

A Broken Society? Parenting in Poverty

Ferguson and Lavalette argue that there is a clear link between poverty, inequality and parents' inability to provide 'good enough' care for their children. This claim needs further exploration and this contribution aims to fill that gap; to argue that, without taking this link into account and acting to provide additional support for families living in poverty, social workers will be like the boy with his finger in the dyke. All families have problems in coping from time to time. Those who can call on the support of extended families or who can buy in support through hiring a nanny, paying a babysitter or accessing private respite care rarely come to the attention of the state. It tends to be the children of those families who, through poverty or ill-health, do not have the resources to help them cope when things go wrong that end up being referred to Social Services.

Over 100,000 or 26% of children in the North of Ireland were living in poverty in 2007, before the economic downturn began. This is 4% below the GB average. But, when we dig below this headline figure, we find that child poverty in Northern Ireland is worse than in other parts of the UK. The first longitudinal analysis of four years of NI Household Panel survey results found that 48% of children were living in poverty at some time over the four year period and 21% were in poverty for either three or four year.¹ Thus, NI has levels of persistent child poverty twice those of Britain. This is very worrying as children can recover quickly from being in poverty for a short while but recent research published by the Dept of Work and Pensions in London found that persistently poor children are more likely than children in temporary poverty to have a long-standing illness or disability; to go without regular physical exercise; to live in bad housing and to lack material deprivation items. The study also found that persistently poor children (aged eight and over) are more likely to be in trouble with the police and that persistently poor secondary school children are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school.²

These children are most likely to be the children who end up in contact with social services. Any research with people living in poverty – including children growing up in poverty – provides clear evidence that this is not because of some 'under-class' effect or because of 'feckless' parents, rather because of the chronic stress caused by trying to make ends meet in an ever more unequal society. And Northern Ireland is one of the most unequal regions in the UK or Ireland and inequality has risen since 'disaster capitalism' arrived with the 'Peace Process'³. The Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey for NI calculated the gini coefficient⁴ for the region and found it had risen year on year from 0.38 in 1998 to 0.42 in 2003⁵. The Republic of Ireland (RoI) is

ranked by recent UN Development Reports as one of the most unequal developed countries in the world, second only to the US, but the gini coefficient there is about 0.35.

There is a marked concentration of poverty in the North, with over half of all children that live in households in receipt of Income Support residing in 16 percent of wards and over three quarters living in just 37 percent of wards.⁶ Many of these wards are in and around the areas most impacted by the 'Troubles'. In fact, a map of the areas where child poverty is most concentrated in Northern Ireland will match very closely the map of areas where the conflict has been most intense.⁷

The legacy of the conflict and chronic poverty in these areas interact with each other to produce a population that experiences huge levels of social distress, manifested in high levels physical illness and of mental ill-health, particularly depression and anxiety. Levels of mental ill-health have risen considerably over the ten years since the Belfast Agreement, with psychological studies reporting that many people who were resilient during the conflict are now suffering psychological distress.⁸

As well as alarmingly high levels of disability and ill-health and particularly mental ill-health, the poorest areas also have high levels of dependence on benefits, economic inactivity and people without any qualifications. This means that for many, paid employment, which is increasingly presented as the only route out of poverty, is not an option. The potential for employment is further limited by the scarcity of public services, in particular childcare, care services for people with disabilities and transport. The lack of good quality, well-paid work is a further obstacle to employment providing a route out of poverty – so feelings of hopelessness are, perhaps, inevitable among people living in these areas.

It is small wonder, then, that Northern Ireland has higher rates of children referred to social services and higher proportions of children on the Child Protection Register than England, Scotland or Wales – although the fact that Wales has the next highest rate of children on the CPR, as well as the next highest rate of child poverty is not a co-incidence.

Historically, the proportion of children in NI placed on the Child Protection Register has been higher than in England, and the gap has grown steadily over the last decade. In 1997/98, for every 10,000 children under 18, there were 30.1 children on the child protection register in NI, compared to 28 in England. By 2008 the rate for NI was 48 (an increase of 15% on 2007 figures) compared to 36.4 for Wales, 26.6 for England and 23.3 for Scotland.⁹ This steady rise in the proportion of children on the CPR has continued even as the proportion of children under 18 in the population has fallen.

