

*Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland:  
Key Research Findings.*

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**Introduction**

Child poverty has emerged as a major policy issue at both a national and an international level. At an international level, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which the UK is a signatory, recognises the need to protect children who experience a deprived childhood, and ensure all children have an adequate standard of living as a basic right. Within the UK, child poverty emerged as a major policy initiative in 1999 when the Labour government pledged the eradication of child poverty by the year 2020 with interim targets of a reduction by half by the year 2010 and by a quarter by the year 2004. More recently the Department of Work and Pensions (2003) has consulted on how child poverty should be measured. Rather than referring to the eradication of child poverty by the year 2020, the ‘Measuring Child Poverty’ document states that the UK goal is to have a child poverty rate which is among the best in Europe and where children are not experiencing material deprivation.

Although Northern Ireland has been considered to be one of the most deprived parts of the United Kingdom and for many years was an EU Objective 1 region, poverty measurement and poverty alleviation strategies have been poorly developed until very recently. The UK government statistics on poverty have not included Northern Ireland prior to 2004.

While the UK government set targets in 1999 for the eradication of child poverty by 2020, it was December 2003 before a method of measurement was agreed (DWP, 2003). After a detailed consultation exercise during 2002/3, the Department of Work and Pensions published the document 'Measuring Child Poverty' in which they argued against the use of an income only measure, as had been UK practice in the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) series. Instead they argued for the adoption of a tiered approach using indicators of absolute low household income, relative low household income and a combined measure of material deprivation and low household income.

Although DWP referred to the use of a range of low-income thresholds in order to measure the depth of poverty (DWP, 2003), no government definition of severe child poverty exists. The recently published Second Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Work and Pensions regarding Child Poverty (House of Commons Select Committee, 2004) recommends the creation of an explicit indicator of severe child poverty (paragraph 89).

This briefing paper provides the key findings from the research report *The Bottom Line: Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland* (Monteith and McLaughlin, 2004), commissioned by Save the Children, which aimed to:

- examine the extent of severe child poverty in Northern Ireland;
- identify those children who are severely poor; and
- consider the policy implications of severe child poverty in Northern Ireland.

Save the Children are working to tackle child poverty internationally through a number of initiatives and in the United Kingdom this has included funding to investigate and develop research on child poverty and severe child poverty. This study investigated severe child poverty using an analysis of the Poverty and Social Exclusion survey in Northern Ireland (PSE NI)<sup>1</sup>, which was carried out during 2002/3. The report replicated

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<sup>1</sup> The Poverty and Social Exclusion survey in Northern Ireland was directed by Professor Eithne McLaughlin (Queen's University Belfast), Professor Paddy Hillyard (University of Ulster) and Mr Mike Tomlinson (Queen's University Belfast); key findings were reported in *Bare Necessities: Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland* (Hillyard et al, 2003).

the analysis of severe child poverty carried in Great Britain by Laura Adelman, Sue Middleton and Karl Ashworth (Adelman et al, 2003) based on the Poverty and Social Exclusion survey, Great Britain (PSE GB). The PSE NI survey methodology is derived from the PSE GB survey and the results can be directly compared (Hillyard et al, 2003). In Great Britain the consensual poverty threshold was calculated as the absence of two or more adult necessities whereas in Northern Ireland the consensual poverty threshold was calculated to be the absence of three or more adult necessities. The same methodology was used in both surveys to identify the ‘necessities’ of life to be included in the study and the poverty thresholds in GB and NI were calculated using the same methods.

This analysis combined data on adult and child necessities with household income to establish measures of severe poverty, non-severe poverty and no poverty (i.e. poverty status). Children were considered to be living in severe poverty when they were poor on all three measures (child and adult deprivation and low household income), while children who were poor on one or two measures were considered poor but not severely poor, and children who were not considered poor on any of the three measures were not living in poverty. The PSE NI dataset also allowed replication of the Adelman et al measurement of social exclusion for children. The analyses carried out in this study and that conducted by Adelman et al used average household incomes along with child and adult deprivation in the calculation of poverty status. It should be noted that the income measure used here and in the Adelman et al study was based on equivalised ‘income data before housing costs have been taken into account’ (2003: 13).

