



The lives of persistently poor children in Scotland

Matt Barnes, Jenny Chanfreau and Wojtek Tomaszewski



Nearly one quarter of young Scottish children grow up in persistent poverty, leaving them disproportionately more likely to face a range of social, emotional and behavioural problems. This is one of the key findings of a new study based on an analysis of the first four sweeps of Growing Up in Scotland (GUS), the Scottish Government-funded longitudinal survey that tracks the lives of Scottish children from early years through childhood and beyond, with the principal aim of providing information to support policy-making.

- According to GUS, nearly one quarter of three- to four-year-old Scottish children are persistently poor, defined as living in income poverty in at least three of the four years from 2005/06 to 2008/09. Just over four in ten of the children had experienced poverty in at least one of the years over the same period.
- How long children experience poverty is linked to child outcomes. Persistently poor children are disproportionately likely to face social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, be overweight and have multiple problems.
- Some children are more at risk of experiencing persistent poverty. Living in social rented housing, living in deprived areas, being the member of a large family or a lone-parent family and having a mother with low or no qualifications are all associated with persistent poverty.
- Having parents who are regularly without work is the factor with most bearing on persistent poverty. Nearly nine in ten children with parents who spent very little or no time in work over the four-year period experienced persistent poverty.
- Parental work has long been seen as the best protection against poverty and this research has again identified worklessness as a key influence on poverty. However, work is not always a possibility for many families. Parents without work often also experience a range of other disadvantages, including low education and skills, disability or complex childcare requirements.
- To tackle child poverty, particularly persistent poverty, policies need to recognise this complexity and also to provide alternative targeted support during periods of parental ill-health or when children are young, when it may not be possible for all parents to work full-time.

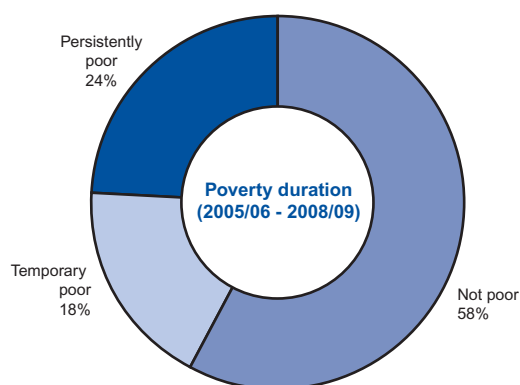
The lives of persistently poor children in Scotland

Nearly one quarter of three- to four-year-old Scottish children were persistently poor

GUS follows cohorts of children through early childhood and these research findings focus on the younger of the first two cohorts (the 'birth cohort'). These children were aged between three and four in 2008/09. The analysis defined children as income poor if the annual income of their household was below 60 per cent of the median population household income, adjusted for household size and composition – the official measure of income poverty adopted by the Scottish Government. For 2007/08, this equated to just over £17,000 per year for a couple with two children and just over £13,000 for a lone parent with two children.

The Scottish Government is bound by the Child Poverty Act (2010) which established four child poverty targets to be met by 2020/21 across the UK. The targets include a 'persistent poverty' measure, defined as living in income poverty in at least three of the past four years, which is the same definition used in this study.

Children were grouped according to the number of years they experienced poverty during the four years covered by the study. The majority of children (58 per cent) were not poor in any of the years (Figure 1). However a substantial proportion of children had experienced poverty in at least one of the years.



Source: GUS
Base: Birth cohort (3-4 year olds)
Unweighted bases: Not poor 2,333; Temporary poor 611; Persistently poor 654

Figure 1. Poverty duration status (2005/06-2008/09)

