

**Department for Work and Pensions**

**Research Report No 594**

# **Living with poverty**

**A review of the literature on  
children's and families' experiences  
of poverty**

**Tess Ridge**

A report of research carried out by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Policy,  
University of Bath on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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# Summary

This review of qualitative research with low-income families and children presents a summary of evidence from the last ten years regarding the 'lived experience' of poverty.

The main aims of the review were:

- to provide a critical summary of recent research on child and family poverty and identify gaps in knowledge about the lives and experiences of children and families;
- to review evidence about childhood poverty: drawing together research that explores childhood poverty from children's perspectives and highlights their accounts of their lives and their experiences of living in poverty;
- to review evidence about family poverty: drawing together research with parents in disadvantage, and exploring the challenges faced by families experiencing poverty in their everyday lives.

Qualitative research with families who are experiencing poverty provides a vital social and relational dimension to understanding the impact and effects of poverty and has considerable potential to inform policy making in the provision of welfare and services, social and economic support and the alleviation of poverty.

This is a thorough and comprehensive review, and all efforts have been taken to draw out research findings from a range of published research studies, including academic studies and engagement activities carried out with families and children by non-academic bodies, for example, charities, pressure groups and other organisations. All evidence has been subjected to a rigorous evaluation regarding findings and the robustness of research/engagement methodologies.

## Methodological insights

Qualitative research with adults, and especially children who are experiencing poverty, is still a relatively new and developing field. Exploring the impact of poverty for people living under complex economic, social and cultural conditions requires considerable sensitivity throughout the research process. Research carried out with children and adults living in poverty has developed over time and in

general, although not always, considerable care is now taken to ensure that research participants are treated as subjects rather than objects of research.

There are a wide range of methods used in research covered by the review and these include in-depth interviews, focus groups, group work, surveying, case studies, participatory workshops and action research.

Overall messages from research about the impact that poverty can have on people's lives shows that the experience of poverty is almost always overwhelmingly negative, and can have psychological, physical, relational and practical effects on people's lives. Poverty is a highly stigmatised social position and the experience of poverty in an affluent society can be particularly isolating and socially damaging.

## Children's experiences: the impact of poverty in childhood

A review of evidence from children reveals that the experience of poverty in childhood can be highly damaging and the effects of poverty are both pervasive and disruptive. Poverty permeates every facet of children's lives from economic and material disadvantages, through social and relational constraints and exclusions, to the personal and more hidden aspects of poverty associated with shame, sadness and the fear of difference and stigma.

Key areas of concern identified by children are:

- economic deprivation: children were anxious about the adequacy of income coming in to their households and were afraid there would not be enough money for them and for their family's needs;
- material deprivation: children lacked important childhood possessions, like toys, bicycles and games, and they also expressed concerns about being short of essentials and everyday items, like food, towels, bedding and clothing;
- social deprivation: poverty restricted children's chances to make and sustain friendships, and reduced their opportunities for shared social activities due to the costs of attending social events, inadequate and expensive transport provision and the expense of hosting social occasions within their own homes;
- school deprivation: children experienced restricted opportunities at school, largely through an inability to pay for resources such as study guides and exam materials, and restricted social opportunities through an inability to pay for school trips and other social activities. Inability to pay for compulsory items, such as uniforms, could also lead to conflict with teachers and disciplinary action;
- visible signs of poverty and difference: a lack of the same material goods and clothes as their peers, and an inability to take part in the same social and leisure activities meant that children experienced bullying and were fearful of stigma and social isolation;

- family pressures: children showed keen insight into the challenges and demands that poverty generated for their parents and anxiety about inadequate household income, household debt and their parents' wellbeing and working conditions. They also often tried to moderate their own needs in response to their parents' financial difficulties;
- tensions with parents: conflicts sometimes arose with parents who were under severe financial pressure, or who sometimes had to work long hours or rely on childcare that children did not enjoy;
- additional responsibilities: children in low-income working families were often taking on additional responsibilities in the home, including housework and caring responsibilities, or engaged in paid work themselves to ease financial pressures at home and to gain access to their own money;
- poor quality housing: this affected children's health and wellbeing, and meant that children had difficulties in sleeping, studying or playing at home;
- homelessness: children experienced considerable anxiety about the quality of their temporary accommodation including a lack of privacy and no space for play. This affected their health, their school lives and their social participation;
- poor neighbourhoods: deprived neighbourhoods created particular problems for children who described them as insecure and sometimes dangerous. They experienced a lack of safe space for play and a dearth of local and low-cost leisure facilities;
- living in rural areas meant that disadvantaged children lacked social opportunities for shared play, were reliant on inadequate and costly public transport, and were unable to meet the high costs of participation. This meant that children often felt confined within their local environments.

Overall, children identified a wide range of issues related to poverty and social exclusion. However, they were not passive 'victims' of poverty: many employed coping strategies such as taking jobs so they could contribute financially to their families, taking on caring duties so parents could work, and restricting financial demands (for example, not telling parents about school trips) to ease financial pressures within the home.

## Parents' experiences: the impact of poverty on family life

A review of low-income parents' accounts of their lives reveals the challenges of managing family life under conditions of poverty and deprivation. The evidence highlights the pressure that disadvantage brings, making family life at times difficult and uncertain.

A family's experiences of poverty are not isolated from other factors in their lives, and complex social, cultural and economic processes and divisions create particular challenges. Family equilibrium can be easily destabilised or undermined

by external and internal shocks such as unemployment, sickness, disability and family upheaval. These events create circumstances of change and uncertainty for all families, but the added pressures and restrictions of poverty leave deprived families highly vulnerable to instability, homelessness, debt and social exclusion.

Parenting under economic pressure can be particularly difficult and although parents strive to protect their children and put them first, this is often at great personal cost particularly for women. Evidence from parents reveals key tensions within low-income families as parents try to balance conflicting demands within the restrictions of a low income. These are summarised below:

- The challenge of meeting their own needs and meeting children's needs: families were often doing without everyday necessities like food, clothing, fuel and social activities. Parents, especially mothers, also often went without so that they could try and ensure their children's needs were met.
- The challenge of balancing the costs of meeting everyday needs against the costs of meeting social imperatives, such as participation in cultural norms and expectations at times of special celebration, like Christmas, Eid and Ramadan.
- There were difficult decisions to be made about buying essential goods or saving for future expenditure. Trying to make money stretch and avoid debt was taxing. For many families even vigilance and strict budgeting could not make their money go far enough, and the everyday demands of sustaining family life coupled with the sudden appearance of extra needs could result in severe financial problems and debt.
- Families had little access to affordable credit, and accessing expensive credit had to be balanced against going without essentials.
- Money for supervised play and leisure activities for children was difficult to find, but the alternative when children lived in degraded neighbourhoods was that their opportunities for play were in dangerous or unsuitable environments.
- Work can be an essential strategy for reducing family poverty, but parents had a range of concerns about employment, including the costs and availability of childcare, time poverty and travel costs.
- Employment could also be unpredictable, demanding and inflexible. This created tension for parents between taking on unstable employment and the desire to provide security and stability in family life.
- Working parents were often torn between doing the right thing for their children and satisfying the needs of their employers. Sustaining work and care was extremely challenging. For some, work meant long hours in low-income employment and this affected their family life and spending time with their children.
- For families in hardship, adequate, reliable and secure welfare support was a critical issue. Many low-income families struggled to negotiate the benefits system and late and missed payments or over-payments could exacerbate stress and financial strain.

## Future research

While there is a growing body of evidence in this field, more qualitative, subjective research is needed. Childhood is constantly changing and as new forms of exclusion open up it is important to understand how poverty impacts on contemporary childhood. In particular, it is important to gain further insight into different experiences and perceptions of poverty in relation to children's age and their gender.

Additionally, there is a need for further research with children and families from specific groups to help us understand their experiences of poverty and how poverty interacts with other characteristics. These groups include:

- low-income working families: the experiences of parents and children in low-income working households;
- low-income fathers: men's experiences of parenting under conditions of poverty and disadvantage;
- families experiencing disability and poverty: in particular, disabled children who are rarely the subject of research specifically about poverty, and children who are living in families where there is a parent or sibling with a disability;
- ethnic minority families on low-incomes: there is a general dearth of qualitative research with children and families from ethnic minority groups and there is also considerable diversity to be explored in relation to different ethnic groups' experiences of poverty;
- marginalised groups: especially the impact of poverty on the lives and experiences of gypsies, travellers and asylum seekers.

Further research is also required into availability and access to public services including childcare and transport, especially for disadvantaged children.

Finally, the review has raised some methodological concerns as some of the engagement with low-income families by stakeholders without research expertise is not methodologically rigorous enough to effectively inform policy making. Stakeholders should address this so that key insights from their engagement are not lost to the evidence base.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

This report presents the findings from an extensive review of current research evidence examining children's and families' subjective experiences of poverty. The review will inform the Child Poverty Unit's plans for engaging children and parents in developing a 'vision' of 2020 – exploring what a world in which child poverty has been eradicated could or should look like.

In March 2008, the Government published *Ending child poverty: Everybody's business* which set out the Government's plans for the next phase of the strategy for tackling child poverty. Part of the Government's plan to eradicate child poverty has been a commitment to work together with a range of stakeholders, including charitable organisations, lobby groups, academics and researchers. Included in this range of stakeholders, and considered to be a key group, are disadvantaged children and families themselves. One important element of producing this strategy is to review and examine the evidence about what is already known about childhood and family poverty from qualitative research in this area.

This evidence review provides a timely opportunity to explore what we already know, and what we need to know, about the lived experience of childhood poverty and family poverty over the last ten years.

## 1.2 Aims and objectives of the review

The aim of the evidence review is to provide information on, and a critical discussion of, key issues relating to the experience of poverty for families and children. The key focus is on research that engages directly with children and parents to gain a grounded and informed insight into their lives, experiences and concerns. The review draws on qualitative subjective research studies carried out with children and parents and covers a ten year period from 1998 to 2008; this is an appropriate time frame as 1998/99 is the baseline year for the Government's target to halve child poverty by 2010 on the way to eradicating it by 2020. The review does not attempt to comment on progress over this ten year period, but to

gather evidence from throughout the period to produce a contemporary account of the experiences of children and families living in poverty.

The main aims of the review are:

- to provide a critical summary of recent research on child and family poverty and identify gaps in our knowledge about the lives and experiences of children and families;
- to review evidence about childhood poverty: drawing together research that explores childhood poverty from children's perspectives and highlights their accounts of their lives and their experiences of living in poverty;
- to review evidence about family poverty: drawing together research with parents in disadvantage, and exploring the challenges faced by families experiencing poverty in their everyday lives.

Qualitative research with families who are experiencing poverty provides a vital social and relational dimension to understanding the impact and effects of poverty and has considerable potential to inform policy making in the provision of welfare and services, social and economic support and the alleviation of poverty.

### 1.3 Methodology

This review is intended to be a thorough and comprehensive review of qualitative literature about the experience of living in poverty, focusing particularly on the evidence which captures the views and experiences of low-income children and families. All efforts have been taken to draw out research findings from a range of published research studies, including academic studies and engagement activities carried out with families and children by non-academic bodies, for example, charities, pressure groups and other organisations. All evidence has been subjected to a rigorous evaluation regarding findings and the robustness of research/engagement methodologies. Some of the more imaginative and innovative messages that emerge from studies involving direct engagement with people living in poverty (e.g. client groups) are particularly productive, especially where adults and children have been able to freely articulate their experiences and concerns in an empowering environment. However, it is also the case that some outputs from research and engagement activities were not suitable for this review, for example, because they were too localised, or too methodologically weak to contribute to the knowledge base of the review. In these cases the research was assessed and, where appropriate, included as illustrative of points made in more robust research.

Note that although the review methodology was rigorous and comprehensive, this is not a systematic review, as a systematic review methodology was not considered the most suitable for achieving the study's aims. A systematic review is arguably best suited to synthesising results on specific topics or questions from studies using specified methodologies and populations, whereas in this case, some

studies which provided valuable evidence were not specifically about poverty or disadvantage, and others which did focus directly on poverty did not contain the kind of first person evidence that was being sought.

The review uses people's own voices and experiences to inform about the everyday challenges that poverty and disadvantage presents. Research and engagement with children and families experiencing poverty presents ethical and methodological challenges for a range of reasons and these are discussed further below. Poverty is also an experience which is often misrepresented, poorly understood and stigmatised. For this reason, the framing and reporting of these findings is also important and terms such as 'the poor', 'poor people', or 'poor parents' can be used pejoratively to imply failings on the part of people who experience poverty. These terms are therefore inappropriate and stigmatising and wherever possible will not be used in this report. Alternative terms such as 'low-income parents', 'children living in poverty or disadvantage' or 'families experiencing poverty, hardship or disadvantage' will be used.

## 1.4 Evidence sources

Three main substantive topics are covered in the review: children's experiences of the economic, social and emotional impact of poverty on their lives; children's experiences of poverty in a range of social settings, including the home, neighbourhood and the school; and parent's experiences of poverty across a range of social and economic settings. This is a broad range of topics and there is a growing literature in relation to each, therefore the criteria for inclusion in the study were that the research should:

- have a focus on the UK including, where available, research materials from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland;
- cover the period 1998 to 2008 and be published and generally available (this excludes conference papers in particular).

The review has entailed a thorough and wide ranging search of libraries, journals, and internet resources. It draws on findings from a variety of research approaches including qualitative data, and, where appropriate, quantitative data with a qualitative component, ethnographic studies, case studies, and participatory and peer research. The review process included bibliographic database searches and Internet database searches. These were supplemented with the most up-to-date material gathered through a variety of other methods including non-academic research and research conducted by charities and pressure groups. Among those searched were the Child Poverty Action Group, Barnardos, The Children's Society, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Women's Budget Group, the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), ATD Fourth World and Shelter. Material was also drawn from UK research programmes, including those of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU), the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), and the National Centre for Social Research, and from the Economic and Social Research Council REGARD database.

Government research material was carefully screened to draw out research that directly engaged with children and/or families and covered areas of interest in a way that allowed the participants to voice their own issues, experiences and concerns. Other government material, for example evaluations of New Deal and the large range of literature on welfare to work, which are more tightly focused on policy interventions and are already a known body of work, are not drawn on in this review. In particular, qualitative evidence from parents used in this review is focused largely on their family lives and their parenting roles. Some quantitative data was also reviewed, but only where it was relevant to the key criteria of engaging with children and families in a way that allowed for some free expression of experiences and issues; a good example of this is the Department for Children, Schools and Families' (DCSF) *Costs of Schooling* research (Brunwin *et al.*, 2004; Peters *et al.*, 2009) which includes a survey component with face-to-face interviews with over 1,600 children of different socio-economic groups.

There are other valuable studies that draw together evidence from other research and/or have very varied samples, for example that include young people up to their mid twenties, or where it is not clear that children are experiencing poverty, or where it is impossible to unpick the experiences of children who are in poverty from those who are not. These studies are not included in the review but some are listed here as useful further sources. They include: Bentley *et al.*, 1999; Seeley, 2004; Barnados, 2004; CAB, 2008; Gibbons and Singler, 2008; and Reynolds *et al.* 2008. In addition to these there are some reviews which also add to the overall picture including: Millar and Ridge, 2001; Attree, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, and 2006; and Phung, 2008. Furthermore, not all children and families included in this report would necessarily be 'poor' according to the standard 60 per cent median BHC measure<sup>1</sup>. That is, some might be materially deprived, or live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, rather than be in income poverty, depending on what study they are from. It is also the case that as the report spans ten years some of the findings will of course relate to old policies and policy initiatives.

## 1.5 Report structure

This report has five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 explores methodological approaches to researching poverty from a subjective perspective. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on evidence gathered from research with children and parents who are experiencing, or who have experienced, poverty and disadvantage. Chapter 3 draws on children's narratives of disadvantage to explore the economic, social and emotional impact of poverty for children, and their perceptions of their lives at home, in their neighbourhoods and at school. Chapter 4 draws on evidence gathered from qualitative research with parents about the impact of poverty

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<sup>1</sup> A person is poor on the Government's standard relative poverty measure if their equivalised household income before housing costs is below 60 per cent equivalised median income using the modified OECD equivalisation scale.

on parenting and family life. Chapter 5 summarises the main findings from the evidence presented and discusses the key issues that arise from this review. This is then followed by a full bibliography of all sources used in the review.

Throughout the review boxed examples are used to highlight case studies, key themes and issues. The material used in this format ranges from key studies and innovative methodologies to illustrative evidence like case studies. To allow the subjective nature of the evidence to come out verbatim, quotations are used throughout to illustrate key issues and develop themes.

In general, in society adult's voices, experiences and concerns tend to hold a privileged position in relation to those of children which are rarely heard and often overlooked or undervalued. Therefore, for the purpose of this review, evidence from children and parents is presented separately to allow children's voices to be heard and valued in their own right.



## 2 Researching poverty from a subjective perspective

Research into poverty from a subjective perspective is still a relatively new field. Prior to the development of qualitative research which engages directly with disadvantaged people, our insight into, and understanding of, poverty was largely informed by quantitative research and statistical analysis of poverty outcomes, risks and trends. Over time, quantitative research has provided essential evidence for policy makers about the dynamics and consequences of poverty and the material and economic impact of poverty on people's lives. However, although we know an increasing amount about who is at the most risk of experiencing poverty, and under what circumstances, quantitative research presents only a partial picture of what poverty means for people who are experiencing it. We know far less about the direct impact of poverty on people's everyday lives and social and economic relationships. Therefore qualitative research with people who are experiencing poverty adds a vital social and relational dimension to understanding the impact and effects of poverty and has considerable potential to inform policy making in the provision of welfare and services, social and economic support and the alleviation of poverty.

Such research presents many ethical and methodological challenges. Adults who are experiencing poverty lack voice and are often marginalised and powerless. They are rarely consulted about the issues that concern them and they are also likely, at times, to be scrutinised and talked at rather than consulted and listened to. These aspects of poverty include a *'lack of voice, disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self esteem; shame and stigma; powerlessness, denials of rights and diminished citizenship'* (Lister, 2004:7). This is the backdrop against which research with families living in poverty takes place. Therefore, a recognition of these aspects of poverty should inform the research agenda and research process and considerable care needs to be taken to ensure that participants are treated as subjects, not objects, and that the research activity is inclusive, respectful and participatory.

The development of qualitative poverty research has seen considerable advances over the last ten to 15 years as researchers have developed new and innovative ways of engaging appropriately and productively with people living in disadvantage. Poverty is a complex issue and there are many different factors that need to be taken in to account when designing research, not least an acknowledgement that people experiencing poverty are not a homogenous group sharing essentially the same life experiences but rather are a diverse population whose experiences will be framed and tempered by other social factors, such as lone parenthood, age, minority ethnicity, and gender. Poverty is also experienced by people living in marginal social positions, such as refugees and asylum seekers, travellers and gypsies. The experience of poverty for many is further compounded by social stigma and social and economic disadvantage associated with conditions of unemployment, disability, and homelessness. Wherever possible in the review, diverse experiences will be highlighted. However, in some fields, particularly in relation to qualitative research with children, there is still an evident lack of complexity in some research, and the need for future research to address diversity in experience and explore the intersectionality of different social factors like gender, age and ethnicity is apparent (see Chapter 5 for a discussion about future research).

### *Research with disadvantaged children*

Qualitative research with children experiencing poverty presents an additional set of ethical and methodological challenges. Children, by virtue of being children, are already relatively powerless, dependent and often easily overlooked or obscured within their family settings. The experience of poverty coupled with the status of childhood means that children can be doubly silenced, and their experiences and the issues that concern them can remain unheard. Children in general are high consumers of welfare services and disadvantaged children are some of the most likely to be targeted by policies intended to address the effects of poverty in childhood. However, research and policies directed towards children can often focus on the potential outcomes of poverty in adulthood rather than the lived experiences of poverty in childhood. Yet, it is in childhood among their more affluent peers that children struggle to negotiate the effects of poverty on their day-to-day lives, and the quality of those childhoods needs to be understood and addressed. Therefore, although addressing adult outcomes is an essential part of tackling poverty in childhood, it is vital that we also develop a deeper, more meaningful awareness and understanding of the everyday realities of childhood poverty, one that is grounded in children's own experiences and meanings. To this end, qualitative subjective research can play a key role in ensuring the voices of children and young people are incorporated in the development of a well informed understanding of childhood poverty in policy and practice.

## 2.1 Research with people living in poverty

Exploring the impact of poverty for people living under complex economic, social and cultural conditions requires considerable sensitivity throughout the

research process. Research carried out with children and adults living in poverty has developed over time and in general, although not always, considerable care is now taken to ensure that research participants are treated as subjects rather than objects of research. There are a wide range of methods used in the research covered by the review, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, group work, surveying, case studies, participatory workshops and action research. Different approaches can yield diverse types of data which can be used for a range of reasons, and some of these are discussed below.

### 2.1.1 Group research

Group work or focus group work can be very valuable for drawing out collective experiences and focusing on particular issues, like the challenges of parenting in poverty or shared experiences of homelessness. Groups can be empowering and also allow space for the recognition of shared disadvantage. Examples of focus group or group work in the review include: Walker *et al.* (2008) who used focus groups and interviews with parents and children; Payne and Fisher (2006) who used a range of feedback events and informal discussion groups; Seaman *et al.* (2006) who used focus groups and interviews; and Collard and Kempson (2005) and Collard *et al.* (2001) who used focus groups to explore financial circumstances and perceptions of financial services.

Box 2.1 illustrates how research using a focus group approach (Green, 2007) with adults and children in Scotland was developed over two phases to allow participants to share experiences and then reflect on the researcher's analysis and interpretation of the findings, thus promoting involvement of participants at several different stages of the research.

#### **Box 2.1 *Voices of people experiencing poverty in Scotland: Everyone matters? Green (2007)***

This study involved focus group work with over 100 adults and children with experience of poverty. The study was in several stages, the first stage was ten focus groups with adults coupled with a further seven focus groups conducted with children and young people. The second stage involved a focus group that allowed a selection of participants from the initial groups to reflect on the findings and analysis.

