Editorial

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Child poverty: numbers, language and boundaries

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A marked feature of looked after children is that the services they receive are restricted to the poor. The problems of better off families aren't solved by taking their children into care. The social philosopher Richard Titmuss highlighted the dangers this poses in his famous dictum 'separate discriminatory services for poor people have always tended to be poor quality services'. Whether that is still the case is hard to say as great efforts have been made to humanise provision with changes like deinstitutionalisation, safeguarding, care plans and staff training, but the links between care and deprivation seem as great as ever.

The looked after system is inevitably closely tied to child poverty and one of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it has resurrected concerns about this along with all the familiar arguments that accept or deny its existence or question its severity. We hear that the 'poor are always with us whatever we do', that 'all children in care are poor but few poor children go into care' and debates about the existence or otherwise of an economic or moral 'underclass'. There is nothing new in this. The plight of deprived children was charted by Booth and Rowntree in their poverty surveys over a century ago and in more recent times we have had the foundation of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in 1965, Tony Blair's 1999 pledge to end child poverty by this year (White, 1999) and most recently a Sage adviser warning that the impact of Covid-19 policies will scar young people for life (Hill, 2020).

One of the problems is that while poverty can be easily measured – although we can argue about the validity of the criteria – there is a moral aspect that is more difficult to pin down. In British society, 'living on benefits' implies more than merely receiving an income. The way wealth is created and is distributed reflects wider social values about individual freedom, market economies and state responsibilities, along with personal choices and individual competence. Theologians agonise over what Jesus meant by 'The poor you will always have with you' (Matthew 26.11) and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher felt sufficiently worried to address the Church of Scotland Assembly on the relationship between Christianity and wealth (BBC Sound Archive, 1988). One of the most arresting conversations I have ever had was with an American clergyman who told me that if an old person said they had no money, he would ask, 'Why's that you bum?'.

But there are three issues in all of this that often get confused. The first is whether child poverty actually exists and if so, to what extent. People often find it difficult to accept the

figures and suspect that pressure groups may blow things up to attract publicity. One of the problems is that much of it is invisible; it is difficult to link what the CPAG says with the well-rounded children emerging through the school gates swigging pop and playing with expensive phones. But the evidence is there – and can be seen in the End Child Poverty/ National Children's Bureau October 2020 publication, *New Child Poverty Data Reveals True Extent of Levelling up Challenge*. This shows that over the past five years, the proportion of children in England living below 60% of median income after housing costs has risen from 28% to 30% with a bigger percentage increase (as high as 16%) in some very deprived areas.

So, while academics tussle over the best measures and politicians brush the urgency aside by pointing out that today's poor children are better off than their Victorian predecessors, the undeniable empirical fact is that child poverty is still a problem – but just how big remains a matter of contention.

The second issue is how we should perceive the families of looked after children and what language most accurately describes their situation. The difficulty is that their circumstances are so varied that almost anything said will be true for some. Are they worn down victims of discriminatory and rigid social structures, trapped by sad personal circumstances, incapacitated by illness and disability and ground down by continuous poverty, or simply feckless, irresponsible and irredeemable people? Social workers have tried hard to revise professional language to make terms less stigmatising and pessimistic as well as more sensitive to reality. This can be seen in the progress made in areas like disability and mental health. Indeed, the term 'looked after' was framed to lessen the stigma and abnormality of being 'in care'. But the social work vocabulary can still lean towards euphemism that obscures unwanted truths and falls short of painting a true picture. Also, the labels we attach to users tend to be either unduly condemnatory or over tolerant, probably what former Prime Minister John Major had in mind when he recommended that we need to 'condemn a little more and understand a little less'. Echoes of the Poor Law's deserving and undeserving poor and West and Farrington's (1977) delinquent way of life still lurk beneath assessments and are reinforced daily in TV reality shows and soap operas. Unfortunately, they are rarely conducive to positive service development.

But the Covid pandemic has highlighted a third question that receives less attention. It is manifest in the fallout between football star Marcus Rashford and a local MP. While they both agree that child poverty exists, the key question is whether it is the responsibility of government to do anything about it. Rashford wanted free school meals to be provided in the school holidays but his political adversaries said, 'No. It's the government's duty to give parents money to live on but not to feed their children.' Thus, the issue is one of the boundaries of responsibility between the state and citizens; and then if responsibility is accepted, how support should be delivered and at what level of detail.

British governments since 2010 have sought to roll back the state and give more responsibility to individuals to manage their affairs. The effects of this on looked after children have been varied. On one level, they are recognised as a group for whom the government accepts special responsibility and so have benefited from improved planning, less drift and better safeguarding, but on the other hand resources to help them have been decimated. The circumstances of their families, in contrast, have at best remained static, not only in terms of income and employment but also from the run-down of support services.

If professionals are to keep up the pressure for change, these three issues have to be kept in mind. There is a need to maintain the pursuit of truth and act on research findings, to

develop concepts and language that accurately portray situations but which are not self-imploding, and to keep in mind wider political issues like the boundaries of government and civic responsibility. It goes without saying that every looked after child should be respected as an individual with rights, needs and wishes. But in adopting this personal approach, we must not lose sight of the fact that his or her situation enshrines profound social issues about the relationship between the state, family and individual.

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