The Good Childhood Report
2019
Summary
Introduction
This is the eighth edition of The Good Childhood Report, an annual report produced by The Children’s Society which studies the state of children’s well-being in the United Kingdom. This ongoing research programme, which began in 2005 through a research partnership with the University of York, was initiated to ensure that children’s own voices could be central to any public debates about their well-being. Over the last 14 years approximately 67,000 young people have been involved in our research programme, which comprises quantitative surveys alongside classroom consultations, focus groups and interviews. This approach is of fundamental importance as it allows children and young people themselves to interrogate our survey findings and interpret them in their own words. Since the inception of the research programme we have helped to generate important new evidence on:

- Trends in children’s well-being over time.
- Local and national variations within the UK.
- International comparisons.
- Variations in well-being between children with different characteristics and circumstances.

We are incredibly proud of this body of knowledge about children’s well-being and our credibility in this field. As a consequence of our work, and that of others both nationally and internationally, there is now widespread agreement that children’s well-being can and should be measured. There is also widespread agreement that children’s own reports of how their lives are going should be considered the gold standard when measuring well-being.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) now incorporates measures of children’s subjective experiences, including a selection of measures produced by The Children’s Society, in its ‘Measuring National Well-being’ initiative. Initiatives like this are incredibly important and should be further developed due to the significant value they hold in helping society know where to focus its attention. It is only by understanding how children feel about modern childhood that we will be able to identify the actions we all must take to bring about much-needed improvements to childhood in the future.

**This year’s edition of The Good Childhood Report contains:**

- An overview of the latest statistics and trends in children’s self-reported subjective well-being, including variations by gender.
- An exploratory analysis of potential child-centred measures of disadvantage and their relationship with well-being.
- A new analysis of the associations between two aspects of household income (income poverty and financial strain) and different measures of children’s well-being.
- Children’s thoughts about their futures, including their priorities and worries, and how they relate to well-being.
Overview of children’s well-being
Overview of children’s well-being

We regularly ask children about three measures of overall well-being that are part of the ONS Measuring Well-being Programme, and are the ONS data source for 10 to 15 year olds. The data for 10 to 17 years olds from our 2019 household survey can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Latest ONS measures of overall well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Average score (out of 10)</th>
<th>% with low scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with life as a whole</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy yesterday</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel life is worthwhile</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Children’s Society’s household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.
The Good Childhood Index

The Good Childhood Index measures children’s overall well-being and their happiness with 10 aspects of life that children and young people tell us are crucial for their well-being. The latest Good Childhood Index results for 2019 are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Average score (out of 10)</th>
<th>% with low scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time use</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Children’s Society’s household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.
Time trends

An important priority for the research programme is the understanding of children’s well-being over time. This year, using data from Understanding Society we present the latest trends in how children are feeling about their lives as a whole, and their happiness with five important aspects of their lives: family, friends, appearance, school and schoolwork.

Comparing children’s responses from the first wave of the Understanding Society youth survey in 2009–10 and those from the latest wave of the survey in 2016–17 suggests there has been:

**Figure 3: Trends in children’s happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009–10 to 2016–17**

A significant decrease in happiness with life as a whole.

The proportion of children with low well-being (a score below the midpoint on a 0 to 10 scale) was:

**4.8% in 2016–17.**

This would be equivalent to over 219,000 children in the population as a whole based on 2018 ONS mid-year population estimates.
A significant decrease in happiness with friends.

No significant change for happiness with family.
No significant change for happiness with appearance.

A significant dip in happiness with school (not seen in last year’s report) in 2016–17.

While not reflective of a long-term downward trend (as the dip is in the latest wave of data), it will be important to monitor any changes in this measure next year.
Gender differences

In recent years we have also taken a close interest in differences between how girls and boys feel about these aspects of their lives. Trends over time for gender found:

- Although boys remain consistently happier with their appearance than girls the gap has narrowed, and boys happiness with their appearance is significantly lower in 2016–17 than in 2009–10.