The research focused on the challenges of living in poverty particularly in relation to the cost of fuel, lack of access to basic financial services, and difficulties in accessing various services, including further education, healthcare, public transport and advice services.

However, as with all research methods there are also potential disadvantages to group work including the dangers of collective silencing of alternative voices and perspectives. Therefore considerable care is needed in group work facilitation. Group research can work well for children who may be inhibited by the intensity of a one-to-one interview situation. However, saving face is an important aspect

of childhood relations and in some instances the sensitivities of talking about experiences of poverty can be too exposing for children among their peers.

### **2.1.2 In-depth research**

In-depth interviewing can give the time and space to individuals to explore their experiences in a safe and private environment and can provide a rich seam of evidence. This can be especially important in relation to complex and sensitive experiences that people may not want to share in a group. The stigmatising effects of poverty discussed above can mean that self identification as someone living in poverty can be particularly difficult and in-depth interviews can give time and consideration to individual thoughts and feelings. Again, great care and sensitivity is needed to ensure that respect, and an acknowledgement and consideration of the social relational challenges that poverty presents, inform the interview process. Examples of in-depth interviews in the review include: Lloyd and Stead (2001) exploring the social experiences of gypsy and show traveller children; Ridge (2002) interviewing children living in families receiving Income Support about their lives; Preston (2006) interviewing disabled parents; and Smith *et al.* (2007) exploring poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families.

Further innovations in research have come with the use of qualitative longitudinal research which, unlike cross-sectional research which illuminates a moment in time, engages with people over a period of time, often several years, to develop a research relationship which can reveal the challenges that people face over time. Examples of longitudinal qualitative research include Ridge and Millar's (2008) qualitative longitudinal study of low-income working life in lone mother households, involving in-depth interviews over four to five years with lone mothers and their children, and Clavinger's (2007) study of parent's experiences of care and support when bringing up children who are disabled, which included observations and in-depth interviews with parents over a two and a half year period.

### **2.1.3 Case studies**

Case studies can be particularly revealing and give an holistic picture of life on a low-income. However, some caution is needed when reviewing case studies as evidence can be weakened in material where few case studies are used and these are composite and chosen to illustrate very particular issues or campaigning viewpoints. In these instances, cases are indicative and can give a valuable insight but are not necessarily robust evidence. Good examples of robust case studies in the review include Sharma and Hirsch (2007) involving interviews and case studies; and Anne Power's (2007) study of the lives and experiences of 24 parents bringing up children in troubled inner city areas.

Other studies, particularly with children and young people, have employed a range of innovative research methods including the use of drama and film, peer research, photography, mapping and 'drawing and writing' techniques (for example Sweeny 2008; Horgan, 2007a, 2007b; Sutton *et al.*, 2007; and Mustafa

2004). Elliot and Leonard (2004) used a combination of one-to-one interviews with detailed picture boards to explore attitudes towards fashion brands (trainers/athletic shoes) and their symbolic meanings with a group of children aged eight to 12 years who were living in poverty.

#### 2.1.4 Participatory research

Other innovative forms of research include participatory research and action research, which factor into the research process elements of support and empowerment. Box 2.2 outlines the research methods used by the Women's Budget Group (2005, 2008) to engage with women living in poverty.

##### **Box 2.2** *Voices of Experience* project: Women's Budget Group

The *Voices of Experience* project was participatory action research carried out in 2006. The aims of the project were to create a space for women to:

- express their individual experiences of living in poverty;
- learn more about the policy-making process;
- develop proposals for improving their situation;
- present those ideas in conversation with policy makers.

The research had around 50 women participants and was designed in three phases to allow for the development of group knowledge, confidence and experience over time. **Phase 1** was a series of initial workshops in three cities where the women shared and discussed their experiences of poverty. **Phase 2** was designed to develop greater understanding for participants about policy making, and the women developed proposals for policies to improve their situations. Phase 3 was an opportunity for the women to meet with policy makers and discuss their ideas for change. Women were recruited through grass roots organisations working directly with women living in poverty and the workshops were designed to be fully participatory.

The *Voices of Experience* project highlights some of the challenges that qualitative poverty research presents for participants and researchers. People living in poverty live complex lives and there can be a range of reasons why participation in research events can be difficult. These can include a range of participation costs such as childcare needs, time costs, difficulties taking time out of caring, travel costs and subsistence costs. The *Voices of Experience* project had a high rate of retention in the project and several factors are likely to have contributed to this, including ongoing support for the women from partner agencies, and the provision of financial resources to cover the costs of childcare, travel, subsistence and participation.

Some charitable organisations have a strong record in developing innovative research with groups experiencing disadvantage, such as Oxfam's (2006) study *A Stronger Voice* which developed participatory workshops with migrants, refugees and asylum

seekers, and ATD Fourth World's (2000) research into the educational experiences of families living in poverty which developed a valuable participatory approach.

A key research project carried out in the late 1990s was the *Poverty First Hand* study (Beresford *et al.*, 1999). This was a participatory and emancipatory research project which brought together participants from over 20 groups to explore through group discussion a range of issues, including what people experiencing poverty felt about how poverty was defined, explained and treated by government and media. Box 2.3 outlines the methodology used by the *Poverty First Hand* study.

**Box 2.3 *Poverty First Hand: Poor People Speak for Themselves***

Twenty groups took part in this research project which involved 137 people. Among the participants were 96 women and 41 men, of which 122 were of white ethnicity and 15 of black and minority ethnicity. Fifteen of the participants were disabled. Participants were recruited from different groups including older people, unemployed and lone parent groups, mental health service user groups, homeless people and youth groups. The research used group discussion to overcome any individualistic focus and to enable participants to develop their views through a shared interchange and understanding in a 'safe' environment.

Participants had the right to check, change or withdraw any of their comments at a later date and the intention was to understand poverty from a 'grounded' perspective based on the views, thoughts and experiences of participants rather than through any pre-conceived ideas.

Beresford *et al.* (1999)

*Poverty First Hand* was a valuable research study but like most qualitative research into sensitive issues it also had problems during the fieldwork process, which included – as above for the Women's Budget group – the need for extra time and resources. It also experienced difficulties ensuring informed consent from participants, especially where initial contact was through gatekeepers. It was also a challenge to ensure equal involvement during the group process. In this instance researchers found that setting ground rules was important to allow people the time and space to articulate their views without pressure from others. The researchers also experienced problems when accessing groups to take part in the project and this was exacerbated by the limited number of people experiencing poverty who were involved in anti-poverty organisations. Despite some limitations this is an important study because the voices, views and perceptions of people experiencing poverty are clearly heard, and the participants have a relatively high degree of control over the research process. However, the study also highlights the challenges of participatory research and the need for extra time and resources at the funding stage if 'user led' participatory research is to continue to develop.

## 2.2 Understanding poverty as a social experience: overall messages from research

Before turning to findings drawn from research with children and parents, which are reported in Chapters 3 and 4, this final section of Chapter 2 sets the scene for the report by highlighting some overall messages from research about the impact that poverty can have on people's lives and the type of concerns that disadvantaged people have about how poverty is defined and conceptualised.

### 2.2.1 What does poverty mean to people who experience it?

During the *Poverty First Hand* project the research groups discussed the effects of poverty in general on the everyday lives of those who endure it. Throughout the discussions poverty was seen to be an 'overwhelmingly negative' experience and the effects of poverty identified by the different groups fell into four main categories:

- psychological effects – including loss of self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, anger, depression, anxiety and boredom;
- physical effects – including damage to people's health;
- relational effects – social and personal relationships were affected and stigma was a key issue;
- practical effects – poverty affected people's choices and presented challenges to parenting.

(Categories identified in Beresford *et al.*, 1999)

The relational effects of poverty can be particularly damaging and corrosive, especially the impact of exclusion and stigma. Therefore, although many of the participants in the *Poverty First Hand* study related experiences that revealed that they were personally severely affected by poverty many did not see themselves as 'poor' nor did they wish to be labelled as 'poor'. One of the main reasons why people may be reluctant to acknowledge their poverty is likely to be the strong negative connotations that are mapped on to social and cultural understandings of poverty. Participants in the study were very concerned about stigma and about negative images and the stereotyping of people in poverty by the media.

*'It does label you, there's no question about it...if you are poor, shall we say, not as wealthy as some, you are considered to be worse in some ways, socially worse – you are literally socially worse, but even as a person, quality of character, it's automatically 'you're poor' therefore you steal or may steal. You're not worthy, you're untrustworthy.'*

(Unemployed person in Beresford *et al.* (1999:64))

Poverty is a highly stigmatised social position and the experience of poverty in an affluent society can be particularly isolating and socially damaging. Social difference and 'otherness' – being perceived as somehow different to other people in society as a result of poverty – has a profound impact on people's lives. As Lister argues (2004:103) naming or labelling people in poverty as 'the other' has 'symbolic, cultural, psychological and material effects'. These issues emerge across the different studies reviewed and they are explored in more detail in the chapters that follow.

# 3 Listening to children: the impact of poverty in childhood

This chapter draws on findings from qualitative research carried out in the UK since 1998 with children and young people who are living in poverty. It examines the impact of poverty on children's lives drawing out key messages that emerged from the evidence review, and highlighting important dimensions of poverty that children themselves identify as areas of concern in their everyday lives. To do so the chapter presents:

- 1 an overview of key studies that engage directly with low-income children and young people;
- 2 the key dimensions of poverty, including the impact of poverty on children's economic, social and emotional wellbeing;
- 3 children's experiences of poverty within the home and its impact on family life and family relationships;
- 4 children's experiences in their neighbourhoods and of public services, including the importance children place on access to affordable transport;
- 5 children's experiences of employment, including their perceptions of low-income parental employment and their own engagement with work;
- 6 children's experiences of school, including perceptions of social inclusion and exclusion within the school environment.

## 3.1 Overview of key studies that engage directly with low-income children and young people

The voices and concerns of children living in disadvantage have historically been absent from policy and research. However, from the mid 1990s a body of

research that engages directly with children and young people living in poverty has gradually developed. Starting with the *Family Fortunes* study, Middleton *et al.* (1994), this field of research has slowly expanded and the voices and experiences of disadvantaged children and young people have started to be heard.

Table 3.1 sets out some of the key research studies since 1998 which have engaged directly with children and young people to develop an overall insight into children's experiences of poverty. These are holistic studies which draw on children's experiences of poverty across a range of different areas to give a strong sense of the challenges that low-income children face on a daily basis. Other evidence in the review is often focused on particular areas of concern, such as housing, neighbourhoods and school. The evidence from all of these studies indicates that the experience of poverty in childhood can be profoundly disturbing and disruptive. However, children are not passive victims of their circumstances; the evidence shows that they try to mediate and make sense of their experiences and are often engaged in negotiating a complex mix of everyday challenges and disadvantages.

Overall findings from these and other studies in the review suggest that poverty can permeate every level and aspect of children's lives confronting and constraining them in a multitude of different ways. It is important in a review of this nature to remember that low-income children in the UK live in a relatively wealthy society, and their disadvantaged childhoods are experienced alongside their more affluent peers. They are children who have the same social and cultural expectations as other children, and are driven by the same social imperatives. They want and need to 'fit in' and 'join in' with other children. As Ridge (2002) argues the children in her study were 'engaged in intense social and personal endeavour to maintain social acceptance and social inclusion within the accepted cultural demands of childhood, a struggle that is defined and circumscribed by the material and social realities of their lives' (p141).

**Table 3.1 Qualitative UK studies which focus on developing an overall understanding of the impact of poverty on children's lives, 1998 onwards**

Title	Contents	Reference
<i>Worth More Than This</i>	In-depth interviews with 60 children and young people aged 13 to 18. Explores the impact of poverty across a range of different areas, including income, friends and social relationships, family relationships, health, school life and perceptions of the future.	Roker (1998)
<i>Bread is Free: Children and Young People Talk about Poverty</i>	Consultation with 106 children living in areas of high poverty and social deprivation. Children aged between five and 16 years, mainly pre-teens. Methods included story books for younger participants and group discussions for older ones. Findings cover experiences of poverty in everyday life, school, health, crime and relationships with parents.	Willow (2001)
<i>Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a Child's Perspective</i>	In-depth interviews with 40 children living in families receiving Income Support. Children aged between ten and 17 with over half between ten and 12 years old. The study used an explicitly child-centred approach. Areas of research were informed by children's own perspectives and concerns, and included access to social and material resources, social and family relations, school life and self-reflections on poverty in everyday life.	Ridge (2002)
<i>Parenting and Children's Resilience in Disadvantaged Communities</i>	Two linked studies that examined the experiences and perspective of parents and children in disadvantaged communities in Western Scotland. The children's study used focus groups, questionnaires and 60 individual interviews. Children were aged between eight and 14 years old. Research explored, among other things, children's experiences of local community, money, family life and relationships with parents, safety and risk, and future aspirations.	Seaman <i>et al.</i> (2006)
<i>Listen up! Children and Young People Talk About Poverty</i>	Consultations with 100 children and young people from five to 16 years of age. Majority under 15. Consultations conducted in areas of high deprivation in Wales. The study used the same methodology as Willow (2001), and covered the same areas of interest.	Crowley and Vulliamy (2007)

### 3.2 Key dimensions of disadvantage: the economic, social and emotional effects of poverty in childhood

Evidence from children reveals several key dimensions of disadvantage including economic and material impoverishment, social exclusion including fears of marginalisation and the deep emotional trauma that can accompany experiences

of stigma and social difference. Each of these three dimensions is explored in more depth through children's narratives in this chapter.

### 3.2.1 The economic and material effects of poverty for children

The economic and material effects of poverty are regularly highlighted by children in research. Children's concerns tend to fall into three main areas: worry about the amount of money available for their families and themselves; unhappiness about lacking material possessions; and anxieties about the material and symbolic markers of social inclusion in childhood such as clothing and trainers. This section looks at each of these areas drawing on evidence from children themselves.

#### *Children's perspectives on money*

Children's concern about the adequacy of income coming into the family for their own and their families' needs is evident across a range of studies (including Roker, 1998, Crowley and Vulliamy, 2002; Ridge, 2002; and Ridge and Millar, 2008).

Crowley and Vulliamy's (2007) consultation with children and young people living in disadvantaged areas reveals the intense social pressures that children living in poverty are under. The selection of quotes below are taken from children's group discussions about whether children who don't have much money are treated differently by other children and adults, and whether not having much money affects what they can do. They show a good understanding of what poverty means for children.

*'You can get picked on because if you haven't got enough money to get Nike trainers and stuff like that.'*

*'The right clothes and the right friends are important.'*

*'You wouldn't get what you wanted for Christmas or have a birthday party.'*

*'If you don't have much money you can't have coal for your fire, or have a bed and you can't have good things for your birthday.'*

*'My mother could give me as much as she could afford. She can't give me all her money... She won't be able to pay off her gas and electricity bills.'*

(Taken from Crowley and Vulliamy (2007:11&13))

Lack of family income meant that many children were feeling deprived and unhappy that they missed out on things that other children had. The following quote from a young girl in the Hooper *et al.* (2007) study reveals very well the frustrations of being a dependent child without any autonomous income, and the

conflict that children experience between trying to help out at home and the need to satisfy their own wants and desires.

R: *'I just really want a little bit more pocket money 'cos I mean at Christmas my mum has to get, she has to like spend 1p coins 'cos she hardly has enough and she really has to fork out to get enough money for toys and stuff, I sometimes say "just get me one little present" and at my birthday, it's coming up now, I said "I'll save up to get a Nintendo" but she's going to help me out a little bit and I don't really feel a little bit happy about that, 'cos she doesn't really have enough money to get it, so I find it really upsetting.'*

I: *'So you're worried that she won't be able to afford it?'*

R: *'Yeah, and I find it really upsetting because I'm just like going to get just that little one thing and I just think I should really be paying for stuff. I should do more for my mum and I'm not doing really, but I don't have enough money to do any more.'*

(Eight year old girl in Hooper et al. (2007:61))

### *Missing out on material things*

Poverty is an outcome of severe economic stress and a lack of material goods are in many ways the most tangible signs of disadvantage. Research evidence shows that for children a lack of material goods and childhood possessions including toys, games and appropriate clothing can have a profound impact on their everyday lives and their social interactions with their friends (see: Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002 and 2007; Crowley and Vulliamy 2007; and Elliot and Leonard, 2004).

Findings from Willow's (2001) consultation with children echo many other studies where children reported going without food, clothes and basic everyday necessities like bedding and towels. A lack of material possessions, including toys and clothing, presents considerable difficulties for children faced with the stiff challenge of maintaining status under the general pressures of childhood consumer culture. In particular research shows that going without what is deemed to be the 'right' type of clothing or trainers can present them with real problems. Children can also lack toys that other children enjoy like computers and games consoles, or have difficulties replacing items like bicycles if they are stolen or broken (Willow, 2001; Ridge, 2002; Elliot and Leonard, 2004).

*'If you are like wearing fashion clothes people don't stare at you. If you are wearing like scruffy clothes people just go "look at him, scrub!" or something like that.'*

(Kevin, 12 years old in Ridge (2002:68))

Even the youngest groups of children had a very sharp sense of what the implications were for children who are in poverty if they do not have the right clothing to wear, especially at school.

*'If you don't have the same clothes as other people they say that you've got rags. If the whole school has got the same clothes except for you they will tease you until you have the right clothes...when you don't have any clothes and you don't have any shoes people bully and people laugh at you when you go somewhere.'*

(Seven year old girl in Willow (2001:19))

Elliot and Leonard (2004) explored the significance of fashion brands (trainers/athletic shoes) for low-income children and found that there was a strong desire among the children in the study to own new premium branded trainers. They saw these as being key symbols of social standing. Children and young people who wore the 'right' trainers were seen as popular and 'cool', and as a result were relatively secure from bullying and marginalisation. Some low-income children were striving hard to get the 'right' trainers and used these as a cover to disguise their real economic situation at home.

### **3.2.2 The impact of poverty on social relationships**

Childhood is a vital time for the formation of self and social identities and it is also an intense and socially demanding time. Children who experience poverty are striving, like their peers, to be included in the social world of childhood (Ridge, 2002). However, unlike their peers they are faced on a daily basis with considerable social challenges which are exacerbated by the economic and material constraints that structure and inform their lives.

A key area of concern for children is the effect that poverty can have on their friendships and other social relationships. Children and young people attach particular importance to sustaining good friendships and being part of the social groups to which they aspire. Findings from a broad range of qualitative studies have shown that poverty impacts heavily on children's friendships and social relationships and this generates significant anxiety, unhappiness and social insecurity for children (see: Roker, 1998; Willow, 2001; Ridge 2002, 2007; Elliot and Leonard 2004; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Crowley and Vulliamy 2007; Walker *et al.*, 2008; and Sutton, 2008).

Morrow's (2001) research conducted with 101 children and young people aged between 12 and 15 years in deprived areas of England shows the importance that children attach to making and sustaining good friendships in their lives. Exploring children's perceptions of their social relationships and their attitudes to local neighbourhoods and facilities she found that secure social networks and friendships were vital to children's sense of belonging and their wellbeing. Friendships were described by children as protective and supportive; friends were fun, trustworthy, and loyal. Good friendship also conferred social security and social connection. The key social relationships in this study tended to be small scale, interpersonal networks based on family and friends, whereas in general children had limited engagement with formal community networks and associations.

When friendships are working well they clearly have a protective effect, a critical advantage for children already disadvantaged on other social and economic dimensions. However, making and sustaining friendships requires resources that are in short supply for families in poverty. Several issues serve to create particular difficulties for maintaining social networks, including the costs of participation. Childhood has become increasingly commodified and many of the activities that more affluent children enjoy as a matter of course are out of reach for disadvantaged children. Studies show that this can be for a range of reasons including a lack of affordable and appropriate transport (the issue of transport is explored further in Section 3.4.2), the costs of entry or membership, and the added costs of clothing, equipment and refreshments. These difficulties are further compounded by poor provision of neighbourhood opportunities including a lack of affordable or accessible out-of-school provision, especially in rural areas (see Box 3.1) (Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002; Sweeny, 2008; Meek 2008).

### **Box 3.1 Case Study: Kim**

Kim is 11 years old; she lives with her mother and two brothers on a council estate in a small rural town. Kim was unhappy and isolated in her neighbourhood and she felt that people on her estate did not like her or her family. She wanted to move to another area, nearer her school, where she could see her friends after school. She rarely played outside. *'We sometimes play at the park but without the other kids'*.

Sustaining friendships out of school hours was problematic for her as she was isolated in a small village, poorly served by public transport. Her only opportunity for meeting with friends was by attending Guides, the sole organised activity available for children in her village. Initially she had problems buying the guide uniform because it was too expensive, but eventually she managed to buy a cheaper second-hand one. However, although she regularly attended Guides, she was unable to join in with the summer Guide Camp because her mother could not afford the costs. Missing out on Guide camp compounded Kim's feelings of difference and because she rarely got the chance to go away on holiday with her family, she felt the lack of opportunity keenly.

*'If you have money you can go on loads of holidays and that, when if you've got less money you've kind of got to stay in all the time and limit how much you spend an' that.'*

Kim's concerns about not having enough money and fitting in and joining in with friends affect her overall sense of wellbeing and security and this is reflected in her anxiety about the future.

*'I worry about what life will be like when I'm older...because I'm kind of scared of growing older, but if you know what is in front of you then it's a bit better, but I don't know.'*

(Case Study taken from Ridge (2005:27))

Walker *et al.* (2008) using focus groups (4) and semi-structured interviews (40) with children living in lone parent families found that poverty had a significant impact on children's capacity to make and sustain friendships. Children were very aware of their poverty and expressed concern about how it affected their social lives and their opportunities for leisure and community activities. This was particularly the case for older children.

*'I'm sometimes sad, like other people get stuff and I wish I had that. Sometimes I feel like I am acting selfishly, I should be happy with what I've got.'*

(Jade in Walker *et al.* (2008:434))

Ridge's (2002, 2005) studies revealed that children and young people tried especially hard to 'fit in' and to 'join in' with their friends and peers. With some of them engaged in complex strategies to cover up their inability to participate, often creating stories to explain why they could not join in with activities that cost money or were inaccessible for them. Their fears about being seen as different and being left out were exacerbated by the knowledge that other children were doing more and having more, creating insecurity and uncertainty for some children.

