Good Childhood Report 2017

Campaign Summary

The Children’s Society
The Children's Society works with children and young people whose lives are complex. They often experience many disadvantages which – in combination – may prevent them from having a happy childhood.

Our Good Childhood Report 2017 shows the shocking scale of some of these disadvantages – from the 200,000 children aged 10 to 17 experiencing emotional neglect, to more than a third living in families struggling to pay the bills.

Fear of crime was the most common problem of all, affecting 2.2 million children, with 1 in 3 teenage girls afraid of being followed by a stranger and 1 in 4 boys worried they’ll be assaulted. One million 10 to 17 year olds face seven or more of these serious problems in their lives.

Our findings reveal the devastating impact that multiple disadvantage can have on how children feel about their lives. Children and young people's happiness with their life as a whole is at its lowest since 2010. Worryingly, children facing seven or more of the 27 serious problems we asked about were 10 times more likely to be unhappy than those with none.

Across the country, local authority children’s services play a crucial role in helping children and families manage and overcome the serious problems in their lives.

However, there is an increasing gap emerging between the scale of the need and the funding available for local authorities to help children and families deal with these problems. The Government must urgently review the funding available for local authority children’s services in order to equip them to adequately address the scale of demand.

At the same time, local authorities must ensure they are making the well-being of children in their area a top priority for all local agencies. They should make children’s well-being a principal focus of their council plans, and involve children in the development of these plans.

It cannot be acceptable that so many children and young people in this country are experiencing serious problems that are leaving them unhappy. It is only possible to improve the well-being of children and young people across the country by correctly resourcing and prioritising the services which help children early, before they hit crisis point.
Research with children in different contexts and countries around the world confirms that they want to be listened to and are keen to be asked for their views on topics that matter to them.

Since 2005, The Children’s Society has worked in partnership with the University of York on a groundbreaking children’s well-being research programme. We explore children’s own perspectives of well-being, and have developed robust means to measure children’s well-being over time. This is the most extensive national programme of research on children’s subjective well-being in the world.

The latest trends over time show that although the majority of children are happy with their lives as a whole, they are less happy than they were in 2010. A significant minority – between 5 and 10% depending on the measure – have low overall well-being.¹

Figure 1: Children’s satisfaction with life as a whole

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfied with life as a whole</th>
<th>Mean satisfaction (out of 10)</th>
<th>% with low well-being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Household Survey Wave 16, May/June 2017, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.
Children’s experiences of multiple disadvantage

It is well established that children who encounter adverse experiences or disadvantages in their lives are likely to have worse outcomes than other children in later childhood or adulthood. There is also evidence that when multiple experiences of disadvantage accumulate, children will have worse subsequent outcomes. What is less clear is whether, and how, multiple experiences of disadvantage impact on children’s well-being in the here and now.

From our experience running local services that work directly with children and young people dealing with some of the most complex problems, we know that they rarely face single problems in isolation. They are often dealing with multiple disadvantages in many different parts of their lives.

This is something that we have also observed in our research. In our Understanding Childhoods study of 60 children growing up in poverty, we found important differences within our sample. Although all of the children were experiencing financial hardship to a greater or lesser extent, some were also facing a whole range of other challenges in different parts of their lives.

We used the latest wave of our household survey of 3,000 children aged 10 to 17 and their parents, to ask about a list of 27 types of disadvantage that the family might have faced in the last five years. Some of these disadvantages were asked of children, but the majority were asked of parents.

This list was chosen because it fulfilled a number of criteria:

- There is research evidence demonstrating that these items can be ‘disadvantages’ for children per se.
- We felt that it was ethically acceptable to ask either parents or children whether they had experienced these factors in their lives.
- It included a spread of items covering experiences that are comparatively rare and those that affect a sizeable proportion of the population.
- There was a balance of items affecting children directly and indirectly through the material or family environment in which they live.
Mia’s story
Mia is 11 years old and in her first year at secondary school. She lives with her mum and two younger brothers in a flat where she has lived for the past year. She spends alternate weekends with her dad who lives in a neighbouring town. Mia’s dad is no longer able to work due to health problems, and her mum is currently a full time mum. Poverty structures many aspects of Mia’s everyday life – where she can go, what she can do and whether she gets to go on holiday.

Drugs, alcohol and mental health problems have featured powerfully in the lives of some of Mia’s closest relatives and family friends. She has witnessed the devastating effects of interpersonal violence and the ways in which it can tear lives apart.

