

Written evidence from ADR UK (Administrative Data Research UK) (CPM0042)

What is the impact of child poverty and how can it best be measured?

[ADR UK](#) (Administrative Data Research UK) is an [Economic & Social Research Council](#) (part of [UK Research & Innovation](#)) programme with a mission is to enable greater access to public sector administrative data for research in the public interest. This is particularly relevant to the measurement of child poverty and achieving a deeper understanding of its drivers.

[Administrative data](#) is information created when people interact with public services such as schools, hospitals, the courts or the benefits system, and collated by government and other public bodies. Public service providers must keep records of interactions with the public for operational purposes: to enable them to carry out their day-to-day work, to monitor and improve their performance, and keep providing services in an effective way.

This wealth of existing data, which represents all those who interact with public services, is an extremely valuable tool for better understanding society and highlighting where change is needed in policy and service provision. With access to the most relevant and comprehensive source of data available about the lives of children, researchers can paint a fuller picture of children's lives and a deeper understanding of child poverty and its causes. In this way, administrative data is an extremely powerful tool for measuring child poverty.

Specifically, when data is shared and linked between different parts of the public sector, researchers can explore the relationships between different aspects of children's lives – such as education, health and household circumstances – to obtain a fuller picture of how they interact with one another. Other methods of data collection, such as surveys, cannot paint such a comprehensive picture of all children's lives and are therefore less useful for measuring child poverty.

Understanding children's lives and outcomes in Scotland

The '[Understanding children's lives and outcomes in Scotland](#)' project, led by [ADR Scotland](#), involves bringing together a range of data about children in Scotland. This includes: pupil census data for Scotland, Scottish Government data on looked after children, children's health, births and deaths, the 2001/2011 national census, attendance, absence and exclusion from school, child protection, secure care for children, exam qualifications, school leaver destinations, and child wellbeing. This linked data will be extremely valuable to the measurement of child poverty and its impacts in Scotland.

ECHILD

The ADR UK-funded [ECHILD](#) (which stands for 'Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data') project, in partnership with UCL researchers, DfE and NHS Digital, involves the creation of a research-ready database linking health, education and social care data for all children in England for the first time, enabling researchers to better understand how education affects children's health and how health affects children's education.

If the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) could **link information reflecting income and benefits to household**, this would be extremely valuable for measuring child poverty in the context of ECHILD and other work. This non-disclosive household

information could be linked to the National Pupil Database (which is included in the ECHILD database), which would be a step forward for all UK countries served by DWP and HMRC. Currently, DWP and HMRC use LSOA (lower super output area) level information to generate the [income deprivation affecting children index \(IDACI\)](#), a component of the English indices of deprivation which is included in the National Pupil Database. However, having household-level information about income and benefits would allow far more in-depth insights into child poverty. For example, household measures of benefit receipt over time would make it possible to assess the impact of changes in benefits, as children in impoverished households could be followed in the data.

Children with severe developmental impairments have a higher risk of living in poverty as their care adds significantly to the cost of a household, whether through reduced income of parents due to caring responsibilities, compliance with therapy and aids, or diminished social support mechanisms. Linked data at household level could enable services to better target benefits and income according to need by, for example, exploring whether those in need are receiving appropriate benefits. Meanwhile, children in poverty have a higher chance of developmental impairment due to increased stresses and hazards before and during pregnancy that affect foetal and early childhood development. With better access to data that allows us to track the progress of these children, we would have the evidence-base to test whether different interventions work at reducing the impacts of childhood poverty in the long-term. If the exposure of poverty were measured by household, it would vastly reduce measurement error.

What links can be established for children between financial hardship, educational under-achievement, family breakdown and worklessness?

As discussed above, the ADR UK-funded GUIE and ECHILD projects will provide valuable insights into the links between these aspects of children's lives, particularly if more accurate household or child measures of income deprivation could be linked into the existing ECHILD database. Administrative data – which represents all those who interact with public services – is unparalleled in scope, and is therefore far more representative of all children than using other forms of data collection in pursuit of establishing these links.

The [first analysis of the GUIE dataset](#), published by the Office for National Statistics [Centre for Equalities & Inclusion](#) in July 2020, found that a high proportion of records were successfully linked between the Census and educational attainment data involved. This successfully demonstrated the feasibility of the GUIE dataset for providing valuable new insights into the lives of children and young people on a wide scale. The report therefore shows the potential of the dataset for understanding child poverty, particularly in relation to the links between household composition as identified by the Census (including characteristics such as household type, carer status, ethnicity and geographical location) and educational attainment.

How effectively does the Department for Work and Pensions work with other Government departments, particularly the Department for Education and the Treasury, to reduce child poverty?

ADR UK is currently working closely with the Department for Education (DfE) to link its data with that of other government departments and enable greater secure access to it for accredited researchers working on projects in the public interest, including in relation to child poverty. We are also in long-running discussions with the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) about enabling access to data, though there have been some barriers to accessing DWP data in contrast to that held by DfE.

For example, the Scottish and Welsh governments have both made cases to DWP that articulate their short, medium and long-term requirements for data to support them in managing the Covid-19 pandemic. These requests are being managed by the ADR UK Strategic Hub and the Office for National Statistics (ONS), as they are related to ongoing work being taken forwards with DWP and HMRC to test ways of linking data across multiple ADR UK data infrastructure sites. Further details of the cases made to DWP for access to benefits data to support Scottish and Welsh government management of the pandemic can be provided to the Work and Pensions Committee on request. Although there is some engagement at a working level with DWP on taking this work forward, this may not result in action in time for any practical benefit on the management of the pandemic to occur. A rapid shift in culture for improving access to data would be required.

There are other areas in which progress between ADR UK and DWP has been slow; for example, in relation to access to the Race Disparity Audit (RDA) dataset. This dataset brings together 2011 Census data with Benefits and Income data from DWP and HMRC at a record level, creating a large and informative research resource which would be highly relevant to better understanding and responding to child poverty. This audit has already helped to inform our understanding of differences between ethnic groups, and to identify those public services where disparities are diminishing and those where work is needed to develop effective strategies to reduce disparities. However, there are many more insights to be gained through increased access for further analysis, which would support further insights into child poverty, if the data were updated. This could include, for example:

- Research into benefits, benefit reform and interactions with benefits;
- Longitudinal analyses of outcomes for vulnerable populations;
- Household and housing analysis.

HMRC and ONS have already given their approval for this data to be made available to external researchers via the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS), and we continue to work collaboratively with DWP to gain their approval. This is a good example of the kind of process that would benefit from being accelerated in order to enable timely access to data to support research in the public interest and particularly in relation to child poverty.

What would be the merits of having a cross-government child poverty strategy?

Linking together data held by different government departments and other public bodies enables a fuller understanding of the relationships between different parts of our lives. This means policy decisions can be taken not in isolation, but with a fuller understanding of how what is done in one area affects what happens in others. However, for this to happen, government departments need to be more joined-up in their approaches.

In relation to child poverty specifically, greater data sharing would enable a better understanding of the interactions between different areas of children's lives – such as education, health, and household circumstances – and how these might play a role in driving poverty. There is a need to have insight into all aspects of a child's life to properly understand the drivers and impacts of child poverty, and this cannot be done by strategies which do not involve different parts of government. ADR UK is already working to join up data from across government to enable a fuller understanding of children's lives, but barriers remain and there is still a lot to be done.

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