It should also be noted that for this analysis a child has been defined as an individual under 16 years, as this was the definition used in the PSE NI survey. In comparison a child was defined as an individual aged 16 or less in the equivalent analysis carried out for Great Britain (Adelman et al., 2003).

## **Defining Severe Child Poverty**

Until 2003 and the publication of *Britain's Poorest Children* (Adelman et al, 2003), the most common measure of severe childhood poverty used in the United Kingdom was based on household income alone. Children living in households with incomes in the lowest deciles bands of household income were defined as the most severely poor. Adelman et al, however, explored the use of a number of poverty measures in order to determine the best method of measuring severe child poverty. Their report investigated three poverty measures: low level of household income, child deprivation and parental deprivation. They subsequently defined severe child poverty as children who were poor on all three measures. This report has adopted Adelman et al's definition of severe child poverty and their methodology is replicated here, as far as possible, to produce comparable Northern Ireland data.

## **Analysing Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland**

Adelman et al used these three measures of poverty (low household income, child deprivation and parental deprivation) to calculate eight permutations of poverty, and then examine the proportion of children who were poor on combinations of these measures. Severe child poverty was defined by Adelman et al as those children who were poor on all three measures. The same proportion of children (eight per cent) in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain were considered severely poor on all three poverty measures (see table 1).

While similar proportions of children were counted as severely poor in Northern Ireland and Great Britain (8 per cent), half of all children in Northern Ireland were considered poor. That is, they are poor on at least one measure, compared to 45 per cent of children in Great Britain.

Among those children who were counted as poor on only one measure (21 per cent in both GB and NI), there were interesting differences between Great Britain and Northern

Ireland regarding the poverty measure by which they were considered poor. In Northern Ireland, 11 per cent of children were considered poor on the child deprivation measure only and a further 8 per cent were considered poor on the parental deprivation measure only, while in Great Britain 17 per cent of children were poor on the parental deprivation measure only.

**Table 1: Poverty permutations**

Poverty Permutations	Percentage of children	
	Northern Ireland	Great Britain
<b>Poor on no measures</b> Not poor on any measure	50	55
<b>Poor on one measure:</b> Income poor only	2	2
Child deprivation only	11	2
Parental deprivation only	8	17
<b>Poor on two measures:</b> Income poor and child deprivation	1	1
Income poor and parent deprivation	3	6
Child and parent deprivation	18	10
<b>Poor on three measures:</b> Income poor, parent and child deprivation	8	8
<i>Base (N)</i>	1195	769

More than one third (38 per cent) of children living in Northern Ireland in 2002/3 were identified as deprived of one or more child necessities, compared to 20 per cent of children in Great Britain in 1999. Slightly fewer children in Northern Ireland (36 per cent) were likely to be poor through parental deprivation compared to 40 per cent of children in Great Britain. It should be noted, that the list of consensually agreed child and parental necessities differed slightly between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. These

items were deemed ‘necessities of life’ and in Northern Ireland almost two in five children lack at least one of these items.

Using the measure of less than 40 percent of median equivalised household income before housing costs (as used by Adelman et al, 2003), 14 per cent of children in Northern Ireland were defined as income poor, compared to 17 per cent of children in Great Britain.

From the analysis of each of the three measures of poverty described above, that is, low household income, child deprivation, and parental deprivation, it can be seen that there were important differences between the proportions of children in Northern Ireland considered poor under each measure compared to children in Great Britain. While in Great Britain, a significant proportion of children were living in households where their parents were deprived compared to the proportion of children who were themselves deprived, this was not the case in Northern Ireland. Almost two fifths of children in Northern Ireland were themselves deprived while 36 per cent of children lived in households where their parents were deprived.

