

# Children, Welfare and the State

## Rich Children, Poor Children

Contributors: Tony Novak  
Editors: Barry Goldson & Michael Lavalette & Jim McKechnie  
Book Title: Children, Welfare and the State  
Chapter Title: "Rich Children, Poor Children"  
Pub. Date: 2004  
Access Date: October 03, 2013  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd  
City: London  
Print ISBN: 9780761972334  
Online ISBN: 9781446221068  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221068.n5>  
Print pages: 59-73

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221068.n5>

[p. 59 ↓ ]

## Chapter Five: Rich Children, Poor Children

Novak Tony, ed.

### Introduction

It is an obvious – although significantly neglected – fact that the living standards, opportunities and life chances of children differ enormously. In a society such as Britain's that is grossly unequal and deeply divided by social class it would be strange were it otherwise. Yet while inequalities between adults, for example in relation to 'race', gender or social class, are often recognised, when it comes to children relatively little attention is paid to the divisions which exist. It is almost as if the presumed 'innocence' of children has no place for the harsh realities of inequality and social division. Certainly there is a notable body of research and campaigning effort on the issue of child poverty, but like the study of poverty in general, this suffers from a tendency to view poor children in isolation. Only very rarely is the whole spectrum of childhood inequality considered, and the children of the poor placed alongside the children of the rich. Yet of all social groups and categories, inequality between children and the inequalities of childhood are probably the greatest.

### The Incomes and Living Standards of Children

Most children and young people do not have any significant income and wealth of their own. For the most part, what we know about the incomes available to children, and the living standards that this allows, is derived from that of their parent(s) and the households in which they live. Households below average income (HBAI) – a series of calculations produced by the Department of Social Security (now the Department of

Work and Pensions) – ranks households and the individuals they contain against the average net income (including benefits, wages and salaries, and after taking account of taxation) of society as a whole. Adjusted for the [p. 60 ↓ ] differing sizes of households, these show that households with children are concentrated at the lower end of the income distribution: three-quarters of children live below average income, and only one-quarter above the average, a degree of inequality more marked than that amongst adults. More significantly, taking half of this average – the now commonly used measure of poverty – one in three children in 1999 was living at or below this level: an increase from one in ten in 1979.

This dramatic growth in childhood poverty, in both extent and severity, is of course but one reflection of the growth of poverty and inequality in Britain as a whole since the beginning of the 1980s. Britain has always been a greatly unequal society, and at any time in its history the gap between rich and poor – amongst children and adults alike – has marked its inequalities of class, whether in terms of wealth and income, health and educational opportunity, or any other feature of social life. During the course of the twentieth century, however, these inequalities, while by no means disappearing, began to narrow. The changes that brought this about were propelled on the one hand by a growing resistance and refusal on the part of working-class people to accept both their unequal lot in life and the naked operation of a market system that produced and reproduced this. On the other, there was a recognition on the part of the rich that some concessions were necessary if their systems of privilege were not to be entirely swept away. As a result, social reforms were gradually and cautiously introduced. Culminating in a so-called ‘welfare state’ between 1945 and the mid-1970s, these changes modified the most brutal consequences of a market economy: the recurrent threat of large-scale unemployment was largely removed; inequalities in income and wealth were reduced; and prospects for the futures of working-class children increased as fundamental needs for health, education and housing were removed, at least in part, from the operation of market forces and the ability to pay.

It did not, of course, last. The imperatives of a market system and the reassertion of the privileges of social class, of wealth and power, that was epitomised in the governments of Margaret Thatcher brought an abrupt end to the limited achievements of the welfare state. Between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s a series of economic recessions, spurred on by government policy, saw mass unemployment return and poverty increase

dramatically. Working conditions worsened for millions as employers took advantage of the new insecurity to claw back what power they had lost.

