

Children in poverty: Measurement and targets

A response from Juno Women's Aid

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About Juno Women's Aid

Juno Women's Aid is the largest specialist domestic abuse organisation in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, and the fourth largest in the UK. We work with women, children, and teenagers who have been affected by domestic abuse and run a wide range of services including the 24-hour Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Freephone Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline.

In 2019-2020, we've worked with 5,324 women, 462 children and young people fostered 53 pets and taken 11,000 calls on our Helpline. At any one time, we're supporting 500-600 women and children in Nottingham and South Nottinghamshire.

Juno is grateful to the Work and Pensions Committee for launching an inquiry into children in poverty and for recognition of its complex nature. As an organisation, we support a multitude of women, children and teenagers who have been impacted by poverty in all forms. We look forward to the government's further response and actions.

Juno's contribution to the inquiry

In the following pages, we have contributed to three questions posed by the Committee:

1. How should child poverty be measured and defined?
2. What is the impact of child poverty and how can it be best measured?
3. How effectively does the Department for Work and Pensions work with local authorities and with support organisations to reduce the numbers of children living in poverty and to mitigate the impact of poverty on children?

The case studies and quotes in this response have been provided by two Children's Refuge Workers at Juno Women's Aid. Suzy works at Zola, our specialist Black Asian Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) Refuge in Nottingham city, and Emma works at Serenity, our dispersed refuge in south Nottinghamshire. Further information about Juno's services is available here: <https://junowomensaid.org.uk/>

Considerations

1. Child poverty is strongly linked to the poverty of women. The poverty of women needs to be addressed in order to impact child poverty.
2. Child poverty needs to be measured through a multi-dimensional lens. Measuring poverty based on financial hardship is inadequate.
3. Local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions require further funding to support women and address the needs and impact of child poverty.
4. The classification of "vulnerable children" needs to be readdressed to include children subject to domestic abuse.
5. The government and local authorities need to work closely with specialist agencies to understand child poverty in its wider context.

How should child poverty be measured and defined?

The current method for measuring and defining poverty, as explored by Child Poverty Action Group¹, is inadequate. By excluding additional hardships such as technological inadequacies and educational underachievement, and assuming poverty through a single lens of financial hardship, the measurement of child poverty does not go far enough. This results in many children not being caught in poverty alleviation methods such as free school meals at school, which furthers poverty and limits children's future life opportunities.

Child poverty is strongly linked to the poverty of women. Women tend to be the primary caregiver to children and the National Education Union refers to a "triple jeopardy" that women are facing – slashed benefits, job cuts and a reduction in core public services,² which automatically affects the children in their care. There have long been conversations regarding poverty through a gendered lens and the detrimental impact of poverty on children. According to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as reported by Women's Budget Group, 45% of single parents, the vast majority (90%) of which are women, are living in poverty and almost half of children living with a single parent (47%) are now in poverty.³

As discussed in 'Keeping Mum' by the Fawcett society, children are at risk of poverty before birth. Having a baby in the UK, particularly for lone mothers, puts women at risk of losing her job, transferring to a lower paid job and debt.⁴ At the time of writing 'Keeping Mum', four in ten children in poverty were in lone mother households and a further three in ten were in households where their father works, but their mother is on a low, or no, income. DWP and the Office for National Statistics need to collect and publish data based on income of an individual, as opposed to household, for a more accurate picture of poverty in the UK. Adequate child care, flexible working and investment in transport are just some of ongoing recommendations⁵ to address women in poverty and consequently, child poverty.

At Juno, we assess the support needed for women on their needs, vulnerability and the intended outcome for the welfare of the woman and her family. So although we don't measure poverty as a single entity, some of the support needed by the women, teenagers and children in Nottingham include accessing benefits, enrolling children into schools, information on food banks, advocating on behalf of women and their families at the Housing Office and more. Collectively, this need for support and advocacy amounts to a measure of poverty as opposed to a singular checkbox on a form.

Tackling the poverty of women is critical to the long-term success of defining, measuring and overcoming child poverty.