In summary, in Northern Ireland, using this definition of severe child poverty, eight per cent of all children were living in severe poverty with a further 42 per cent of children living in non-severe poverty. Extrapolating this to the whole population of children in Northern Ireland who were under 16 years, this would indicate that approximately 32,000 children were living in severe poverty and a further 167,000 were living in non-severe poverty.

### **The Necessities Children Lacked**

In Northern Ireland, the evidence suggested that severely poor children are going without some very important items deemed as necessities due to a lack of money. Worryingly high proportions of children who were poor on all three measures (i.e. severely poor children) were going without the following basic necessities:

- meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent at least twice a day (22 per cent of severely poor children)
- fresh fruit and vegetables at least once a day (20 per cent of severely poor children)
- three meals a day (14 per cent of severely poor children)
- a comic or magazine once a week (52 per cent of severely poor children)
- educational games (23 per cent of severely poor children)
- new clothes when needed (42 per cent of severely poor children)
- new not second hand clothes (29 per cent of severely poor children)
- at least seven pairs of underpants or knickers in good condition (19-per cent of severely poor children)

Comparing children who were poor in Northern Ireland to children who were poor in Great Britain, the most stark difference was that severely-poor children in Northern Ireland were much more likely to lack three meals a day, with 14 per cent of severely poor children in Northern Ireland going without three meals a day compared to eight per cent in Great Britain. Basic foodstuffs and cooking fuel are more expensive in Northern Ireland compared to Great Britain and this may contribute to difficulties in the provision of children's nutritional requirements. These findings may also assist in understanding of the extent of adult health inequalities and premature death rates in Northern Ireland, as it is likely that children's nutritional status affects their health on a lifelong basis.

### **The Necessities Parents Lacked**

Parental deprivation was highest for housing-related items and for items associated with personal finance (access to a decent pension, regular savings and a small amount of money to spend on yourself). Many parents of severely poor children lacked enough money to replace worn furniture (93 per cent), or to replace or repair broken electrical goods (93 per cent). Similarly a lack of finance meant that many parents did not have regular savings (92 per cent), access to a decent pension (75 per cent), or a small amount of money to spend on themselves (92 per cent).

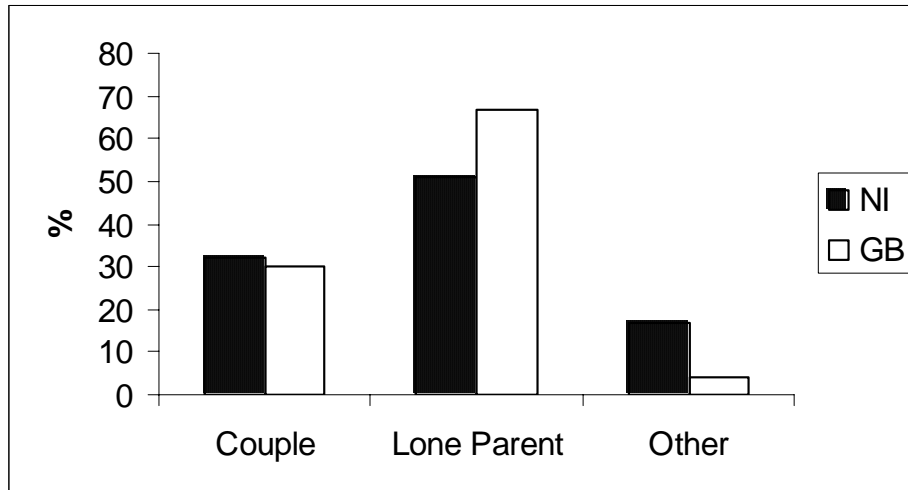
Parents of severely poor children (i.e. poor on all three measures) were also likely to go without home contents' insurance (61 per cent), a car (49 per cent), new not second hand clothes (46 per cent), two pairs of shoes (48 per cent), good clothes to wear to an interview (58 per cent), enough money to pay heating, electric and telephone bills (59-per cent), enough money to keep their home in a decent state of decoration (50 per cent) and fresh fruit and vegetables every day (30 per cent). In comparison to Great Britain, such parents were less likely to have suitable clothes for an interview, have a telephone, enough money to replace or repair broken electrical goods, enough money to replace worn furniture, or to have two pairs of shoes.