At the same time, while the wealthy were rewarded with tax cuts to boost their already spiralling incomes, the welfare services on which the poorest most depended were reduced, abolished or stripped of their helping role (Jones and Novak, 1999). During the 1980s and 1990s government policy, rather than softening the effects of free market inequalities, added significantly to the growing divide between rich and poor. According to one study, while market forces, including both the dramatic rise in unem- [p. 61  
↓ ] ployment and its subsequent negative effect on wages, especially of the low paid, were primarily responsible for growing inequality in the first half of the 1980s, by the late 1980s changes in state benefits and taxation policies were having a greater effect (Atkinson, 1996). Children, and especially those children whose parent(s) depended on state benefits, invariably suffered as benefit levels were cut or made more difficult to claim and the household incomes of the poor reduced.

Other government changes specifically targeted benefits for children and young people, including the postponement of benefit paid to school leavers and the abolition of dependent child allowances to the sick and the unemployed. By 1987 there had been fourteen cuts in social security for children and young people that had deprived them of some £200 million of income (Andrews and Jacobs, 1990: 77). Then, in the 1988 Social Security Act, government removed altogether the right of 16- and 17-year-olds to claim benefit, and significantly reduced the level of benefit payable to all young people up to the age of 25.

The result was that over this period inequality of incomes in Britain grew to a greater extent and at a faster rate than in any other industrialised country, wiping out all the gains made in the post-war era, and increasing the gap between the highest paid and the lowest paid amongst those in work to levels not seen since the end of the nineteenth century. Trends towards a levelling of class differences in health or education were similarly halted, and in many cases reversed.

# The Impact on Children

For a variety of reasons, children have been most affected by this growing divide: although children make up 22 per cent of the whole population, 29 per cent of children are in the lowest-income fifth of the population, and 11 per cent in the richest fifth. One reason for the growing polarisation in the fortunes of children is the way in which the dynamics of growing poverty have impacted most upon those families and households of child-rearing age. Thus between 1979 and 1993 the risk of living in poverty doubled for couples without children, but increased three-fold for those with children (Oppenheim and Harker, 1996: 55). The dramatic rise of unemployment in the early 1980s, and its persistence, has dramatically increased poverty amongst the children of the unemployed: in 1998/9 only 10 per cent of children in families with a full-time worker were found in the lowest income group, whereas the figure rose to 76 per cent of children in families with no working adult.

It is, however, not only unemployment that has impacted on the living standards of many children. The presence of children can limit the earnings [p. 62 ↓] potential of their parent(s), just as it increases household costs. Especially in the absence of affordable or adequate childcare facilities, parents may find themselves restricted to part-time work or required to take longer periods of time outside of the labour market while their children are dependent. This is particularly the case for mothers, who continue to bear the greater responsibility for childcare. Yet it is to women, and married women in particular, that employers have tended to look for their new sources of labour. Again the consequences of these changed patterns of work have a differential social class impact: whereas 65 per cent of professional and managerial women work full time and only 17 per cent part time, for women in unskilled and manual jobs the proportions are more than reversed, with only 8 per cent working full time and 55 per cent part time. Incomes followed the trend: in 1994 the earnings of full-time professional women averaged £400 a week, those of women in manual part-time jobs £70 a week (*Guardian*, 17 September 1995).

For single parents dependent on a sole income, achieving a job that pays sufficient to provide for themselves and their children in comfort and safety is a minority achievement. Some manage this quite nicely, but only 3 per cent of the children of

single parents make it into the top fifth of income groups (compared with 12 per cent of all children), while 54 per cent remain in the poorest group (Department of Social Security, 2000: 75). As a result, the children of lone parents are more likely than children of two-parent families to find themselves in the poorest households: four-fifths of all lone-parent families are in the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution, a figure that rises to 90 per cent of lone parents without paid work. At the same time, and as a reminder that lone parenthood in itself is not necessarily a cause of poverty, 3 per cent of the children of lone parents enjoy the lifestyles of the highest income group (Department of Social Security, 2000: 75).

