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, using the baseline of 2004/05 HBAI, estimates the poverty rates for these groups of children in 2010 on present policies and if an additional £3.8 billion was spent.

The original modelling was carried out for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Brewer, Brown and Sunderland (2006) *Microsimulating child poverty in 2010 and 2020*.

Introduction

There are currently 100,000¹ children living in officially defined levels of poverty in communities across Northern Ireland. 100,000 children who will go without many of the material things and activities that their friends take for granted. 100,000 children who will experience the lack of choice and dignity that poverty can too often bring.

A further group are living in severe poverty; around 44,000² children and young people will be missing out on regular items that the rest of the community see as essential and poverty will have a particularly devastating effect on them.

Yet there are actions that the Northern Ireland Executive, together with the Westminster government, can take which will greatly reduce the number of children living in poverty and improve the kind of life chances they have.

Actions that include making extra income available to those families most in poverty, providing childcare and better access to employment as well as improving educational outcomes and better family support for children living in poverty.

In March 1999 the Prime Minister made a historic and ambitious pledge to end child poverty within a generation, and in November 2006 the Northern Ireland Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy – Life Time Opportunities pledged government here to halving child poverty by 2010 and ending child poverty by 2020.

Eight years since that original pledge there are still over 100,000 children living in poverty in Northern Ireland. While there has undoubtedly been progress with 600,000 children having been lifted out of poverty across the UK that progress has now stalled. In order to achieve the 2010 or 2020 targets both the Westminster government and the Northern Ireland Executive will need to prioritise policies for ending child poverty right across government. 'The battle to reduce child poverty has reached a critical juncture'³ and action is required now if pledges are to be fulfilled.

The problem: inadequate incomes and low wages

In 2005/6 a couple with two children in the UK spent on average £642 per week.^{4a} Yet families living on benefit have only one third of this to live on – a couple with two children currently receive £204 in weekly benefit and for a lone parent with two children only £170 per week.^{4b} These fall below the Government's own poverty line which for a lone parent with two children is £223 and for a couple with two children is £301.

Even for many working families poverty is a reality – 47 per cent of the children living in poverty in Northern Ireland live in a household with at least one parent working. This is contributed to by the low level of wages for many workers here – 160,000 workers receive less than £6.50 per hour (the minimum wage is £5.35 per hour)⁵ giving us a higher proportion of low paid full-time workers when compared with Britain.

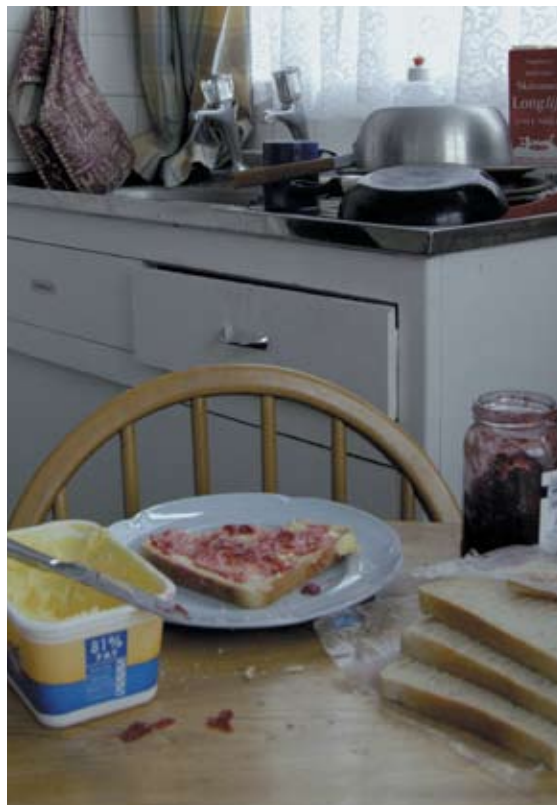
The children most likely to be in poverty, whether or not they have a parent working, include families affected by disability, lone parent families, black and ethnic minority families and large families and children in a family where a parent works. These are some of the most vulnerable children and children for whom the Northern Ireland Executive must make an extra effort to improve their life chances and lift them out of poverty.



