1. Executive summary

- Child poverty constitutes an adverse childhood experience due to its well-established association with a wide range of negative consequences during childhood, for the adults children become, and for wider society.
- Child poverty rates in the UK are high, and are beginning to rise. Increases in child poverty outstrip increases in poverty among other societal groups, and the rise in child poverty is likely to continue under current policies.
- Parents in poverty are sacrificing their own needs to provide for their children, often to the detriment of their own well-being.
- There is scant evidence that the attitudes and behaviours of parents living in poverty differ to those of their better-off counterparts, other than in their efforts to manage on constrained resources.
- The use of the household unit is problematic; children’s moves between multiple households will affect their access to resources, and the way that resources and labour are shared within and between households can impact the well-being of families and children.
- Children’s perspectives on poverty and their material needs reflect a dual focus on development towards adulthood, and enjoying childhood.
- Children living in poverty are often acutely aware of their family’s lack of resources, and attempt to protect themselves and their family in a variety of ways which may be detrimental to their long-term well-being.
- Feelings of missing out, stigma, and shame are common among children growing up in constrained circumstances.
- Terminating a policy approach which disproportionately impacts low-income families, and increasing the incomes of the poorest families, are key to child poverty reduction. Several additional recommendations are presented in section 10.

2. Introduction

2.1. This submission addresses two specific points of the Terms of Reference: contributing to evidence for the link between adverse childhood experiences and long-term negative outcomes; and the extent to which national government policies reflect the existing evidence base along with suggestions for implementation.

2.2. There is strong evidence for including child poverty as a category of early childhood adversity, and one which is amenable to evidence-based policies.

3. Child poverty as an adverse childhood experience

3.1. Although not named specifically in the Terms of Reference, childhood poverty is a very well-established predictor of a host of negative outcomes, during childhood and for the adults children become. These outcomes cover a wide range of life domains including lower educational attendance, attainment, and achievement; increased risk of morbidity and mortality, including death during childhood and lower life expectancy; and increased risk of experiencing poverty in adulthood (Bradshaw, 2016; Griggs and Walker, 2008). Many of these outcomes relate to those detailed in the Terms of Reference, including impacts on education,
employment, and health. Thus it is reasonable to view childhood poverty as an adverse childhood experience alongside those explicitly named.

4. The extent of the problem

4.1. Although the targets of the 2010 Child Poverty Act have now been abandoned, figures on poverty rates according to the different measures are still published. The child poverty rates in the UK in 2015/16 were 20% (relative low income); 17% (anchored low income); and 12% (combined low income and material deprivation)\(^1\) (DWP, 2017). In a comparative context, the UK does not perform well: UNICEF analysis placed the UK anchored child poverty rate at 18\(^{th}\) in a list of 31 rich countries in 2014, and noted that an increasing proportion of child poverty is located within in-work families (Cantillon et al, 2017). A more detailed examination of children’s material living standards conducted in 2012 shows that based on low income combined with lacking three or more necessities established through popular consensus, 27% of children were living in poverty (Main and Bradshaw, 2018). Across these different measures, children are significantly more likely than working-age adults or pensioners to experience poverty.

4.2. Vulnerability to poverty differs across groups of children in the UK. Children living in lone-parent families, from certain minority ethnic groups (including Black, mixed-race and Pakistani/Bangladeshi children), and living in rented accommodation (both social and private) were at higher risk of poverty (Main and Bradshaw, 2018). The association between poverty and household worklessness is more complex. While children in workless households are at the highest risk of poverty, the majority of poor children do not live in workless households. This is mirrored in official figures: according to the DWP (2017) 67% of children in poverty live in families with at least one adult in paid employment. Figures on child poverty in workless households are further complicated by the various reasons adult household members might be without work – our analysis showed that the majority of children in poverty in workless households lived with adults who were inactive (34% of children in poverty) rather than unemployed (6%).

5. Child poverty and policy

5.1. Child poverty achieved particular prominence in UK politics following then-Prime-Minister Tony Blair’s commitment in 1999 to end it within a generation. A suite of policies were introduced geared towards increasing the incomes of the poorest families, extending affordable child care to enable parents to work, and providing support for families with children (e.g. Sure Start centres). These efforts culminated in the 2010 Child Poverty Act which passed through parliament with cross-party support.