- Girls were happier with schoolwork than boys.

- There were no consistent gender differences for happiness with life as a whole, family, friends or school.

No significant change for happiness with **schoolwork**.

The increase shown in previous years was counteracted by a decrease in the latest wave of the survey.

Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect).


Presentational note: All graphs use the same size range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared.
Exploring children’s self-reported experiences of disadvantage

In their work across England supporting vulnerable children and young people, our practitioners and volunteers often talk about how the children we work with never face just a single problem in their life. There are always multiple challenges for young people to overcome and they often compound one another, making things even more difficult for the children we support.

Wider research into concepts like ‘multiple disadvantage’ and ‘complex needs’ complements such observations, identifying links with low well-being and other poor outcomes.  

In 2017, we asked children and parents completing our annual household survey to tell us how many disadvantages, out of a list of 27, they had faced in the last five years. This provided a valuable insight into the prevalence of ‘multiple disadvantage’ and its links with well-being.  

This year we have further developed this work. Whilst in the first year we had to rely on parents to provide information about certain disadvantages (because children would be unlikely to know or it may not be ethical to ask them), this year we wanted to see if we could identify and understand multiple disadvantage using only self-reported experiences from children. To do this we conducted a survey with over 650 teenagers in Year 10 (primarily aged 14 and 15) that asked them about 24 different disadvantages in four broad areas: family, material, school and neighbourhood.

Figure 4 shows the variation in overall well-being (using a multi-item measure on a scale of 0 to 10) explained by each disadvantage after controlling for age and gender.
Figure 4: Individual disadvantages and children’s life satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of disadvantage</th>
<th>% explained variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect (6%)</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory neglect (4%)*</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young carer (9%)</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved house more than once (6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (3%)*</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free school meals (10%)</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child missing three or more items (17%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child has less money than friends (22%)</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child worries about how much money family has (16%)</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child does not have enough food to eat each day (11%)</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child shares a room (16%)</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child shares/does not have bed (3%)*</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless in the last two years (3%)*</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying in the last three months (15%)</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fights at school every/most days (20%)</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child does not feel safe at school (9%)</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child moved school in past two years (12%)</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighbourhood factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child does not feel safe on way to/from school (8%)</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child does not feel safe walking in area they live (10%)</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fights in local area every/most days (9%)</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood problems (48%)</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced crime/anti-social behaviour (43%)</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Denotes a statistically significant difference between the mean life satisfaction score of those who reported experiencing a disadvantage and those who did not.

*Disadvantages reported by less than 5% relate to a small number of young people (N<30). Findings for these disadvantages should be treated with more caution.

The life satisfaction score was only available for a small number of those who said they did not feel safe at home (N<15). The results of regression and significance testing have therefore been excluded from this table, although this disadvantage is considered in the cumulative analysis presented and should be explored in future studies.
Findings

- Some of the questions did not work as well as we might have hoped and so require some additional testing. For example, young people struggled to answer how often there were fights between people in their local area and whether they had more, less or about the same money as friends.

- The three items that had the largest explanatory power in terms of children’s well-being, on a scale of 0 to 10, included experiencing bullying in the last three months, not feeling safe at school and missing three or more items from a previously tested index of material deprivation.

- There were also more rarely reported disadvantages, such as supervisory neglect, which seemed to impact on the well-being of the small number of children that reported them (although these difficulties held less explanatory power for children’s well-being overall). These rarer occurrences also need to be considered in developing measures of multiple disadvantage.

- As found in the 2017 report, children experiencing disadvantages across multiple areas of their lives had lower average well-being than those experiencing more than one disadvantage in one area, suggesting an index spanning different domains may be more effective.