*'They go into town and go swimming and that, and they play football and they go to other places and I can't go...because some of them cost money and that.'*

(Martin, 11 years old in Ridge (2002:102))

During Crowley and Vulliamy's (2007) group consultations, children and young people were very clear about the social implications of poverty. The discussions highlighted difficulties with friendships and lack of opportunities for participation, including the cost of transport and how this affected children's capacity to attend activities. Younger children showed a keen sense of these social restrictions, describing how not having enough money meant restricted leisure activities and hobbies:

*'You've got to sit in the house, no watching telly or going to McDonalds. You'd sit there bored out of your brains.'*

*'You can't go swimming.'* *'You can't buy a violin.'*

*'You can't play baseball.'*

(Younger children in Crowley and Vulliamy (2007:13))

Links were also made between social exclusion through lack of money and resources and bullying and stigma. The older children in the study stressed the importance of leisure and social activities, and linked the lack of opportunities with boredom and the dangers of getting caught up in crime and substance abuse. These findings were echoed in Willow (2001) where older children linked

boredom to youth crime and emphasised how leisure activities were vital for young people's happiness and development. In Willow's study, shared activities were seen as valued and important by the young people's groups but they also wanted individuals to be able to exercise choice, to have vouchers or swipe cards to enable them to go swimming or to the cinema for example.

### 3.2.3 The emotional impact of poverty

Poverty strips children of economic security and penetrates deep into their social relationships. It also has an emotional cost as children struggle to cope with social risks of difference and disadvantage. Children's inner fears are largely hidden, and they are rarely asked what their thoughts and feelings are. Sensitively done, research with children and young people reveals that poverty can cause significant anxiety and sometimes depression. Children can feel different and inferior and they can be anxious and fearful about being bullied, isolated and left out. Poverty brings uncertainty and insecurity to children's lives, sapping self-esteem and confidence and undermining children's everyday lives and their faith in future wellbeing. (See: Willow, 2001; Ridge, 2002; 2007; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Hooper *et al.*, 2007; and Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007).

The experience of poverty is often mapped onto other challenges in children's lives for example the ill-health of a parent or sibling, unemployment, family breakdown and separation, domestic violence, poor housing and homelessness. The study of family lives in hardship by Hooper *et al.* (2007; 59) reveals some of the intense stresses and strains that poverty can exert on children's lives. Children were sad about being 'poor', and described how the experience of poverty made them feel 'anxious, frightened, frustrated and/or angry'.

#### *Bullying*

One of the key stresses that children experienced was trying to cope with the stigma of poverty and the corrosive effect of bullying. Without secure friendships some children were isolated and unhappy.

*'It was in school and they said, one of my friends says "I've got more money than you 'cos you're really, really poor, your family will always be poor" and it really upset me.'*

(Girl, eight years old in Hooper *et al.* (2007:67))

In the group consultations carried out by Willow (2001) and later Crowley and Vulliamy (2007), children talked about the painful social and emotional effects of poverty. Children were particularly aware of their vulnerability to teasing and bullying, and many had experienced name calling and the humiliation of being picked on and ridiculed for wearing the wrong shoes or clothes, or for not fitting in to the demanding social and material norms of childhood. School uniforms were also seen as costly and one 11 year old described how teachers put pressure on children about school uniform policies.

*'You have to wear the uniform. There is no other option. But some of the jumpers are £11 so even if you can't afford it you have to get it. If not the teachers come down on you really hard...I know at our school if you don't come in uniform you have to get like a uniform pass and you explain to the teachers that you can't wear uniform and you give a reason, but after two days you have got to wear the uniform. If you don't you get like a detention and a letter home and the teachers are like blaming you and not your parents because you have got to make sure you are in school and not your parents make sure you are. It's like the teachers are picking on us, on the children that can't afford as much.'*

(11 year old in Willow (2001:37))

One group of 11 to 13 year olds in Willow (2001) described how children in their school were punished and publicly humiliated and even stopped from cooking if they owed any cookery debts even very small ones. There were also accounts of children staying at home because they were worried about being bullied, with two of the groups mentioning knowing young people who had tried to commit suicide because they were under extreme pressure about having the wrong kind of clothes and footwear at school. These concerns about being bullied within the school environment were also echoed by participants in both Roker's (1998) and Ridge's (2002) study. In Roker (1998) there was evidence that bullying was a key factor in some young people's experiences of school, and there was a sense that teachers were often seen by young people in the study as uncaring and unhelpful. In Ridge's (2002) study, children were anxious about difference and stigma and this was particularly the case for some children at school who had been bullied for wearing the 'wrong clothes' or just for being perceived as 'different'.

*'I want to change to a new school because I don't like it up there no more. I got bullied and well, the police officer used to come and see me, and a girl found out and she's told everybody at the school, now I just want to move school.'*

(Bella in Ridge (2002:63))

The issue of bullying at school is also picked up in Section 3.6 that focuses on social relationships at school.

### 3.3 Living with poverty: children's experiences of poverty in their home lives

A secure, loving and supportive home environment is an essential requirement for all children and young people. However, the impact of poverty can bite deep into the home and family life, challenging parents' capacity to adequately provide for their children and creating the potential for stress, ill-health and in some cases discord (see Chapter 4 for parent's accounts of the challenges of parenting in poverty). Children's experiences of poverty within the home are complex and

nuanced. In general, the evidence review highlights the strengths of families and the vital role that loving support especially in adversity can bring to children's lives.

Children are also active rather than passive family members and a range of studies reveal how children are key contributors to family life, playing an important role in mediating and managing the experience of poverty within families. In some cases children are actively contributing to the home through care work and/or through cash or kind contributions to family finances with income generated by their own employment (see also Section 3.5) (Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002 and 2007; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Hooper *et al.*, 2007; Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Ridge and Millar 2008).

### **3.3.1 Housing: the impact of poverty on children's home environment**

Poverty and disadvantage is experienced by children in a range of settings and central among these is within the home. For most people the home environment represents the secure foundation of our lives, and for children the home represents the primary source of emotional support, material security and secure social relationships. We know from research with parents living in poverty that they strive to protect and support their children in the face of disadvantage (see Chapter 4). And we have seen that children are aware of the pressures that poverty and disadvantage bring to their families and into their homes, and that they seek to moderate, manage and negotiate those pressures (see Section 3.3.3 below for further discussion). This section examines the evidence from children about their experiences of housing and the impact of the home environment on children's social and emotional wellbeing, including children's experiences of homelessness.

#### *Children's perceptions of their home environment*

Research carried out looking at the impact of poor quality accommodation and homelessness reveals that the type and quality of housing experienced by children can significantly affect their social and emotional wellbeing (Roker, 1998; Nettleton 2001; Ridge, 2002; Mustafa, 2004; Rice, 2006; Walker 2008). Studies show that while some children in low-income and disadvantaged households are positive about their homes, others indicate that their homes can be damp and cold and run down. There can also be a shortage of room in households for privacy, homework, associating with friends or having friends over to stay.

Rice's (2006) research was carried out with children aged between seven and 11 years who were living in poor housing in 2006. The children reported a range of concerns, including difficulties sleeping, studying and playing in their own houses because of unfit conditions and overcrowding, or where children were living in temporary accommodation. Children expressed anxiety about their school work and the frustrations of having no space to work. Children who were in unfit housing referred to a range of difficulties affecting their health, including rats, dirt and damp, and severe overcrowding. Some of the quotations below taken from children's accounts reveal the impact that poverty coupled with poor housing can have on children's lives.

*'Every day I think of moving...Every time I walk through the house I am not really happy.'*

(Darran, 13 years old)

*'It's harder to make friends because every time I move again I miss them and I can't make new friends.'*

(Asad, 15 years old)

*'I get sick often, I get a lot of flu... I get sick so much, then I miss my school work, but I don't stay at home that much...Maybe I catch it from other people or maybe I get it from this home...[The Landlord] never repairs anything...Everything breaks.'*

(Jasara, ten years old)

*'It's freezing in the winter; you have to wear hats and scarves...Even though you wear too much clothes you still feel cold. It's bad when you sleep.'*

(Mark, nine years old)

(Children in Rice (2006:43:22:50))

It is clear from the research evidence that poor housing conditions can have a high social cost for children. The voices of young people in Roker's study (1997) reveal some of the social and emotional costs of poor housing born by children and young people, and their anxieties about stigma and difference.

*'It's just too embarrassing; I'd never have people back here. It is just too awful.'*

*'It's difficult. There's nowhere like, to be on your own. I go out in the garden sometimes, in the rain, just to be on my own, to get some peace. There's nowhere else to go.'*

(15 year olds in Roker (1998:10/11))

In Ridge's (2002) study, lack of space coupled with a lack of transport meant that the general to and fro of childhood relations, the sharing of lifts and overnight stays was difficult for children in disadvantaged families and affected reciprocity between families, which in turn restricted children's opportunities to go out with friends and to have friends over to stay the night. One child reported his friend's reluctance to stay because his house was too cold without central heating.

### *Homelessness*

Shelter has conducted several research studies with children in unfit housing and who are homeless (see: Robinson, 2002; Mustafa, 2004; Rice, 2006; and Harker, 2006). Rice's study (2006) of children who were homeless illustrates many of the

key issues identified by children in other studies. Homeless children experience upheaval and loss, but they also suffer the added disadvantage of moving away from schools, neighbourhoods and key social relationships. In Rice's study, children talk eloquently about losing friends, having poor health and enduring long and tiring journeys to try and stay at their original schools. Some children experienced repeated moves and these were highly stressful. Homelessness and the resulting upheaval create disruption and social fracture for children. Nettleton's (2001) research with homeless families whose homes had been repossessed involved interviews with 17 children and young people aged between 7 and 18 years. Children's narratives reveal that the loss of their homes had a significant impact on their everyday lives at a social and psychological level. They felt very sad about leaving their homes and were worried about their parents wellbeing, although in some cases the loss of a home was a result of a father not paying the mortgage and some of these children felt 'let down' by their fathers. The importance for children of staying at the same school was vital and most of the children had managed to stay at their old schools. However, their schools and previous neighbourhoods could be some distance away and children found the costs of fuel and fares to return to the area made it difficult for them to keep in contact with their friends.

### **Box 3.2 Case Study: Ben**

Eight-year-old Ben lives with his mother and two brothers in an overcrowded ground floor flat. Shortly after the family moved in, a severe damp and mould problem developed. An environmental health inspector has declared the property unfit for human habitation on two separate occasions. *'It's the smell that's almost the worst thing. It's so bad when you come into the flat'* describes Ben's mother, Sandra.

The damp and mould is having a severe impact on the children's health, which is affecting their education because they are missing school so often due to illness. *'My oldest little boy [Ben] is having difficulties at school. And he's had so much time off, so when you have lots of time off it makes things much worse.'* The children's mental health is also being affected. Ben is being teased at school because his clothes smell of damp, which is affecting his self-confidence. *'It's not right...to be told that you smell. Kids are so cruel. [Ben] was teased for it. He's seeing the child psychologist now because he has low self-esteem.'* The condition of the house makes it difficult for him to have friends round to play, which is impacting on his social development.

*'When my friend comes round he says [my home] stinks and when I go to school this boy says my clothes stink...but Mummy washes them.'*

(Ben aged eight)

Case Study taken from Harker (2006:24)

Mustafa's (2004) study of 29 children also explored children's experiences of homelessness. The study was conducted with children aged between four and 16 who came from a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities. The study used a variety of research activities including drawing, writing, questionnaires and drama, (there are also three case studies). Evidence from the children revealed the high costs of homelessness for their health and wellbeing, their education and their social relationships. Their temporary accommodation created difficulties for them eating, sleeping and having space to play and privacy. Their accommodation was often of poor quality, with shared amenities for washing, eating, bathing and using the toilet. Five children in the study reported seeing rats or mice.

*'I eat in the corridor...I don't want to eat in my room...if I put my food on the floor the mouse will come...it will poo on it...it's black.'*

(Boy, six years old in bed and breakfast accommodation in Mustafa (2004:19))

Some children in this study had been re-housed and these children were generally happier with their new homes. Despite the stresses children and their families experienced, all of the children in this project said that they were close to their parents and expressed a sense of care and responsibility for their families. This was evident in children's accounts of caring for siblings and, for example, helping to translate documents or conversations.

### **3.3.2 Children's relationships with their parents and other family members**

In research, children have shown a keen awareness of their parents' situations and the potential tensions and strains that poverty precipitates within families. During Willow's (2001) consultation with disadvantaged children they were asked about what they felt the financial impact of having little money would be on family life. Their responses revealed that children and young people have considerable empathy with their parents and understand the financial pressures they are under. Their descriptions of how parents might feel about having no money included sadness, anger, frustration, and loneliness.

This was echoed in Crowley and Vulliamy's (2007) study where younger children in particular expressed an acute awareness that parents might feel sadness and shame if they were in poverty. Children in both studies were also concerned that parents might argue about money. However, not all group discussions in Willow's study were negative and young people from one group felt that a lack of money could draw families together. It is sometimes hard to unpick from group consultations whether children are talking about their own experiences or their perceptions of what other people's lives are like. But it is clear from both studies that children and young people are very sensitive to the challenges and demands that poverty presents for family life.

For many children poverty comes into their lives close on the heels of other difficult and often painful situations. This may be the onset of sickness and disability, unemployment and/or family dissolution and change. This means that the experience of poverty is closely entwined with other difficult life events that children have to mediate, make sense of and negotiate. The evidence shows that children are very conscious of the link between family change and family poverty (see Ridge, 2002, and Walker *et al.*, 2008)

*'I've always been broke. I only get money at birthdays and Christmas, maybe Easter. Nothing else. I feel really poor. I just think why did my dad left [sic]?'*

(Thomas in Walker *et al.* (2008:433))

Hooper *et al.* (2007) carried out in-depth interviews with parents and children in 70 households for a study that focused particularly on family relationships. The study included families living in poverty and in more affluent neighbourhoods. It also included families from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The study found that even very young children had worries about their family's circumstances, and when parents were stressed children were also likely to be stressed. Where family pressures were associated with poverty then children tried to hide their needs. There was evidence that some children were experiencing conflict within their homes and also indications of difficult relationships with non-resident parents. Children also felt vulnerable to bullying. Sometimes children's accounts revealed how the stresses of poverty could create tensions between children and their parents.

I: *'Can you tell me about a time when you were teasing her and she shouted at you and then you felt sad?'*

R: *'I was trying to have a joke with her but, and saying, "oh I forgot what it was but I joked to her about something and then I tried to make", I was just trying to make her laugh and she was quite stressed because she had like no money at that moment and she said, she said stuff like "Go up to your room now" and "Would you stop it please" and "I don't like the way you joke with me most of the time" and stuff. But I was only trying to make her feel better instead of being stressed.'*

(Nine year old in Hooper *et al.* (2007: 58))

However, despite the pressures that poverty exerted on family life, mothers were seen as a vital support by children, and almost all children in Hooper *et al.*'s (2007) study included mothers as key members when mapping their social networks and indicated that they would talk to their mothers if they had a problem or were worried. This was especially the case for younger children. Relationships with fathers and stepfathers were not given the same status as relationships with mothers and overall only about one-fifth of the children in the study said they would turn to their fathers or stepfathers if they had problems or worries.

Grandparents were also seen as important family supports by the children in Hooper *et al.*'s (2007) study and this echoes findings from other studies, especially if there was ongoing conflict with parents, and particularly for children in lone parent

households (Walker *et al.*, 2008; Ridge and Millar, 2008; Millar and Ridge, 2009). In Millar and Ridge's (2009) qualitative longitudinal study, children living in low-income, working, lone-mother families were interviewed over several years and their accounts show that they tended to have very close, enduring relationships with their grandparents. It was also often their grandparents who played a key role in caring for them when their mothers were working.

*'My mum and granddad had like a fallout quite a while ago now and like he didn't used to come up in the morning and it was so hard, like what were we to do...I think that if he wasn't here it would make all our lives a lot harder, so he's quite a big part in our family.'*

(Taken from Millar and Ridge (2009:115))

It was apparent from children's narratives across several studies that poverty did not always bring family tensions and for some children the restrictions of low-income could mean more time spent together as a family which could enhance relationships and strengthen bonds. However, this was still tempered by the overall constraints of poverty. Box 3.3 presents a selection of quotes from children which gives some insight into children's alternative views of family life and poverty drawn from a range of studies.

### **Box 3.3 Children's views of family life and poverty**

*'Oh it has made some differences to our lives, like material things, we have hardly any of them...But also because they are on benefits and my dad has got Disability Living Allowance he can't work, he's at home all the time and so we really have a lot more family involvement, and I think my relationship with my parents is a lot better than some.'*

(Nell in Ridge (2002:101))

*'It was good because she spent lots of time with me, but then the bad thing was that you couldn't do anything at that time because there was no money coming in. You had to limit on stuff. Using the gas and everything really, it wasn't good in that way. But it was good because my mum was staying with me.'*

(Roshan in Ridge (2007: 403))

*'I think I'm the same as other people but sometimes I think I enjoy it more because I don't like get loads of stuff. I try and enjoy it more, whereas my friend will get loads of clothes and things all the time.'*

(Fifteen year old in Roker (1998:59))

### **3.3.3 Children's strategies for coping with poverty and disadvantage at home**

In general, the evidence reveals that low-income children tend to be very protective of their parents, and they adopt various strategies for managing and coping with reduced family incomes. It is apparent that children adopt a range of different

strategies to ease financial pressures within their families, including actively contributing to family budgets where and when they can and limiting their needs and reducing their demands to take pressure off strained family resources. In doing so, children are often actively trying to protect their parents from knowing the true cost of poverty on their childhoods.

We know from studies about parenting on a low-income that parents, particularly mothers, tend to go without to provide more resources for their children (Middleton *et al.*, 1994; Middleton *et al.*, 1997; Goode *et al.*, 1998). In this way parents are trying to protect their children from the worst effects of poverty. However, what is apparent from research with low-income children is that children themselves try to moderate the impact of restricted finances within their families. Several studies have shown that children are very active and responsive family members who have a keen insight into the financial circumstances of their parents and the pressures that a restricted income can generate within their families. The studies reveal the ways in which children tried to reduce financial pressures by concealing their needs and reducing their expectations, and where possible seeking financial support elsewhere through employment and thereby easing the pressures on family budgets for pocket money and clothing (Roker, 1998; Backett-Milburn *et al.*, 2003; Ridge, 2002, 2006a; Hooper *et al.*, 2007).

Ridge's (2002) study shows that children's and young people's strategies of support for their families can be both overt and more covert. Where children were able to work and earn their own small incomes they were often contributing financially to the home, lending or giving money to their parents, or helping out in kind, easing economic pressures by buying their own clothes and paying for activities etc. (see Section 3.5 below on children's experiences of employment). However, this was not an option for most of the children in the study either because they were too young or unable to find work or there were no such opportunities available to them. For these children, strategies of support for parents were often more covert and included restricting any financial demands that they might make in relation to their own needs or desires, for example for clothes, activities and school events. Some children and young people in Ridge's study were going without by effectively excluding themselves from school activities and trips by not asking their parents for the money to go. There was a realistic assessment by them that parents could not afford the trip and therefore they were often already resigned to not going. In this study girls in particular were very protective of their parents.

*'I knew it was a struggle for them and I knew that what I wanted couldn't have been that important to go and ask for money and I just...I've always got a sense when things are wrong and I can tell so I just won't ask 'cos I don't like asking for anything.'*

(Amy, 15 years old in Ridge (2002:98))

Ridge's (2006a) study of low-income children's lives in working lone-mother families (drawn from a larger qualitative longitudinal research study) revealed how children had developed a keen awareness of the costs of everyday essential

items like food, petrol, fuel, gas and electricity. Prior to their mother's employment when their families were living on Income Support many children had experienced tight financial constraint in their homes and they recalled cutting down on food, clothing, and material goods as well as social activities. However, even when mothers were working their financial circumstances were not necessarily much improved and some children were still actively managing their expectations and needs to try and spare their mothers any increased financial stress.

*'Well I don't like asking Mum for money that much so I try not to. Just don't really ask about it...It's not that I'm scared it's just that I feel bad for wanting it. I don't know, sounds stupid, but, like sometimes I save up my school dinner money and I don't eat at school and then I can save it up and have more money. Don't tell her that!'*

(Courtney in Ridge (2006:209))

#### *Other forms of support given by children for their families*

In addition to children's economic strategies, evidence from research looking at parental employment and parental illness and disability reveals that some children are playing a key role in sustaining family life through their own care and labour within the home.

Research by Ridge (2006, 2007) reveals that children in low-income, working, lone-mother families played a key role in sustaining their mothers in employment through taking on extra chores and responsibilities within their households. Children's accounts of their lives revealed a complex range of caring and supporting activity including helping around the house – cooking, cleaning, and washing; helping with sibling care, and in many cases taking on the responsibility for self-care; moderating needs, sharing financial burdens where and when they could; and giving emotional support to their mothers and siblings.

#### *Children as carers*

For children and young people living in families where there is sickness and disability there is also likely to be poverty and hardship associated with long-term receipt of benefits, increased costs associated with disability and the additional costs of caring. Sickness, disability and long-term health care problems can cause severe financial hardship within families and there is a strong association between poor health, young carers and poverty and social exclusion (Becker, 2008). There are a range of research studies that engage directly with young carers to give a valuable insight into the complex and sensitive issues that surround young carers' lives (Bibby and Becker, 2000; Dearden and Becker, 2000, 2005; Becker and Becker, 2008). The focus of this evidence review is on the experience of poverty and in the case of young carers the multifaceted nature of relationships of care within their families creates particular challenges for young people which can be further compounded by the additional demands of coping with severe and enduring disadvantage. Caring tasks carried out by young carers range from domestic chores like cooking and cleaning to emotional support, managing medications

and personal, intimate care (see, among others, Dearden and Becker, 2000). Research with young carers reveals the extra impact of financial strain on already complex and challenging lives. Children's accounts of caring in poverty expose the likelihood of experiencing problems at school from missed time and feelings of exclusion which can result in poor educational outcomes and difficulties making transitions from school into employment. Often young carers take on part-time rather than full-time employment to accommodate time needed to continue with caring responsibilities resulting in further disadvantage (Bibby and Becker, 2000; Dearden and Becker, 2000, 2005; Becker and Becker, 2008).