Another consideration in tackling poverty of women and children, in the context of domestic abuse, is the link between economic abuse and financial poverty. Economic abuse is extremely hard to measure as a statistic of poverty. In some households, their combined income may look positive, but this isn't to say that the woman and children benefit from the

¹ <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/measuring-poverty>

² <https://neu.org.uk/advice/women-and-poverty>

³ <https://wbg.org.uk/blog/dwp-data-reveals-women-continue-to-be-worst-affected-by-poverty/>

⁴ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=355a7eee-9eb3-4715-bc97-f28ed9dc6b73>

⁵ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/the-female-face-of-poverty/>

income. It could be the case that the perpetrator of abuse controls the finances, disables the woman from buying basic groceries and medication – she may have no access to the money. This is an example of poverty in the context of abuse. To further this, if a woman decides to leave an abusive relationship where the perpetrator is the main breadwinner, the perpetrator has immersed her in debt, or the perpetrator has control of the finances and won't let her access them, a woman who was classified as “not in poverty” is suddenly plunged into poverty. This in turn affects any children she may have and their poverty status.

Another hindrance of attempting to measure poverty in the context of domestic abuse is the hidden aspect of it. Not many women and their families are forthcoming about their family and financial circumstances, many more do not recognise a perpetrator's behaviour as abuse. At this stage, agency intervention could help and measure the level of support a woman and her family may need, thus helping to establish a more accurate measure of child poverty and poverty in general.

What is the impact of child poverty and how can it be best measured?

“The impact of child poverty is expansive, depending where the family settles can hugely affect their access to culturally diverse education and an understanding of their needs. City schools tend to have a more diverse background of pupils and teachers, but access to funding can then be tighter as we know from working with the [local] council.

This was clear when trying to find places for children in the city and for them to access education and free school meal vouchers during lockdown. If [they are placed] in a good school with access to funding such as pupil premium benefits, then they can support these needs and the technology needs of the child by offering to lend equipment to a child.”

Suzy, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's specialist BAMER Refuge, Zola.

Digital exclusion has been particularly prevalent during the pandemic. Children in poverty lacked access to online educational resources, which further restricts their ability to thrive in education and impacts their future life prospects such as employment and earnings. Access and ability to use technology, eligibility for benefits such as free school meals, and a holistic approach to education, including addressing cultural needs, are all considerations required to more accurately measure and define poverty. Poverty is not a single entity.

“Being unable to bring visitors back to the refuge means that building relationships is hard as a child as is questioning about where you moved from and why you moved here. Lacking money for the latest technology or basic equipment can put the child at odds from their peer group and mean that they don't 'fit in' to certain social groups.”

Suzy, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's specialist BAMER Refuge, Zola.

The specific home circumstances need to also be taken into consideration. Children in Refuge, for example, are undergoing complex transitions mentally and in their physical environment. Agency involvement with a family, for example, domestic abuse organisations or social care, can provide further insight into child poverty. Women in Refuge are not necessarily struggling financially, but the aforementioned stresses on a child, as well as being at odds with why the family have moved to somewhere unknown, including a new school, means the child is at a disadvantage educationally and on a pastoral level in comparison with their peers.

“[Children] are not classed as being ‘vulnerable’ when in Refuge as they do not always have a social worker. Social care often close cases when they are residing with us seeing that they are being supported and are safe. Therefore, children could not access school as a vulnerable child. In this instance, the woman then has children at home for long periods of time, coupled with not accessing full benefits, can mean the woman and children are struggling to buy basics such as food and clothing and rely heavily on donations.

Suzy, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's specialist BAMER Refuge, Zola.

Case Study:

ZH (female aged 6), AH (female aged 3) and MH (male aged 2) are siblings that arrived in the Zola Refuge in March 2020. Their ethnicity is Pakistani and mum speaks only Mirpuri (dialect of Punjabi). The siblings fled from Stoke-On-Trent with their mother who had experienced physical, financial and emotional abuse at the hands of their father. The Children have experienced emotional abuse from their father and witnessed the abuse to their mother.

At the beginning of their time here in refuge all children were very loud in sessions and fighting for attention from mum and key workers. There were a lot of behavioural issues to deal with and mum was struggling to cope. Mum had not been allowed to parent the children previously and so was very under confident. Mum cannot read or write.

The two youngest siblings had not attended a nursery setting, the eldest daughter had briefly attended school in Stoke-On Trent and was doing well.