With additional testing of questions in a larger scale, representative survey, we feel the insights gathered from our 2017 report and this year’s provide a firm foundation for designing a short index for use with children and young people, which could help us to better understand children’s experiences, and the consequences, of living with multiple disadvantage.
Family finances and children's well-being

One of the key contributions this research programme has made over the last decade is a deeper understanding of the important yet complex relationship between families’ financial circumstances and children’s well-being. There is a link between household income and children’s well-being, but we have consistently found that it is closely related to children’s own experiences – their experiences of not having enough, of financial stress and strain, and of not having some of the material possessions and opportunities afforded to their friends.

This year, using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), we consider two different ways of looking at household economic circumstances – based on (a) income and (b) how well the family is coping financially. We look at information about economic circumstances in the present and in the past, as persistent poverty may have a particularly corrosive effect on children’s lives. We compare the links between these different approaches and two measures of children’s subjective experience: life satisfaction and depression.

As we have previously found, these two measures have an important relationship as they often co-occur, but can still be experienced separately, ie a child may have low life satisfaction but not actually be experiencing depression, and vice versa.

Over a third of children included in the MCS at 14 years old were living in income poverty, based on the widely used income poverty threshold of up to 60% of median equivalised income (here taken before deduction of housing costs). A comparison of the percentage of poor and non-poor children with low well-being on each measure shows children living in income poverty to be significantly more likely to experience low life satisfaction and depression.
Overview of children’s well-being

Figure 4: Income poverty and low well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of children with low well-being</th>
<th>Low life satisfaction</th>
<th>High depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not in income poverty</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In income poverty</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking at families experiencing financial strain instead of income poverty, we found a more marked relationship. The well-being 'gap' is larger, particularly so for depressive symptoms, when comparing experiences of financial strain to experiences of income poverty.

**Figure 5: Financial strain and low well-being**
The MCS is a longitudinal study that has followed a cohort of children from their birth (in the year 2000–01) to the present. We wanted to use the MCS to understand how a child’s historical experiences of income poverty and financial strain during their childhood are linked to their well-being and depressive symptoms.

**Figure 6: Any experience of income poverty (across six MCS waves) and low child well-being at 14 years old**

Panel 1: Overview of children’s well-being

- **No income poverty**
  - Low life satisfaction: 8.0%
  - High depression: 11.4%
- **Income poverty at least once**
  - Low life satisfaction: 12.4%
  - High depression: 16.4%
We found that any experience of income poverty or financial strain across childhood (even only once in six times) is related to lower life satisfaction and higher levels of depressive symptoms.

Another important finding was that intermittent experiences of income poverty were linked to higher rates of low life satisfaction compared to children who had experienced income poverty consistently throughout their childhood.
Findings

The broad message from the analysis above is that how one measures family economic circumstances has important implications for the conclusions that are drawn on their link with child well-being:

- Our analysis started by bearing out previous research findings of a relatively weak link between current income and children’s life satisfaction and depressive symptoms. A focus on current family financial strain produces a different picture, however. Here the links with children’s life satisfaction and, particularly, depressive symptoms are more evident.

- The patterns we found for histories of poverty are illuminating. It seems that living in intermittent poverty is associated with lower life satisfaction than living in persistent poverty. This may link to other experiences and factors related to fluctuations in income, and requires further exploration. Nevertheless, the analysis clearly shows that any experience of income poverty, and indeed any experience of financial strain, at six points in childhood is associated with lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms at 14, compared with no experience of poverty/financial strain.

In summary, this analysis demonstrates that the link between economic circumstances and children’s subjective experience is much more complex and important than is evident from considering only current household income.
Children’s well-being and their feelings about the future

A consistent finding in our Good Childhood Reports is that, of the 10 domains of well-being that we ask children about, the lowest average score is for what may happen in the future. This year we wanted to explore in more detail what it is about the future that concerns children and young people.