While some of this difference may be related to the higher levels of persistent poverty, the scarcity of services for children in the region means that families struggling to make ends meet do not get even the level of support that they

might in England, Scotland or Wales. Research commissioned by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People revealed that expenditure per child on personal social services in Northern Ireland in 2006-07 was £287. In Scotland it was £513; in Wales £429.10; and in England it was £402.¹⁰ Although the *Sure Start* initiative was introduced to Northern Ireland in 2000-01, funding for it has been significantly less than in other parts of the UK. In 2008, only 30,000 children aged under the age of 4 and their families (not all of them living in poverty) had access to the services provided through the programme in NI. The paucity of *Sure Start* services reflects the general lack of family support services in the region.

Childcare in NI is scarce and, apart from London, the most expensive in the UK¹¹; when data from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) was analysed, it revealed that the number of registered childminders and day care places in Northern Ireland equates to only 1 place for every 6.4 children under four in the region¹². Further, there are significant variations in provision between the east and the west of the region and between better-off areas and more deprived ones. The *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland* report showed that the more deprived western areas (Fermanagh, Omagh and Strabane and Derry) have less than half the number of nursery and childminder places per 1,000 children under 5 years than available in the better-off eastern areas (South and East Belfast and Castlereagh). Within Belfast, a similar pattern can be seen: South and East Belfast has 330 places and the more deprived North and West Belfast has 190 per 1,000 children. The idea that this lack of supply might be due to a lack of demand because working class mothers 'choose' not to use childcare is shown to be nonsense by the figures for the high quality, free nursery-school places offer for 3 and 4 year olds¹³ in NI. The target had been to have over 90% of such children in nursery school by 2010. Once the offer was introduced, it was immediately over-subscribed; over 95% of 3 year old children were in nursery school by 2008.

It seems to me that the above figures provide clear evidence that families living in poverty in NI are not being given the support they need to help through family difficulties, resulting in large numbers of our children being put at risk. And, even before the recession started to bite, services for children were being cut to meet Gordon Brown's 'efficiency savings' targets. In 2008, Sinn Féin Minister for Education, Catriona Ruane, announced that the outworking of the Budget 2007 process would result in a considerable reduction in the resources available for the Extended Schools programme from a 2007/08 allocation of £10m to an allocation of £5.826m in 2008/09.

It seems unlikely then that families in Northern Ireland who are living in poverty and facing additional difficulties are going to get the support we all need at such times. As a result of the state not providing this support, parents will be unable to cope; their children will be neglected and, perhaps, abused; families will fall apart; and social workers will have to cope with more children being placed on the Child Protection Register or taken into care.

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- ¹ Monteith, Lloyd and McKee (2008), *Persistent Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*, ARK/Save the Children, Belfast
- ² Barnes, M., Conolly, A. and Tomaszewski, W. (2008), *The circumstances of persistently poor families with children: Evidence from the Families and Children Study (FACS)*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No 487
- ³ Horgan (2007), Northern Ireland: the privatisation of peace, *International Socialism Journal* 114, London
- ⁴ The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality ranging from zero (complete equality) to one (complete inequality)
- ⁵ Hillyard, P. et al (2003), *Bare Necessities: poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland*, Democratic Dialogue, Belfast
- ⁶ McClelland, A. (2003), *Gini Coefficient Analyses*, NISRA, Belfast
- ⁷ Fay, M.T., Morrissey, M. and Smyth, M. (1998), *Mapping Troubles-Related Deaths and Deprivation in Northern Ireland*, INCORE/CTS, Belfast
- ⁸ Cairns, E. (2005), "Coping with political violence: lessons from Northern Ireland"
<http://www.ulster.ac.uk/news/releases/2005/1941.htm> .
- ⁹ DHSSPS (2008) Children Order Statistical Bulletin 2007-2008
- ¹⁰ Economic Research Institute for Northern Ireland and Institute for Fiscal Studies (2007), *An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
- ¹¹ Kenway et al (2006), *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland*, JRF, York.
- ¹² Gray, A.M and Carragher, L. (2006) *Possibilities: The Views of Lone Parents on Childcare in Northern Ireland*, *Gingerbread*, Belfast
- ¹³ most 4-year olds in NI have started formal education; the compulsory school starting age is 4