In Becker and Becker's (2008) study of young carers aged between 16 and 17 years (and between 18 and 24 years) some young carers revealed the extra pressures that poverty brought to their lives. Participation in leisure activities could be especially constrained for young carers who were also living in poverty. The study found that those who were least likely to be engaged in leisure and recreation were constrained by heavy caring responsibilities coupled with financial disadvantage which together created a '*powerful barrier to participation*' (Becker and Becker, 2008: 40). Some young carers also revealed that they sometimes went hungry because their families did not have enough money for food. This created anxieties, particularly for young people concerned about sick family members; the quote below is from a 16 or 17 year old young carer who is trying to protect his mother when the budget is too tight to buy sufficient food.

*'And I worry about me mum then because she is not eating what she should be eating. It's not like we can eat three meals a day, like you should do, because we haven't got the money to do that.... So sometimes I go without food to give it to me mum. Do you know what I mean?'*

(Taken from Becker and Becker (2008:42))

## 3.4 Neighbourhood and public services

Poverty is essentially a restrictive and constraining experience and as has already been already shown, children and young people in low-income households experience significant difficulty in gaining access to activities and opportunities outside of their immediate localities due to a lack of affordable transport and the costs of participation.

### 3.4.1 Children's perceptions of living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

The quality of space, security and opportunity that children can enjoy within their home neighbourhoods is of critical importance for low-income children. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods, especially urban ones tend to be degraded and unsafe. They can also be characterised by aggressive and hostile behaviour from adults and gangs. In some localities, children and young people have to negotiate a range of risks including litter, broken glass and discarded needles. Overall, the evidence from children indicates that impoverished neighbourhoods are often

lacking in safe spaces for play, have a lack of space for children to meet up and limited opportunities for shared social activities (Ridge, 2002; Elsley, 2004; Butler, 2005; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Walker *et al.* 2008; Sutton, *et al.*, 2007; Sutton, 2008; Meek, 2008).

In a study by Butler (2005) for Barnardos Cymru to contribute to the Generation 2020 Project in Swansea, a group of 60 disadvantaged children aged between 6 and 11 took part in a range of innovative research activities, including focus groups, map making, art work and photography groups to explore a range of issues, including their experiences and perceptions of their neighbourhoods and communities. Children identified their neighbourhoods as being both friendly and unfriendly. They greatly valued the closeness of communities and the familiarity of neighbours, friends and family. But they also expressed substantial concerns about their neighbourhoods being 'scary' places, especially with regard to incidents of aggression, drunkenness and harassment from adults and gangs of older youths. A significant number of children in the study had experienced, witnessed or felt very strongly about aggressive behaviour from adults in their communities.

Public space is social space for children and young people and the particular value of public space for the wellbeing of low-income children is revealed by a study supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Sutton *et al.*, 2007; Sutton, 2008). This study used participatory methods to compare the lives of children from different social backgrounds. The study drew on findings from research with 42 children with a particular focus on children's freedom, safety and use of public space. Findings show that for the disadvantaged children in the study, public space and street play were of vital importance. In particular the use of public space compensated children for a lack of space at home and reduced opportunities for alternative activities. The use of public space was not without hazard for children, who had in many cases developed competencies in assessing risks and managing their own safety. Nevertheless, children were particularly aggrieved by the loss of space as areas became boarded off and used as building land.

Morrow's (2001) study of children and young people's perspectives of their neighbourhoods found that young people's experiences of their neighbourhoods differed according to their gender, ethnicity and age, with girls more likely than boys to feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods, and children from ethnic minority groups reporting unpleasant episodes of racial harassment. Younger children felt that they did not have enough places for play and older children were concerned about a lack of places for them to meet and socialise.

Elsley (2004) used a small case study approach to engage with children and young people aged 10 to 14 who were attending an after-school club in an area of high deprivation in Edinburgh. The study explored children's and young people's views and experiences of public space in regeneration areas, and considered whether children's perspectives were accurately reflected in public policy. The study used a variety of participatory techniques including a focus group, map drawing and individual interviews. It also included a group expedition to discuss and photograph

places that were liked and disliked in the area. Elsley found that children and young people particularly valued public spaces, streets and shopping areas but also 'wild' areas around the community like woods, ruins and an old slag heap. They also identified a shortage of space and facilities for children and young people, and expressed dissatisfaction at feeling left out of consultations or having their views ignored about what was needed in their neighbourhoods.

*'We asked for it [a park] ages and ages ago and they says we canna dae it because there's just a wee park along the road...[it's] too far away and for babies.'*

(Girl, aged 12 in Elsley (2004:160))

*'Keep on saying to them, "need more facilities so don't get bored". [They] say they will do it but [they] never really do it.'*

(Girl aged 14 in Elsley (2004:160))

Seaman *et al.* (2006) explored disadvantaged children's and young people's strategies for keeping themselves safe in difficult local environments. They found that in general, children valued the role of parents and other key adults like teachers in protecting them and keeping them safe. But like the children in Sutton's study they had also developed their own strategies for staying safe and these often included staying in groups and protecting each other. Older children were also looking after younger children. However, these strategies became problematic when adults became threatened by groups and the police were called. Grouping together could also mean that other peers interpreted group activity as looking for trouble. Children were not always able to protect themselves and some children were just trying to ignore attacks or bullying, and in some cases accepting them with resignation.

Interviewer: *'Do you ever get hassled?'*

Girl: *'Yeah, I've had a golf ball threw at me. I've been spat on hundreds.'*

Interviewer: *'And what have you done when that happens?'*

Girl: *'Tried to ignore it because to retaliate they would all jump on me.'*

Interviewer: *'So what do you do when that has happened?'*

Girl: *'If I've been spat on I'll go home and get washed but nothing really, you just have to accept it.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you talk to your friends?'*

Girl: *'Yeah, go home and talk to my friends.'*

Interviewer: *'Do you talk to your parents?'*

Girl: *'Yeah, but I find it embarrassing sometimes, in case they think I can't take care of myself.'*

(Fourteen year old in Seaman *et al.* (2006:56))

### *Rural childhoods*

While children in urban areas have to negotiate insecure and sometimes dangerous environments, low-income children and young people in rural areas are presented with different challenges. The experience of poverty in rural communities can be a particularly isolating one as many rural areas are predominantly affluent, and children and young people are particularly vulnerable to stigma and difference. Although it would appear that rural areas have more space and potentially more desirable environments studies show that in reality children tend to be restricted from entering many rural spaces (Ridge, 2002; Meek 2008). Access to rural space can often be contested or denied. Rural communities often have few facilities and space for children is in tension with space for adults, so for example small playing fields can be captured by adult interests like cricket, and children are not allowed on the turf. Modern farming practices have also meant that farmland can hold hidden dangers from heavy farm machinery and dangerous chemicals, further restricting children's access to safe rural spaces (Davis and Ridge, 1997). Furthermore, an overall shortage of suitable transport coupled with a lack of affordable and accessible activities leaves low-income children with nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. As a result they are particularly vulnerable to increased visibility and the potential for surveillance and censure by hostile adults (Ridge, 2002; Meek, 2008).

Ridge's (2002) study found that children's accounts of their lives in rural areas revealed a dearth of opportunities for shared play and association in their neighbourhoods. They reported bad service provision and even where opportunities existed for shared leisure activities the cost of participation tended to restrict children's involvement. Without adequate transport and lacking the resources to access activities and opportunities outside of their immediate neighbourhoods, disadvantaged rural children felt confined within their local environments. Several of the rural children in Ridge's study expressed considerable concern about being isolated and excluded within their rural communities.

### **3.4.2 Children's experiences of public services**

A vital element in supporting low-income children's play and social development is the provision of formal services such as public transport and opportunities for shared leisure activities.

#### *Public transport*

Difficulties in accessing and affording transport emerge regularly in children's narratives. In general, children are dependent on other people for their transport needs because they are too young to drive and this affects their capacity to see friends, take part in activities and access environments beyond their immediate localities. Children are therefore highly dependent on being able to draw on affordable, reliable, safe and flexible transport. However, evidence from low-income children shows that lack of affordable and appropriate transport is a key issue for them. Unlike more affluent children whose parents are more likely to have

access to private transport, low-income children tend to be heavily dependent on costly and inadequate public transport. Affordable transport is a vital component linking children to their friends, to after school services and to formal and informal leisure activities, yet children's accounts repeatedly mention difficulties in gaining affordable access to the transport they need (see, among others: Ridge, 2002; Crowley and Vulliamy 2007; Wager *et al.*, 2007; and Sweeny 2008).

Sustaining friends can be particularly hard for rural children who can be bused long distances to their secondary schools then returned to their local villages unable to meet up with friends out of school due to a lack of adequate transport. Even where families have access to their own cars, especially in rural areas, the running costs can be prohibitive and responding to children's social needs may be low on the list of essential trips to be afforded (Ridge, 2002, 2007).

Transport was an important issue for children and young people in Sweeney's (2008) study of rural childhood. Public transport is particularly expensive in rural areas, and young people experienced considerable difficulties getting to further education, socialising and meeting up with friends. Some children felt that being in groups deterred drivers from stopping to pick them up and many young people expressed concern about their safety on buses.

*'There should be a bus for children to get on to because if you go on a Saturday after a match it's full of drunk men and you don't feel safe.'*

(Female 12 in Sweeney (2008:13))

### *Leisure opportunities*

Children's opportunities to take part in leisure activities are severely compromised by a range of factors including limited provision, the costs of participation and difficulties accessing services without affordable and appropriate transport. Research with children reveals that they can struggle to access formal leisure opportunities more easily available to their peers (Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002; Wager *et al.*, 2007; Sweeny, 2008; Meek 2008; Horgan, 2009).

A research project carried out in Scotland (Wager *et al.*, 2007) provides a valuable insight into children's use of formal service provision, including leisure activities. The study explored the effect of poverty on children's access to, perceptions of and use of services. Fifty-six children aged ten to 14 years took part and the study compared the experiences of deprived and more affluent children in both urban and rural areas. A key finding was that public space had a far greater significance for disadvantaged children than more affluent children.

*'That's near my street but. We play there, we play outside, we play round the back, we play round at the shop, play up at [a friend's] street, play down at the shopping centre, play at the park, just play everywhere.'*

(Girl, ten years, City Estate, deprived, lower income in Wager *et al.* (2007:8))

When public space was available children had less motivation to use formal activities or they were seen as additional to public play. But when public and informal spaces were restricted or children had no gardens to play in, formal provision of space and activities became more critical for low-income children. However, despite an evident lack of safe and accessible informal space and the clear need for formal services there were considerable constraints and barriers to low-income children taking up formal provision. These included: the location where services were provided (due to children's and young people's restricted mobility); how much information there was about the services and whether they were designed in a way that was attractive to children; how staff engaged with children; whether the services were located in safe environments; and what time of day and/or year they were available.

For deprived children these supply side issues were further exacerbated by a lack of provision generally, the costs of participating and transport costs. The cumulative effect of these barriers impacted disproportionately on low-income children and acted to exclude them from what limited service provision there was.

Pinnock and Evans' (2008) study of children and families' experiences of the Children's Fund revealed that children often greatly value the extra support they gained from their Children's Fund support workers and the opportunities for participation that were open to them. These included 'group activities, such as library-based book clubs, homework clubs, child-minding services for disabled children'. In addition 'several home-school liaison projects provided group and individually tailored support for children in school-based nurture groups and break-time clubs, as well as supporting parents' (2008:88). However, although activities and support were appreciated, children did not like what they saw as arbitrary age limits where services were withdrawn. This was especially the case when there were few other opportunities for play and participation in their neighbourhoods. One 13 year old girl who had attended a participation project was particularly frustrated by the withdrawal of that opportunity as she got older.

*'I used to go there, but when I started secondary school I wasn't allowed to go...It wasn't fair...they could actually do something else around here because the nearest place for us older kids is...up in [another district].'*

(Thirteen year old girl in Pinnock and Evans (2008:95))

### 3.5 Employment: children's experiences of low-income parental employment, childcare and their own employment

For low-income children, parental employment status is a highly significant issue. The onset of unemployment can bring poverty and disadvantage, and conversely a return to work by a parent who has primary care responsibilities – like a lone parent – can mean significant changes in family life, family practices and family time. Children themselves are also often engaged in their own employment

to improve their access to income (see also the discussion of children's coping strategies in Section 3.3.3).

### 3.5.1 Low-income working family life

There is very little research that has engaged directly with low-income children about their experiences of low-income, working family life. For an insight into this issue the review drew on recent qualitative longitudinal research with children and their mothers in low-income, working, lone-mother households (Ridge, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2008; Millar and Ridge, 2009). The value of this study lies both in its engagement with the family as a whole through interviews with children as well as working mothers, and in the longitudinal aspect of the study which is able to follow children's experiences over time. This qualitative longitudinal sample started off with 61 children and young people aged between eight and 15 years living in 50 lone mother households in 2003, and continued for four to five years over three waves of interviews<sup>2</sup> (see Chapter 4 for lone-mother's accounts of managing low-income employment and family care). The study follows the lives and experiences of children and lone-mothers as they managed the everyday challenges of trying to successfully sustain low-income work and family life, following a period of time outside of the labour market receiving benefits.

The research found that children whose mothers had managed to move into and sustain employment felt that overall they had gained from their mother's employment, especially in relation to an improvement in family income, and a general increase in social participation, albeit from a low starting point. However, despite the advantages identified by children of their mother's employment there were also concerns expressed about the costs of employment to them and especially to their mothers. These included worries about their mother's health, and for some, anxiety about inadequate incomes from work and rising debts. For many of the children, especially younger children, there were concerns about the amount and quality of time spent together as a family since the onset of employment. On the other hand, many of the older children and young people had taken on considerably more self-responsibility and were spending time alone at home, letting themselves in at night and leaving last in the mornings. This increase in responsibility and time alone was generally greatly valued. Overall, almost all children in the study had taken on extra responsibilities within the household to help sustain work and family life (see also Section 3.3.3).

Children and young people whose mothers had not been able to sustain secure employment were generally less buoyant than those whose mothers were still in work. These children and young people were experiencing renewed anxieties about poverty and financial insecurity, and the promise of a better life through employment had not materialised. In some cases, children had found the movement in and out of employment particularly difficult and expressed some uncertainty about the value that was to be gained from work.

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<sup>2</sup> The third wave consisted of 37 children and young people and 34 mothers.

The following two case studies drawn from Ridge and Millar (2008) show how family life can change for low-income children when their mothers take up employment and how the outcomes for children can be fluid and variable.

### **Box 3.4 Case Study: Molly**

Molly is 17 years old and had left home in crisis when she was 16, since then she has been homeless and living with various friends for about a year. Her experiences of her mother's employment had been very difficult. Her mother had an unstable employment history over the period of the study, entering work after a long period on IS and then moving between several different jobs including self-employment.

Molly was supported during the early period covered by the study by her grandfather who played a key role in ensuring that she got going and went to school in the mornings, and saw her after school in the afternoons. However, sadly he had died and this secure structure was undermined and her home life started to unravel.

Molly recalls her mother's first job as relatively well paid but as time went by and her mother changed jobs, her perceptions of her mother's work became more negative. One job required long hours: *'...sometimes I did miss her, because most of the time she wasn't there and you never knew when she was there and when she wasn't. There wasn't a set time that she was going to be in. She was just there when she pleased. I guess I felt a bit lonely when she was working, because my brother was never there and it was just me in the house'*. She had also experienced long periods of time when, despite her mother's employment status, she had felt anxious and insecure about money. *'My mum used to throw it in my face all the time that we didn't have this money and that she couldn't pay the bills and we were going to have to get rid of the house soon and it just all weighed down on top of me.'*

Anxiety about money also affected the ways in which Molly engaged with her mother: *'Like my friends, they'd all want to go to the pictures and stuff and I daren't even ask my mum for it, even if I knew she had the money, because I thought, "Oh, no, it needs to go towards the house," so, I'd stop asking for money.'* For Molly the benefits of employment had been outweighed by the costs and she had entered a period of personal turbulence which had resulted in her leaving home and, in part, ultimately affected her own opportunities to sustain herself at work or in training'.

Case study taken from Ridge and Millar (2008:70).

**Box 3.5 Case Study: Josie and Alfie**

Josie (15 years old) and Alfie (16 years old) were both happy with their mother's employment and felt that overall they had benefited over the last few years from her work. Their mother has mainly worked school hours and Alfie and his sister have always done a range of chores around the house to help with her employment.

Alfie liked sports and felt that he had benefited because his mother's work enabled him to take part in activities, and he also reflected on the value of this for access to resources and equipment like the Internet to help with school work for him and his sister, particularly at important times like exam revision. *'I think we wouldn't have the facilities what we've got now if she wasn't [in work]. So, like the Internet for Josie and mine last year for revising and stuff, we wouldn't have had that.'*

Josie was also positive about her mother's employment and felt that it had helped her considerably, especially to get out and do things. *'It's quite boring like just to hang around locally and you get a bad reputation for it, we normally try to go out to the cinema more or bowling or whatever. And now that mum's working, we get more money to do it and like we've got the car, so we can do that. So yeah, it has made a really big impact. Like, if mum went back to not working now, I wouldn't like it.'* Although Josie felt that she was more able to take part in activities she was also aware that they were still on a relatively low income and care needed to be taken about the costs of petrol, etc.

Case study taken from Ridge and Millar (2008:67).

**Childcare**

In Ridge and Millar's (2008) study, children expressed strong views about childcare and the type and quality of care that was available to them. There was a general dissatisfaction with formal out-of-school care which centred on the type and quality of care that was available. Chief among their concerns was that childcare was often inappropriate, unsuitable and stigmatised. They stressed poor service provision, badly mixed age groups and a lack of stimulation, resulting in boredom. Many children and young people also expressed a preference for spending time with their 'mates' and did not like the idea of staying on after school, especially if they did not like school in the first place. There were children and young people in this study that were very resistant to the idea of breakfast and after-school clubs, and they expressed concerns about the perceived stigma of attending them, these particular children tended not to be involved in formal care.

For younger children who received informal care there was greater involvement with wider family members, especially grandparents, who played a key role in helping families to maintain employment. For children receiving formal childcare

the experience was variable, with some enjoying their child minders and after-school clubs and others expressing dissatisfaction with the type of care they received which was often described as boring.

### *Children's own employment*

A key strategy of low-income children for coping financially and trying to boost their own and often their family's incomes is to take work themselves. Research evidence shows that disadvantaged children do not tend to have access to regular forms of childhood income like pocket money or an allowance – something that more affluent children take for granted. What money is available in the household is often already allocated for basic necessities like food and clothing (Middleton *et al.* 1994; Ridge, 2002). Where children do have some access to pocket money, it is likely to be irregular and often from other family members like grandparents (Ridge, 2002). In highly constrained economic circumstances and in the absence of any other monetary source, children are likely to seek out opportunities for employment. Several research studies have shown that where employment is available, low-income children and young people are often keen to take it up (see: Roker 1998; Leonard, 1998; Mizen *et al.*, 2001; and Ridge, 2002).

Roker's (1998) study highlights the responsibility that children can feel about helping out financially at home. Many of the young people in this study were very concerned about the financial difficulties their families faced and saw these not just as problems for their parents but rather as difficulties to be shared. Roker's sample were 13 to 18 years old and many of the young people aged 15 to 18 were engaged in some form of work or were trying to find work. Gaining employment allowed these young people a measure of autonomy and also helped them contribute to the family income in kind. There were also a number of young people who said that they helped their families whenever they could, through their own earned income or if available from savings.

*'[I give money to mum when she is short]...it's only fair that. We're a family and we have to bind together.'*

(Fifteen year old in Roker (1998:18))

*'If my mum's toughed up for money I go and buy the milk and her bread [using own money] and I go up to Safeways and buy her vegetables and all.'*

(Fourteen year old in Roker (1998:17))

Mizen *et al.* (2001) used child-centred research methods to engage with 70 children, from different socio-economic backgrounds, including children from deprived areas, to explore children's experiences of work. The study used semi-structured interviews, group work, diaries and photographic accounts over a 12-month period and found that for low-income children in the study, employment represented an opportunity for freedom and independence. It also gave them a

chance to keep up with other children and enjoy some of the same social and economic experiences as their peers. As in other studies these children were taking responsibility for their own needs and trying to take pressure off their family's budget.

Children and young people in Ridge's (2002) study were often juggling the different and often competing demands of work and school while also trying to maintain their social lives. Not all children in this study were working or were old enough to work, but those above the legal age for work who were not in employment were actively seeking it. In general, where young people were working the experience overall was positive, allowing young people a measure of freedom and some control over an autonomous economic resource. However, the demands of employment could also be in tension with the expectations and requirements of school work and some young people in the study were finding this hard to manage. Low-income children face particular challenges as they try to balance their pressing need for money in the present with their equally pressing need to stay connected and achieve at school to lift their future prospects in the labour market.

### **Box 3.6 Case Study: Laura**

Laura had given up work because she was afraid that her school work would suffer. She had found life at school very hard and felt that she was being singled out as someone who would not succeed at school. This left her with a dilemma at work because although it gave her more immediate access to her own money, her long-term intention was to ensure that she did not have to manage on a low income in the future, like her mother

*'I did used to have a job but it was interfering with my school life so I quit that...I want to show people that I can do well [at school]. Like some people think that I can't do that well but I want to prove to people that I can do well'*

Case study taken from Ridge (2002:46). Laura is 15 years old.