In our annual household survey we asked children and young people questions about their personal future and issues that may affect society in the future:

Table 1: Household panel survey questions about the future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal future</th>
<th>Societal issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about your own future, how important is…</td>
<td>Thinking about wider issues in society, how worried are you about…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response options:</strong> ‘very’, ‘quite’, ‘not very’, and ‘not at all’ important, and ‘not sure’.</td>
<td><strong>Response options:</strong> ‘very’, ‘quite’, ‘not very’ and not ‘at all’ worried and ‘not sure’/’don’t wish to answer’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And, how worried are you about…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response options:</strong> ‘very’, ‘quite’, ‘not very’ and not ‘at all’ worried and ‘not sure’/’don’t wish to answer’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Getting good grades/marks at school.
- Being able to go to university.
- Being able to find a job.
- Having enough money.
- Having somewhere to live.
- My mental health.
- Being well (not being ill).
- The environment.
- How money is made and used within this country (the economy).
- Leaving the European Union (Brexit).
- The amount of crime.
- People’s information being shared online.
- Homelessness.
On the whole, we found that children tend to value these aspects of the future as similarly important regardless of their gender, age or household income. Children felt that having somewhere to live was most important, with their physical health and finding a job second and third. The least important issue was going to university, which only 30% of children thought was ‘very important’.

However there were differences between what young people told us was most important in the future and what they were most worried about.
**Figure 8: Extent of worries about the future***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Quite</th>
<th>Not very</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Not sure**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enough money</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find a job</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get good grades</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place to live</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to university</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Children’s Society’s household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

*Scores may not total 100% due to rounding.

**‘Not sure’ is a combination of those responding ‘Not sure’ and ‘don’t wish to answer’.
There were some important differences in the extent of worries (considering those who were ‘very’ or ‘quite’ worried) about the future between different groups of children. For example:

- Girls were more likely to be worried about all areas than boys. The largest gap in worrying was for mental health.
- Older children (14 to 17) worried significantly more than younger children (10 to 13) about getting a job, having enough money, having a home to live in and their mental health.
- Children living in a household in income poverty were significantly more worried about having a home to live in, having enough money, and their future mental health.

Turning to the broader issues in society that children worry about when thinking about the future, young people reported being most worried about crime, the environment and people’s information being shared online; and were least worried about Brexit and the economy.

### Figure 9: Extent of worry about broader issues*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Very worried</th>
<th>Quite worried</th>
<th>A little worried</th>
<th>Not at all worried</th>
<th>Not sure**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brexit</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Children's Society’s household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

*Scores may not total 100% due to rounding. **Not sure** is a combination of those responding ‘Not sure’ and ‘don’t wish to answer’.
Girls were significantly more likely than boys to worry a lot (quite or very) about the environment, people’s information being shared online, and homelessness.

Older children (14 to 17) worried more about the economy, Brexit, crime, and information sharing online. A large proportion of the younger age group were not sure about these issues – particularly Brexit and the economy.

There was not a great deal of difference in levels of worry about societal issues according to income poverty. Children in poverty did worry less about the environment and Brexit than other children.

It was unsurprising that being very worried about a range of issues was linked to lower overall well-being. Whilst we cannot assume any particular causal link in either direction between worries and life satisfaction, children’s responses provided a valuable insight into the relative strength of the link between worrying about different issues and life satisfaction.

The 1 in 9 children who had low life satisfaction were significantly more worried about all seven aspects of their future than other children.

However for the broader issues they were only significantly more worried about the environment and the economy.

The largest gap in worries was for future mental health. Children who currently had low life satisfaction were almost three times as likely to be quite or very worried about their future mental health as other children.

There were also large differences for having enough money and finding a place to live – children with low life satisfaction were twice as likely to be worried about these issues as other children. They were also almost twice as likely to be worried about finding a job in the future.
Findings

This chapter presents an up-to-date picture of how children and young people aged 10 to 17 in Great Britain view various aspects of their future, and the world around them – what they think is important and what they worry about.