### **Characteristics of Severely Poor Children**

In Northern Ireland, children who were living in severe poverty in 2002/3 were most likely to be: living in households with no workers (70 per cent); living with a lone parent (51 per cent); living in public sector housing (57 per cent); whose parents have no qualifications (54 per cent); living in Catholic families with three or more children (37 per cent); living in large families (24 per cent of severely poor children lived in families with four or more children); have parents with health problems or disabilities (27 per cent); or were disabled children (14 per cent). See Appendix A for a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of poor children in Northern Ireland.

In comparison to Great Britain, a larger proportion of children living in severe poverty in Northern Ireland were from large families (20 per cent GB and 24 per cent NI) or had parents with no educational qualification (40 per cent GB and 54 per cent NI), while in Great Britain more severely poor children lived with a lone parent than in Northern Ireland (67 per cent compared to 51 per cent).

**Figure 1: Family type of children living in severe poverty, NI and GB**



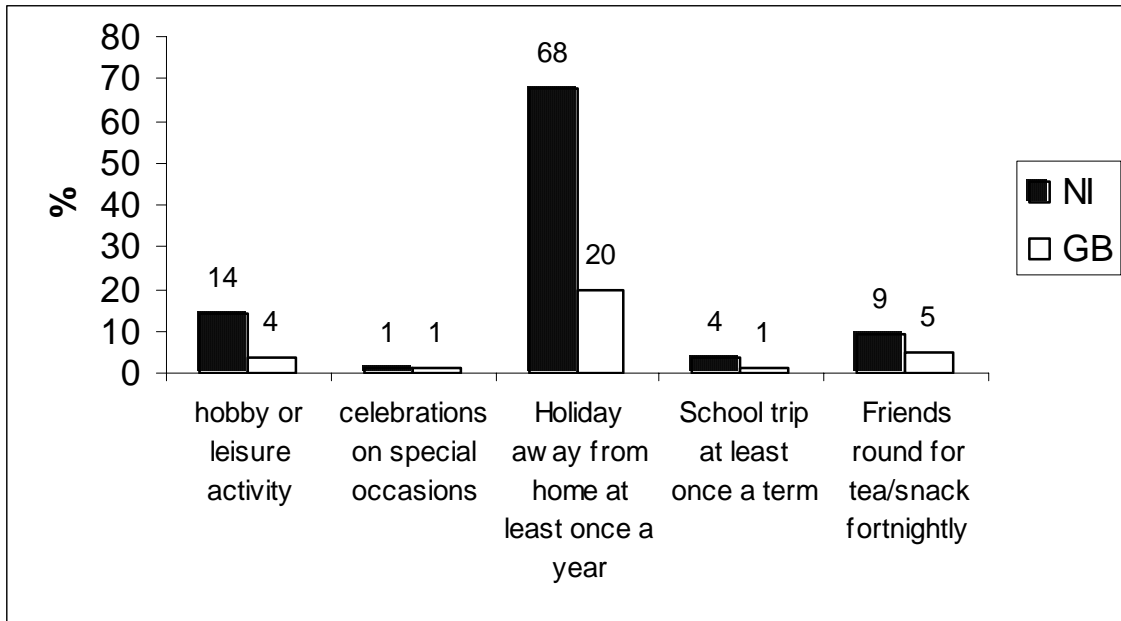
### **Subjective Child Poverty**

Over one quarter (26 per cent) of children who were severely poor lived in households where the parents believed that they had been living in poverty often or most of the time. This figure is slightly higher than that found for such children in Great Britain (24 per cent). While parents in Northern Ireland were more likely to report living in long term poverty (i.e. often or most of the time), parents in Great Britain were more likely to report that they lived “a lot” below a self-defined poverty income line. Almost two thirds of severely poor children in Northern Ireland (62 per cent) lived in households where parents thought they lived “a lot” below the self-defined poverty income line, compared to 67 per cent of children who were severely poor in Great Britain.