## **3.6 School**

This section explores children's accounts of their school lives. Children spend a large proportion of their daily lives in the school environment and it is one of the key areas where intervention to improve the lives of low-income and disadvantaged children is possible. Although school is an important place for the development of children's skills and capabilities for future, it is also a key site of social and cultural learning. There are a range of studies that engage with children about their experiences of school and these highlight how the presence of poverty in childhood can permeate every aspect of children's school lives. Key studies in this area include: Roker, 1998; Ridge 2002; ATD Fourth World, 2000; Willow, 2001; Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Horgan, 2007a, 2007b; 2009; Sutton *et al.*,

2007; Wikeley *et al.*, 2007. Children's experiences of school are diverse. However, while some children in these studies were having positive school experiences the overwhelming message from qualitative research with children in disadvantaged families is a negative one. Children's accounts reveal that poverty has a damaging effect across all areas of their school lives, including the social and material realm and through apparently exclusionary institutional practices.

Sutton *et al.*'s (2007) study gives some insight into the different experiences of school for disadvantaged and more affluent children. This was a participatory study with 42 children looking at their perceptions of social difference. Half of the children came from an independent fee paying school and half came from a disadvantaged background. The differences between the children were particularly sharp in relation to their experiences and attitudes towards education. The more affluent children who went to private schools had an intensive school life, were generally very positive about school and had access to a wide range of after-school activities. In contrast, the disadvantaged children held more negative attitudes towards school and their accounts painted school as boring and controlling, saying that they were often shouted at for not knowing what to do. In general, these children tried to spend as little time there as possible by not attending out of school activities for example. The disadvantaged children contrasted their experiences with those of more affluent children.

NS: *'Is life more unfair to some children than others?'*

G1: *'Yes, it is. It is, it's unfair for us because we have to just listen to teachers all the time.'*

NS: *'But isn't that the same for all children?'*

G2: *'No. It's not, because if you're rich you get to go to a posh school where the teachers probably teach you with respect.'*

(Taken from Sutton *et al.* (2007:22))

Roker's (1998) study of low-income young people in the 13 to 18 age group found that many of the children (22 out of 38) had experienced difficulties at school. These included problems with reading and writing, and falling behind because of illness or because they 'could not keep up' and did not understand the work. These young people also felt that school was irrelevant and boring. For many of these young people problems at school had been followed by difficulties in gaining places on college courses or training courses and they were disheartened by their future prospects.

### **3.6.1 Material disadvantage at school**

Children's accounts of their school lives show that material disadvantage can have a particularly problematic effect for children within school (see also earlier discussion about children and material disadvantage in Section 3.2). Without adequate economic resources, children report difficulties buying essential items for school like books, and materials for practical lessons including materials for

examination subjects. Some children express particular anxieties about being able to access important material for study and revision, for example revision guides. They also feel vulnerable to bullying from peers because they are unable to afford appropriate school uniforms and other clothing needs (Ridge, 2002; Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Walker *et al.*, 2008; Horgan, 2009).

The children and young people in Willow (2001) and Crowley and Vulliamy's (2007) study had strong views about the impact of not having much money on school life. Overall, children felt that poverty affected school life and that it was a stigmatising experience in school. They pointed to four main areas where they perceived disadvantage: being unable to afford the school uniform; the embarrassment of receiving free school meals; experiencing difficulty buying essential items for school; and being unable to pay for extra things at school like school trips and books. All of the children and young people recognised that school provided a potential route out of disadvantage but some felt that living in a deprived area meant that the type of education offered was likely to be poor as well. In Crowley and Vulliamy's study, teachers were identified as part of the problem for some young people who felt that teachers had lower expectations of them because of where they lived.

*'Teachers don't understand that we have problems at home – we're passed around to different teachers and end up walking around school. Getting kicked out of school is down to stress at home for poor families and teachers not prepared to listen and help out with problems.'*

(Taken from Crowley and Vulliamy (2007:17))

### **3.6.2 Social disadvantage at school**

The costs of schooling and school materials map in turn onto the social milieu of school life, and children's concerns about social disadvantage were particularly strong through all of the studies. Although school is generally expected to be free there are many occasions where children's families need to find extra funds, for material goods but also, and critically, for social activities, for example school trips, fêtes and wider club-based activities.

Attendance at school-based activities could be particularly important for children who were already missing out on opportunities for shared leisure activities and clubs in their neighbourhoods (see Section 3.4). Wikeley *et al.*, (2007) used in-depth interviews and leisure maps with 55 children to explore their experiences of educational relationships in and out of school. The study, using a matched sample of disadvantaged and more affluent children, found that children who were in poverty had considerably less access to formal out-of-school activities than their more affluent peers. Lack of participation in activities also included out-of-school activities based within the school environment. For children who did engage in out-of-school activities there were clear benefits, not just in terms of participation and the development of skills but also in relation to children's wider experiences of formal schooling and their relationships with teachers.

A key area where children felt the costs of schooling to be especially problematic was with regard to school trips (see Ridge, 2002, and Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007). Attendance on school trips could be especially important for children in families that could not afford to go away for holidays. Half of the children in Ridge's (2002) study had not been away on a family holiday in recent years and some had never been away for a family holiday. Overall, the children in this study felt that going away with peers on a school trip was a highly valued social event; there were also trips that were linked to examination criteria. Some children were not taking messages home about school trips because they were trying to protect their parents from costs.

*'I don't go usually go on trips 'cos they are expensive and that...At our school they do loads of activities and they go to loads of different places...I don't bother asking.'*

(Martin, 11 years old in Ridge (2002:77))

The Department for Children, Schools and Families' studies of the costs of schooling (Brunwin *et al.* 2004; Peters *et al.*, 2009) include a survey component with face-to-face interviews with over 1,600 children of different socio-economic groups. These studies have consistently found that children from low-income families were more likely than others to feel that their parents could not afford things for school and some children were not passing on letters about school trips because they felt that their parents could not afford to pay.

### **3.6.3 Relationships at school: teachers and peers**

Horgan's (2007a, 2007b) research looked at the impact of poverty on young children's experiences of school. She carried out group work with 220 children aged four to 11 in advantaged and disadvantaged schools in Northern Ireland and also talked with parents and teachers. Horgan found that disadvantaged children clearly felt the impact of their poverty on their school experiences. They were considerably more aware than their advantaged counterparts of the costs of things at school and concerned about their parents ability to afford them. There were signs that these children worried about asking for even the smallest amounts of money such as the 50p or a £1 that can be charged for a non-school-uniform day.

As well as peers, teachers play a key role in children's school lives but many of the disadvantaged children in Horgan's study reported poor relationships with teachers and complained about being 'shouted at' in school. This was in contrast to the more advantaged children who did not report this experience. Girls were as likely as boys to complain about being shouted at, but only the disadvantaged boys linked this to their reasons for disliking school, and there were signs in this study of young disadvantaged boys already feeling very disconnected from school.

Teachers shouting at children was also a finding from other studies, including Sutton *et al.* (2007) where disadvantaged children complained about shouting from teachers and their perception of the poor quality of teaching they received. ATD Fourth World (2000) found that children were often unhappy with their

teachers and they gave some interesting responses when asked about what they felt made a good teacher.

### **Box 3.7 Children's views on what makes a good teacher**

The ability of the teacher to be a good listener was an important attribute and this appeared a lot in interviews. When asked what made a good teacher, one boy answered *'patience, being able to listen to people.'* He added that:

*'Some listen to you and talk to you reasonably, but others just shout at you when you ask a question.'*

He felt that the solution was to make it more difficult for people to become teachers, and to observe how people coped with children before they could become teachers. Several children thought that their teachers should *'shout less.'* One boy (aged 15) explained that *'I wouldn't shout, I'd smile.'* He went on to talk about the *'old-fashioned'* teachers at his school, who had been teaching at the school for a long time and tended to shout a lot.

One boy (aged eight) described that he was so afraid of his teacher that he never asked her questions and instead would ask his older friends to help him if he did not understand something.

Other children spoke about the importance of teachers being fair:

*'If someone's bad and then they're good, then the teacher says "yes, you've made an improvement, very good." But if you're good all the time then nothing happens.'*

(Boy, aged 14)

Children also spoke of favouritism towards cleverer students:

*'In my Maths class, because I'm not very good at Maths the teacher hardly talks to me, if it's not to have a go at me. He's only there for his prime students.'*

(Boy, aged 14)

One boy (aged 15) felt he was discriminated against because he was a boy:

*'Some classes you're treated the same, but some classes the teacher can be a wee bit sexist towards the boys. If you're sitting with your hand up for about ten minutes and you tell the teacher, the teacher says "wait a minute." Then when a girl sticks her hand up, the teacher automatically goes straight to the girl before he goes to you. It's a male teacher that does that, so it's a bit weird.'*

Other children talked about being treated with respect by teachers:

*'If a teacher treats me with respect, I treat them with respect.'*

(Boy, aged 15)

Continued

**Box 3.7 Continued**

One boy (aged 15) gave an example of when he had not been treated with respect when told off by a teacher in front of the whole class. He explained how he felt humiliated and belittled, but could not complain because the teacher had the authority.

Taken from ATD Fourth World (2000:22).

Relationships between children, their parents and the school were also a cause for concern for some children and the study by ATD Fourth World (2000) with children and families living in long-term poverty found that while children's attitudes to parent's evenings were often positive especially when parents are involved, many did not attend with their parents, although they wanted them to be there. Some children felt that their parents were only ever at school when there was trouble.

Bullying and the fear of being seen as different at school underpinned children's accounts of school in many studies (see, amongst others: ATD, 2000; Willow, 2001; and Ridge, 2002) (see also Section 3.2.3 of this report for a discussion about bullying). ATD Fourth World (2000) found that one of the main reasons children gave for refusing to go to school was bullying or fear of bullying. The box below gives some examples of the experiences that children in the study have had of bullying at school.

**Box 3.8 Children's descriptions of bullying**

*'They started pushing me about and tripping me up and chucked my shoes in the showers.'*

(Girl, now 15)

*'This boy almost broke my arm and it really hurt – I was too upset to go (to school).'*

(Boy, aged 7)

*'He'd tell his teachers that I called him names because he's coloured; that I'd called him Paki. So he would use the school against me.'*

(Boy, aged 12)

*'They call me names and kick me and punch me. He got everyone to push a coat over my head and someone punched me in the nose and tripped me over.'*

(Boy, aged 7)

Continued

**Box 3.8 Continued**

*'I was bullied when I was short and fat. They used to call me names and sometimes beat me up because I couldn't run fast. I used to hate it. I used to come home crying.'*

(Boy, now aged 14)

[One child talked about retaliation as a response to bullying]

*'If someone bullies you, they keep on bullying you until you stand up for yourself. It can be like a month or a year of really bad bullying. If you've been bullied and you beat a bully, you only get trouble for just one day.'*

(Boy, aged 11)

Taken from ATD Fourth World (2000:26).

Poverty can also be mapped onto other perceived social differences and research by Lloyd and Stead (2001) and Ureche and Franks (2007) with gypsy and traveller children and young people reveal the harsh realities of school life for many children and young people who live in marginalised communities.

**3.6.4 Institutional processes at school**

Institutional processes at school appeared to compound disadvantage and children's narratives reveal the dangers of them of being excluded 'within' school (Ridge, 2002). Ridge's study found that children were suffering from a range of institutional problems which exacerbated their disadvantage at school. These included: an insistence on wearing uniforms; demands for extra school items and materials for examinations and practical subjects; deposit deadlines that families were unable to meet; meetings after school with no transport home; and stigmatising processes of welfare delivery, particularly with regard to free school meal provision.

**3.7 Summary**

A review of evidence from children reveals that the experience of poverty in childhood can be highly damaging and the effects of poverty are both pervasive and disruptive. Poverty permeates every facet of children's lives from economic and material disadvantages, through social and relational constraints and exclusions to the personal and more hidden aspects of poverty associated with shame, sadness and the fear of difference and stigma.

Key areas of concern identified by children are:

- economic deprivation: children were anxious about the adequacy of income coming in to their households and afraid that there would not be enough money for them and for their family's needs;

- material deprivation: children lacked important childhood possessions like toys, bicycles and games, and they also expressed concerns about being short of essentials and everyday items like food, towels, bedding and clothing;
- social deprivation: poverty restricted children's chances to make and sustain friendships, and reduced their opportunities for shared social activities due to the costs of attending social events, inadequate and expensive transport provision and the expense of hosting social occasions within their own homes;
- school deprivation: children experienced restricted opportunities at school largely through an inability to pay for resources such as study guides and exam materials, and restricted social opportunities through an inability to pay for school trips and other social activities. Inability to pay for compulsory items such as uniforms could also lead to conflict with teachers and disciplinary action;
- visible signs of poverty and difference: a lack of the same material goods and clothes as their peers, and an inability to take part in the same social and leisure activities meant that children experienced bullying and were fearful of stigma and social isolation;
- family pressures: children showed keen insight into the challenges and demands that poverty generated for their parents and anxiety about inadequate household income, household debt and their parents' wellbeing and working conditions. They also often tried to moderate their own needs in response to parents' financial difficulties;
- tensions with parents: conflicts sometimes arose with parents who were under severe financial pressure, or who sometimes had to work long hours or rely on childcare that children did not enjoy;
- additional responsibilities: children in low-income working families were often taking on additional responsibilities in the home, including housework and caring responsibilities, or engaged in paid work themselves to ease financial pressures at home and to gain access to their own money;
- poor quality housing: this affected children's health and wellbeing and meant that children had difficulties in sleeping, studying or playing at home;
- homelessness: children experienced considerable anxiety about the quality of their temporary accommodation, including a lack of privacy and no space for play. This affected their health, their school lives and their social participation;
- poor neighbourhoods: deprived neighbourhoods created particular problems for children who described them as insecure and sometimes dangerous. They experienced a lack of safe space for play and a dearth of local and low-cost leisure facilities;

- living in rural areas meant that disadvantaged children lacked social opportunities for shared play, were reliant on inadequate and costly public transport and were unable to meet the high costs of participation. This meant that children often felt confined within their local environments.

Overall, children identified a wide range of issues related to poverty and social exclusion. However, they were not passive 'victims' of poverty: many employed coping strategies such as taking jobs so they could contribute financially to their families, taking on caring duties so parents could work, and restricting financial demands (for example, not telling parents about school trips) to ease financial pressures within the home.

The next chapter looks at evidence from parents about the effect of poverty on family life and social relationships.



## 4 Listening to parents: accounts of family life and parenting under pressure

This chapter reviews the qualitative research evidence from parents about their experiences of parenting in poverty. It is an opportunity to look across the lives of families who are in poverty and hear directly from parents about their experiences of parenting under pressure and the challenges that the everyday hardships of low-income family life present. The chapter examines the evidence gathered with parents using a range of different qualitative techniques including interviews, group work, case studies and peer research. Much of this evidence has been gathered from women who are usually the main carers of children and this is often reflected in research design. After providing an overview of key studies exploring the impact of poverty on family life, the chapter covers a range of key issues identified by parents, these are:

- 1 The impact of poverty on family life, including managing and moderating family needs and coping with financial hardship.
- 2 Parenting under pressure including parents' perceptions of and concerns about the impact of poverty on their children's lives at home and at school.
- 3 Managing low-income parental employment and balancing work and care.
- 4 Experiences of public services including social security, and school.

## 4.1 Overview of key studies that engage with low-income parents

Poverty can have a severe and deleterious effect on family life and the challenge of managing to cope with everyday family needs in the face of severe financial constraint weighs heavily on the shoulders of parents. Although there is more qualitative evidence available about the effects of poverty from parents than children, it is still the case that people living in poverty are some of those least likely to be asked about the circumstances of their lives and the challenges that poverty presents for them and their families. However, there is a growing interest in engaging with people about their lives and understanding the implications of people's accounts for policy and practice (see for example the Oxfam Get Heard Project<sup>3</sup>, Get Heard, 2006). This review has identified a number of valuable qualitative studies carried out from 1998 onwards in the UK with families on low-incomes (including: Beresford *et al.*, 1999; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Hooper *et al.*, 2007; Sharma, 2007; Power, 2007; Barnados, 2009). These give a good insight, from the parents' perspective, into the impact of poverty and disadvantage on contemporary family life, and the particular challenges that poverty presents for parents trying to raise children under conditions of hardship.

**Table 4.1 Qualitative UK studies which focus on the impact of poverty on family life and parenting, 1998 onwards**

Title	Research study	Authors
<i>Poverty First Hand</i>	Two year participatory research project involving group discussions. Twenty-two groups involving a total of 137 people took part. Respondents from a wide range of different groups took part, including unemployed people, homeless people, lone parents and women's group members.	Beresford <i>et al.</i> (1999)
<i>Parenting and Children's Resilience in Disadvantaged Communities</i>	Two linked studies that examined the experiences and perspective of parents and children in disadvantaged communities in Western Scotland. The parents' part of the study involved 84 individual interviews with mothers and fathers, 17 focus group discussions and questionnaires. Research explored, among other things, parents' perceptions of children's safety and wellbeing, and parenting in a poor neighbourhood.	Seaman <i>et al.</i> (2006)

Continued

<sup>3</sup> The Oxfam Get Heard project (2006) was one of the largest projects ever undertaken in the UK where people with first-hand experience of poverty gave their views on government policies designed to combat poverty. The campaign was set up by the Social Policy Task Force (SPTF).

Table 4.1 Continued

Title	Research study	Authors
<i>Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping</i>	The study investigated parents' perspectives on life in poor environments, and the challenges of child rearing under pressure, exploring factors at the community, family and individual level. The study has quantitative and qualitative components. The qualitative sample involved 40 in-depth unstructured interviews and included a range of different family structures including lone parents, large families, very low income families, reconstituted families, parents with health problems or children with sickness and/or disability, parents of 'difficult children', and those with accommodation problems. Eighty-nine per cent of participants were white British, with 11 per cent of minority ethnicity. The sample included people from a wide range of different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.	Ghate and Hazel (2002)
<i>Unequal Choices: Voices of experience exposing challenges and suggesting solutions to ending child poverty in the UK</i>	Participatory study looking at employment, childcare, income and benefits, disability, education, health and wellbeing, and parents' perceptions of the experience of poverty in childhood. Three-hundred people in six feedback events in a range of different styles including small informal discussion groups and larger pre-recorded testimonies with participative audiences of over 100 people.	Payne and Fisher (2006)
<i>Living with hardship 24/7: the diverse experiences of families in poverty in England</i>	The study aimed to explore the perceptions of parents about the impact of poverty on their own lives and wellbeing, parenting on a low-income, the impact of poverty on their children's lives, and experiences of statutory and non-statutory services. The sample was 70 low-income families (82 parents, of whom 15 were men). Thirty-two families were living in high deprivation areas and 38 in more affluent areas. Of the 70 families, 12 had a child placed on the child protection register and 39 were receiving, or had received, social services support. This study has a central focus on child maltreatment.	Hooper <i>et al.</i> (2007)
<i>City Survivors: bringing up children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods</i>	Part of a large longitudinal study of 12 highly disadvantaged areas. Life story approach with 24 families drawn from a larger research data base. Interviews with the main carer, 98 per cent of whom were mothers. Investigated experiences of raising children over six years in disadvantaged city neighbourhoods. Not all families were low-income families but the study is a valuable source for gaining an insight into diverse communities and the parenting experiences of both white and ethnic minority groups. Case studies.	Power (2007)
<i>Life in low-income families in Scotland: research report</i>	Participatory study exploring the views and experiences of poverty among those living within low-income households with at least one child under the age of 18. Focus groups and interviews with nearly 100 people drawn from a diverse population in terms of work experience, demographic profile, experience of poverty, minority status, geographical residence, family background and life stage. Focus groups comprised, on average, between five and six people.	McKendrick <i>et al.</i> (2003)

## 4.2 The impact of poverty on family life and parenting

As discussed, this review covers the period from 1998, however, in 1996 a meta-analysis of 31 qualitative studies with low-income families was carried out by Kempson (1996). This revealed that people living in low-income families were suffering from a range of disadvantages including poor health, poor housing, poor diets, financial exclusion and severe labour market problems. These issues identified by Kempson in 1996, are still powerfully present in parents' accounts of low-income family life in the period of this review. Some of the main concerns expressed in studies with parents are the challenges of parenting under pressure, including coping with the demands of sustaining family life and wellbeing when family budgets and parental intentions are persistently undermined by the costs of everyday essential items like clothing, food and fuel (McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; Seeley, 2004; Horgan, 2007; Green, 2007).

### 4.2.1 Financial stress: parenting on a low-income

For people taking part in Beresford *et al.*'s (1999) participatory study, the experience of poverty was seen as an overwhelmingly negative experience, the impact of which was felt across all areas of their lives psychologically, physically, relationally and practically (see Chapter 2). In group discussions, people highlighted the damaging personal and social effects of poverty, including the ways in which it affected families through restricted opportunities and choices. Poverty imposed heavy demands on people's capacity to cope with everyday economic and social pressures and manage family life under severe financial restrictions. Participants highlighted how financial limitations often resulted in 'doing without' everyday necessities like food, clothing, and utilities. Poverty also meant restrictions on social activities and making sacrifices like not having holidays and cutting back on special occasions. A key dimension emerging from these accounts is about choice; there is a fundamental lack of choice that is a central experience of poverty because the available income can only cover (or might not even cover) essential items each week. And when people did feel that they were just about managing, things cropped up that could unbalance budgets. The exchange below, between two lone parents at one group meeting, highlights some of these challenges.

*'You're all right if there's no birthdays, it's not Christmas and you don't want to go on holiday and you haven't got a car and you don't smoke. If you are a good budgeter you find you can live on it, but when things come up...'*

*'But there's always something crops up that you don't expect and it's, "Oh, \*\*\*hell, where am I going to get the money for this". Because you can't borrow, you can't get a loan – well, if you can you're going to pay treble what it's worth. Nine out of ten you've lost your credit rating because of things that happened in the beginning when you were first out of work.'*

(Group of lone parents in Beresford *et al.* (1999:106))

Horgan's (2007a and 2007b) research in Northern Ireland with a group of 72 mothers, mainly aged between 30 and 50 years, asked the participants to highlight what issues they felt had most impact on their lives and income inadequacy was the dominant and recurring theme of the interviews, regardless of whether mothers and/or their partners were receiving benefits or in work. The mothers described the effects on their family lives of inadequate income, including food poverty, fuel poverty, restrictions on social participation, an inability to make ends meet resulting in debt and stress and concerns that their children were missing out in social participation and at school. The stresses and strains that these mothers felt were considerable and they were concerned about the impact of this on their wellbeing and mental health.