- Whilst children and young people placed similar importance on different aspects of their future, they did worry about them to varying extents. There were some significant differences based on gender, age and income poverty.

- Not surprisingly, it is also clear that feelings about the future and well-being are linked.

- Overall, it is the extent of children's worry that is of most concern. Whilst up to a third of all children surveyed worry about issues related to their own future, such as finding a job and having somewhere to live, two fifths of children are worrying about things like crime, the environment and online security. It is important that we acknowledge these worries, monitor them and respond to them in order to reduce the amount of worry children are experiencing and promote positive well-being.
Discussion
Discussion

Our analysis of the latest trends (comparing 2009-10 with 2016-17) in subjective well-being for children aged 10 to 15 show decreases in children’s happiness with life as a whole and with friends. However there has been no significant change in their happiness with other areas (family, appearance and school work). There was a dip in happiness with school in 2016–17, which needs to be monitored going forward to see if this is the beginning of a longer term trend.

As reported in previous Good Childhood reports, boys were happier with their appearance than girls (although the gap between girls and boys continues to narrow), and girls were happier with school work across the period (2009–10 to 2016–17). There were no consistent differences between boys and girls for happiness with life as a whole, family, friends or school.

We considered present and past experiences that can affect children’s well-being, and explored the possibility of asking teenagers themselves about their experience of disadvantages, relating to their family, economic/material factors, their school and their neighbourhood. As well as learning about the types of questions that children find harder to answer, responses to the survey highlighted experiences that most well predicted the children’s well-being – such as bullying and material deprivation – and more rarely reported disadvantages like supervisory neglect that, while less able to explain variations in children’s overall well-being, are linked to lower levels of well-being among the small numbers who report them.

Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study revealed that children aged around 14 who had experienced intermittent poverty had lower life satisfaction than those of the same age living in persistent poverty. In fact, any experience of either income poverty or financial strain was found to be associated with lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms at age 14.

Finally, analysis is presented of children’s current views of their own future and broader issues, which are likely to be intrinsically related to their well-being. Children were most worried about having enough money – around 1 in 9 children said that they were very worried about this. The issues that children worried most about in relation to wider society were crime and the environment – around 2 in 5 were very or quite worried about these topics.

Across the chapters of this report, school emerges as an important theme for further focus. Not only are scores for the school domain of our Good Childhood Index consistently low, but more recent figures from Understanding Society suggest there may have been a dip in satisfaction with school in the most recent wave of the survey. Our analysis on poverty and well-being also highlights connections between income poverty and financial strain, and children’s feelings about school at age 14. Taking these findings at face value suggests that a key way of improving children’s subjective experience may be to improve their experience of school.
Policy recommendations

This year’s Good Childhood Report provides important insights for decision makers, professionals and the general public on the state of our children’s well-being and some of the things we could do to improve it.

The Children’s Society has been measuring children’s well-being for over a decade, and during much of this time children’s well-being has been in decline. The evidence is clear and uncontroversial: from family issues and neighbourhood safety to progress at school and mental-ill health, understanding children’s well-being provides important insights that could be used to improve childhood. As a society we have to start taking children’s well-being more seriously.

With increasing concerns about children’s emotional health, and a fragmented patchwork of bodies delivering public services (eg schools, clinical commissioning groups, local authorities and the police), it is clear that no single actor has a really clear view on how children are feeling about their lives. The result is confusion and contradiction. Record investment in NHS mental health services for children is accompanied by massive cuts to children’s social care. More children go to outstanding schools than ever before at the same time as unprecedented food bank use by families struggling to put meals on the table. We are not seeing children and young people in the round.

