

Family values – parents’ views on necessities for families with children

By Donald Hirsch and Noel Smith

Introduction

This summary sets out the main findings of a qualitative research project designed to identify the views of parents about which items should be considered ‘necessities’ for families with children, and why. The research was commissioned by the Child Poverty Unit (CPU), principally to inform the selection of a shortlist of items to go into the Office for National Statistics’ ‘Opinions’ omnibus survey in September 2009, in which members of the public were asked to identify necessities for families. The purpose of this latter survey was to update the items used annually in the Family Resources Survey (FAS) asking families with children which items they want but cannot afford, as part of the Government’s combined measure of low income and material deprivation.

The research was part of an effort to check the ‘basket’ of goods and services used to measure deprivation, to ensure that it reflects contemporary views of necessities. By anchoring measures of poverty in the views of parents and other members of the public about what are necessities for families today, this process helps to add credibility to these measures. Without such public validation, the measures can seem arbitrary, based on statistical comparisons of incomes with the median.

In addition to aiding with item selection for the omnibus survey, the qualitative research described here helps to improve understanding about the rationales used by members of the public when responding to questions about necessities for families with children. The issue of what constitutes a ‘socially defined necessity’, and why, is important to the modern understanding of poverty.

Methodology

The research drew on methods used in ‘consensual’ research convening groups of members of the public to draw up budget standards. It was carried out by the team that researched consensual budget standards in the ‘Minimum Income Standard for Britain’ (MIS) project. However, rather than compiling whole budgets, the groups in this case were asked to identify specific items that could be classified as necessities for families with children, and whose absence is likely to cause hardship to families unable to afford them. They were also asked to focus on those items that significant numbers of families in Britain today may have to go without, rather than things such as basic nutrition that almost everybody now has. Eight small groups of parents (45 participants in all) were recruited in Birmingham, Reading and Sheffield. Five groups comprised parents with school aged children and three had parents with children below school age. Each group had a structured discussion lasting two hours.

Key messages

- Parents give high priority to necessities that affect social relationships within families. For example, they think that a family home should have an area where the family can eat together, not on their laps in front of a television. Families should be able to go on outings, overnight trips and possibly short holidays: the fact of being able to share these experiences is more important than the precise activity and its cost. Similarly, the groups thought that couples with children need time to do things together outside the home, which may require the cost of a babysitter.

Download this and other research reports free from
<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

- Children's long-term health and well-being plays a bigger role in parents' definition of necessities than their short-term comfort and enjoyment. Activities such as swimming and learning to ride a bike are of benefit to health and enable children to feel included in society. The number of toys and games that every family should be able to afford was defined in terms of the ability of children's ability to learn and develop through play. Government guidelines such as eating five fruit and vegetables a day were considered important in defining what families should be able to afford.
- In some cases, parents believe that all children should have an item, but not necessarily by ensuring that they have the income to buy it privately. For example, they thought that many activities for children cost too much, and should be subsidised as a means of opening up opportunities for families with limited means to access them.
- Judgements about what kinds of information and communication technologies are necessities for all families are in a state of transition. Parents agree that all children of school age now need access to a computer at home, and there is a growing consensus that internet access is also needed for children. Whether it is a necessity for adults, and whether everyone needs a mobile phone, causes greater disagreement, but all parents acknowledge that such items are becoming ever harder to live without.
- These findings deepen our understanding of what makes a 'socially perceived necessity' in Britain today. From the parents' perspective, the most significant necessities are often not things whose absence causes immediate suffering to individuals, but are in particular those whose absence damages family relationships and the healthy long-term development of children.

Specific findings

Accommodation

There was strong consensus that every family needs enough bedrooms so that children would

not have to share with their parents and those of different sexes over the age of about ten would not have to share with each other. Some parents feel that older children should not have to share at all, but there was no consensus over this, as expected standards seem to vary significantly from one family to another. There are also varying views about outdoor space, with some families thinking that a private outdoor area is essential and others that a shared space or nearby park is adequate for children to play and get exercise. Behind these differences are varying views about security for children, affected by individuals' own living experiences. One area of consensus however was that even though a dining room is not essential, it is important to have an area of a kitchen or living area where the family can eat meals together, as mealtimes are an important focus for family interaction.

Durable goods: technology

In previous surveys of deprivation, computers have not been considered to be essential, but parents in this research all agreed that for children this has now changed. They emphasised how important computers have become for school work from an early age, and did not think that external access such as via libraries was adequate to avoid disadvantage. In general, they also felt that internet access has become a necessity for school aged children, but had more mixed views about whether it is absolutely essential for adults in managing their lives. They also disagreed with each other about the extent to which a mobile phone has become a necessity for everyone, but generally felt that families should have at least one mobile phone between them if only for security and emergencies. Parents tended to feel that mobile and landline phones have become complementary and even those who did not think that mobiles are yet a necessity acknowledged that this is likely to change soon.