### **Child Poverty and Childhood Social Exclusion**

One dimension of social exclusion for children is exclusion from social activities, defined as those which at least half of parents in Northern Ireland thought were necessary for children. The analysis included an examination of which and how many social activities, children were excluded from, as reported by their parents.

**Figure 2: Social activities lacked by children living in severe poverty, NI and GB**



As in Great Britain, there is a strong relationship between exclusion from social activities and poverty status. For each of the nine social activities included in the Northern Ireland analysis, the likelihood of exclusion was greater for those children living in non-severe poverty compared to children not living in poverty, and was even greater again for children living in severe poverty. Over two thirds of children living in severe poverty (68 per cent) were unable to have a holiday away from home for one week in the year. Many of these children were also missing out on family day trips because their parents could not afford them (50 per cent).

Children living in severe poverty in Northern Ireland were four times more likely to be excluded from going on family day trips, three times more likely to be unable to have friends round for tea or a snack fortnightly, twice as likely to lack a hobby or leisure activity or to have sports gear or leisure equipment, and almost twice as likely to miss out on an annual holiday away from home compared to children living in non-severe poverty. Compared to children who were not poor, these differences are much greater.

Examining the provision of services, of particular concern was the exclusion experienced by severely poor children from a range of vital children's services such as safe play areas, after school clubs and youth clubs which were lacking for 37 per cent, 23 per cent and 12 per cent of severely poor children respectively.

### **Child Poverty and Household Exclusion**

Housing quality provides an environment-based indicator of social exclusion, which is clearly essential to a child's well-being. The problems with accommodation which the parents of severely poor children were most likely to report in the PSE (NI) survey were a shortage of space (30 per cent), damp walls and floors (18 per cent) and rot in window frames or floors (17 per cent). A strong relationship was found between being poor and the likelihood of experiencing these accommodation problems. For seven out of the 11 housing problems surveyed children who were severely poor were more likely to live in accommodation experiencing these problems than children who were non-severely poor, who were in turn more likely to live in a home with these problems than children who were not poor.

The local environment in which children grow up is largely out of the control of their parents and yet this may have a major influence over their childhood experiences. Almost one in ten severely poor children in Northern Ireland live in an area viewed by their parents as a bad place to live, compared to one in 16 non-severely poor children and one in 100 non-poor children. The problems reported "as a major problem" in the area were the speed or volume of traffic (13 per cent), underage drinking (13 per cent), dog mess (12 per cent), teenagers hanging around on the streets (10 per cent), rubbish and litter (9 per cent), drunkenness (8 per cent), vandalism (8 per cent), vehicle theft (8 per cent), joy riding (7 per cent) and graffiti (6 per cent). These are all problems which affect the lives of children whether they are directly involved (e.g. underage drinking, joyriding) or at risk (e.g. speeding traffic, dog mess). Children who were severely poor were more likely to live in areas where these were reported as major problem than non-severely poor children or children who were not poor.

Household finances were a key concern for the families of severely poor children. Almost nine out of 10 severely poor children in Northern Ireland had parents who worry all the time about household finances (compared to one in two non-severely poor children and one in 10 non-poor children). Similarly, almost nine out of every 10 severely poor children and 2 out of 5 non-severely poor children lived in households where the household income was viewed as not adequate to meet basic needs (compared to 1 in 14 non-poor children).

Children living in severe poverty (41 per cent) were also three times more likely to live in households which had been disconnected from utilities (gas, electricity, or telephone) than non-severely poor children (14 per cent) and almost fifteen times more likely than children who were not poor (3 per cent). These disconnections were primarily from the telephone. Children living in severe poverty were also much more likely to live in families which were seriously behind with key payments. One in four severely poor children lived in households which were late with their electricity payments, one in three severely poor children lived in families who were late with catalogue payments and one in five severely poor children had parents who were behind with hire purchase payments.