5.2. Following the 2007/8 financial crisis and the 2010 change in government, cuts to public spending were prioritised and a policy agenda of austerity was pursued. Simultaneously, the government announced plans to revamp the 2010 Child Poverty Act targets. The 2010 Act and its targets were scrapped in the 2016

\(^{1}\) Relative low income defined as an equivalised household income below 60% of the median in that year; anchored low income as below 60% of the median in the base year (2010); combined low income and material deprivation based on lacking necessities and income below 70% of the median in that year). All income measures taken before housing costs.
Welfare Reform and Work Act. While austerity policies were positioned as a political necessity, promises that ‘we are all in it together’ are challenged by the ultimate impact of cuts, which have disproportionately affected families with children (Bradshaw, Chzhen and Main, 2018). At the same time, pensioners have benefited from the ‘triple lock’, and savings made by austerity measures have been almost entirely off-set by tax breaks for the richest sections of society (Whittaker, 2017). This raises the question of whether austerity is genuinely an economic necessity; whether different prioritisation would have protected children; and whether concerted policy action now could prevent further increases in child poverty.

6. Parenting in poverty
6.1. Frank Field’s (2010) report on poverty and life chances emphasised factors beyond household income. Alongside the subsequent consultation on measuring child poverty (DWP, 2012), this represented a shift in policy focus on child poverty from income transfers towards parental attitudes and behaviours. However, this approach is questioned by academic evidence (e.g. Kiernan and Mensah, 2010) and has attracted criticism for detracting from the importance of income and deprivation in understanding child poverty and its impacts.

6.2. Evidence from recent analyses bolster this criticism. Dermott and Pomati’s (2018) examination of data from the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey revealed that parental inability to provide resources for their children is a result of constraint rather than choice, with parents engaging in a range of economising activities themselves before reducing spending on children. Similarly, they found very few significant differences in parenting activities between parents in poverty and their better-off counterparts. Based on the same data, we found that parents prioritise children’s needs over their own, going without comparable necessities; and that parents living in impoverished circumstances engage in economising behaviours which are highly detrimental to their own well-being in order to protect their children’s material well-being – including 69% of adults living in households with children in poverty going without enough to eat to ensure that others are provided for (Main and Bradshaw, 2018).

6.3. These criticisms pose a strong challenge to efforts to address child poverty which are based on changing parental behaviours and attitudes. In order to avoid exacerbating child poverty, and detrimental effects to parents from sacrificing their own needs, a shift back to focusing on income and resources is indicated.

7. Families and households
7.1. Most research and policy around child poverty treats the household as the unit of measurement – i.e. income is measured at the household level, and it is assumed that variation between household incomes translates into variation in living standards, and that household incomes are equitably distributed among household members. These assumptions are problematic for multiple reasons, detailed next.

7.2. Studies of how resources are shared within households have repeatedly challenged the assumption of equitable sharing. Differences between household

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2 For example see a response from the UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Study team, here: http://www.poverty.ac.uk/report-poverty-measurement-life-chances-children-parenting-uk-government-policy/field-review
members are apparent, including that women tend to be more likely to skimp on food and lack individual resources; are more likely to have the burden of managing budgets in low-income households while men are more likely to be responsible when resources are plentiful; are more likely to be responsible for spending on family and children; and if payments are made to women money is more likely to be spent on children (Bennett, 2013). Our own analysis of the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey shows that adults living in households with children tend to prioritise children’s needs over their own, and make substantial sacrifices to ensure children’s needs are met (Main and Bradshaw, 2012). Thus children living in low income households may be protected from the worst effects of poverty due to parental altruism; but this is not a long term solution as ultimately resources cannot be conjured from nowhere, and the cost to parental well-being is high.

7.3. Changes in family structure in recent decades mean that increasing numbers of children live in multiple households, and the financial situation of these households may vary substantially. This relates to increasingly complex characterisations of ‘family’ – children access resources from diverse sources including parents, siblings, extended family, and non-family (Main, 2017).

7.4. Family and friends external to the household can be consumers of and contributors to household resources – e.g. where unpaid care is provided to sick or disabled family members or friends external to the household; or where grandparents provide free child care (see Dermott and Pomati, 2018; Main, 2018). These contributions can be of substantial nominal financial value, and can complicate the extent to which income can be translated into higher living standards. Families with children who do not have access to support from extended family and friend networks may therefore struggle to make the same resources stretch as far as those with such networks.

7.5. Based on these complicating factors, more detailed and nuanced approaches to measuring child poverty may help to better understand differences between outcomes for children in ostensibly similar circumstances. Children’s lives could be improved through a recognition of the resources provided by those external to their households – e.g. grandparents providing care; and by recognising within the social security system the unpaid labour provided by children and (predominantly female) parents in caring for disabled and sick relatives and friends.