The children of ethnic minority families similarly share the poverty – and much less often the wealth – of their parent(s). All ethnic minority children are more likely to experience poverty than white children but for black and Pakistani or Bangladeshi children the risk is much, much higher: 74 per cent of Pakistani or Bangladeshi children live in households with incomes less than half the national average, as do 57 per cent of black children, compared with 34 per cent of children as a whole (Department of Social Security, 2000: 81).

What these statistics reveal then is a picture in which large numbers of children – and for those with single parents, parents of an ethnic minority or parents who are unemployed, a majority of children – are brought up in conditions below, and sometimes far below, prevailing measurements of poverty. Some children, conversely – and, like their parents, a minority – enjoy all the benefits and privileges that wealth and high incomes confer. For those who experience childhood as poverty and deprivation, the consequences, as we shall see, are enduring and far-reaching. Moreover it is, for many, more than just a temporary or short-lived experience. To [p. 63 ↓] experience the depths of poverty at any time during childhood may be seen as a potentially damaging experience; to spend a whole childhood in poverty can have the most devastating, and well-documented, long-term effects. Authoritative evidence produced for a joint study by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion and HM Treasury shows that over a six-year period from 1991–6, while 37 per cent of all children were in poverty at the beginning of the period, 25 per cent stayed in poverty for four out of the six years, and 13 per cent remained in poverty for the whole six-year period. In other words, 35 per cent of poor children remain permanently poor: a figure that rises to 45 per cent for the children of single parents (Walker, 1999: 9).

# Health

Put a child from an unskilled or semi-skilled family background next to one from a professional or managerial background, and one will live nearly ten years longer than the other, be less likely to die at birth, in infancy and childhood, will suffer fewer diseases and live a healthier mental and physical life. It is no accident.

According to an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* in July 1999, 'poverty, as every doctor knows, is a major determinant of health, much more so than access to health services'. The latter remains important – the wealthier classes and their children still enjoy better access to state, not to mention private, health care (Ascherson, 1998). But it is in the causes of death and ill-health that class inequalities first have their impact.

Over twenty years ago the Report of the Working Party on Inequalities in Health chaired by Sir Douglas Black concluded that 'class differences in mortality are a constant feature of the entire human lifespan.... At any age people in occupational class V have a higher rate of death than their better-off counterparts' (cited Benzeval, 1997: 154). Since then the situation has, if anything, got worse. Infant mortality – the number of children who die before the age of 1 – is one of the most widely-established measures of health and health inequality, used to measure economic and social development and health inequalities across the globe. In Britain overall levels of infant mortality have fallen over time, but inequalities between social classes remain largely untouched. Children born in social classes IV or V have a 50 per cent higher rate of infant mortality than those born in social classes I or II, while other studies using different criteria show even greater rates of difference: infant mortality in Salford, for example, being twice as high as that in south Suffolk (Yamey, 1999). Poor nutrition in pregnancy is one factor, leading to an average birth weight in social class V 115 g lighter than in social class I, while 25 per cent of mothers living in bed and breakfast accommodation in one London borough were found to [p. 64 ↓ ] have low birth-weight babies, compared to a national average of 7 per cent (Lee, 1999). Low birth weights account for 59 per cent of neonatal deaths, contributing to a national infant mortality rate that now puts Britain on a par with Slovenia as a country with one of the worst records in Europe.

Once past the very unequal hazards of infancy, most children can expect to live to adulthood with very little chance of an early death. Those who do die early, however, are much more likely to be poor.

Death by accident is the biggest killer of children: about 500 die each year as a result. Poorer children are five times more likely to die in accidents than those from 'better-off' families, eight times more likely to be killed by a car (despite, it should be noted, fewer poor families owning one), and fifteen times more likely to die in a fire. 'The gap between rich and poor has widened since 1981, and is the steepest social gradient in childhood deaths' (*Guardian*, 22 December 1999).