Durable goods: kitchen appliances

As ownership of certain kitchen equipment such as a refrigerator have become close to universal,

their importance in distinguishing deprived from non-deprived households has lessened. However, the parents in the survey put a lot of emphasis on having three basic appliances – cooker, washing machine and fridge freezer – and being able to repair or replace them when needed. These were seen as more than mere conveniences, but essentials in providing the basic needs of modern life.

Indoor goods for leisure and development

In thinking about what toys, books and other resources families need, groups found it hard to be specific, but emphasised their importance in children's development rather than just as 'leisure' items. Conventional toys, games, books and in some cases computer games were cited as things that help children learn. Parents of pre-schoolchildren cited specific toys such as puzzles and building blocks in this respect. At the same time, many of the parents disliked the phenomenon of buying large number of toys, which they feared would cause children not to value them enough.

Outdoor resources: a bicycle

In common with previous research, this study found ownership of a bicycle to be an agreed necessity for children – the one specific item of outdoor equipment identified as such. It was needed, groups believed, both for physical development and for recreational participation. Learning to ride a bike was considered an important requirement of childhood. There was no age cut-off for this: the groups of pre-school parents emphasised that it is almost never too early to learn to cycle, or to have a tricycle as a precursor.

Leisure activities and social participation

Parents in this research supported the idea that certain forms of leisure and social activities were necessities that every family should have access to, but in some cases put emphasis on different items than those featuring in the existing measure of material deprivation.

Some items, like having friends round and paying for hobbies, were not recognised by participants as being crucial things whose unaffordability for some families are causing children to suffer. Others, like birthday parties, were considered important but not necessarily very expensive. On the other hand, participation in organised activities after school or in the holidays was considered both essential to children's development and potentially hard to afford. They thought that every child should be able to go swimming regularly, and to pursue some sporting, cultural or other interest in an organised activity at least once a week. Parents emphasised that classes can be very expensive, and that places in subsidised options, for example in extended schools, can be hard to find. They believed it is important to make more options available at an affordable cost, rather than accepting that a large amount spent on out-of-school activities should be part of every family's budget.

The groups all agreed that it is important for families to do things together outside the home, through holidays, short breaks or day outings. It was important, they believed, for families to feel a sense of commonality from having done things together. Staying away overnight, away from the daily pressures of the home, was frequently mentioned as part of this. However, the research did not confirm previous findings that a week's holiday away is an essential minimum: the groups were divided between those who thought that it is and others who thought a long weekend would suffice. In addition to whole family time together, the groups thought it was important for couple parents to go out together on a regular basis, in order to maintain their relationship. For some couples, this implies the expense of a babysitter.

Food and clothing

Not many items of food or clothing were seen by parents as both being necessary and being potentially hard for some families in Britain today to afford. In both cases it was seen as being socially acceptable to buy most things at low-cost outlets choosing basic brands. The most significant exception for food was fresh fruit and

vegetables, whose prices have been rising at a time when consciousness of the Government's 'five a day' message is strong. Parents also felt that fresh meat could be hard to afford, but unlike with fruit and vegetables there was no consensus about how much (e.g. eating meat every day, twice a week) was 'enough', and therefore how much constitutes 'necessity'. In the case of clothes, parents generally felt that while a certain amount of 'fashion brand' buying may be seen as necessary for teenagers, most items could be bought at cheap outlets such as Primark without stigma. The item most commonly seen as a hard to afford necessity was fitted shoes, which parents believe are needed for children's healthy development. Parents also thought the cost of school uniform could put great pressure on families, but did not see lacking items of uniform as being a significant source of deprivation, since there was no choice but to buy them, with the high cost shifting pressure to other areas of the family budget.

Transport

Parents did not generally think that a car is a 'necessity'. All of those taking part lived in cities with extensive public transport networks, and this finding cannot be taken as applying to those in rural areas. A number of the groups stressed that the cost of public transport can be very high, applied to a whole family. The cost of a season ticket on the local bus network was seen as a necessity for each family member in order to travel to school, work, activities, shops and leisure. This could be hard to afford for people on limited means.

Savings, debt and maintaining a standard

As well as being asked about day to day purchases and durable goods, parents were asked about savings, debt, insurance and maintaining their homes.

Groups in general agreed that it was important to make provision for the long term, but found it very difficult to pin this down to precise things that families should be able to afford in order to avoid deprivation. In general they agreed that families should be able to put some money aside (about £10 a week) for 'rainy day' purchases and to service their debts without falling behind on payments. While replacing key electrical goods like a washing machine was a key priority, they put less emphasis on replacing old furniture or redecorating. Unless furniture was broken or the house 'really shabby so you can't invite anyone round', these items of spending were seen as desirable rather than essential.

Keeping warm

One of the existing measures of deprivation asks parents if they can afford to keep their homes warm enough in winter. Not surprisingly, the groups all readily agreed that this was a necessity.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 730 3. Research Report 641. March 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

Other report summaries in the research series are also available from the website above and from:

Paul Noakes,
Commercial Support and Knowledge
Management Team,
3rd Floor, Caxton House,
Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA.
E-mail: Paul.Noakes@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

If you would like to subscribe to our email list to receive future summaries and alerts as reports are published please contact Paul Noakes at the address above.