

## Growing Up in Scotland – 2010 – Topic Research Findings

# Growing Up in Scotland: The Circumstances of Persistently Poor Children Summary Report

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### The Growing Up in Scotland Study

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of a cohort of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotGen). Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy-making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially 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 first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005.

### Background to Report

This document is one of a series that summarises key findings from the fourth sweep of the survey, which was collected in 2008/09 when the birth cohort children were aged 3-4 years and the child cohort aged 5-6 years. It presents key findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) report *The Circumstances of Persistently Poor Children*. The report focuses on the circumstances of persistently poor young children in Scotland.

The Scottish Government is accountable to the targets set out in The Child Poverty Bill, which defined success in eradicating child poverty. The bill established four child poverty targets to be met by 2020/21 and a 'persistent poverty' measure. Much of the current research on child

poverty in Scotland has focused on understanding child poverty as a static concept, rather than exploring distinctions according to poverty duration. Consequently little is known about the persistence of child poverty and the circumstances of persistently poor Scottish children.

The report seeks to answer the following questions:

- How many children experience persistent poverty?
- Which children are most likely to be persistently poor?
- What are the outcomes of children from persistently poor families?



## Measuring persistent poverty

Children are defined as income poor if they live in a household that has income below 60% of the median equivalised population household income. This is the official measure of poverty adopted by the Scottish Government and for 2007/08 equates to just over £17,000 per year for a couple family with two children and just over £13,000 for a lone-parent family with two children. We define children as persistently poor if they lived in a low-income household at three or all of the four annual GUS interviews.

- Approximately three in ten young Scottish children in GUS were income poor in any one year, according to each of the four separate annual sweeps of GUS from 2005/06 to 2008/09.
- Just over four in ten GUS children (42% of each cohort) experienced poverty at least once in the four-year period. This suggests that poverty touches more Scottish children than standard, point-in-time estimates may imply.
- One in four (24%) 3-4 year-olds and one in five (21%) 5-6 year-olds were persistently poor over the period (that is, poor in three or four years from 2005/06 to 2008/09).
- Four in five of the children poor in 2008/09 had been persistently poor over the previous four years.

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 a number of detailed questions about a variety of income sources to all adults in the household. Hence it is important to note that we are not able to compare our estimates of persistent poverty in Scotland with estimates of persistent poverty in Great Britain from these other surveys. Although estimates of persistent poverty among young Scottish children appear higher than estimates of persistent poverty among children in Great Britain, there are a number of reasons why we are not comparing like for like, including the aforementioned differences in methodology and because GUS focuses on families with younger children only.

## Children most likely to be persistently poor

Whereas one in four (24%) of all 3-4 year-olds and one in five (21%) 5-6 year-olds were persistently poor, this varied according to children's background circumstances.

- 89% and 85% (of the birth and child cohorts respectively) with parents with low average work intensity were persistently poor. This corresponds to the situation of a family where all parents worked, at most, in only one of the four years under investigation.
- 73% and 59% (of the birth and child cohorts respectively) in lone-parent families were persistently poor.
- 59% and 51% (of the birth and child cohorts respectively) in families that lived in social-rented housing were persistently poor.
- 49% and 42% (of the birth and child cohorts respectively) with parents with no or low education were persistently poor.
- 48% and 44% (of the birth and child cohorts respectively) that lived in multiply-deprived areas were persistently poor.
- 37% and 35% (of the birth and child cohorts respectively) in families with three or more children were persistently poor.

Multivariate analysis confirmed that these factors were significantly associated with persistent poverty – even when taking other potentially confounding influences into account – and that being continuously out of work was the factor that bears most on being persistently poor.

## Outcomes of children from persistently poor families

One of the reasons GUS asks only limited information about income is to allow the interviewer sufficient time to ask mothers about a range of issues regarding their children. We looked at five indicators of child disadvantage, measured at sweep 4 of GUS, including being overweight, concerns over language development, and social, emotional and behavioural problems – and explored whether persistently poor children were at greater risk of these. We also counted how many of these disadvantages children have, enabling us to identify children with multiple problems. The following findings show examples of statistically significant relationships between poverty duration and a range of child outcomes, although these only held when other factors, such as parents' work intensity and education, were not taken into account.

- 21% of persistently poor children in the *birth cohort* had language development concerns, compared to 16% of temporarily poor children and 12% of children who avoided poverty over the period.

- 17% of persistently poor children in the *child cohort* had general development concerns, compared to 13% of temporarily poor children and 9% of children who avoided poverty over the period.
- 23% of persistently poor children in the *birth cohort* had social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, compared to 12% of temporarily poor children and 7% of children who avoided poverty over the period.
- 23% of persistently poor children in the *child cohort* had social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, compared to 17% of temporarily poor children and 8% of children who avoided poverty over the period.
- 28% of persistently poor children in the *birth cohort* had multiple disadvantages, compared to 19% of temporarily poor children and 13% of children who avoided poverty over the period.

For other outcomes there was no statistically significant relationship with poverty duration, including being overweight (child cohort only), having accidents or injuries (birth cohort only), and concerns with language development (child cohort only).

Multivariate analysis showed that when other factors were taken into account the relationship between persistent low-income and child outcomes was no longer statistically significant. Furthermore, there was no relationship between any experience of low income over the period and child outcomes. Instead we saw a range of other factors being associated with child outcomes, including gender, family size and mothers' ethnicity and health. What is important to note here is that the effects of living in poverty are complex and not necessarily captured solely by an indicator of low income or the duration of low income (particularly when using the imperfect measure of income collected in GUS). Poverty can manifest itself in many ways, and many of the effects of poverty are captured by characteristics such as low parental education and living in a lone-parent family – both associated with persistently-poor families. Therefore our research suggests that the impact of poverty appears to be evident through the association with other family disadvantages, rather than low income per se, and that the presence and accumulation of these disadvantages can have negative impacts on outcomes for young children.

## Conclusion

The evidence from GUS suggests that persistent poverty is concentrated in a minority, but still a substantial proportion, of young Scottish children. Despite this evidence, persistent poverty is still prevalent among young Scottish children and there are no concerted policy measures to tackle persistent poverty above those designed to tackle poverty in general.

This research further supports the assertion that being without work, and regular work in particular, is a key influence on poverty. However, given that families without work are also likely to experience a range of other disadvantages - including low education and poor health, and often require quite complex childcare arrangements to make work a possibility - employment policy needs to operate alongside policies designed to contend with these other hardships.

Although work is often seen as the best protection from poverty, this research has also shown that work does not always protect families from persistent poverty, particularly when there is only one worker in the household. Policy must recognise this and also that work is not always possible for all parents at all times, particularly during periods of ill health and concentrated times of caring for young children. This implies that other types of support may be required. Given 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 specific circumstances may be appropriate.

Finally, this research has shown that poverty is a complex and dynamic phenomenon and that measuring poverty, and its impacts, is not straightforward. Understanding poverty through survey data requires a range of robust indicators, ideally measured over time. GUS provides a useful source of data for exploring poverty among young children in Scotland and there is undoubtedly scope for further research of this rich dataset. Some suggestions for further research include exploring families' transitions into and out of poverty, and the role of financial stress on parenting.

Further information on the Growing Up in Scotland Study can also be found at: [www.growingupinscotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinscotland.org.uk)

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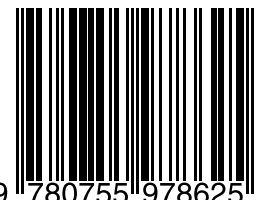


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