Of course poorer children face more hazardous lives than richer children, and it is their poverty which is the cause of this. Overcrowded living conditions, lack of gardens and other safe play areas make poorer children more vulnerable. Poverty also brings added perils: families who have to cook on open fires, or light the house by candles, because the electricity supply has been cut, and the cheap, but less reliable, electrical appliances, child safety locks, smoke alarms and fire-proof furniture that are the lot of those who cannot afford more.

While childhood deaths mark an extreme of health inequalities, ill-health also has its own persistent and long-lasting impact. Children and young people are remarkably resilient, and this in itself has contributed to the neglect of their health problems and inequalities. According to one source:

Perhaps the biggest obstacle of all to understanding the health needs of young people has been the assumption that adolescence and health go hand in hand, what Bennet referred to as 'a widespread belief that they are a fit and healthy group'. This assumption, which still pervades much medical thinking, is rapidly being shaken by evidence concerning the health of young people themselves and by a broader concern with the social and economic conditions they face as they enter adulthood. Economic recession, unemployment, low-paid jobs, and the sense of having no future are potentially all components of a social malaise that may affect the health of us all, but especially the young. (West and Sweeting, 1996: 50)



It is, however, not all of the young who will suffer such consequences, but rather those with lower incomes and from poorer social classes (Kumar, 1993). According to consultant paediatrician James Appleyard, one of the authors of the BMA report 'Growing Up In Britain', 'we are programming our children at an early age for lifetime problems.... The first five years are absolutely crucial to the development of children's bodies, minds and personalities. Deprivation in early life causes lifelong damage' (cited Lee, 1999: 1).

Moreover, it is not only the direct material impact of poverty which blights the lives of children in poorer families. As Richard Wilkinson has [p. 65 ↓ ] convincingly shown, the existence of inequality itself contributes to lower levels of health and well-being: Japan and Sweden, while not the richest countries in the developed world, have the narrowest income differences, and come first and second respectively in the world's ranking of life expectancy at birth (Wilkinson, 1994: 10). The psycho-social impact of class inequalities on health, rather than just the material effects of poverty, are as yet little understood, but the evidence of depression and suicide amongst young people shows a familiar class pattern. Those young people who leave school with no qualifications, for example, are three times more likely to be diagnosed as depressed by their mid-20s than graduates (*Guardian*, 12 July 2000), while a study of 1,000 young people from the west of Scotland, who were followed from the age of 15 to 21, found a significant deterioration in the mental health of those who faced unemployment: 'for almost all the mental health measures, unemployed males and females were in poorer health. Nine per cent of males and seven per cent of females who were unemployed reported attempting suicide, much higher rates than those found for those at work or in education' (West and Sweeting, 1996: 57).

## Education

The cementing of class inequalities begins at an early age, and among the myriad of ways in which the privileges, or deprivations, of social class are passed down from one generation to the next, formal educational systems figure centrally. Schooling both reflects childhood inequalities and reinforces them, reproducing in each generation similar patterns that last into adult life.

In Britain the starkest example of the class inequalities in the schooling of children and young people is the deep-rooted divide between state and private schooling. As Nick Davies wrote in a special review of private schools in *The Guardian* (8 March 2000), 'there is no other country in Europe where private schools present a fully fledged alternative to the state system, open essentially only to the affluent'. In other countries, although private schools exist, and sometimes cater for a greater proportion of children than in Britain, their rationale tends to be based on religious affiliation rather than on wealth. In Britain private schools have for over a century (ever since they abandoned their founders' intention to provide free education for the poor, earning them the title of 'public' schools to which many still cling) sought to provide educational, social and interpersonal benefits to the small minority of children whose parents are able to pay.

With an annual income from fees alone of some £3.2 billion, Britain's 2,300 private schools currently cater for 7 per cent of the country's children, [p. 66 ↓ ] a proportion that has increased from 5.8 per cent in 1980. Yet the products of private schooling continue to dominate public life: almost half the students at Oxford and Cambridge have a private school background, from where they go on to fill 80 per cent of the judiciary and 83 per cent of High Court appointments. In other parts of the state apparatus, young people from private schools go on to take over half the places at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, 80 per cent of the highest army ranks, and 40 per cent of the diplomatic service, while providing half of the permanent secretaries who run Whitehall (*Sunday Times*, 4 June 2000).