Our findings this year highlight the cost of ignoring children’s well-being.
**Family finances**

Our chapter on families’ financial histories shows the long term consequences for children – both in terms of lower well-being and higher risks of depression – as a result of any experience of poverty or financial strain at any of six points in their childhood. This is an important finding to consider in relation to Universal Credit, for example. The roll-out of the new benefit payment has seen increased reports of families experiencing financial strain in the media. The waiting period, the move to monthly instead of more regular payments, and the use of bridging loans instead of grants during the transition period have all been cited as putting additional financial pressure on families. This pressure can often be exacerbated by the lack of support available through Local Welfare Assistance Schemes. Our evidence suggests that experiences like these have a real and long term impact on children and young people.

**Children’s services**

This year’s report also has important messages for children’s services. Children experiencing ‘multiple disadvantage’ are supported by social workers and other professionals across the country to recover from experiences of abuse and neglect. Issues like parental substance misuse and domestic violence, for example, have long term consequences across a range of important outcomes for children. However our research suggests that alongside these critical safeguarding issues, children living in the most complex and difficult circumstances also significantly struggle with issues like bullying and material deprivation.

If we truly want to support these young people to thrive, surely we need to address their concerns? We need to listen to them and respond to the range of issues that are affecting their well-being, because by doing so we can improve the chances that they will be able to overcome the challenges they face. Currently we prioritise the most high risk issues – and rightly so – but children’s services often fail to address other issues which, whilst they might not pose so high an immediate risk, do pose long-term and serious challenges to children’s well-being.

**Supporting children to be confident about the future**

Our findings about children’s worries around issues like the environment, online safety and crime pose a significant challenge. These are intergenerational issues and often the steps we take to address them in the present will have far reaching consequences into the future. It’s clear that young people need to be heard, but without them being able to vote how do we ensure that their views are taken seriously and acted upon?

There are lots of approaches in policy-making that could be used to achieve this – from more passive options like advisory boards and impact assessments, to more active ones like participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and co-production in service design. If these are done well, and publicised, they could go some way to convincing young people that they do genuinely have a say in how decisions are made in this country.
Re-prioritising early intervention

Being worried about the future or experiencing lower well-being because your family struggles financially, or you are experiencing a range of challenges in your life, are not uncommon experiences for anyone. They all take a toll on emotional health and if left unaddressed could escalate in a variety of ways, from experiencing mental ill-health to doing badly at school, or requiring support from social care because a child may find themselves in an unsafe situation.

In recent years local authorities have shifted their spending on children and young people away from early intervention as they attempt to use constrained budgets to meet their statutory duties to those most at risk. The result has been the closure of youth services, reduction in early years support and a lack of early intervention work with children and families to stop problems escalating.\textsuperscript{xvi}

We urgently need to address this. By ignoring the issues that contribute to lower well-being we are allowing children to become more unhappy with their lives and creating a situation where their issues begin to escalate and become even more difficult to address. Whether it’s through youth services, family support, or drop-in hubs for children worried about their emotional health, it is crucial that every community has a range of services and support focused on early intervention.

Our proposal for comprehensive national measurement of children’s well-being

After years of consistent decline in our children’s well-being it is time we started thinking differently about how the state supports children to thrive. Measuring children’s well-being is a crucial way of kick-starting this radical re-think of how we support children; it provides an evidence base, allows the identification of trends and pressures on well-being, and allows us to track progress so we can understand if the changes we make are resulting in improvements.

Currently children’s well-being is measured in an ad hoc manner. Across the country children fill out a range of (often unstandardised) surveys led by schools, charities, or local authorities. The data gathered is useful but rarely benchmarked, and most of the time it is of little use to, or little used by, other local and national decision makers.

At the national level it is The Children’s Society, a charity, that provides the national data on children’s well-being to the Office for National Statistics. When compared to the quarterly survey of over 150,000 people that is used to track well-being for the adult population\textsuperscript{xvii} it is clear that children and young people – one fifth of the population\textsuperscript{xviii} – are being short-changed.