What are the impacts of poverty on children and their families?

By using Government income figures there are 100,000 children in poverty. However, if we take account of children who are also experiencing deprivation, the figure increases to 160,000.⁶ What does this mean in terms of life chances and outcomes?

- The rate of infant mortality in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland is one third higher than that of the Northern Ireland average.⁷
- The rate of teenage pregnancies for girls aged 13 to 16 years in the most deprived areas is three times that of the rest of the country.⁸
- In 2001 half of all lone parents lacked a car.⁹
- 28 per cent of those living in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland do not have a bank account, which means they will pay significantly more for financial services and utility bills.¹⁰
- Children living in poor areas do less well in school – in English 37 per cent of 11 year olds in the most deprived fifth of primary schools fail to reach level four – this compares to an average of 23 per cent.¹¹
- The proportion of young people getting few or no GCSEs has remained largely unchanged for the last decade at around 14 per cent of all 16 year olds. This is doubled among children entitled to free school meals at 30 per cent.¹²
- There are almost 27,000 families with children living in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.¹³
- Families with disabled children are 50 per cent more likely to be in debt and 50 per cent less likely to be able to afford holidays, new clothes, school outings or 'treats' for their children.¹⁴
- No family in Northern Ireland cannot afford to feed their children, but many have seriously depleted diets and many suffer material and social deprivation. While for some poverty is a transitory experience, for most of those who are poor it is something they are used to. Over two thirds of those living in poverty will have been poor for at least three out of the last four years.¹⁵



Karen is a lone parent with four girls, aged between seven and two. She survives on weekly benefit of £240 and finds it difficult to cover the costs of food, heating and clothes. She usually has to borrow money at the end of each week.

'My children have never been swimming. I would love to take them but I can't afford it and could not afford the transport to the pool... I want my children to be happy, well educated and for them to have goals which they think that they can achieve and for them not to think that they are not good enough.'

Karen – Tullycarnet Family Project, Belfast

This complex experience of poverty highlights the need for a mix of policy responses to combat poverty across both the medium and long-term. This must be a priority for both the Westminster government and the Northern Ireland Executive if we are to have any impact.

What would the £3.8 billion investment mean?

With an additional £3.8 billion estimated by the IFS for the report, there could be, by 2010, across the UK (compared with 2004/05):

- 320,000 fewer poor children in lone parent families
- 240,000 fewer poor children in families with a disabled adult
- 90,000 fewer poor children in two parent families where one parent works full-time and the other parent does not work
- 50,000 fewer poor Pakistani and Bangladeshi children.

Without the additional £3.8 billion investment there could be, by 2010, (compared with 2004/05):

- 70,000 more poor children in two parent families where one parent works full-time and the other parent does not work
- 30,000 more poor children in lone parent families
- 40,000 more Pakistani and Bangladeshi children living in poverty.



Keeping the child poverty promise

By investing an extra £3.8 billion

Keeping the promise to halve child poverty by 2010 will require the UK government to spend a total of £3.8 billion more than currently planned. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has identified that the child poverty target could be achieved by increasing the child element of the Child Tax Credit by a further £11 a week and giving an extra £20 per week the third and subsequent children through the family element of one child tax credit.

By providing help with extra costs

Low income families struggle at certain times of the year and often end up paying extra for basics like utilities. Targeted support could make a real difference to the quality of life for many children. Holidays can become a time of 'survival' for many families. 60,000 children are eligible for free school meals during the year and compensating families for the loss of this could make a real difference. In Northern Ireland this would cost approximately £5 million per year.

Many families in poverty were in debt either from the Social Fund, doorstep lenders or friends. Many of these loans were to cover the cost of Christmas, birthdays or essential household goods. Doorstep lenders can charge between 160 and 800 per cent per year on loans and trap families in a vicious cycle of debt.

There must be a strategy to prioritise ending financial exclusion of low income families with banks playing a key part.

By giving wider help to families

The £3.8 billion at Westminster level is crucial if government is to meet its 2010 target but equally important are actions that can be taken by the Northern Ireland Executive.