Their numbers equally dominate the major professions such as law and medicine: careers for which private school pupils are groomed from an early stage. According to one study:

The future career plans of the private school pupils were generally made at a very early age. Indeed there was often evidence of extensive knowledge of job types within a particular career. Subjects wanted to go into criminal law instead of just law, and surgery instead of medicine. Many pupils reported a pressure from teachers and careers staff to decide on an occupational plan at the age of 14, in order to ensure they made 'the correct' choice of GCSE and then A level subjects. Additionally, an extensive programme of work experience was

organised for pupils, often involving the parents of the pupils to provide access to hospitals, legal offices and accountancy practices. (Roker, 1991: 9)

In law, for example, half of the appointments to partners within the 'magic circle' of the five leading London law firms come from private schools, where they can expect to climb a ladder leading to current salaries of up to £1 million a year, and half of these were also educated at Oxford or Cambridge. According to a report published by the magazine *Commercial Lawyer*, 'You still have a better chance of being made a partner if you had a private education. The odds are stacked against you in the legal profession if you went to a state school. If you went to an ex-polytechnic, you can forget the magic circle' (cited in *The Independent*, 15 July 2000). Seventy-five per cent of private school pupils go on to take managerial and professional jobs, compared with only 40 per cent of those from the state sector (*Guardian*, 8 March 2000), and, along with the unknown numbers who fill the country's boardrooms, they form a small and largely self-perpetuating elite in whose hands the major economic and political institutions of the country substantially remain.

All this, of course, comes at a price. According to the Independent Schools Information Service, basic fees 'vary widely' depending on the particular school and the age of the child. For 'pre-prep' schooling, aged 2–7, fees are between £2,100 and £3,600 a year; for Junior or Prep schools, £3,600 to £7,500; and for Senior schools, aged 11 or 13–18, from £4,800 to £10,500, with additional charges for boarding schools. At the same time 'extras can add considerably to the bill'. In return, those with the ability to pay can receive a seamless web of private education from infancy to young adulthood. One such example is that of Mill Hill school in London; as the *Observer* reported:

[p. 67 ↓ ] The pre-prep (£5,340 a year for 4 year olds) feeds into Mill Hill's prep school (fees £6,411 a year). At 13 they proceed to the main school on the same leafy 150-acre campus. This costs £8,250 a year, adding up to £100,000 per child for the full 15 years. The state sector spends barely a quarter as much. (*Observer*, 15 February 1998)

Fees alone, however, are not the only source of income for educating the children of the wealthy. Many private schools enjoy charitable status, with the result that they

escape all tax on income from stocks, shares, trusts and property as well as escaping all VAT, corporation tax on their profits, capital gains tax and stamp duty on their property transactions, inheritance tax on new endowments and up to 100 per cent of their business rates. As Nick Davies reported:

In 1996 the Independent Schools Council surveyed 838 of its members and concluded that they were saving £62.6 million a year. In 1992 the master of Haileybury, David Jewell, suggested that ending charitable status would add 30 per cent to fees – making charitable status the equivalent of a state subsidy of about £1,945 per pupil, some £200 more a year than the state now invests in the education of a child at primary school. (*Guardian*, 8 March 2000)

What this buys is a range of advantages over other children. According to the head teacher of Mill Hill's pre-prep school, for those aged 4–7, 'the difference is mostly a question of money and class size. We have an in-house music teacher, a full-time PE and dance specialist, and they start learning French at six' (cited in *The Observer*, 15 February 1998). Its prep school also has a rose garden, chapel, playing fields, six tennis courts and networked computer system, together with one teacher for every eleven pupils. Many other private schools similarly are able to afford such extensive facilities; with an average of eighteen acres of land each, 93 per cent of private pre-schools teach music, almost all teach French, two-thirds teach Latin, and a quarter teach German. In contrast, state schools have faced drastic cuts in music and sports facilities, school playing fields are sold off at the rate of twenty a year, state primary schools have on average one computer between eighteen pupils, and class sizes twice those found in the private sector (*Guardian*, 8 March 2000).

