

Poverty and ‘place’: does locality make a difference?

It’s easy to view poverty as an all-encompassing and uniform experience. However, the reality of poverty varies from place to place. Carol-Ann Hooper, Sarah Gorin, Christie Cabral **and** Claire Dyson **present new research that highlights the impact that community context has upon families living in poverty.**

THE IMPACT OF POVERTY on child well-being is well established. Both parenting and community context are thought to play some part in this relationship, although exactly what part is debated – the relationship between communities, families and children is clearly complex¹. Most studies of parenting in poverty have focused on families living in deprived neighbourhoods². There is some evidence that the disadvantages associated with such neighbourhoods are associated with increased stress³, and much policy effort has recently been focused on these areas (eg through area-based initiatives). However, locality is only one factor influencing poverty and social exclusion (so many families in poverty are missed by such approaches), and it is clear inequality has an independent effect on well-being⁴. Poor families living in relatively affluent areas with greater local inequality might be expected to face a different set of issues, which have been relatively unexplored so far.

This article discusses findings from a qualitative study of low-income families, which aimed to explore the relationships between poverty, parenting and children’s well-being in diverse social circumstances by including families living both in deprived and in relatively affluent areas. Our data suggests, as did a previous qualitative study⁵, that each kind of community context may disadvantage families in poverty in substantially different ways, although there were also many similarities.



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Sample and methodology

The research project was based in two locations – London and York. Families in London were recruited from local authorities that were amongst the 10 per cent most deprived in the country by Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) rankings. Families in Yorkshire were recruited from the 40 per cent least deprived. In each location families were recruited via Children’s Services, voluntary organisations and schools, to include families with a range of experiences of services. In total 70 families participated, 32 living in the areas of high deprivation and 38 in the more affluent areas. Where possible we interviewed both parents (where there were two in the household) and one child (the oldest within the age range 5–11). A total of 82 adults (including 15 men) and 59 children were interviewed. In the deprived areas, the sample was ethnically diverse (with Bangladeshi the most common ethnicity, followed by white British), in the affluent areas the sample was almost entirely white

British. Nearly half the adults interviewed in the deprived areas were first-generation immigrants.

In-depth interviews with parents explored their current situation in relation to money, housing, parenting and support, past life experiences including their own childhoods, and their experience of services, as well as gathering information on children's well-being. Interviews with children, which were shorter and more playful, covered their views about money, family and friendships, how they spent their time, their subjective well-being and their understanding of stress within the family. Focus groups were also held with professionals – health visitors, teachers and social workers – in each location, to explore their perspectives on the relationship between low-income families and services in that area. Full details of the methodology and sample are given in the report⁶.

The different community contexts

The deprived local authorities in London were characterised by below-average household income, high levels of unemployment and an ethnically diverse population. The less deprived local authorities in Yorkshire had far fewer low-income families, and were predominantly white and relatively affluent overall – most of the participating families lived in small towns or cities with a few living in villages. Community context was only one of the sources of diversity in the sample – gender, ethnicity, class, religion and individual biography also interacted in many and complex ways to influence identities, experiences and opportunities. Poverty was also only one of the sources of adversity in their lives, accompanied for many by domestic violence, child maltreatment, mental health problems, relationship breakdown, children's behavioural problems and more.

Housing

The majority of families we interviewed in both locations (similar proportions in each) were renting from the council or a housing association. Poor housing conditions and overcrowding occurred in both contexts. These could impact on children's health (eg damp and draughts contributing to respiratory conditions), and general well-being – for example, overcrowding intensified conflict between siblings and inhibited opportunities for play and sleep, with lack of sleep in turn undermining ability to concentrate in school. Housing conditions were significantly worse in the deprived areas, where local authorities were generally unresponsive in tackling problems. Parents in both locations talked of long waits for repairs, despite problems being

reported repeatedly to the council, and even longer waits for re-housing. In the deprived contexts, however, there was a widespread sense of powerlessness to influence their home circumstances among parents, and even professionals were made helpless by their encounters with Housing Departments. As one health visitor put it, 'it gets to the point where you just think "what's the point?"'