8. Children’s views on poverty

8.1. The majority of studies on child poverty are based on parental reports of household income and/or the resources available to children. This provides vital detail and must form a large part of the evidence base. However, children are increasingly recognised as social actors with experiences and views which may not be available to or represented by their parents. The UK’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child commits the government, under Article 12, to listening to children’s perspectives on issues of importance to their lives. The details above show the high impact poverty can have on children’s lives; thus it is reasonable to see poverty as an issue of importance to children’s lives, and therefore as one on which they have a right to be consulted.

8.2. Missing Out (Main and Pople, 2011; Main, 2013) was a study conducted with children aged 8-16 about their perspectives on their material needs, using focus
groups and a representative survey. Children were found to be highly engaged in discussions about poverty and material needs. Four themes were identified in why children identified particular resources as important: development towards successful adulthood; building relationships with family and friends; having fun and being able to relax and enjoy leisure time; and fitting in with other young people. Children felt that adults were more focused on their developmental and especially educational needs, and could at times be dismissive of their needs around having fun and fitting in. This is illustrated by children’s identification of the right kind of clothing to fit in with other young people as a necessity: only 31% of adults agreed that this was necessary for children, despite it being available (by adult and child reports) to over 80% of children, and its lack being associated with a substantial drop in children’s subjective well-being. Children in the focus groups discussed being bullied as a result of lacking these resources, and even engaging in bullying other children if they were believed to lack them.

8.3. These findings indicate that parents may not always understand children’s perspectives on their needs, and may not be able to accurately represent children’s material living standards. Children should be consulted in decisions about how to understand, measure, and address child poverty, and their perspectives should be taken seriously.

9. Shame, stigma and social inclusion

9.1. A wealth of evidence confirms that poverty is a source of shame and stigma among adults (e.g. Walker and Chase, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016). Children’s experiences of stigma and shame have been less fully explored.

9.2. Recent survey data from the Fair Shares and Families study (all subsequent figures from Main, 2017) highlight that children living in poverty are often aware of their circumstances, and that this impacts their subjective well-being and activities. This survey involved 1,010 parent-child pairs, representative of gender, age and socio-economic grade for children aged 10-16 in England.

9.3. 57% of children in income poverty (compared to 39% who were not in income poverty) worried about how much money their family had; parents were less likely than children to report that their child worried, indicating that parents are not always aware that children are under stress as a result of impoverished circumstances. 89% of children in income poor families (compared to 71% in other families) reported that they knew when their parent(s) were worried about money.

9.4. 42% of children in income poverty are in subjective poverty (i.e. judge themselves to be poor), compared to 16% of children not in income poverty; 10.6% (compared to 5.5%) are not happy with their access to money and possessions; 30% (compared to 17%) are aware that they have fewer resources than their peers; 40% (compared to 30%) report that a lack of money has prevented them from doing something they wanted to, and 59% (compared to 43%) that a lack of money has prevented them from buying something they wanted. Shame and stigma are prevalent among children in low-income families: 33% (compared to 21%) reported having been made to feel embarrassed due to a lack of money.

9.5. Children are active contributors to their family’s material well-being. 24% of children reported pretending that they did not want something in order to help their family save money; 15% reported making do with old or worn-out things. 10%
reported getting a job to provide for themselves financially, and 2% reported getting a job in order to get money for their family. 2% reported stealing to get things they needed, and 1% reported stealing for other family members.

9.6. These findings highlight the importance of listening to children’s perspectives: they often have a stronger awareness of living in poverty than adults may acknowledge, and are actively attempting to ameliorate their situation. Increasing the resources available to low-income families, and ensuring that activities and provision for children does not depend on families or children being able to pay, could help to ameliorate the sense of missing out among children from low-income families, and could reduce the feelings of shame and stigma that growing up in poverty creates.

10. Recommendations
10.1. Terminating a policy approach which disproportionately impacts low-income families, and increasing the incomes of the poorest families, are key to child poverty reduction. In addition, the following actions could be taken:
10.2. Ensuring that social security payments are made to the children’s main carer rather than to another adult in the child’s household.
10.3. Acknowledging the contributions and costs of family and friends external to the household, such as grandparents providing child care and families providing care to sick or disabled family and friends – e.g. through social security and access to flexible working.
10.4. Increasing the provision and availability of high-quality, low-cost child care so that parents (particularly mothers) can feasibly enter the labour market.
10.5. Avoiding targeted interventions which (however subtly) identify children as poor among their peers
10.6. Ensuring that the resources children need to participate in educational and social contexts are available to all children, and that the cost does not pose a burden on family which is detrimental to children’s or parents’ well-being.
10.7. Listening to, and taking seriously, children’s own perspectives on poverty and their material needs, and incorporating consideration of these perspectives into policy and practice.

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References


