

# ALL YOU NEED IS...

## MEASURING CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF DEPRIVATION

### Introduction

Through our work with families both Barnardos and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul see each day the lived experience of poverty and disadvantage and its impact on children and families. However, current measures of poverty and deprivation are based on adult's lifestyles and experiences. These measures fail to capture the child's experience of having to 'go without' due to a lack of money.

### Objective

The research conducted by the Children's Research Centre (TCD) was undertaken in order to examine deprivation from a child's perspective - what children need, what they have, and what they have to go without due to a lack of money. This culminated in a set of items that children identify as necessities for all children, regardless of their parents' income, and subsequently the creation of a child specific deprivation index.

Measuring children's deprivation with this child-specific deprivation index provides some insight into what childhood deprivation means for children themselves beyond the more general items that deprived households are forced to go without. It also gives some insight into the intra-household distribution of resources, where parents may be going without so that their child's needs can be met.

### Method

A socially perceived necessities method was used. This entailed the compiling of a list of 47 items (possessions, activities and access to services) that are indicative of an acceptable standard of living for childhood. This list was then presented to 262 children aged 9-11 years who were asked which items they deemed essential and which items they owned or did not own because their parents could not afford them. The sample of children was chosen

based on urban/rural settings and according to whether their school was classified as disadvantaged under the Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) initiative run by the Department of Education and Skills. As a result the sample is broadly representative of the wider population.

The child-specific deprivation index was compiled by retaining the items that were:

- a) considered essential by a majority of children and
- b) lacked by 3% or more of them

The children's parents also participated in the research and were asked to indicate which of the items they deemed essential and which items their children owned or did not own because they could not be afforded. In order to investigate the link between household and child deprivation, parents were also asked to indicate which of the 11 SILC household deprivation items<sup>1</sup> the household had to go without due to lack of money.

### Key Findings

- Children understand what is meant by necessities as there was a strong consensus between children and parents about which items were essential for children.
- The 12-item child-specific deprivation index is very child centred and has a focus on participation. The items in the index capture the voices of children and highlight what children deem to be essential to guarantee an acceptable standard of living during childhood. The indicators are:
  - Three balanced meals each day with fruit/vegetables and meat/fish
  - Enough of the right clothes for different seasons, e.g. a coat to keep warm and dry in winter

<sup>1</sup> The EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC), carried out by each member state, is a household survey covering a broad range of issues in relation to income and living conditions. It was conducted in Ireland by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the first time in 2003 and is currently being conducted on an annual basis. It is the main measure used in the calculation of rates of consistent child poverty in Ireland.

- Separate bed and bedding of their own
  - Own books for reading for fun
  - Food and drinks for friends when they call over to play
  - Own money for school activities or days out
  - Family holiday once a year (can be in Ireland or abroad)
  - Day out with family at least twice a year (e.g. go to beach, fun fair, leisure centres)
  - Visit to a restaurant for a family meal at least twice a year
  - A bank, post office or Credit Union account to save money
  - Shops close to home (e.g. food shops, clothes shops or chemist)
  - A trip to the library
- Using this index, 69.5% of children reported not having to go without any item, leaving 30.5% of children being deprived of at least one item.
- Mothers' educational attainment influenced the degree of deprivation a child experienced (as measured by the 12-item index), with children of graduate mothers significantly less likely to report high levels of deprivation and children of mothers with the lowest level of educational attainment significantly more likely to go without two or more child necessities. An inverse relationship between mothers' education and child deprivation was also noted, in that deprivation decreased as mother's educational attainment increased.
- There is also a relationship between household deprivation (as measured by the 11 SILC items) and child-specific deprivation (as measured by the 12-item index). However, household and child deprivation are not one and the same phenomenon and the experiences of adults and children within the household can vary. The survey found that 28% of children living in a non-deprived household were deprived of at least one item from the child deprivation index. Conversely 58% of children living in deprived homes are not deprived of any of the 12 child-specific items.

## Analysis

There is a strong argument for using child specific indicators when trying to capture the extent and experience of child deprivation. Such indicators tell us what children are going without within the household and ensure

that the experience of children themselves is taken into account when describing the impact that child deprivation has on their childhood right now. Child-specific indicators also help us to understand the longer term effects of deprivation on children's life chances. It is evident that the childhood of many children is being compromised now and any further cuts to household income or public services will continue to have an adverse effect on them.

This research confirms that a child's risk and experience of deprivation is aligned with his or her mother's educational attainment. The intergenerational nature of deprivation and its link with early school leaving, unemployment and wider societal inequalities is clear.

The research also suggests that the distribution of resources within the family is linked with the extent to which children experience deprivation. Given the complex nature of deprivation it is hard to clearly identify the factors at play here, however we do know that deprivation is closely related to living on a low income. It may be the case that many of the children who are exposed to deprivation are living in households with a low income (at risk of poverty), making it more difficult for parents to protect children from going without. We also know that many parents are likely to be sacrificing their own needs so that their children do not have to go without. Poverty and deprivation require a holistic response based on a prevention and early intervention model of services and supports operating at a local level, and robust income supports for families on low incomes. This two pronged approach is a must if the social inequalities that perpetuate poverty and deprivation are to be eradicated.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

To capture a true sense of the extent and meaning of child deprivation it is important to ask children directly about their experience and to use child specific indicators in calculating child poverty along with traditional household-focussed measures. It is incomplete to assess children's lives using an adult lens. It is hoped this research will help lead to a greater understanding of the complexity of deprivation experienced by children and influence the development of appropriate and long lasting policies and services that will end child poverty.