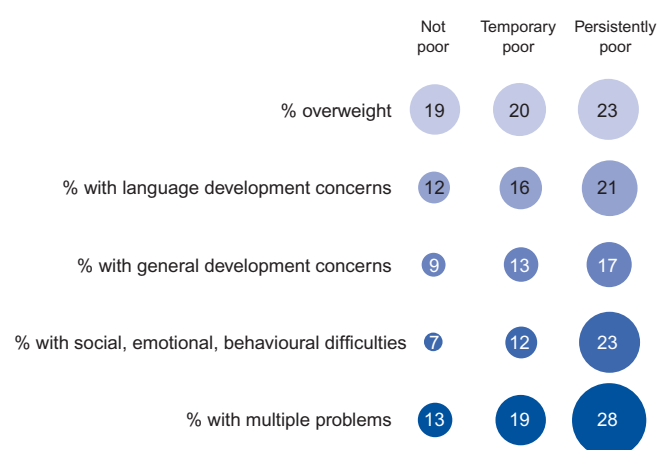
Nearly one quarter (24 per cent) of the children were persistently poor; they had lived in a low-income household at three or all four annual GUS interviews. The children experiencing poverty in one or two of the four years were defined as temporary poor and made up 18 per cent of the children. GUS collects information on household income in a different way to specialist income surveys. GUS asks the mother to indicate the total income of her household from a set

of income bands, whereas specialist income surveys ask all adults in the household a number of detailed questions about a variety of income sources. This means estimates of the number of persistently poor children from GUS are not strictly comparable to those from these other surveys.

Unlike specialist income surveys, GUS collects information about the child's development and well-being. The mother, or main carer, provides information on areas such as the child's health and development, and social activities. Other information is collected directly from the child, such as height and weight, or through standard assessment tools such as the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire which is designed to measure social, emotional and behaviour difficulties.

Persistently poor children were more likely to have development and well-being problems

The research explored whether children's development and well-being varied according to how long they had been living in poverty. Mothers' concerns about their child's development and language skills were more prevalent among persistently poor children. In addition, weight issues and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were more prevalent among this group. Moreover, persistently poor children were also more likely to have multiple problems (Figure 2).



Source: GUS Base: Birth cohort (3-4 year olds)
Smallest unweighted base size: 555

Figure 2. Child outcomes by poverty status

Multivariate analysis showed that the link between poverty and child outcomes was no longer statistically significant when other factors were taken into account. Factors associated with child outcomes included the child's gender, family size and mothers' ethnicity and health. It is important to note here that the effects of living

in poverty are complex and not necessarily captured solely by our indicator of low income or its duration.

Knowing more about the other factors associated with persistent poverty can help us understand the links between poverty and child outcomes. It is also useful to policy-makers who wish to target interventions on families most likely to be experiencing persistent poverty.

Having parents regularly out of work is the key predictor of persistent poverty

The analysis showed that certain children are more likely than others to experience persistent poverty. These include those in lone-parent families, those in larger families, those with parents with low education, and those who live in rented housing, (particularly social-rented housing). However, having parent(s) regularly out of work is the key predictor of persistent poverty (Figure 3).

To look at the effect of employment, an indicator of average work intensity (AWI) was constructed based on the ratio of people in employment to the total number of adults available to work. Thus, both a lone-parent household where the parent worked full-time in all four years and a couple-family with both parents in full-time work throughout has the same AWI (100 per cent). Children in families with low AWI faced the highest risk of poverty: almost 9 out of 10 of these families lived in persistent poverty and virtually all of the remaining 10 per cent experienced temporary poverty at some point.

Multivariate analysis confirmed that these factors are significantly associated with persistent poverty, even

when accounting for other, potentially confounding, factors. It should be noted that the analysis reveals associations but not causes of poverty. These factors may not necessarily be driving persistent poverty; some, such as living in social housing, may instead be consequences of being poor.

Work does not always protect families from persistent poverty, particularly when there is only one worker in the household