## **Policy Implications**

The major policy implications identified by the study, and discussed further in the report published by Save the Children, “The Bottom Line – Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland (Monteith and McLaughlin, forthcoming 2004), include:

- the immediate need for policy initiatives to tackle severe child poverty and support those children living in severe poverty;
- the development of child poverty measurements to include severe child poverty, including the use of combined poverty measures;
- the adoption of ‘after housing costs’ in official child poverty measurement;
- the need to address the financial hardship of families of children living in severe poverty;
- the need to help parents meet the nutritional needs of children living in severe poverty;
- further analysis to examine poverty and the transition to adulthood so that the needs of young people aged 16 and 17 years, and their families, can be identified and addressed, and so that this group, still legally recognised as children, are not lost in adult statistics;
- the improvement of the environmental quality of the areas in which severely poor children live, ensuring children's services are targeted towards severely poor children;
- a coherent approach to the development of strategies to tackle child poverty (including severe child poverty), poverty measurement and target setting and monitoring, with a shared agenda and timetable on child poverty between the Children’s Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy. This should include the measurement and monitoring of progress in tackling severe child poverty.

## References

Adelman, L., Middleton, S. and Ashworth K. (2003) *Britain's Poorest Children: Severe and Persistent Poverty and Social Exclusion*. London: Save the Children.

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**APPENDIX A:**

**Characteristics of Children living in Severe Poverty, Non-Severe Poverty and No Poverty in Northern Ireland**

	<b>No Poverty (%)</b>	<b>Non-severe Poverty (%)</b>	<b>Severe Poverty (%)</b>	<b>All (%)</b>
<b>Employment Status*</b>				
2 workers	64	26	4	43
1 worker	29	40	25	33
more than 2 workers	4	3	1	3
no workers	2	31	70	20
<b>Family Type*</b>				
Couple	75	57	32	64
Lone parent	8	28	51	20
Other	17	15	17	16
<b>Age of Child</b>				
1 year and under	11	11	10	11
2-4 years	16	16	12	16
5-10 years	36	41	41	38
11-15 years	37	32	37	35
<b>No. of children*</b>				
1	23	21	22	22
2	47	30	30	38
3	25	26	24	25
4 and over	5	23	24	14
<b>Ethnic Group</b>				
White	96	97	96	96
Non-white	4	3	4	4
<b>Religion*</b>				
Neither Catholic/Protestant	6	6	7	6
Catholic	44	51	63	49
Protestant	50	43	30	45
<b>Housing Tenure*</b>				
Outright Owner	14	8	1	11
Owner with Mortgage	78	52	13	62
Private Tenant	5	9	22	8
HA tenant	<1	3	7	2
NIHE Tenant	3	29	57	18

**Characteristics of Children living in Severe Poverty, Non-Severe Poverty and No Poverty in Northern Ireland (cont'd)**

	<b>No Poverty (%)</b>	<b>Non-severe Poverty (%)</b>	<b>Severe Poverty (%)</b>	<b>All (%)</b>
<b>Child Disability*</b>				
Yes	4	5	14	5
No	96	95	86	95
<b>Parent Illness/Disability*</b>				
Yes	13	23	27	19
No	87	77	73	81
<b>Highest Qualification*</b>				
Degree or higher	20	5	2	12
Higher Education	18	7	0	12
GCE A level	19	10	4	14
GCSE A-C or equivalent	25	36	32	30
GCSE D-G or equivalent	6	15	8	10
Other Qualification	<1	0	0	<1
No Qualification	11	27	54	21
<b>Income Support*</b>				
Yes	2	26	76	18
No	98	74	24	82
<b>Job Seekers Allowance*</b>				
Yes	<1	<1	6	1
No	99	100	94	99

*Base NI = 1195*

\* these differences were statistically significant using chi-square significance tests. Note that differences by religion were statistically significant for families with three or more children but there was no significant difference in poverty status by religion for families with one or two children.