Poor housing conditions and overcrowding were less extreme in the affluent contexts, but there were some different problems such as a lack of affordable housing and the expense of heating a large house. Although housing authorities here were similarly unresponsive over repairs and re-housing, families mostly had more personal or financial resources to manage this, either by standing up to the council or by finding a way to pay for repairs themselves. Many were nevertheless angry at what they felt was degrading and disrespectful treatment by housing authorities.

Neighbourhood context

There were greater fears about crime (including gun crime), drugs, racism and unsafe neighbourhoods in the deprived areas. Many parents were anxious about their children being influenced by or drawn into drugs or anti-social behaviour. Some kept their children inside despite lack of space to avoid them getting into trouble. For some, particularly lone parents, the desire to supervise and safeguard their children in these contexts conflicted with the need to work. Some women also avoided going out themselves for fear of being attacked.

Families in affluent contexts usually had safer environments for themselves and their children, although some lived on estates with a relatively poor reputation. They generally had safer space for children to play outside, although the children sometimes had fewer others to play with, whether because of being on different income levels from neighbours, lack of children of a similar age in the neighbourhood or living at a distance from children's school friends. Although relatively little crime was seen as a benefit of the neighbourhood in affluent areas, there were often specific threats identified (eg a known 'paedophile', a violent ex-partner, a particular group of lads or 'bad family') and some similar fears and strategies in relation to children.

Several families in the deprived areas talked of a lack of cultural integration. This tended to be viewed positively by insiders to the group con-

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cerned (giving a sense of belonging) and negatively by outsiders (contributing to isolation). Cultural diversity was not mentioned by parents in the affluent areas, but was also an issue there, though with fewer and different minority communities present (largely Kosovan refugees and East European migrants). Professionals had considerably more experience of thinking about culturally specific needs, constraints and patterns in the deprived areas.

Poverty, inequality and social exclusion

In both contexts, parents were aware of the pressures on children to keep up with their friends by having the latest toys and the 'right' clothes and trainers, but parents in the affluent contexts had higher standards for their children to live up to. They worried about their children being unable to have, for example, similar kinds of (expensive) birthday parties, leisure activities (eg horse riding) and foreign holidays.

Children as young as five years old had a fairly accurate perception of their families' relative poverty within their local context. When shown five money bags of increasing size and asked to indicate where they would place their family's income level and then that of their friends' families, children in affluent areas consistently chose a smaller (often the smallest) money bag for their own family and a larger money bag for their friends' families, typically two money bags larger. Children in deprived areas picked all sizes of money bags for their own families' income and were just as likely to choose smaller as larger money bags for their friends' families. Children's friendships were very important to them and those with strong friendships with children from better-off families said the inequality did not affect their friendships or what they did together. They sometimes reported friends sharing resources (eg money to spend on a shopping trip, toys children would not otherwise get to try) and friends' families including them in outings they would not normally get to do with their own families. However, children in the affluent areas also reported significantly more bullying than those in the deprived contexts. This was not a representative sample, but being a small and visibly different minority may make children more vulnerable to bullying in affluent contexts. Several children in affluent areas described being told they were dirty or had nasty habits because they came from a poor family or that they would always be poor because their parents were poor. At the same time, weapons and violent assaults in schools (not necessarily against the children interviewed) were mentioned more frequently by

children from deprived areas, and a more violent local culture (often influenced by gangs) may mean children who are bullied in such contexts are at greater risk of injury.

Access to amenities and services

Families in the deprived areas tended to have better access to affordable (or free) amenities and facilities for children, to live close to schools, shops, mosques, churches and community centres, and to have better transport links than did families in more affluent contexts. However even relatively low costs, combined with the effort involved, could inhibit use of facilities, as could the condition of those facilities or their other users. In the affluent areas, affordable activities for children, cheap shops and many services were at a greater distance and less easily accessed (without a car), and there was simply less available tailored to the needs of low-income families. Services such as counselling and childcare were provided primarily by the private sector. Some were lucky enough to have a nice park or playground nearby, and such free facilities were generally in good condition and relatively safe, but the awareness of many facilities out of reach (for whatever reason, cost, time and/or transport), was a significant source of frustration and stress.