Many of the adversities that we tend to think of in relation to multiple disadvantage – poverty, violence, substance misuse, mental health problems and homelessness – are present in Mia’s life. But in Mia’s case it is the experience of these, in addition to other less obvious hardships, that are also important.

She has moved seven times in the last nine years. This has affected the way she approaches neighbourhood friendships – never getting too close to other children in a new area – and it has prevented her from putting down roots in a place she can call home. One of the things that really bothers Mia is the way her neighbours shout and scream all the time, race their noisy motorbikes up and down the road and bang their front door open and shut 24 hours a day, creating an environment of stress and heightened insecurity.

If Mia could help her family in any way she would give them more money. Not a lot more, but just a ‘normal’ amount – enough for her mum to stop worrying all the time and maybe even treat herself every now and then without feeling guilty. And if Mia could change anything in her own life she would create a future for herself free from sadness and anger, where she would be happy and remain so for the rest of her life.
In keeping with our expectations, we found some types of disadvantage to be more widespread than others. Using Office for National Statistics (ONS) mid-year population estimates for 2016, we estimate that approximately 2.2 million 10 to 17 year olds across the UK are worried about crime in their local area. There are also 2.1 million living in households that are struggling with their bills. The full list of disadvantages explored is included in Table 1.

**Table 1: Population estimates for various types of disadvantage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of disadvantage</th>
<th>% of children</th>
<th>Estimated population of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent-child relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect: Child has experienced emotional neglect</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory neglect: Child has experienced supervisory neglect</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young carer: Child is a young carer</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family/household factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence: (Responding) parent has experienced domestic violence</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol: (Responding) parent has had problematic alcohol use</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental mental health: (Responding) parent has a mental health problem</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>1,650,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison: Someone in the household has been in prison</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental illness/disability: (Any) parent/carer has had a long-standing illness or disability</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>1,250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child illness/disability: (Any) child has had a long-standing illness or disability</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement: Someone in the household has died</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential transience: Family has moved house multiple times</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>1,150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced move: Family has experienced a forced house move</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal education: Mother left school without qualifications</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal education: Father left school without qualifications</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>350,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of disadvantage</th>
<th>% of children</th>
<th>Estimated population of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt: Household has problem debt</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling: Household has struggled to pay bills</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>2,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child poverty: Equivalised income is less than 60% of median household income</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>850,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment: Main income earner is unemployed</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free school meals: Child receives free school meals</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destitution: Family has used a food bank</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness: Family has been homeless</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of homelessness: Family has been at risk of homelessness</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcrowding: Child shares room</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcrowding: Child shares a bed or doesn’t have a bed</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighbourhood factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety of neighbourhood: Experienced two or more neighbourhood problems</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>1,850,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety of neighbourhood: Worried about two or more crimes/anti social behaviour happening</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>2,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety of neighbourhood: Experienced crime/anti social behaviour</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>950,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We counted up the number of disadvantages present in children’s lives to explore their multiple experiences of disadvantage. This demonstrates that just under a million children aged 10 to 17 are not facing any disadvantage, but that this is a minority of children.

A more common experience – affecting half of the population – is for three or more of the disadvantages that we asked about to be present in children’s lives. At the top end, we estimate that one million children are facing seven or more disadvantages.

Table 2: Proportions and numbers of children aged 10 to 17 experiencing multiple disadvantage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of disadvantages experienced</th>
<th>% of children</th>
<th>Estimated number of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>950,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>950,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>550,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total child population aged 10 to 17</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>5,800,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The impact of multiple disadvantage on children’s well-being

We explored the relationship between the number of disadvantages present in a child’s life and their subjective well-being. As can be seen in Figure 2, multiple disadvantage has an almost linear relationship with children’s subjective well-being: the greater the number of disadvantages that children face, the more likely they are to experience low well-being.

While 3% of children with no disadvantages had low levels of well-being, this rose to 29% for children with seven or more disadvantages in their life.

Figure 2: Multiple disadvantage and children’s life satisfaction
The impact of individual disadvantages on children’s well-being

We looked at the effect of each disadvantage individually on children’s subjective well-being. Almost all of the disadvantages were significantly associated with children’s well-being (after taking account of age and gender variations). The main exception was a father having no educational qualifications, which was only marginally associated with lower well-being.