It is time the Government invested in its understanding of children and young people, so that across the country those trying to improve children and young people’s lives have the information they need to do so.
We propose an annual short well-being survey of all secondary school aged children, utilising the existing National Pupil Database as the repository for the data. Such an approach has several merits. Firstly, it provides a near census of teenagers in England. Secondly, it will link well-being data with other important information such as demographics, attainment, school moves, and important social indicators like eligibility for Free School Meals and the Pupil Premium. Thirdly, the existing database and its supporting infrastructure would minimise cost.

Such a dataset is not uncommon internationally – from Dubai and the Netherlands to South Australia and Canada, comprehensive measurement of children’s well-being is increasingly valued by decision makers globally.

Whilst the National Pupil Database is currently the most obvious mechanism to use to achieve comprehensive well-being measurement, we do accept there are other options. The newly proposed Health Index in the Prevention Green Paper from the Department of Health and Social Care could be a useful opportunity for example, or a brand new population survey of children and young people led by the ONS. At the very least, the Department for Education should endorse a standardised well-being measure for all of England and incentivise its uptake by schools and local authorities through support with benchmarking and analysis. Without some standardisation we will never have a holistic picture of young people’s lives.

In recent weeks both the Children’s Commissioner and Action for Children have called for a cross-Governmental taskforce to tackle some of the biggest policy issues affecting the lives of children and young people. We join them in this call. However, any taskforce needs to have an evidence base and it needs to include children and young people so they can have their say and help find solutions. There are many ways this could be achieved, but comprehensive national measurement of children’s well-being is, in our view, the broadest way of understanding children’s complex and wide-ranging experiences in a holistic way.

Although the majority of children are happy with their lives overall, this year’s Good Childhood Report does not make for optimistic reading. Declining overall life satisfaction, children struggling with their friendships, worried about the future and – for those living in poverty or families under financial strain – long term consequences for both their well-being and their mental health.

Making the effort, once a year, to ask young people how they are feeling – and then working with them to respond nationally and locally in an authentic way – is a simple way to start addressing these concerns and make genuine progress in improving children’s well-being. This is not a policy recommendation that requires a significant spending commitment, but it could result in a long-term and more holistic approach to policy making and public service delivery for children and young people that could result in real change for them.

That’s why, this year, we are petitioning our new Prime Minister to put children’s well-being at the very top of the political agenda and to introduce national measurement of children’s well-being in England.
References and Notes


ii The full version of The Good Childhood Report 2019 is available on The Children’s Society’s website at www.childrenssociety.org.uk/goodchildhood


iv Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15. The analysis uses weightings provided in Understanding Society dataset to ensure the samples are representative of the general populations, but confidence intervals do not take account of design effects. All graphs use the same size range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared.


vii Some parts of this chapter are an expanded version of an analysis previously published in Poverty magazine. (Rees, 2019 ‘Poverty and Children’s Well-being at 14 Years Old’. Poverty 162, page 8-10). Some statistics may differ from the previous publication due to a different application of income poverty thresholds and a different set of control variables.


ix The exact figure in the MCS data is 34%. This analysis makes use of a variable provided in the MCS data set that is based on the 60% threshold and uses the OECD equivalised poverty adjustment which counts a 14-year-old child as an adult. In earlier waves, the same children would have been counted as a child (which assumes a smaller burden on household resources). This measure does not take account of housing costs. In the later section where we calculate histories of poverty, we adjust the equilisation so that a 14-year-old is counted as a child so that there is consistency in definitions across waves. Although there have been some recent criticisms of this income poverty measure, it is still widely used both in the UK (e.g. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/articles/persistentpovertyintheukandeu/2017) and at a European level.
References


xviii Based on ONS mid-year population estimates (2018/19) for children and young people aged 0-17. The UK population is currently estimated to be 66.4 million, with 14 million children and young people aged 0-17. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland


The Children’s Society and our supporters have been there for vulnerable children and young people for more than 130 years.

We believe that every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That’s why we run services and campaigns to make children’s lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

Together with our supporters, we’re improving the lives of children today and long into the future.

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