*'Psychologically, for me, you get sick of telling your kids 'no'. And it does your head in and it does depress you...I'm talking about day-to-day stuff. Can I go to the pool, can I go to the cinema, can I have two pounds for MacDonalds if I go with my friend. And you do get a wee bit down – no, a lot down.'*

(Taken from Horgan (2007a:62))

Sharma's (2007) study explores the challenges of parenting in poverty and presents the evidence – based on interviews with 40 families using Barnados' services – as a series of case studies of different family types. Much of the overall evidence in this study comes from other research but the case studies provide a valuable insight into the lives of different families and the issues that concern them.

#### **Box 4.1 Case Study: Leah**

(Barnardo's Priory Family Centre, Barnsley, Yorkshire)

Leah is a lone parent with one daughter Emily, who is 14 months old. Leah is of mixed race and her daughter has a white father. She is a recovered drug addict:

*'There was a lot of drugs around in the area when I was growing up. I took it to make myself feel better because I'd been abused by a family friend and I was bullied all the time at school about race – it's mostly white around here. I wouldn't like my daughter to go through the same as me.'*

Leah does not work – her previous drug addiction has resulted in her losing all confidence – but she would like to work when Emily goes to school. Due to the previous abuse she cannot trust anyone but her mum to take care of Emily. Leah lives on benefits...and she borrows from her mum and step dad. Leah describes the impact of living on a low income:

Continued

**Box 4.1 Continued**

*'We only have a basic living. I can't afford to do anything else. We don't struggle for food because my mum helps us out. I don't ever save any money – there is nothing left to save. I wish I could. Emily misses out on lots of things. I can't take her swimming or to playgroups or any activity as they will have to be paid for and I can't afford it. I can't take her out to parks and things like that as there are people doing drugs around here and don't want to get caught up with them.'*

Leah would like to be able to attend social activities for her and her child but generally cannot afford them. She says:

*'Priory is the only place around where I can go and be like the other mums. We don't have to pay to come here...only for drinks if we have some spare money.'*

For Leah the future for herself and her daughter looks far from hopeful:

*'I see our future as being bleak really. I don't look forward because there's nothing to look forward to. We can't afford anything to change. Everything we get is only because someone else buys it for us. I don't think Emily will achieve what the other kids will because I can't afford college or university. Even if I do work, what I bring in still won't pay for that.'*

Case Study taken from Sharma (2007:16).

**4.2.2 Seasonal costs and expenditure**

In several studies parents have also highlighted the extra costs that are generated during holidays and special seasonal occasions (Ridge, 2002; McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; Gill and Wellington, 2003; Gill and Sharma, 2004; Horgan, 2007a, 2007b; Barnados, 2009).

An innovative longitudinal study by Barnados (2008) called *A Year in the life* followed 16 families living in poverty through the course of one year (2008). Initial briefings from the study highlight the hardship that families are experiencing on a daily basis, and the seasonal nature of some of their expenses. Following families through the winter season reveals the pressures that families face in a season where there are a large number of important holidays and festivals for different religious groups, including Christmas, Diwali, Eid and Chanukah. Festivals and holidays bring extra expenses in food, gifts and where possible entertaining. This expenditure highlights the importance to many families of trying to keep up with social and cultural traditions. All of the families in this study found it very difficult to manage the extra costs associated with the seasonal festivities and many had to borrow to see themselves through this period. The winter period also brings bad weather and the extra expense of heating. Like other low-income families they did not have easy access to affordable credit and most had taken out loans with a home credit service and were paying exceptionally high interest rates. Some

families in this study said they were still paying debts that they had accumulated from the Christmas before.

Food costs also tend to rise during the school holidays and this is particularly problematic for families receiving Income Support because they do not receive free school meals during the holidays (Ridge, 2002; Gill and Sharma, 2004). Interviews with parents receiving Income Support and living in rural and urban areas of the South West (Gill and Sharma, 2004) found that the school holidays were particularly stressful and money was difficult to manage. During this time parents no longer received free school meals and yet their children were at home for dinners and also needed entertaining so families also need to find the money to attend activities. Using case studies they highlight the cumulative impact of low-income and the extra demands of school holidays on family budgets.

#### **Box 4.2 Case Study: Julie**

Julie Neate is a lone parent with four children...Julie receives Income Support. In addition she receives Housing Benefit and so pays no rent charges. The older three children are all getting free school meals which have a weekly value of £23.25. Julie says she has less money in the school holidays.

*'Because I have to find an extra 15 meals a week. They never stop eating. They're always eating from the moment they get up to the moment they go to bed.'*

She goes on to say:

*'I have to save up during the term for the school holidays. At the end of each week I put any money I've got into a money box for the school holidays...I'm always having to save in the school term time.'*

Later Julie says:

*'I have a box under the bed. I fill it up with extra food for them when I can afford it. But I don't tell the children about it.'*

Case Study taken from Gill and Sharma (2004).

#### **4.2.3 Sickness and disability**

For families experiencing poverty, the additional burden of coping with ill-health and disability can be severe. There is a range of evidence from families in hardship which draws out some key issues and gives a valuable insight into the effects of sickness and disability on family life and the added challenges of caring and coping (Howard, 2001; Woolley *et al.*, 2004; Harrison and Woolley, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Preston, 2005, 2006; Clavering, 2007; Clarke and McKay, 2008). Health and disability are also common and recurrent themes in other studies of low-income family life, appearing as a backdrop and compounding factor in families' experiences of low-income employment, public services, social security, transport, schooling etc. (See for example: Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Payne and Fisher, 2006; Horgan, 2007; Women's Budget group, 2008; and ATD, 2008).

Families coping with a disabled child or adult need extra financial support because coping with disability and illness generates extra costs. Research by Preston (2005) based on interviews with 20 families who had a disabled child or children found that families with sick or disabled children are highly vulnerable to poverty because of the extra costs of care, and the extra costs associated with disability. They are likely to experience difficulties accessing suitable employment and childcare and they tend to be reliant on what are perceived to be complex, erratic and unreliable disability benefits as a source of income. Preston's interviews with parents highlighted the additional demands that disability makes on family budgets including extra food, special food stuffs, special clothing, extra heating, high laundry costs and the need for suitable toys and equipment. Making the home safe, accessing suitable childcare, and undertaking any leisure pursuits are all problematic. In families caring for more than one disabled person the financial pressures increase. In Preston's study parents talked about their feelings that the whole family was being disabled due to social and economic restrictions. Some parents were fearful of being socially isolated and of their children being excluded from activities and opportunities available to others. For some parents the stress of trying to make ends meet resulted in their own health suffering, and also put a severe strain on their relationships, sometime resulting in family breakdown and separation.

#### **4.2.4 Financial management: the challenges of budgeting on a low income**

Previous research studies exploring the day-to-day management of low-income budgets within families have found little evidence that families mismanage their money. A combination of different factors, including changes in financial or family circumstances, debt, and persistent or repeated spells of poverty, have a severe impact on families' capacities to manage (McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; Ghate and Hazel, 2004; Millar and Ridge, 2001).

Ghate and Hazel's (2004) interviews with 40 low-income parents showed that parents tried to make strategic choices about expenditure and that 'successful' money management was the result of tight prioritisation of money. The study showed that coping on a low-income was demanding and time consuming. Interviews revealed that under financial pressure the first things to be cut were leisure and recreation activities followed in turn by heating, equipment, clothing and then food. The parents in this study said that they always tried to put children's needs first and that financial imperative structured parent's budgeting and spending. Very careful juggling of money was needed to time payments. Participants also used delaying strategies at times such as paying small instalments, using mail order catalogues and prioritising only the most demanding expenses. Parents also spent a considerable amount of time searching for bargains and low cost essential items like food.

*'I'm very organised to be truthful. I've a tin upstairs, it is a big old biscuit tin that I've had for years. It's got envelopes in it and on every one I've got like gas, electric, rent, all things like that. And every week when we get paid that's the first thing I do. Jim goes to the bank and gets his wages, and I put money in the envelopes [assigned] to what we have to pay out every week.'*

(Mother, large reconstituted family in Ghate and Hazel (2004:208))

Qualitative data is able to get right inside the family unit and see how poverty affects different family members. Qualitative research into budgeting and the management of money in low-income families (see: Goode *et al.*, 1998; Scott *et al.*, 1999; Snape *et al.*, 1999; and Sung and Bennett, 2007) has shown that there is often a gendered pattern of disadvantage and women in particular can bear the burden of responsibility for managing restricted incomes. Goode *et al.*'s (1998) study was based on interviews with 31 couples in low-income families and the findings revealed that while both men and women identified the need to protect children from the effects of poverty it was women who tended to be the most likely to go without or restrict their own and their partners' spending to try and ensure that there was enough money for their children's needs.

#### **4.2.5 Debt**

For many families even vigilance and strict budgeting cannot make their money go far enough and the everyday demands of sustaining family life, coupled with the sudden appearance of extra needs, can result in severe financial problems and debt. Research such as Millar and Ridge's (Ridge and Millar, 2008; Millar and Ridge, 2009) study of low-income, lone-parent employment and Preston's (2005) study of families trying to cope with the extra costs of disability show that changes in circumstances for families such as bereavement, unemployment, divorce and the onset of illness and disability can have a profound effect on people's capacity to pay their bills, and fuel, rent, mortgage and service utility debt is a common experience for low-income families.

Access to financial services and affordable credit can be severely constrained for low-income households (see among others Kempson and Whyley, 1999, and Collard and Kempson, 2001 and 2005). Informal support in income and in kind from family and friends can also play a key role in many families' strategies for survival but informal support is not always available and extended families and friends may themselves have difficulty in providing support when they have their own financial constraints. (McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; and Millar and Ridge, 2008).

In the participatory peer research project Voices for a Change (ATD Fourth World, 2008), participants identified a range of social assets the strongest of which were informal support from friends, neighbours and families. Voluntary organisations and faith groups also played an important role for a third of the participants. However, life in poverty is very fragile and social assets were sometimes compromised by shocks and destabilising events like separation from a partner, or becoming a

carer; without social assets people felt lonely and isolated. Financial assets were weak and structural factors like labour market inequalities, low pay, inadequate benefits, complex benefits systems and debt were all identified by participants as factors that compounded their experiences of poverty. Debt was shown to have an impact on other assets including housing, for example, through rent arrears. Ways of acquiring debt identified by participants included inadequacy of income, including from employment, lack of access to affordable credit and, in some cases, problems with benefits. Once in debt people's capacity to recover and move out of debt is clearly severely compromised.

*'I'm still trying to get rid of my rent arrears at the moment, that's why I am living in a one bedroom flat with three children.'*

(Taken from ATD Fourth World (2008:12))

Ridge and Millar's (2008) longitudinal study of low-income, working family life (see Section 4.4 for discussion of low-income employment), showed that when the mothers first entered employment following a period of financial constraint – while receiving Income Support – they often had debts, for example from Social Fund loans. Once in employment, with increased incomes they were generally able to pay off these debts. However, they also had access to financial services and credit which was previously denied to them. They were also anxious to capitalise on their changed circumstances and try to improve their lives and those of their children. However, if their employment was unstable or short term it could actually exacerbate debt and financial problems because they generated new debts while in employment based on improved income and credit opportunities. By the third wave of the study there were signs of considerable financial distress and debt among almost half of the mothers in the study. There were several key areas where debt tended to be generated including housing – through over mortgaging, re-mortgaging and improvement loans – which the mothers were then unable to repay due to changes in income from unemployment or reduced tax credit entitlement. Partnering and re-partnering could also generate debt – especially through debts accrued at separation. Some mothers had also experienced problems with benefits and tax credits due to changing levels of entitlement and/or overpayments and loss of entitlement. Poor employment conditions including instability, low pay and unemployment were highly damaging to mothers' attempts to budget and manage financially. Several mothers in the study had become so heavily in debt that they had either turned to a debt consolidation company, taken out an Individual Voluntary Agreement (IVA), or declared themselves bankrupt.

Debt was also a key factor for many families experiencing poor health. Evidence from parents across a range of studies shows that concerns about money and the stress of debt, dispossession and homelessness had a significant effect on the health and wellbeing of parents and their children (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Horgan 2007a, 2007b; Women's Budget Group, 2008). For people with existing medical conditions the pressure of trying to cope with poverty and manage debt could be severe. The quotation below comes from a small study in Islington and

illustrates some of the pressures experienced by a mother with mental health issues who felt unable to deal with the impact of her mounting debts.

*'I have debts but I am not acknowledging them. I got a £90 charge when I went over my overdraft limit. It is just too stressful – all the letters asking me for money go behind the settee in a big pile. It is not a good way but I just can't deal with it. I went to Mary Ward [Legal Centre] and they did tell me what to do but sometimes I get agoraphobic and can't bring myself to sort things out. I don't like talking about it because it makes me upset and angry.'*

(Taken from 'Invisible Islington' by The Cripplegate Foundation (2008:24))

#### 4.2.6 Coping strategies

Parents utilise a range of strategies for coping with hardship and these are recurrent themes across other research studies. Many of these strategies are identified by participants in McKendrick *et al.*'s (2003) study of life in low-income families in Scotland. This participatory study using focus groups reveals a range of different negotiations and strategies for survival and a hierarchy of need as parents try to prioritise children's needs and essential items like food and fuel. However, these strategies were stressful and not without personal costs for parents. Table 4.2 gives some examples of the management strategies used by low-income families in the study.

**Table 4.2 Financial management strategies deployed by low-income family households**

Strategy	Example
Doing without	'Oh yes, you give up lots. You give up hair dos, you give up clothes, you give up.' (Peripheral housing estate in large rural town)
Doing it yourself, not paying for services	'I cut my hair myself last week because I couldn't afford to get my hair cut.' (Peripheral housing estate in large rural town)
Travel distances for cheaper goods	'And yer getting four tins of peas in yae can get 4 tins of beans in Asda for 99 pence whereas yer like 40, 50 odd pence fur one tin of bens up here. Ken that's why a lot – most – folk dae their shopping in Airth – because it's cheaper.' (Peripheral housing estate in small de-industrialising town in rural area)
Delay purchase	'I waited and waited for my husband's wages to come in about a week later to go and get my prescription which is really, really hard thing to sit and do.' (Peripheral housing estate in large rural town)
Use charity shops	'British Heart Foundation and the Shelter – that is where I get my clothes.' (Young adult, rural town in Northern Scotland)
Re-use [clothing] within family	'Older kids – don't ruin it [clothes], because your wee brother can get it after you.' (Peripheral housing estate in city)
Seek interest free credit	'You look for things that are interest free, that you don't need to pay extra for.' (Peripheral housing estate in city)

Continued

**Table 4.2 Continued**

Strategy	Example
Use cheaper outlets	'When you're on a low income, you find all the cheap shops. You do ...it's like radar, you go out and find them, you know. It's amazing.' (Peripheral housing estate in city)
Buy cheaper products	(on food) '...it's like Asda's smart price or whatever you call it, everything's white in the fridge, you know!' (Returners to education, inner city neighbourhood)
Seek bargains and bulk buy	'Why have you got five bottles of washing up liquid? Because they were on special and they'll no' be on special for long. By the time that runs out, they'll be on special again!' (Peripheral housing estate in city)
Spend wisely/ carefully	'Stretch it to the limit. Get what you could get, get your money's worth out of it.' (Peripheral housing estate in city)
Forward planning	'That is the other thing I mean – you start Christmas shopping in the summer.' (Rural Northern Scotland)
Budget for end of month shortage	'I keep my child benefit for monthly right enough, so that helps me at the end of the month.' (Returners to education, inner city neighbourhood)
Focused shopping	'You get your money and make a shopping list of everything we're going to eat between that day and the next day you get money. You go to the shop and you buy all that.' (Peripheral housing estate in large rural town)
Forego quality goods	CRFR*: 'So what else has tae go then, basically? P***: Good shoes.' (Young mothers, city housing estate)
Don't pay	'I'm in a grand's worth o' debt – why do you think I'm movin' hoose? I'm huvin'tae bump it all.' (Young mother, city housing estate)

Taken from Table 1: Financial Management Strategies Deployed by Lone Income Family Households in McKendrick *et al.*, (2003:11, 12).

\* CRFR indicates a researcher from the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships.

\*\* P indicates a participant in the study.

### 4.3 Parenting under pressure: parents' perceptions of the impact of poverty on children's lives and family relationships

The struggle that low-income parents face in their endeavours to maintain satisfactory family life and provide children with the security and support that they need is apparent right across the field of qualitative research with low-income parents. Anxieties about children's present and future wellbeing are recurring themes in the narratives of low-income parents. The effects of hardship on family life are evident and people's parenting practices can be severely compromised by a lack of assets, resources, choices and opportunities (see also discussion about financial stress within families in Section 4.2). An insight into the experience of parenting under the pressure of poverty is provided from a range of studies including Beresford *et al.*, 1999; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Hooper *et al.*, 2007; and Power, 2007. There have also been

valuable reports from charities where there has been engagement with parents in a variety of settings including small scale discussion groups with service users (see among others: Gill, 2001; Payne and Fisher, 2006; CAB, 2008; and Strelitz and Lister, 2008). In this section we focus in particular on what parents say about their role as parents, and the challenges that poverty presents for them.

In Beresford *et al.*'s (1999) study parents identified a range of issues that were clearly detrimental to their capacity for satisfactory parenting. These included the corrosive effects of poverty on relationships between children and parents because of the stress and hardship that it created, and the fear parents felt about the effect that poverty was having on their children's lives. Parents also expressed anxiety and uncertainty about future wellbeing and the worry that their situations could get worse. Despite the challenges that poverty clearly presented for parents they also revealed the considerable efforts they made to reduce the impact of poverty on their children's lives.

Findings from The Women's Budget Group (2008) using participatory action research with low-income women show that mothers in the study felt very keenly the challenges to their parenting that poverty brought. They expressed concerns about their ability to be financially and emotionally supportive parents to their children and felt strongly about being unable to provide even small luxuries for their children, expressing their frustrations, fears, guilt and sadness about the restrictions they experienced.

One of the key messages that came from parents' accounts of parenting under pressure was that they had very few opportunities to treat their children, especially with regard to social activities, holidays and even day trips. A family holiday represented shared time together and time away from the daily pressures of managing at home and many parents across studies expressed concern that their children were missing out on these valuable social and family experiences (see: Ridge, 2002; McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; and Ghate and Hazel, 2004).

*'I don't think we've ever really been on a holiday...I just couldn't afford it. With K...he does see his friends going off on these holidays with the school and so and so is going somewhere. I think he does sort of feel a bit left out like, but that's the way it goes. I keep telling him to do well at school so he can get a decent job.'*

*'We just couldn't afford to go on holiday, there's never any money left to save, it's just gone...I would like to be able to say let's just go out for the day but I can't.'*

(Lone parents in Ridge (2002: 96))

A small group of parents with experience of poverty came together for a group discussion in 2007 with ATD Fourth World (Strelitz and Lister, 2008). Their narratives illustrate how determined and resourceful low-income parents need to be just to manage on a daily basis. The parents in this study constantly referred their conversations back to the effects of poverty on their children. They expressed

particular anxiety about the stigma of poverty affecting children and how children were being teased and bullied at school.

To try to mitigate some of the effects of poverty on their children they tried to put their children's needs in front of their own wherever possible. But putting children first could be costly for parents and they reported going without food and feeling depressed and socially isolated. They were often unable to afford to go out, as one mother put it *'you get quite isolated sometimes if you haven't got a lot of money. You can't do things so you stay indoors and watch a lot of television'* (2008:12).

The quotes from parents below indicate some of the impact that going without and putting children first makes on parents both physically and mentally.

*'At the end of the day, you end up going without, under-nourishing yourself. Obviously you undernourished yourself because you never under-nourish your children. It ends up making you ill, and whatever happens to your children when you're ill? You just have to get on with it. It makes it harder.'*

(Tony)

*'It's very hard saving on a low-income. It's very hard to put money aside because now that the children are getting older they need something all the time; either underwear or a tee shirt or skirt. Children are always needing something. It is very hard to put money away I don't really put money away to be honest.'*

(Dawn)

*'It's that once you get your money, once your bills are paid – your gas, your electric, your rent – you sit there and think, oh, I've got everything I need but I can't do anything with the kids because there's nowhere to take them. So they miss out. All right you can take them to a park, it don't cost you nothing, but when they get a little older, they're not interested in parks no more. They want to go to farms, go to this, go there, and you're like I haven't got the money. It's a struggle. It's a struggle for us.'*

(Tina)

*Yeah, sometimes. If I feel quite low, I hope the kids don't pick up on it but I am sure they do sometimes. My daughter will say "come on Mum, give me a smile" and I think oh no. Your partner comes home and you're watching the telly and you're like "why can't we go out", you know. You work six days and on Sunday you want to go somewhere other than the park.'*

(Anne)

(Taken from Strelitz and Lister (2008: 12, 8 & 10, 13))

Ghate and Hazel's (2004) interviews with 40 low-income parents explored stress factors at the level of the family and found that financial difficulty was a significant

source of stress, especially for parents in large families. Parents reported severe limitations in their ability to purchase even basic items including food, clothing, heating and social activities and holidays. Financial strain put pressure in turn on parenting due to the continual effort to make ends meet and budget. Parents reported feeling under pressure to buy expensive branded clothes and trainers for their children and young people. These pressures were fuelled by parents' anxieties that their children were being bullied or marginalised if they didn't wear the 'right' clothes.

*'Well they've got to be in the fashion. They've got to be the same as their friends. If not they're called 'tramps' or they get picked on at school. They make your life hell, because kids are calling them [names] at school and [daughter] has ended up on the phone to me crying (from school), wanting the Adidas [trainers]. But, I can't get them, where am I supposed to get [the money] from.'*

(Mother, lone parent, poor health in Ghate and Hazel (2004:71))

Ghate and Hazel argue in their study that 'it is difficult to overstate the importance of financial difficulties as a source of stress in the daily lives of families in poor environments' (2004:65). Their study shows that 'financial strain' constantly trying to manage on an inadequate income, debt, poor housing and poor neighbourhood environments were major 'stressors' and had a profound effect on family life. In addition to financial stressors Ghate and Hazel identified a further factor, 'family structure and/or family relationships', which could create additional difficulties for the parents in their sample. For example, lone parents in the study were more likely to experience certain parenting problems, in some cases in relation to 'difficult children'. However, these difficulties were not seen as a function of ineffective parenting, or lone parenting *per se* and participants suggest that a key factor was poverty. Furthermore, in couple families, conflict in family relationships including unco-operative partners, domestic violence and abusive relationships made a severe impact on some parents' capacity to cope with parenting.