The professionals we interviewed also commented that low-income families were often reluctant to use what facilities there were (eg mother and toddler groups or swimming pools) in affluent areas, feeling they would stick out as noticeably different in predominantly middle-class environments. Children in deprived areas were much more likely to go swimming or to regular sports sessions than children in affluent areas, partly because free or cheap facilities were more available and partly because the lack of safe places to play outside meant some parents made extra efforts to make this possible. More children also attended after-school clubs in deprived areas.

Schools

Parents in both deprived and affluent areas had had mixed experiences with schools. Where teachers had time for them, took an interest in their children and were friendly and approachable, they were by and large happy with their schools, especially (but not only) if their children were also doing well. Where communication was poor, classes or schools were too big and busy, or parents felt looked down on or their circumstances not recognised, they were less happy. The experience of feeling disrespected

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was sometimes related to low income, primarily in the affluent areas where poverty was a less familiar issue to schools. One parent described feeling humiliated by having to reply saying he couldn't afford it every time the school's standard letter asking for a contribution to trips came round, despite having explained his situation to the school.

Teachers in both areas were conscious of the disadvantages children from low-income families brought with them to school. There were many positive initiatives developing, like nurture groups run by speech therapists for children starting school with poorly developed language skills (mostly from low-income families and attributed to lack of stimulation and interaction at home) in the affluent areas and homework clubs for children whose parents lacked the confidence or capacity to help them with their homework to get help elsewhere in the deprived areas. Professionals in affluent areas observed that children from low-income families were more likely to stand out as different at school in such a context and often had an internalised sense of difference too, and could have a hard time as a result. Low-income families could easily become perceived as a problem or the source of other problems in schools where they formed a very small minority, and where schools and other parents were less familiar with their situations.

Although the parents we interviewed placed a high value on communication with schools, teachers talked of the difficulties of involving parents. This was especially so in the affluent areas where teachers reported that it was 'impossible' to get parents from poorer areas in parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and often difficult to get them to come to parents' evenings. Lack of involvement was thought to be the result of such parents' feeling intimidated, both by the school and by middle-class parents, lacking confidence in such environments, and/or lacking motivation or aspiration for their children. While these may all be relevant, more imaginative thinking about how to engage parents might prevent judging poor parents against standard, middle-class lifestyles. Teachers in the deprived areas emphasised the need to be informal, accessible and sensitive to culturally diverse lifestyles. A dedicated facilitator to develop initiatives such as coffee mornings and make personal contact with parents, learning mentors for children who could also engage parents on a one-to-one basis, and careful timing of meetings (eg first thing in the morning – 'we don't let them leave the gates!') were recommended.

Concluding comments

The differences between community contexts should not be overstated. Even in areas of high deprivation, inequality is often highly visible, both in schools and the wider environment, and there is considerable variation within and between both deprived and affluent areas. However, the situation of low-income families in affluent contexts merits more attention. While in some contexts lower demand on services may mean needs are better met, in others families may be disadvantaged by lack of accessible services or feel more 'under the microscope'. Professionals wishing to develop services tailored to low-income families in the affluent contexts had often been frustrated by lack of funding, political will or community support. At the same time, professionals working in highly deprived areas talked of the risk of over-familiarity with poverty, of becoming immune and not noticing it any more, and may sometimes fail to give due recognition to the challenges it poses as a result. What is clear is that attention to child poverty and its impacts are needed in all areas, not only those known for high levels of deprivation, and that the challenges poverty presents for parents are by no means uniform. The needs associated with diverse contexts merit more recognition in national policy. Housing needs should also be routinely incorporated into local planning for children.

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