As a result of support provided by Juno, including support to access to Healthy Start Vouchers, access to a health visitor, securing a place at the local nursery, applications to schools, access to opticians (where it was discovered that the eldest daughter needed glasses), donations including books, toys etc., the siblings became kinder and more supportive to one another, the mother's English hugely increased and the family grew in confidence and happiness as a unit.

As a result of the barriers a child's mother faces, children suffer. The relocation of a family due to financial hardship (for example, a local council rehousing a family in a new area), being unable to access extracurricular activities (for example, as a result of a mother's language barriers) and an inability to access support (for example, transportation costs) can all be explored further in light of the above testimony. These extrinsic hardships need to be considered when measuring child poverty and data collected from specialist organisations and agencies can help support this.

"Many of the women within our service, are able to meet their monthly bills and put food on the table as long as there is nothing else putting stresses on their finances. There is no support in getting the children into the closest school or transport if needed to go further. There are many obstacles that women face that push them further into poverty. The simple actions of having to take the bus to school forces our women to at times rely on the food bank.

Even if this is not an issue, the money they receive certainly does not allow for life opportunities other than the local park.

It is also worth noting that these women are starting from fresh and have very little to set up a home. Again, impeding on the children's life experiences, opportunities and putting another boundary between them and their friends."

Emma, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's Serenity Refuge

"Some children from larger families and different cultures do not access local amenities such as parks and theatres or galleries that may offer free workshops and out of school activities. This could also be due to the fact that local organisations do not work to engage diverse communities, hence creating another barrier for our women and families."

Suzy, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's specialist BAMER Refuge, Zola.

It is clear that child poverty impacts every aspect of a child through to adulthood; financial poverty, in its traditional sense, is just one branch of it. Through a lack of opportunity, socialisation with culturally diverse groups, or access to education, children suffer. In a large majority of cases, child poverty is a direct result of women facing poverty. The disadvantages that women face need to be addressed in order to successfully alleviate child poverty.

To further the above discussion, child poverty needs to be measured in a way that encapsulates the entirety of their experiences. This could include school absences, hospital visits, the time spent in homeless shelters, whether they are accessing food banks, which benefits they are using, which benefits they are eligible for, access to technology, access to local services and even what extra-curricular activities they engage in. Some women have less access to child benefits and universal credit than those who have fled a violent

relationship due to the father's name being attached. This pushes mother and child into further financial hardship.

"I would measure child poverty based on their access to education, health care and free school meals - our children often miss out on these when moving to the area as they are not yet placed in school. Time away from the city and experiences with the family such as trips to the farm, or the zoo or a trip to the beach, which are taken for granted by families not viewed as in poverty. [Children in poverty] do not access experiences beyond their day-to-day life. Some children I work with tend to see a trip to the supermarket as a huge treat, this is often their only experience outside of school."

Suzy, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's specialist BAMER Refuge, Zola.

Broadening children's opportunities would greatly impact a child's future and can be achieved through wider educational facilities and opportunities that are affordable and easily accessible. Ensuring funding is being distributed into the appropriate channels and targeted towards families who need the extra support. More work may need to be done to ensure these families are aware of the additional support available to them and that they are accessing the maximum entitlements. There needs to be considerations around the reliance of food banks, clothes banks, donations, financial savings, independence from services, annual holidays and more. Child poverty is extremely nuanced – its impact and how its measured needs to consider every aspect of a child's life.

How effectively does the Department for Work and Pensions work with local authorities and with support organisations to reduce the numbers of children living in poverty and to mitigate the impact of poverty on children?

Although good relationships have been established with the DWP and local nurseries, the staff at Zola are continually advocating for the rights of women and children. Loaded wording, a lack of resources and time often hinder their work.

"We do have a good relationship with workers at the office of DWP who support our women to access the benefits they are entitled to.

Our struggle is working with the council admissions team who do not class our children as 'vulnerable' as they do not have a social worker. This is an ongoing battle to find school places for our school aged children.

Also, the fight for these women to access free school meals whilst awaiting a school place is one which is ongoing, but I have been told by the city council that there is no funding for

this and was pointed to food banks. This is something which the women are entitled to but they are falling through the gaps.”

Suzy, a Children's Refuge Worker at Juno's specialist BAMER Refuge, Zola.

At the Serenity Refuge, their experience working with the DWP would suggest that they work well within their limits. They have supported women and recognised the issues facing women when fleeing domestic abuse.