It should therefore be of little surprise that academic achievement of children in the private sector generally far exceeds that of children in state education. Ninety-two of the top 100 schools judged by A-level results are private. Nor can the superior results of private schooling be seen as a reflection of some innate superiority amongst the children of the wealthy: a University of London Institute of Education study tracked a group of 350 students who were equally able academically, half of whom went to private schools and half to state schools. Those who went to private schools did much better in

their A-levels and were more than twice as likely to go to a top university (Lampl, n.d.: 2).

It is not, however, only the smaller class sizes and the vastly superior facilities of most private schools that mark the advantage of a fee-paying education. Just as schooling in general is one of the major institutions [p. 68 ↓ ] ensuring the reproduction of class inequalities, so those destined by birth and money to become the future ruling class of the country are trained in the culture and attitudes of their class. As Bryan Appleyard put it in the *Sunday Times* (4 June 2000):

It is not just that private school pupils gain better qualifications – though they do – it is also that they are perceived to function better in society.... It is a sad truth that even the brightest state pupils tend to lack the wit, charm and confidence of their private school coevals,

'Wit', 'charm' and 'confidence', when interpreted as they invariably are in their class-specific contexts, go a long way. Along with the personal contacts and networks that ease privileged children into their future careers, they undoubtedly do much to make up for any lack of intelligence or ability. Research suggests that private schools lay great store by the development of such attributes; as an interviewee in one study saw it, 'the exam results are better ... but it's more than that. Private schools give you confidence. You really feel you can do anything ... you're made to believe it.' Another felt this had tangible results: 'I've had two interviews at University and you can see it makes a difference ... they're just influenced by it' (cited Roker, 1991: 9). As the author of the study concluded:

Pupil[s] believed that the high academic achievements of private school pupils was important; but it was this added confidence and forwardness that gave people from private schools 'the edge' over other young people in interviews for University and also, eventually, for jobs. 'It's a very subtle difference' [one] suggested, 'but it's very real'. (Roker, 1991: 10)

While private schooling marks the pinnacle of a class-divided education system, state schooling also mirrors this divide. Class inequalities within state education have been

a persistent feature since its origins, and reforms over the years have done relatively little to change the situation. In the first place, a small but educationally significant part of the state system still reserves the right to select its own pupils. Grammar schools, although accounting for only 3 per cent of children at state schools, account for 22 per cent of top state performers at A-level, and 30 per cent of state school entries to Oxford and Cambridge, while the latter take only 20 per cent of their intake from the 85 per cent of children educated in unselective state comprehensive schools (Lamp, n.d.: 2). Even within the comprehensive system factors of wealth and social class bear heavily on achievements and future prospects. Although unselective in name, in practice those with sufficient income and wealth can play the housing market and pay the inflated house prices that are now commonly associated with the catchment areas of the best state schools.

Of perhaps greater significance, however, in perpetuating educational advantage and disadvantage even within the state system are the material benefits that favour the educational success of the more affluent, and the in-built and largely middle-class ethos and culture of the educational system itself.

[p. 69 ↓ ] The result is a state education system that systematically disadvantages those from poorer backgrounds. Whereas in 1998 more than two-thirds of children of the professional and managerial classes gained five GCSEs at grades A to C, only 20 per cent of children whose parents were in unskilled manual jobs achieved the same standard (*Guardian*, 11 May 2000). The consequences for future educational progression and, ultimately, for job prospects and careers are equally divided. Those who leave school with no qualifications are four times as likely to be unemployed than those who progress on to a university degree, while at every step of the educational ladder, future earnings are heavily determined by qualifications received. Thus males leaving school with O-levels or GCSEs will earn between 12 and 21 per cent more than those with no qualifications; those with A-levels 27–39 per cent more, and those with a degree 37–67 per cent more (Department of Social Security, 2000: 23). This link between education and future earnings, moreover, 'is getting stronger over time': between 1980 and 1994 earnings for men with A-levels increased twice as fast as for those with no qualifications (*ibid.*).