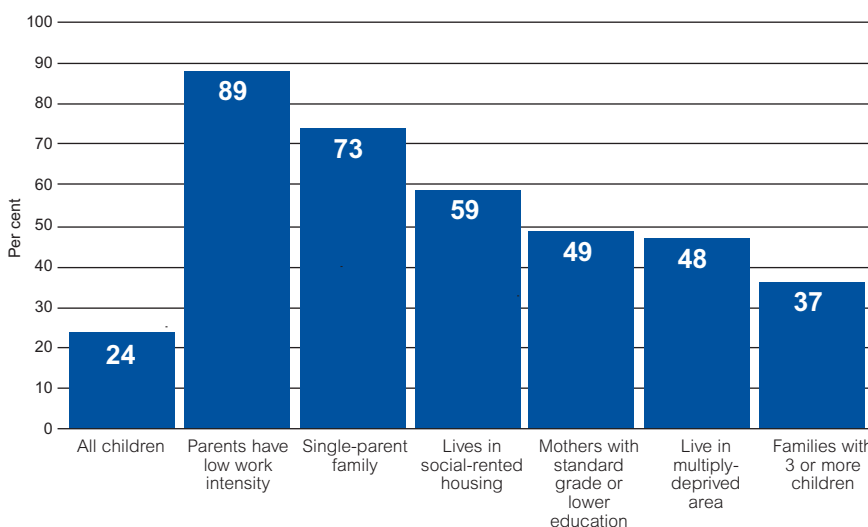
The evidence from GUS suggests that persistent poverty is concentrated in a minority, but still a substantial proportion, of young Scottish children. As the Child Poverty Act (2010) works towards a target for reducing persistent poverty, the UK and Scottish governments will need to consider in their poverty reduction strategies how their policies address persistent poverty. Concerted policy measures to tackle persistent poverty, over and above those designed to tackle poverty in general, may be necessary.

This research further supports the assertion that being without work, in particular regular work, is a key influence on poverty. In addition, families without work are also likely to experience a range of other disadvantages – including low parental education and poor health – and may require quite complicated childcare arrangements to make finding and sustaining work a possibility. This means that employment policy needs to operate alongside policies designed to contend with these other hardships.

Policy must recognise the complexity of the constraints faced by many parents and also take into account that

work is not always possible or desirable for all parents at all times, particularly during periods of ill health and concentrated times of caring for young children.

This raises questions regarding the adequacy of benefit and wage levels for keeping some families with dependent children out of poverty and implies that other types of support may be required. As this research has shown links between persistent poverty and maternal health, low education and family composition, it may be that targeted and tailored support for families and mothers with these specific circumstances may be appropriate.



Source: GUS Base: Birth cohort (3-4 year olds)
Unweighted base size: 2,914

Figure 3. Factors associated with persistent poverty

The lives of persistently poor children in Scotland

Further research is required to better understand the effects of persistent poverty on child outcomes

The impact of poverty on child outcomes is complex and, as these findings suggest, low income is not the only driver of poor outcomes during early childhood. It is possible that income-poor parents are able to protect their young children from the effects of income poverty, for example by prioritising their needs, but this could in turn adversely affect the well-being of other family members.

However, as other poverty-related factors are linked to worse outcomes for children, more direct measures of poverty, such as material deprivation, bad housing or multiple disadvantage, may be better predictors of outcomes for young children living in poverty. The breadth of GUS data, and its longitudinal element, would allow researchers to explore these issues as well as the ordering and timing of the accumulation of disadvantage in families with young children.

Methodology

- Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of cohorts of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. The principal aim of the study is to provide information to support policy-making.
- The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) in collaboration with the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at the University of Edinburgh and the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow.
- The study is conducted through face-to-face interviews with the main carer of the GUS child. Interviews take place annually until the child

reaches the age of five years, and then at key stages in later childhood.

- Focusing initially in 2005/06 on a cohort of 5,217 children aged 0-1 years old (birth cohort) and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old (child cohort), the same GUS families were interviewed each year to 2008/09. The birth cohort has since been followed up for a fifth time in 2009/10 and a new birth cohort will be introduced to the study with interviews being carried out in 2011/12.
- GUS collects information on household composition and family demographics, parenting styles and support, parental education and employment, household income, benefits and accommodation. In addition, the mother, or main carer, is asked about the child's health and development, the childcare used and the activities the child takes part in.
- The findings presented here relate to the first four years of the lives of the original birth cohort children. Please see the full report for the findings based on analysis of data on both original cohorts.

Obtaining the full report for this study

The full report of these research findings, *Growing Up in Scotland: The Circumstances of Persistently Poor Children*, by Matt Barnes, Jenny Chanfreau and Wojtek Tomaszewski (2010) is published by Scottish Government and available online at: www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/310430/0097968.pdf.

Further information about GUS can be found at www.growingupinScotland.org.uk or by contacting Paul Bradshaw at ScotCen (Paul.Bradshaw@scotcen.org.uk)

Both ScotCen and NatCen carry out a number of research studies on poverty. Please contact Matt Barnes (Matt.Barnes@natcen.ac.uk) for further information.