Employment – most parents want to work and see this as a way out of poverty but continue to experience real barriers to getting a job and staying in it. Research evidence from both Britain and the USA shows that good job matching is central to individual's sustaining work.

Case study

The following case study is just one example in Northern Ireland which typifies the situation many families find themselves in through no fault of their own.

Sally – Barnardo’s Strabane Family Centre

Sally is a lone parent living in Strabane. She has five children aged between 16 and 4 and lives on benefits income which is £60 below the government’s official poverty line. Sally is determined to return to work in order to improve her children’s chances. She has recently started a hairdressing course but has received little support from government. Her parents have paid both the £85 for the course and the £20 for the kit.

‘Without my family support, dad taking me to the course and mum babysitting the children, I would not have been able to do this. In the long term I hope to be off the dole and be a qualified

hairdresser, be able to support my children, be able to save for emergencies...I want to be able to enjoy being with the children and playing with them. Not to be always worrying about the bills and about where we are going to get the money for that week’s food.’

Sally’s eldest child has high aspirations and would like to go to university. However, he is worried that his family could not afford this. This saddens Sally: *‘a 16 year old boy should not be worrying about whether or not his family will have enough money for him to go to university.’*



The Northern Ireland

Executive should:

- Introduce the New Deal for Families and the full Jobcentre Plus programme to Northern Ireland.
- Ensure that progress is measured by sustainability of jobs and not number of placements.
- Undertake a review to examine the best way to support second earners into the labour market.
- Childcare – there have been a number of childcare initiatives established by the last Northern Ireland Executive including the development of Sure Start. However, many parents and in particular lone parents struggle to find childcare which is high quality, reliable, affordable and can support them in their return to work.
- Review the current level of childcare affordability and accessibility and develop a programme to address the deficit.
- Further develop the programme of Sure Starts in local areas and ensure long-term sustainable funding.
- Families affected by a disability, whether of a parent or child, are at a greater than average risk of persistent poverty. The additional costs of disability push many families into poverty – it costs three times as much to bring up a disabled child as it does a non-disabled child. Parents in such families are less likely to work and when they do they are more likely to be in low paid employment.
- Review the opportunities for training and employment for disabled young people.
- Review the current level of short breaks provision for families with a disabled child and develop a strategy to ensure an appropriate level of provision.
- Department of Employment and Learning should widen access to help for parents with health conditions and disabilities.
- Address the impact of poverty on education and health – for many families the experience of persistent poverty means they are caught in an on-going cycle of ill-health and poor educational attainment. This makes escaping from poverty especially difficult.
- Invest further in schools in those most deprived areas where educational attainment is lowest to tackle educational under-achievement among poor children.
- Address the needs of the 16 per cent of children who fail to get GCSEs.
- Narrow the gap in health outcomes, including teenage pregnancy and infant mortality, for the poorest children.
- Tackle the cycle of deprivation by providing pathways out of poverty for children and families through programmes of family support, and programmes which address community barriers.
- Continue the Executive Programme Fund for Children as a mechanism of providing additional investment to those families and children most in need.
- Prioritise child poverty in the comprehensive spending review and commit the necessary resources to ensure the targets outlined in Life Time Opportunities are achieved.

(I hope) that he grows up and that he's not stuck on the Brew like me, that he goes out and does well at school, goes to college.

Morag, 20 and a single parent of an 18 month old boy.
PACT project, Belfast.

Conclusion

It is the responsibility of both the Westminster government and the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver the target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. This requires a programme of action to address those children most in need. Barnardo's Northern Ireland is asking government to keep its promise to those children and young people by putting in place now the actions required to ensure they and their children do not spend the next ten years in poverty.

Karen has summed up the need for action:

'I know that money cannot buy happiness and my children have loads of love, but having enough money is important to ensure my children are well looked after and have the things that they need in life.'

Karen, Tullycarnet Family Project, Belfast

All names have been changed to protect identities.

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Copies of the main report *It doesn't happen here – the reality of child poverty in the UK* are available from Barnardo's head office, tel: 020 8498 7750

For further information visit:
www.barnardos.org.uk/poverty

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