Figure 3 illustrates two ways of looking at the association between each disadvantage and children’s well-being. The first is to look at the explanatory power of each disadvantage in affecting children’s well-being at a population level. The red bars on the right of the chart show the power of each disadvantage (after taking into account age and gender). The figures can be thought of as a percentage – so living in a family that was struggling with bills had the largest explanatory power at 4.5%.

However this approach tends not to work as well for disadvantages that are quite rare. In these cases, the disadvantage could have a big effect on the small number of children who experience it, but nevertheless not make a big contribution to explaining variations in children’s well-being in the population as a whole.

Figure 3 also shows in the green bars the difference between a child having and not having the disadvantage. So for example although the explanatory power of the emotional neglect variable is only 2.1%, this disadvantage shows the largest gap in life satisfaction (1.3 points on a scale from 0 to 10) between children who experience it and children who do not.

The percentages of children experiencing each disadvantage are shown along with the description of the disadvantage in the chart for reference purposes.
Figure 3: Individual disadvantages and children’s life satisfaction

- Emotional neglect (4%)
  - Difference: -1.3
  - Explanatory power: 2.1%
- Supervisory neglect (5%)
  - Difference: -0.7
  - Explanatory power: 0.6%
- Young carer (9%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 0.8%
- Multiple moves (21%)
  - Difference: -0.3
  - Explanatory power: 0.5%
- Forced to move (14%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 1.3%
- Mother no qualifications (5%)
  - Difference: -0.4
  - Explanatory power: 0.2%
- Father no qualifications (6%)
  - Difference: -0.3
  - Explanatory power: 0.1%
- Parent alcohol problem (12%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 1.5%
- Domestic violence (13%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 1.4%
- Child illness/disability (13%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 1.3%
- Bereavement (7%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 0.9%
- Someone been in prison (4%)
  - Difference: -0.5
  - Explanatory power: 0.4%
- Parent depression/anxiety (28%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 2.4%
- Parent illness/disability (22%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 2.1%
- Household debt (30%)
  - Difference: -0.7
  - Explanatory power: 2.9%
- Struggling bills (36%)
  - Difference: -0.8
  - Explanatory power: 4.5%
- Low household income (15%)
  - Difference: -0.5
  - Explanatory power: 0.9%
- Unemployment (2%)
  - Difference: -0.5
  - Explanatory power: 0.2%
- Free school meals (13%)
  - Difference: -0.3
  - Explanatory power: 0.5%
- Food bank (9%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 1.1%
- Homelessness (7%)
  - Difference: -0.8
  - Explanatory power: 1.3%
- Risk of homelessness (9%)
  - Difference: -0.9
  - Explanatory power: 2.0%
- Child shares room (10%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 0.9%
- Child shares/not have a bed (2%)
  - Difference: -0.9
  - Explanatory power: 0.4%
- Neighbourhood problems (33%)
  - Difference: -0.5
  - Explanatory power: 1.8%
- Worry about crime (38%)
  - Difference: -0.6
  - Explanatory power: 2.6%
- Experienced crime (17%)
  - Difference: -0.9
  - Explanatory power: 4.1%
This summary focuses on new data from the Good Childhood Report 2017 on experiences of a range of 27 disadvantages relating to parent-child relationships, family/household circumstances, material/economic factors and neighbourhood experiences among children in the UK aged 10 to 17 years old.

The large majority of children (84%) experienced at least one of the disadvantages. More than half (53%) experienced three or more. One million children (18%) experienced seven or more disadvantages.

Some of the disadvantages were relatively common while others were rarer. Fear of crime was the most common problem of all, affecting 2.2 million children, with 1 in 3 teenage girls afraid of being followed by a stranger and 1 in 4 boys worried they'll be assaulted. Over two million young people are living in households where parents are struggling to pay the bills, and we estimate that 200,000 children in the UK aged 10 to 17 are experiencing emotional neglect.

Experiencing almost any of these disadvantages is linked with lower subjective well-being for children. The estimated gap in mean life satisfaction (on a scale from 0 to 10) ranges from around 0.3 for disadvantages such as experiencing multiple house moves, to 0.9 for the 2% of children who do not have their own bed, and 1.3 for the 4% of children who are experiencing emotional neglect.