## An End in Sight?

In March 1999 Tony Blair announced that his government was committed to the abolition of child poverty in Britain within twenty years. As a number of commentators have pointed out (see Fimister, 2001), it was both a bold and a limited commitment, whose ultimate success has yet to be judged. During its first term in office the New Labour government saw some significant inroads made into child poverty, with the numbers living below the poverty line reducing by an estimated one-third. Yet reducing the number by one-half will still leave Britain with one of the highest rates of childhood poverty in the industrialised world, and with a level still exceeding that when the last Labour government left office in 1979. Lifting all children above the poverty line will also, on current government policy, be a much more difficult task: New Labour's insistence on work as the route out of poverty leaves untouched those families with children unable to work and would call for a substantial redistribution of income, especially through the benefit system, that New Labour has shown itself reluctant to countenance. Even if it were to succeed, a target of twenty years will leave hundreds of thousands of children to endure its damaging effects in the interim.

What is more, lifting children above the poverty line will not put an end to childhood inequalities. The poverty line, set at half of average income, is itself an arbitrary and meagre definition of need, and to lift children from below to slightly above this line will still leave them facing substantial deprivation and hardship. As with adults, the continuum of childhood [p. 70 ↓] poverty stretches from the most wretched and miserable through a myriad of lesser deprivations. But poverty remains a matter of relative definition, and, like poverty in general, children's poverty is felt in comparison with others. In other words what it means to 'live normally' is judged by how other people live. It is entirely possible, and necessary, to eradicate the worst excesses of childhood poverty, but to give all children a normal life means addressing the huge gap that exists between those at the top and those at the bottom. Yet, despite the progress made by New Labour in raising the living standards of some of the poorest children, the gap between rich and poor continues to increase.

For children, compared to adults, the pressure to be like others is probably the most acute. As one mother said:



You can accept it for yourself; it doesn't matter if you haven't got a pair of knickers without holes in or no stockings because you can cover up; you can accept it more for yourself, you can't accept it for your children, and that's the worst thing. (Cited in Beresford et al., 1999: 108)

Just because some children cannot afford what other children have does not mean they do not feel a need to be the same. Commercialisation of childhood has increased the pressure to compare and consume. Children are now a major target in the sales of everything from supermarket foods to financial services, to say nothing of music, clothes and fashion. Inequalities amongst children also open up new areas for commercial exploitation: most of the big financial institutions now operate special children's savings accounts, such as the Nationwide's Smart-2-Save (aged 1–11) or Bradford and Bingley's KidZone (aged 1–16). As the *Daily Telegraph* (9 February 2000) noted, reporting research commissioned by the Royal Bank of Scotland showing that while one-fifth of children get no pocket money at all, another fifth get an average in excess of £20 per week, with the earnings, gifts and other savings that some children enjoy, children are big business. Moreover, as the *Telegraph* helpfully reminded its readers, with children entitled, like adults, to an income of £4,335 per year before becoming liable to tax, those that can afford it have an added incentive to boost their children's wealth.