*'It's better as a single parent; you have not got that pressure...Well he was a wife beater and he made your life hell, day to day. How could you be a decent mum?'*

(Mother, lone parent in Ghate and Hazel (2004:77))

Many parents were relatively well supported by kin and friends, although asking for help was seen to have disadvantages in relation to a potential loss of privacy and control. However, in Ghate and Hazel's (2004) study some groups of parents, particularly those from ethnic minority groups and lone parents, tended to have smaller networks of support, although these were not necessarily less supportive just not as extensive.

*'When you grow up in the same area, you know each other and trust each other. But when you move in, they don't know you...And sometimes if you're in trouble, you don't think anyone could help you here. You have to do it on your own.'*

(Mother, ethnic minority, in bad accommodation in Ghate and Hazel (2004:106))

*'Everybody is about, and they're interested in my wellbeing – they're just there for you; if you need anything, they're there. They're supportive, not just financially, I mean my mam has nothing really but if they've got it they'll give it. If you need emotional support, they're just there. It's the same with a lot of families up here. There's quite a lot of extended families on this estate.'*

(Mother with sick child in Ghate and Hazel (2004:106))

### **4.3.1 Neighbourhoods, housing and parenting**

Quality of neighbourhood and local environment is clearly important for parents. However, many low-income families are living in low-cost, run down, and inadequate housing in deprived neighbourhoods where there is a lack of basic amenities and services. Environmental hazards make parents anxious about children's safety. Dirty neighbourhoods, traffic, and fears about drugs and violence all permeate parents' accounts of their communities. Accommodation problems are a major stress factor for families in hardship, and many low-income families live in housing that is in poor condition but are unable to either fund improvements or afford to move. A range of studies give a good insight into the challenges of parenting in poor housing and deprived neighbourhoods (see: Mumford and Power, 2003; Edwards, 2005; Seaman *et al.*, 2006; Power, 2007; CAB, 2008; and Reynolds, 2008).

Power's (2007) study of parenting in inner city communities found that neighbourhood conditions had a direct impact on family wellbeing and this made it difficult for parents to do the best for their children. This study has a strong representation of people from diverse ethnic groups and provides a valuable insight into the lives of families. Several families in the study spoke of the breakdown of their communities and demolition of local areas. The families in this study had a strong orientation toward community and the children had friendships spanning across racial divides. However, the parents felt that their active parenting roles were challenged by external threats such as the perceived poor parenting of others, and anxieties about children being drawn into 'street cultures'. These low-income parents expressed a need for more support, and more accessible facilities and activities such as safe parks and play areas, youth provision, childcare and affordable leisure activities like swimming.

In Ghate and Hazel's (2004) study, parents were also under pressure about the environment in which they were parenting, this included in the home and in

the neighbourhood. Children's opportunities for getting out of the house and playing could be restricted by degraded and threatening environments in poor neighbourhoods and parents expressed concerns about drug taking, prostitution and violence on the streets where they lived, and the impact that this had on their children's freedoms.

*'There would be prostitutes on the corner and there would be people fighting after dark, and they were employing children on BMXs to run crack from the dealers to the buyers and back again. So we were worried about children getting caught up in people fighting over drugs [if they played outside]. It just meant stay indoors. Most of my friends don't let their children out to play at all.'*

(Mother, lone-parent, low income, bad accommodation in Ghate and Hazel (2004:91))

The quality of neighbourhood was also a pressing concern for the parents in Seaman *et al.*'s study (2006). They identified a range of different risks associated with their local environments for their children. These included both threats to children and young people's physical safety, often from gangs or aggressive peer groups, and also fears about them being drawn into problematic lifestyles. Gangs featured significantly in this study and, in particular, parents' accounts reveal how gangs can gain control of territory which excludes children from accessing services. Other spaces like parks were also seen as risky areas with anxieties about possible attacks or intimidation of their children by drunken or drugged adults or gang members.

*'The kids have got a lack of amenities, there's nothing for them to do. There's a wee church and that's one day a week, that's it, there's nothing. I mean they cannae go – I mean those lasses, were saying about territorial, that's an issue in our area. They always fought with [adjacent area] and that's where the sports centre is, that's where the [gangs] is. So I mean I couldn't let my kid go over there himself.'*

(Parents focus group in Newhouse in Seaman *et al.* (2006:24))

A key strategy to protect children adopted by parents was to make sure they attended adult-organised activities. These were seen as both safe and secure for children but also important for developing life-enhancing skills and social connections. The drawback for these low-income parents was that their strategies cost money and time and therefore they relied heavily on the availability of low-cost provision.

#### 4.4 Low-income parental employment and balancing work and care

Undertaking employment can be an essential strategy for reducing family poverty, but evidence from a range of qualitative studies with low-income parents shows

that there are considerable concerns about pressure to move into work – especially for lone parents – the type and quality of work that is available and issues of choice and training. Parents' narratives also express concerns about barriers to employment including the costs and availability of childcare, time poverty and travel.

#### 4.4.1 Low-income employment

Because of the centrality of employment for government policy this is generally a well researched and well understood area and there is a body of literature that draws on qualitative research across a broad range of employment issues (see among others: Harries and Woodfield, 2002; Farrell and O'Connor, 2003; Innes and Scott, 2003; Gillespie *et al.*, 2003; Smith, 2005; Hoggart *et al.*, 2006; Millar, 2006; and Ray *et al.*, 2007). This review will concentrate on an overview of key themes and particularly highlight research which gives space to hear parents' voices about their experiences and the issues that concern them (Innes and Scott, 2003; Preston, 2005, 2006; Payne and Fisher, 2006; Graham *et al.*, 2005; Lister and Strelitz, 2008; Dean, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2008).

*Unequal Choices* (Payne and Fisher, 2006) reports the findings of a participatory study across the UK with over 300 people. The research used a variety of different methods which ranged from small informal discussion groups, to larger pre-recorded testimonies with participative audiences of over 100 people. The findings are wide ranging and in places very generalized but give a good indication of disadvantaged people's concerns. Discussions do not necessarily relate to individual experiences. During discussions about employment there were concerns expressed about pressures being put on people, especially lone parents to move into employment before they were ready. This was seen in one session as an issue of choice, particularly for parents with pre-school children, and pre-school was seen as a time for training and improving skills ready for the labour market. Voluntary work was also seen as a route back in to work. Barriers to work that were identified included the difficulties for people in poverty of gaining skills and qualifications; and a lack of basic skills. Participants reported that they felt many jobs were short term and people were moving between benefits and work to their increased disadvantage. Moving into employment from benefits was seen as a critical time for longer term support and benefit run-ons. There was a desire to see more support in work, including better wages, more childcare support and flexibility from employers. Parents felt that they were always feeling torn between doing right by their children or doing right by their employers.

Longitudinal qualitative studies of low-income working family life give a good insight into the demands of sustaining employment over time. Recent studies (Graham *et al.*, 2005 and Ridge and Millar, 2008) have shown that the experience of sustaining work and low-income family life is one of considerable and ongoing flux. There is evidence of, among other things, changes in employment, family life, family practices and family structure, health and financial wellbeing.

Graham *et al.*'s (2005) research for the DWP involved interviews with couple parents and lone parents. This was a follow up sample of 29 families who had first been interviewed in 2001 and 2002 (see Harries and Woodfield, 2002 and Farrell and O'Connor, 2003). Graham's study identified three core factors in parents' desire to sustain work, which were financial gain, material improvement and psychological benefit. They also highlighted the strong motivation of parents to escape benefits.

*'I feel a lot better about myself with working. I don't feel as though I'm taking something and not giving it back. I could claim social security, but I'm putting something back in now, because I'm working and paying my national insurance, you know, I think of it that way.'*

(Female, 39 years old, couple family, in sustained work in Graham *et al.* (2005:91))

The longitudinal nature of this research shows that over time work, relationships at work and the possibility of progression at work became more important. Job loss was associated with difficulties at work, poor health, childcare issues and financial problems. Overall, involvement in work appeared to change people's expectations of work. For example, in the first wave of interviews respondents emphasised the importance of just being in work, but by the second wave there was more emphasis on the conditions of work, the financial rewards and how work fitted with family commitments and obligations, highlighting the importance for parents of family-friendly employment and matching people with jobs that meet their needs and aspirations.

These points were also highlighted by Ridge and Millar's (2008) study which involved interviews over three waves with lone-mothers and their children, between 2003 and 2007 (see Chapter 3 for more on children's experiences of low-income employment). Lone mothers' accounts of employment show that improving their financial circumstances was a key element in their decision to enter employment and most felt that they should be better off in work, although about half of the sample were not feeling financially secure. Throughout the study, although most of the mothers had managed to sustain some employment there was considerable employment instability, flux and change (see also Graham *et al.*, 2005). Almost all of the parents in the sample had experienced some change in employment, including job changes, due to insecure or temporary employment (jobs which had a fixed contract), changes in hours and days of work, spells of unemployment, time off for sickness, loss of jobs through redundancy, changes in jobs associated with moving home and re-partnering, and periods of maternity leave. Some elements of change were beyond the control of mothers in the sample, for example, periods of sickness, redundancy, insecure employment and temporary work. Some changes were driven by women seeking to control their employment circumstances and accommodate changing family needs, childcare needs and the need for higher wages (Ridge and Millar, 2008:4). Although generally keen to continue working, the mothers' narratives revealed some ambivalence about work and concern that employment brought greater levels of stress and, for some, increased costs in relation to clothing and travel. Many of the women in the study were also experiencing poor health especially in relation to depression and stress.

**Box 4.3 Case Study: Sarah**

Sarah has five children with her two youngest still living at home, who were aged 15 and 16 at the time of the third interview. She has worked for the same company for four years. For her income she relies on her wage and her tax credits, receiving Child Tax Credit (CTC), Working Tax Credit (WTC) and Housing Benefit (HB). She also receives child support which she believes has made the biggest difference to her income. She works weekdays nine till one and has the use of a car from work. Her wage has stayed fairly static over the last four years. *'I think I've had one wage rise, probably about 10p an hour or something like that. Not a lot because obviously if [my boss] puts my wages up then my tax credits take it off.'*

Sarah is very reliant on income sources that are potentially unstable, especially in the case of child support, and, in the case of tax credits, time limited. At the time of interview she was about to have a promotion at work, this would mean more administration and less physical work like cleaning, although the other conditions of her employment would stay roughly the same. She does not want to leave her employment to get a better paid job elsewhere because she values the car too much *'I don't think I would want to at the moment because I've got the flexibility of having the car. That is a main godsend because I don't pay tax or insurance. If I was on this income and on the tax credits there's no way I could afford to run a car off my own money. There's no way I could do it.'*

Thinking ahead, Sarah recognises that her life will change as her children get older and she loses her tax credits, but she is hoping to stay with the same employer and have the opportunity to go full-time.

Case study taken from from Ridge and Millar (2008:61-62).

*Managing work/life balance*

Parents' endeavours to sustain a satisfactory work/life balance are also explored in Dean's (2007) small scale study of low-income working family life. The study entailed in-depth interviews with 42 economically active parents (35 women and seven men) and six unemployed people. The majority of the sample were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. All of the parents in this study wanted to work but were also striving to put their children first. The study reveals the immense complexity for parents and carers of trying to balance work and family life under the circumstances of low-income. There was evidence that as workers, the parents were sometimes unable to control their work-life balance and they were engaged in trade offs which affected their caring rather than their work participation, as work responsibilities took precedence over family responsibilities. Pressures from employers and conditions of work meant that sometimes the demands of work had to be served before caring responsibilities to maintain employment. Sustaining work and care was extremely challenging and most parents in the study were

engaged in complex negotiations around childcare, transport and time, with some parents arranging shift work to fit with shift parenting (see also Innes and Scott, 2003, and Skinner, 2005).

#### 4.4.2 Caring responsibilities

Caring is a gendered issue and it is women who are mainly responsible for caring work within the family and for arranging formal care provision outside the family. It is also an issue that is not confined to childcare but also the management of care responsibilities for other family members especially those who are sick or disabled and/or frail and elderly (see below). This is a well researched subject; for more evidence see, among other studies, the Daycare Trust's qualitative research using focus groups to ask parents about their use of, views on, and needs for childcare, with groups including lone parents (Daycare Trust, 2007b), black and ethnic minority parents (Daycare Trust, 2007a) and parents with disabled children (Daycare Trust, 2007c). However, the focus in this chapter will be on qualitative research which focuses on low-income experiences of caring.

A range of studies have engaged with low-income parents, mainly women, about work and care (see: Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2001; Innes and Scott, 2003; Payne and Fisher, 2006; Symonds and Kelly, 2005; Shemilt, 2003; Smith, 2005; Sharma, 2007; CAB, 2008; DCSF, 2008; Roberts, 2008; Ridge and Millar, 2008; and Millar and Ridge, 2009). These studies show that deprived households are the least equipped in terms of finances and resources to manage the demands of sustaining a satisfactory work-life balance. Low-income families experience particular problems when trying to manage work and care. These include disadvantages in relation to the cost, quality and availability of care, and tensions in coping with the demands and lack of flexibility that often attend low-income and insecure employment.

Dean's (2007) study of low-income employment showed that work conditions often allowed little flexibility and the demands of restrictive working hours and conditions placed a considerable strain on parents' capacities to manage work and family life. The account of one mother in the study who was seeking employment reveals a complex (unsuccessful) negotiation between the employer, childcare and one of her children as she attempted to fit her home life around an employment opportunity.

*'But when you have [to work] bank holidays and you have shifts when you're coming home at quarter to seven in the evening – that's not what I call a job. That's what I call working me down to the ground and I'm not doing it...I was thrown into an interview saying it was only 20 hours or 22 hours a week...Twenty minutes later got a 'phone call saying I got the job. When I was told the shift patterns...I baffled my brains. Me and my [11 year old] son's worked it out and I thought – I can't do this shift. I can't do it. I went to the nursery and they said they can't cover that...That means I've got to get up, go out, come back, cook, then leave again. Can't do it...I spent a whole two days trying to get it sussed out.'*

(Taken from Dean (2007))

### *Formal care*

Symonds and Kelly's (2005) study of childcare in Wales included participants from a deprived area and a crèche project for ethnic minority mothers. The study found that parents wanted childcare but needed it to be diverse and flexible to suit individual and community requirements. Parents also identified the need for pre-school and after school provision, particularly to fit in with shift working. In this study there was a general dearth of information for parents living in deprived areas and mothers from ethnic minority families. This meant a lack of information about childcare options and costs for parents in hardship.

Few of the mothers from the ethnic minority women's network crèche had knowledge of other childcare provision in the area. They were also unaware of Sure Start and none had ever heard of tax credits. Researchers found that there were no leaflets about these types of services at the crèche nor had the visiting teacher on the childcare course given the mothers any information about child care or tax credits. The quotations below relate to their comments on the affordability of childcare.

*'It's very expensive. I couldn't afford the prices I know.'*

*'My friend says it costs her around £300 a month and that's out of her nurse's wage. I couldn't pay that.'*

(Women from the ethnic minority women's network crèche in Symonds and Kelly (2005: 43))

Breakfast clubs and after-school clubs have a key role to play in the lives of working families, and Shemilt *et al.* (2003) conducted a study of parents' attitudes to school breakfast clubs (as part of a larger study which included a parental survey). They used interviews with 46 parents of children aged between five and 15 years with access to a school breakfast club and found that in general parents valued breakfast clubs. They helped to encourage children to eat breakfast in the morning, and they were also seen to reduce pressures in households in the morning. For parents who were working, seeking work or studying, breakfast clubs were seen as safe and affordable. This study included a sample of low-income parents and there was evidence that for these parents breakfast clubs had a further function of providing a suitable meal when families did not have adequate incomes to ensure a good breakfast.

*'They get a selection of cereals, right, and at the end of the day I couldn't afford to give them that choice, you know, that's the reality of it.'*

(Lone mother of two in Shemilt *et al.* (2003:106))

In Millar and Ridge's (Ridge and Millar, 2008; Millar and Ridge, 2009) longitudinal study of lone-parent employment the challenges of balancing employment with family care was a key issue. In some families children and young people were very resistant to the idea of formal care (see Section 3.5), and there was also a perceived

dearth of suitable and affordable childcare. The mothers in this study were often trying to manage tensions between work and family life by adopting a range of strategies, chief of which were drawing on informal care from family members and working only during school hours. They were aware that only working school hours reduced their earning capacity but as children grew older many of the women talked about trying to increase their hours as more children were able to take on responsibilities for self-care. This was also linked to a loss in tax credit entitlement as children became too old to be eligible for support. Childcare was also an issue for some mothers in the study who were unemployed. Megan's experiences (see Box 4.4) highlight the pressure some lone mothers expressed about working. In Megan's case she felt strongly that managing employment with a large family and very young children was out of the question.

#### **Box 4.4 Case Study: Megan**

Megan had five children living at home, the oldest was 13 years old and two of them were under 18 months of age. Although she had re-partnered, the relationship had not lasted and she was bringing up her children alone. Her previous experiences of employment have made her anxious about leaving her children in childcare. She also had strong views about leaving young children with a child minder or in any other kind of private provision.

When Megan had been in work she had not felt better off. She attended a work focused interview every six months although she would not consider entering work until her children were older and she greatly resented the pressure she felt she has been put under to do so. *'I've told them I won't leave them with a childminder...They're my children. I had them. I should obviously look after them and I understand yes, that I should be working and I shouldn't be claiming money from the Government and what have you, but I will eventually go back to work and I'll pay back, in my eyes, what I've had from them.'* She also feels that there is a lot of stigma attached to attending Jobcentre Plus for mothers like her. *'I don't like going because I don't like going down to the job centre because all the benefits and stuff are all in the job centre now and I mean, obviously there's people there...and it's just the way people look at you when you're walking in...Like something that came off the bottom of their shoes, some of them sort of look at you like that, sort of thing. But, obviously, they don't see the full picture. They only see half of the picture.'*

Case study taken from Ridge and Millar (2008:34).

#### *Informal care*

Informal care and support is an essential component of low-income families' reconciliations between work and care and family support, especially support from grandparents, who can play key roles in providing flexible childcare (see Box 3.4, the case study of Molly). In Ridge and Millar's (2008) study, grandparents

were a key component of many families' strategies for managing work and care. However, over time some of these grandparents had become elderly and in need of care themselves, or had died. These changes in care relationships had a profound effect on the families in the study and for some mothers this resulted in a period of depression and time off work.

A study of low-income mothers' strategies for managing work and care by Backett-Milburn *et al.* (2001) found that caring arrangements in low-income families were fluid, diverse and complex and they changed according to several factors: children's changing needs and preferences, the availability of care, and the demands of employment especially working hours. Families were essential providers of informal care and this informal arrangement was seen as safe and flexible and therefore highly valued by mothers. However, it was not without cost and at times mothers found it difficult to arrange and variable. It also involved mothers in complex family negotiations and systems of reciprocity.

A series of participatory studies with women in Glasgow (see Innes and Scott, 2002 and 2003 and Gillespie *et al.*, 2003) explored barriers to employment faced by women moving from unemployment into sustainable employment. The research used, among other methods, 'care diaries' which were kept by 12 women for two weeks. The findings reveal that women in low-income households face real difficulties in achieving a balance of work and care, and face additional problems including the likelihood they would have more care responsibilities than other families, and fewer material and social resources for support to deal with them. This research also found (like Ridge and Millar, 2008) that poor health in low-income families meant that informal support structures could be fragile, especially when key family members like grandparents became ill, or in need of care themselves.

*'She's ma support, Sue, she's ma main support, ma Mum. I was never able to do [unclear] anything without ma Mum. But she's not fit enough now, Sue. She had an operation that went badly – although she would never say no, then I know her good days an' her bad days and I would never pressurise her intae, you know, if she was really unwell that day, then L [nursery age child] wouldnae've been goin' over and I wouldnae've been at work, it's as simple as that.'*

(Taken from Innes and Scott (2003))

### *Sickness and disability*

The research evidence shows that parents with a disabled child or adult in the household are at high risk of poverty and experience substantial barriers to employment. Many find themselves unemployed or in low paid employment with a lack of support at work (Preston, 2005, 2006; Clavering, 2007; Salway *et al.*, 2007). In Clavering's (2007) study of parents with young children who were disabled, all of the parents had needed to make decisions about their employment following their child's disability, these included reducing hours, changing to more flexible work patterns or leaving work altogether.

Inflexible employers and a lack of appropriate childcare were also key issues for parents in Preston's (2005) study. Parents with a disabled child or children in the family expressed concerns that their needs for childcare were not being met. Childcare needed to be affordable, accessible, suitable and of high enough quality for their children's special needs. Parents who tried to combine work and care found it particularly difficult and those parents who did manage to sustain some form of employment found that time away from work to attend hospital appointments coupled with the unpredictability of their children's care needs, meant that they regularly had to take unpaid compassionate leave from work, and this resulted in high levels of financial uncertainty and anxiety.

#### **Box 4.5 Case study: Jennifer and David**

Jennifer and her husband David are not disabled but they have four children, two of whom are on the autistic spectrum. David has worked previously but he lost his job three years ago because he was unable to sustain employment and balance this with his caring responsibilities for his disabled children.

David now acts as a full-time carer for their four children. As Jennifer comments:

*'David was basically rushing round between hospitals and trying to fit in a job as well as dealing with all of us. I wouldn't say [his employers] directly made him redundant because of that particular period – but the image of somebody builds, and I think they decided that he had too many family responsibilities and there was too much going on and he'd never be fully engaged in work.'*

Case study taken from Preston (2005:64).