The disadvantages also have a cumulative effect – of children who had experienced seven or more disadvantages, 29% had low well-being compared to 3% of children who had experienced no disadvantages.
The evidence outlined in this report points to the importance of early support for children and their families in order to prevent negative consequences on their well-being. Implementing the following recommendations for both national and local decision-makers would help address the issues set out in the Good Childhood Report 2017:

1. **The Government should make more funding available to support children and young people who are experiencing multiple disadvantage, with a particular emphasis on early help services.**

   Our findings suggest a significant proportion of children and young people are facing multiple disadvantage in their lives, with one million children aged 10 to 17 alone experiencing seven or more types of disadvantage affecting their well-being. The experiences of disadvantage range from financial hardship and emotional neglect, to being exposed to parental alcohol misuse and domestic violence at home. Evidence from the report shows that the more disadvantages in a child’s life, the greater the chance of them facing lower levels of subjective well-being.

   Support from children’s services helps prevent the development and escalation of disadvantage. Recent analysis by the Local Government Association reveals there will be an estimated £2 billion funding gap for children’s services in England by 2020. This means that many of these services have to operate with significant constraints on their funding. Much of this funding pressure is the result of rising numbers of children and young people needing more urgent support from local children’s services.

   Reductions in funding for early help services are particularly contributing to the pressures on children’s services.

   Our previous analysis found that Government funding for early help services is expected to be cut by 71% between 2010 and 2020, from more than £3.2 billion to less than £1 billion. Children’s centres, teenage pregnancy support and short breaks for disabled children are among some of the services that are affected by reductions in funding.

   Many local authorities are making the difficult decision to reduce spending on preventative and early help services due to the lack of adequate funding. This leaves children and families without the vital support that often helps them manage and overcome their problems before they reach crisis point. These interventions are good value for money, resulting in savings in the long run.

   **Our recommendations:**

   - In the Autumn Budget the Government should address the expected financial shortfall in children’s services in England.

   - The Government should use local variations in the well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage to determine how this additional funding will be allocated. Particular emphasis should be placed on the provision of early help services to help prevent needs from escalating.

   - The devolved nations should review the adequacy of funding for children’s social care across the UK.
Local authorities should prioritise the well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Local agencies working with children, young people and their families have a crucial role to play in enabling a supportive and protective environment so that young people can flourish and thrive. Local authorities are already required, under the Children Act 2004, to cooperate to promote the well-being of children in their area.11

Local authorities should address the low well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage within their council plan by making it a top priority for all local agencies. Council plans should assess the prevalence of disadvantages among children locally. This information should inform an annual children and young people’s local profile that brings together the range of data that is available on children’s lives in the area.

Based on some of the disadvantages identified in the Good Childhood Report 2017, council plans should set out provision for children facing multiple disadvantage, focusing on difficulties in family relationships, household circumstances, material and economic factors and neighbourhood experiences including the fear of crime.

Plans should outline ways to deliver integrated responses, including signposting, for children and young people experiencing multiple disadvantage to make sure their needs are addressed holistically. For example, they could make sure there is advocacy support available for children and young people experiencing emotional neglect, or develop clear pathways to support across all agencies who work with young people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Our children’s well-being programme has consistently shown that listening to children and giving them a say in decision-making is the best way to make sure that policy and practice solutions deliver positive outcomes for young people. Council plans should therefore be produced in collaboration with children and young people living in the local area.

Our recommendations:

- Local authorities should make sure all corporate programmes and projects include, as a primary focus, measures to prioritise the well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage in their local area.
- Addressing the disadvantages children face should be a central theme within all elements of the Council Plan.
- Investment decisions and priorities should be based on the assessment of local prevalence and need.
- These plans should outline how agencies will promote positive well-being for children in the community, and be developed in partnership with children and young people.
- These plans should also set out how local agencies will work together to identify and prevent the accumulation of disadvantages in children and young people’s lives by devising multi-agency early help support.
For more information on this programme, see The Good Childhood Report 2017.


Since 2010 The Children’s Society has conducted a regular household survey in England, Scotland and Wales that is socio-economically representative of these countries. The latest wave of the survey – conducted in May/June 2017 – included a sample of 3,000 10 to 17 year olds and their parents.

NB These are intended to give an indication of the scale of the issue for 10 to 17 year olds, not to generate precise figures. For this reason, we have rounded down all of the estimates.

Controlling for age and gender.

Again after controlling for age and gender.


Under s.10 of the Children Act 2004, local authorities are under a duty to cooperate to improve well-being.
Too many children and young people in this country don’t feel safe, loved or able to cope. Together we can change their lives.

The Children’s Society is a national charity that runs local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country’s most vulnerable children and young people.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.

Find out more at childrenssociety.org.uk