Poverty of course is not only a matter of money. In the final analysis, poverty is a social relationship, and the experience of poverty is framed not simply by a lack of resources but by the way people are treated and perceived by others around them. This, importantly, includes government policy, and the growing trend towards means-tested benefits – justified as a way of ‘concentrating help’ on those in the greatest need – reinforces the feeling of being separate and apart. The fear of being stigmatised, of being made to stand out, and in particular to be seen as inadequate or a failure is a constant pressure, and for many children a daily reality. According to James Roberts, aged 14:

Kids whose parents don't have much money are forced to go to the cheap shops and if anyone sees them then they get picked on in the estate and at school. My friend and I have both had [p. 71 ↓] these problems- You. also get picked on in school if you get a free school



dinner ticket; you get called things like 'poor boy', 'scavenger' and things that are a bit rude and I'm not allowed to repeat. This makes us feel sad, and sometimes angry with them, and then we get into trouble and get called troublemakers. (Cited in McMahon and Marsh, 1999; 14)

Learning the lessons of poverty is a painful experience, and it is one that most parents seek to avoid for their children. Parents go to huge lengths to shield their children from it, with mothers in particular sacrificing their own diet and health to ensure that children have enough to eat or can go on the school trip. Yet for millions it is a futile struggle against impossible odds and the cause of great conflict and tension that add to the pressures that poor children face.

For some children and young people, these pressures have proved catastrophic. For some it has meant family breakdown and the perils of life on the streets or 'in care' (see Jones, this volume). For others it has led to drug addiction, mental and behavioural problems, and a rising level of suicide. For many thousands it has created a position of economic and social marginalisation through which crime may offer the only viable route for survival. By 1997 there were approximately 150,000 16- or 17-year-olds not in education, training or paid work, a majority of whom received no income from the state. One survey conducted earlier in the 1990s found that 45 per cent of this group were or had been homeless, a quarter said they had had to beg, steal or sell drugs in order to survive, and a quarter of the girls were pregnant (cited in Wilkinson, 1994: 36). With girls from social class V backgrounds ten times more likely to become teenage mothers than girls from social class I, with 30,000 young people still leaving school with absolutely no qualifications and over 25 per cent of mostly poor young people leaving school with only the most basic qualifications to face an unemployment rate in excess of 16 per cent, state policy needs radically to rethink how it can deal constructively with a legacy that has pauperised so many children and young people for a generation and more. Getting 'tough' with young people left at the margins of society may win votes, but will do little to counter the damage that has been inflicted and the consequences this continues to have. Yet 4,000 young people aged between 10 and 16 are locked up in custody in secure units, young offenders institutions or prison, with their numbers predicted to rise. With a growing tide of incarceration answering the hopelessness, frustration and poverty of a great many young people, the gap between their lives and those of other children is enormous (see Goldson, this volume).

It would be possible, although in a short chapter such as this not practical, to detail the whole spectrum of childhood inequalities, with its privileges for a few and its disadvantages and deprivations for many. What can be said about children's health or education can also be said about every single aspect of their lives. This is of course merely to recognise that inequalities are pervasive and extensive. Combined together, as for many children they frequently are, they do immense and often long-lasting [p. 72 ↓ ] damage to a child's present and future prospects. That not all children suffer such a fate ought simply to remind us that we live in a deeply fractured and class-divided society. As such, the differences that mark children's lives – differences in education, physical and mental health, employment prospects, and general sense of confidence and well-being – are not merely the product of class divisions. They are also the starting-point for the reproduction of class divisions in the future. Britain's ruling class of tomorrow is already being formed in the private schools and other institutions through which privilege is passed from generation to generation; at the same time, and at the other end of the spectrum, today's 'failures' amongst the children of the poor are being prepared for the bleak future as adults that this society will offer them. Breaking this cycle calls for a much more radical assault on class privilege and the system that maintains it.

## Key Texts

The publications of the Child Poverty Action Group are an invaluable source of information, at least on the impact of poverty on children. One particular book that looks critically at current government proposals to abolish child poverty is *When Children Pay* by Rosemary Link and Anthony Bibus (London: CPAG, pp. 2000).

The wider context of growing inequality in Britain is covered in Chris Jones and Tony Novak, *Poverty Welfare and the Disciplinary State* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Finally, as a reminder that inequality embraces the rich as well as the poor, John Rentoul's *The Rich Get Richer*, although not focused solely on children, gives some idea of how the other half (or, in this case, the other 20 per cent) live (Rentoul, 1997).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221068.n5>