Salway *et al.*'s (2007) study of long-term ill-health, poverty and ethnicity included 86 interviews with Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Ghanaian and white English working-age people living with long-term ill-health conditions. The interviews revealed that financial hardship was common and people with long-term conditions faced severe labour market disadvantages because they needed very flexible employment conditions. This was due to health-related needs including pain, fatigue, unpredictable symptoms and health appointments. Needing time off and flexible working patterns could conflict with employers' needs for reliability.

## 4.5 Low-income parents' experiences of public services

People in disadvantaged households tend to be highly reliant on access to public services for themselves and their children. Evidence from qualitative research shows that low-income parents can face particular problems when engaging with public services.

Research by the DCSF (Page and Whitting, 2007) explored the experiences of people from black and ethnic minority communities of public service provision for

children. Using ten case studies of providers they found that several factors were important for ethnic minority parents to be engaged with services. These included: taking an holistic approach to addressing issues facing families; having a member of staff dedicated to parental engagement and acting as an advocate; recruiting staff from local communities to break down 'us and them' barriers; and helping parents to meet each other and reduce feelings of isolation. However, although this study clearly involved parents living in hardship, the effects of poverty on service engagement was not fully explored.

Pinnock and Evan's (2008) study of families' involvement with the Children's Fund found that services delivered through the Children's Fund were highly valued by families in hardship. Key factors included specialist support tailored to the individual's needs, family-oriented approaches, the development of trusting relationships with service providers, multi-agency approaches and the sustainability of services. However, there were concerns expressed by children and parents about the short-term nature of support. Families reported losing access to services when children reach an upper age limit of 13 years old for eligibility for provision. Services had also been terminated due to the loss of funding and decommissioning processes. For some parents and children, services and interventions seemed too short, and families reported the need to have more enduring support systems. The quotation below is from a grandmother whose granddaughter – who lived with her – had been receiving a 12-week session of one-to-one support. That intervention, valued by the granddaughter and the grandmother, had finished too soon for the family's perception of their needs.

*'I miss her myself, and I'd like a little bit for myself but the kids miss her terrible. They're going back to their old routine at school, and to be quite honest, I said I just can't cope with that happening. Everything that [the support worker] had done good were turning back to normal.'*

(Grandmother in Pinnock and Evans (2008:95))

### *Benefits and tax credits*

For families in hardship, adequacy, reliability and security of welfare support payments is a critical issue. They have few resources to fall back on in times of need, so interruptions, delays or deductions in payments can be extremely destabilising (see: Farrell and O'Connor, 2003; McKendrick *et al.*, 2003; Smith, 2005; Preston, 2005; CAB, 2005 and 2008a; Hooper *et al.*, 2007; Ridge and Millar, 2008; and Lister and Strelitz, 2008). There is great complexity in the social security system and many low-income families struggle to negotiate it successfully. Recourse to discretionary support, such as the Social Fund, is also often problematic for families. Some decisions may respond appropriately to individual circumstances, but to people in hardship many others appear inconsistent and irrational (Buck and Smith, 2003; McKendrick *et al.*, 2003).

Farrell and O'Connor (2003) interviewed 22 lone parents and 15 people in couples who had experienced a family member moving into employment following a

period in receipt of benefits. This study revealed that any financial improvements in income from work was used by parents to improve life generally, especially with regard to essentials like housing, food and fuel, but in particular, parents tried to prioritise the needs of children. Not all families saw a sustainable improvement in living standards from work and for some, debt and arrears had a profound impact on family life. No longer eligible for the Social Fund, people felt their only options were expensive private loans or informal loans. Reliable delivery of in-work support was a critical issue and some families ran into difficulties when in-work support was compromised in any way.

*'I mean I'm not used to it, even though I've been working for a year and a half, because nothing's consistent, like Working [Families'] Tax Credit, it's really good what they give me and everything. But it's not consistent like, because they messed up my claim, it then fell back on me, so I was responsible for the first two weeks [...] to you know, explain to everyone, "well I haven't got the money, they've messed up my claim", and they were like, "well we want it anyway".'*

(Female, 25, lone parent, one child, in Farrell and O'Connor (2003:5))

Hooper *et al.* (2007) found that of the 70 families in their study only a few reported having no problems with the benefits system. For others it was often a significant source of stress and uncertainty. When the system worked well, parents particularly valued the financial support and independence it gave them. Passported benefits, free prescriptions and Social Fund loans, for those who had received them, were all identified as positive aspects of the system, although some families needed the support of an advice worker to negotiate and circumvent the system; for example when families needed school uniforms – which were not provided under benefits system rules – the advice worker helped them to buy the uniforms by encouraging them to make a claim for children's clothes instead – which was allowed under the system's rules. However, in general, experiences of the administration and delivery of benefits for families in the study were negative. The system was seen as difficult to understand and negotiate, complex and confusing. Late payments precipitated people into debt, and changes in payments or the cessation of payments due to overpayment or re-assessment was highly stressful. Similar problems were reported in relation to Housing Benefit, Council Tax and Tax Credits.

Longitudinal research with low-income working parents (Graham *et al.*, 2005 and Ridge and Millar, 2008) shows that tax credits were of central importance in sustaining low-income families in employment. However, many parents found the rules of entitlement complex and difficult to understand and there were severe difficulties generated for families when their tax credits were overpaid or there were changes in eligibility. Ridge and Millar's (2008) research showed that tax credits were seen by low-income lone mothers as a vital element in their decision to enter work and their capacity to manage financially when in work. However, there were signs of financial insecurity for some which was related to concerns about future entitlement to tax credits as their children aged out of eligibility. There was also a significant increase in debt, due in part to tax credit overpayments and

changes to entitlements that had resulted in reduced payments that mother's had not anticipated.

Marginalised groups like gypsies, travellers and asylum seeking families can experience particular problems when claiming state support. Webster and Millar's (2001) study of New Travellers in the South West of England showed that families had difficulties gaining and sustaining work and this was further exacerbated by problems encountered through welfare support systems and some families had experienced considerable difficulties claiming benefits and in-work support due to a lack of understanding of the travelling lifestyle.

*'My benefits, including Child Benefit were being paid into my bank account but I wasn't getting any milk tokens. I phoned the benefit office up and asked them to send them to my dad's address as it was the only safe address I had. They didn't believe I was living where I was, so everything was cut off, even my Child Benefit. The Children's Society wrote a letter but they wouldn't communicate with them. They paid up at the end, eventually, but it took a lot of hard work. I was without anything for a good six weeks.'*

(Female, aged 29, travelling eight years in Webster and Millar (2001:21))

Low and inadequate benefit levels and the fear of entering low-paid employment and losing eligibility for Housing Benefit were also seen as a reason for taking low-paid work in the informal economy by respondents in a study by Katungi (2006). The study, which involved interviews, also found that families seeking asylum struggled to manage on welfare support which came from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). This was in the form of vouchers, set at a level below basic Income Support that could be exchanged for groceries etc. Unable to work in the formal economy, this was the only form of support available to them between applying for asylum and getting a decision from the Home Office about permission to stay. As a result, many of those interviewed felt they had to take informal work to survive.

*'My husband went to the Home Office to apply for a work permit so that he could start work because we had been here for two-and-a-half years waiting for Home Office to decide on our asylum, but he was turned down and officials asked why he wanted a work permit when he was on NASS support. From there he got informal paid work as a barber because we and the kids were living in abject poverty. By the time we got leave to remain, both my husband and I were doing cash-in-hand work and we still do.'*

(Christine, 28 in Katungi (2006:11))

In a study of prisoners' families, Smith *et al.* (2007) conducted interviews with 41 family members who were living at or below the poverty line. The study found that there tended to be a heavy reliance on welfare provision and benefits among prisoners' families. This reflected a decision among many of the women in the study – wives, partners and grandmothers – to put the needs of the prisoners' children first rather than maximizing income from work. This meant that women were prepared to give up work to care for the prisoners' children, and this in turn increased their vulnerability to poverty.

### *Sickness and disability*

Social security benefits and social services are crucial elements of support for families coping with sickness and disability. A qualitative study by Preston (2005) conducted with parents from 20 low-income families who had a disabled child or children explored participants' experiences of claiming Disability Living Allowance (DLA). The parents in the study were anxious about the stigma and negative public perceptions about benefit claimants. However, claiming DLA was an essential step in trying to ensure extra funds to meet the extra costs of disability. Once obtained – if families were eligible – DLA was highly valued and the extra income made a significant impact for the whole family, not just the disabled child. However, any withdrawal of benefit or reduction in payments was highly destabilising for families. Overall there was a general lack of knowledge about what help was available and parents said they often needed professional help from a social worker or advice worker to access the system successfully.

### *Transport services*

A qualitative study of the lives of 30 low-income mothers with young children who were without a car (Bostock, 2001) found that compulsory walking for mothers who were transport deprived undermined health and wellbeing in several ways, including stress from trying to manage the demands of young children worn out from walking, and restricted access to health services, retail and social care resources – due to a lack of transport options and the extra demands of walking long distances with tired children. Mothers struggled to get to hospitals and GPs and were particularly likely to not attend preventative (but non-urgent) services such as cervical smears. Social and family relationships were also affected both through an inability to travel any distance to meet with relatives and through sometimes difficult negotiations with car-owning relatives for transport support. The study also found walking with small children through littered, depressed and neglected areas was exhausting and stressful as mothers strived to keep children safe on the streets and on the road.

*'You try not to let it get to you. I try not to think about it even. But when you walk up the shops and you past the houses that have been boarded up, and the pub that has been burnt out and the park that is covered in glass, dog mess and good-knows-what, it does get to you...You feel forgotten and it doesn't feel good.'*

(White lone-mother on Income Support, caring for one child aged four years in Bostock (2001:14))

*'The roads are so busy, and I am trying to watch her and she is trying to run off, and then I start shouting at her because I am worried that she'll get run over.'*

(Black lone mother, on Income Support, caring for one child aged two years in Bostock (2001:15))

### *School*

School holds the potential of future security and the promise of better times ahead for the children of disadvantaged families. And parents in these studies were keen for their children to do well at school and have the same chances as their peers. However, evidence from research shows that promises of future wellbeing are undermined by inequalities within the school system and parents' accounts of difficulties negotiating the economic and social processes of school life reveal intense anxieties about their capacity to support their children at school. There are several studies that engage directly with low-income parents in relation to their experiences of school services and school processes (these include ATD Fourth World, 2000; Ridge, 2002; Tanner *et al.*, 2003; Payne and Fisher, 2006; Seaman *et al.*, 2006) and recent reports by several charities report parents' anxieties about meeting hidden school costs (for example, CAB, 2008b). These studies report that parents experience a number of difficulties particularly in relation to additional school costs for social, cultural and educational activities. Parents are also fearful that their children will be bullied and excluded if they do not share in extra school activities with their peers or if they do not have the right school uniform or equipment. The following quotes are from parents who are using CAB services (CAB, 2008b). Although not a rigorous research study these are the experiences of families in hardship and are indicative of much of the research findings in this field.

*'Even with the benefits I receive, I find it hard to pay all the bills, and I cannot afford proper uniform or shoes for my son, so he gets picked on at school.'*

(Jamelia 28, one child under 14 in CAB (2008b:15))

*'I am a single mum of two living on benefits. My daughter starts secondary school in September and I am panicking about the cost of the uniform as it is so expensive. I just know I won't be able to manage. Not only will I have to buy uniform for her there is also my son to consider. He will need a new uniform too. I just don't know how I will cope.'*

(Clara 29, two children under 14 in CAB (2008b:15))

ATD Fourth World (2000) interviewed parents and children in 39 low-income families to explore their experiences of the education system (see Section 3.6 for children's experiences). The study revealed that poverty had a significant effect on how children and parents experienced school. One tension identified was in the quality of relationships between the school and parents. Although some families had good relationships with school, others found these relationships difficult and reported feeling left out and ignored by the school when things went wrong. School attitudes could be discouraging and parents at times felt that they were looked down on. Perhaps as a result, involvement with PTAs was generally poor and the PTA was seen as middle class and exclusive. Some parents also felt excluded from school engagement through disability, caring responsibilities and ill-health. Difficulties in home-school relationships was also reflected in a wariness,

expressed by some parents, of home-school agreements which were seen to be one sided, especially when parents felt their own opinions were ignored.

In addition to these difficulties in relationships between schools and disadvantaged parents, there were also economic problems and the extra costs of school participation were very difficult for parents to meet. Some of these costs could be hidden and included travelling to school, school uniforms, school dinners and school activities. Additional costs associated with examinations were also a worry for parents, particularly when children were encouraged to buy certain books or equipment to improve their chances of doing well.

*'She hasn't started her GCSEs yet but the teachers say it will help you (in science) if you buy such and such a book and the same in Spanish if she buys a dictionary. It's a bit of a burden you know because every week you're thinking you should be saving a little bit of money just to get that certain book. Her friend didn't have the science book and you were allowed to take it into the exam but if you didn't buy it you didn't have it, so you were losing out on that exam really.'*

*'You're expected to pay for their trips. When it went to £6 I told all of the weans [four of them] they're not going. In the last couple of weeks they've been saying "Ma we're the only ones that's not going" and I feel guilty. I wouldn't mind paying for two. I'll put in for a loan.'*

(Parents in ATD Fourth World (2000:38,39))

## 4.6 Summary

A review of low-income parents' accounts of their lives reveals the challenges of managing family life under conditions of poverty and deprivation. The evidence highlights the pressure that disadvantage brings, making family life at times difficult and uncertain.

A family's experiences of poverty are not isolated from other factors in their lives, and complex social, cultural and economic processes and divisions create particular challenges. Family equilibrium can be easily destabilised or undermined by external and internal shocks, such as unemployment, sickness, disability and family upheaval. These events create circumstances of change and uncertainty for all families but the added pressures and restrictions of poverty leave deprived families highly vulnerable to instability, homelessness, debt and social exclusion.

Parenting under economic pressure can be particularly difficult and although parents strive to protect their children and put them first this is often at great personal cost particularly for women. Evidence from parents reveals key tensions within low-income families as parents try to balance conflicting demands within the restrictions of a low income. These are summarised below:

- The challenge of meeting their own needs and meeting children's needs: families were often doing without everyday necessities like food, clothing, fuel and social activities. Parents, especially mothers, also often went without so that they could try and ensure that their children's needs were met.
- The challenge of balancing the costs of meeting everyday needs against the costs of meeting social imperatives, such as participation in cultural norms and expectations at times of special celebration like Christmas, Eid and Ramadan.
- There were difficult decisions to be made about buying essential goods or saving for future expenditure. Trying to make money stretch and avoid debt was taxing. For many families even vigilance and strict budgeting could not make their money go far enough, and the everyday demands of sustaining family life coupled with the sudden appearance of extra needs could result in severe financial problems and debt.
- Families had little access to affordable credit, and accessing expensive credit had to be balanced against going without essentials.
- Money for supervised play and leisure activities for children was difficult to find but the alternative when children lived in degraded neighbourhoods was that their opportunities for play were in dangerous or unsuitable environments.
- Work can be an essential strategy for reducing family poverty, but parents had a range of concerns about employment including the costs and availability of childcare, time poverty and travel costs.
- Employment could also be unpredictable, demanding and inflexible. This created a tension for parents between taking on unstable employment and the desire to provide security and stability in family life.
- Working parents were often torn between doing the right thing for their children and satisfying the needs of their employers. Sustaining work and care was extremely challenging. For some, work meant long hours in low-income employment and this was in tension with family life and spending time with children.
- For families in hardship, adequate, reliable and secure welfare support was a critical issue. Many low-income families struggled to negotiate the benefits system and late and missed payments or over-payments could exacerbate stress and financial strain.

# 5 Concluding comments and recommendations for future research priorities

It has been clear from this report that over the ten year period of the review, from 1998 to 2008, there has been a growing body of work in the field of qualitative research with parents and to some degree children who are living in poverty. The evidence gathered from the research reviewed here gives policy makers a valuable insight into the everyday challenges and demands that deprivation and poverty present for children and their families, and has considerable potential to inform policy making in the provision of welfare and services, social and economic support and the alleviation of poverty.

This final chapter reviews some of the key messages from the research and points to some of the places where further research could help to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge, particularly in relation to research with children.

## 5.1 Children's experiences of poverty

Findings from this review of qualitative research with children experiencing poverty reveals the widespread and profound impact that poverty has on children's lives. It penetrates deep into the heart of their family life and it structures and constrains their everyday lives at home, in their neighbourhoods and in their schools among their peers.

The experience of poverty in childhood is clearly damaging and it permeates every facet of children's lives from economic and material disadvantages, through social and relational constraints and exclusions to the personal and more hidden aspects of poverty associated with shame, sadness and the fear of difference and stigma. Yet evidence from children and young people also shows how active and resourceful they can be. They are not passive victims of poverty but rather mediate, negotiate and seek to control the experience of deprivation where and when they

can. However, these strategies of survival – working, moderating needs, covering up, protecting their parents and making do – are often hidden and can be highly detrimental to children’s wellbeing.

## 5.2 Parents’ experience of poverty and parenting under pressure

Parents’ accounts of their lives reveal the challenges of managing family life under conditions of poverty and deprivation. Their narratives expose the pervasiveness of disadvantage throughout all areas of family life. This heavy hand of poverty overlays family life and permeates economic and social relationships. It makes everyday life difficult and uncertain and family equilibrium is easily destabilised or undermined by external and internal shocks. Unemployment, sickness, disability and family upheaval create circumstances of change and uncertainty for all families but the added pressures and restrictions of poverty leave deprived families highly vulnerable to instability, homelessness, debt and social retreat. The conditions of poverty make the daily demands of parenting particularly challenging, and although parents strive to protect their children and put them first this is often at great personal cost, particularly for women.

## 5.3 Future research with low-income children and families

There are many different family factors that influence poverty and hardship but there has often been insufficient qualitative evidence available to draw out every theme and issue for this review. The risk of experiencing poverty varies for families according to different family characteristics and household types. Some families, for example those from minority ethnic groups, lone parents, large families and families where there is sickness and disability, are especially vulnerable to experiencing poverty and some face additional challenges in coping with the hardship and disadvantage that poverty brings. A family’s experiences of poverty are not isolated from other factors in their lives, and complex social, cultural and economic processes and divisions create particular challenges for families.

Intersections between different socially and culturally constructed categories such as those based on race and ethnicity, gender, class and disability interact and reinforce conditions of inequality and poverty. However, there is still a limited amount of qualitative research that explores these particular intersecting experiences to understand how social divisions and social processes create conditions of multiple disadvantages.

Although there is a growing body of research with disadvantaged children there is still a need for updated research into the contemporary experiences of poverty for both rural and urban children. Childhood is constantly changing and becoming more commodified, and as new forms of exclusion open up it is important to understand how poverty impacts on contemporary childhood.

Throughout this review it has been apparent that although some studies have tried to incorporate an analysis of age and gender into the research process, there is still not sufficient evidence to inform us more fully about how children's experiences of poverty might differ according to their age, or their gender. Given the gendered nature of some issues to do with adult poverty, especially in relation to caring and sacrifice, more research in these areas in relation to girls and boys would be valuable.

There is also a need for research that would make more visible the experience of different groups of children and families, in particular the specific groups discussed below.

There is still a relative dearth of evidence about the experiences of poverty from different ethnic minority groups. Although ethnic minority groups are increasingly included in studies as participants, there is seldom an attempt to analyse data in relation to the particular experiences of minorities or explore the particular experiences of poverty created by intersections between race, age, class and gender. There is considerable diversity in minority experiences and there is a need to understand the ways in which poverty might impact on different minority families and the men, women and children within them, across all areas of their lives.

Disabled children are often the subject of research, but they too are rarely the subject of research about poverty. In general, research focuses on disability itself rather than the child's experience of poverty. Yet in low-income families children who have a disability or have a parent with a disability are likely to be reliant on social security provision over a long duration and that experience may have a very particular quality.

Much of the research into parenting under the pressures of poverty has involved mothers, although fathers may be included but not in significant numbers. Therefore, in general the experiences, perceptions and concerns of low-income fathers are largely absent from research, and this is an important area for further exploration.

Children and families who are on the margins of society and highly vulnerable to poverty and exclusion are also poorly represented in research, particularly in relation to the experience of poverty across their lives rather than the focus of research on their difference. When research is carried out it tends to focus more on people's membership of particular marginalised groups rather than on their overall experience of poverty. As a result, there is very little research that engages with gypsy and traveller children, refugees or asylum seeking children that looks explicitly at how poverty affects their lives. There is also a need to understand better the challenges of poverty for parents of these children especially when they move away from their traditional forms of support and are trying to settle permanently.

Finally, disadvantaged children are increasingly being expected to attend child care or after-school activities. Further insight into whether deprived children are happy with their care, and what the care experience means for boys and girls, children of different ages and those with different social and cultural needs is essential, especially given the evidence that some children are very resistant to attending after-school clubs due to inadequate care provision and stigma (see discussion of childcare in Section 3.5).

## 5.4 Methodological insights

A range of different research methodologies were used in the studies reviewed and these included in-depth interviews, focus groups, group work, surveying, case studies, participatory workshops and action research. Different approaches can yield diverse types of data which can be used for a range of reasons and throughout the review the intention has been to ensure that the voices of children and parents are given space and attention, so that their experiences and concerns can be articulated, realised and communicated to the reader as directly as possible.

However, it has been evident during the process of this review that the evidence gathered with parents and children is not always in a form that allows it to be easily used or understood by policy makers. There is a real need for more rigour in research in this field especially when the issues covered are so sensitive and people are often understandably reluctant to commit themselves to the research process. This means that research needs to be both rigorous and robust. This does not mean a withdrawal from the development of innovative studies like peer research and participatory projects – these are often very carefully planned – but rather a commitment is needed to ensure that all research, of whatever size or approach, is carefully designed, documented and reported. This in turn does justice to the generosity and commitment of the participants, and allows their contributions to be received and utilised by a wider audience.

Finally, the review has raised some methodological concerns as some of the engagement with low-income families by stakeholders without research expertise is not methodologically rigorous enough to effectively inform policy making. Stakeholders should address this so that key insights from their engagement are not lost to the evidence base.

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