

Lessons from *Family Futures*

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The war on poverty

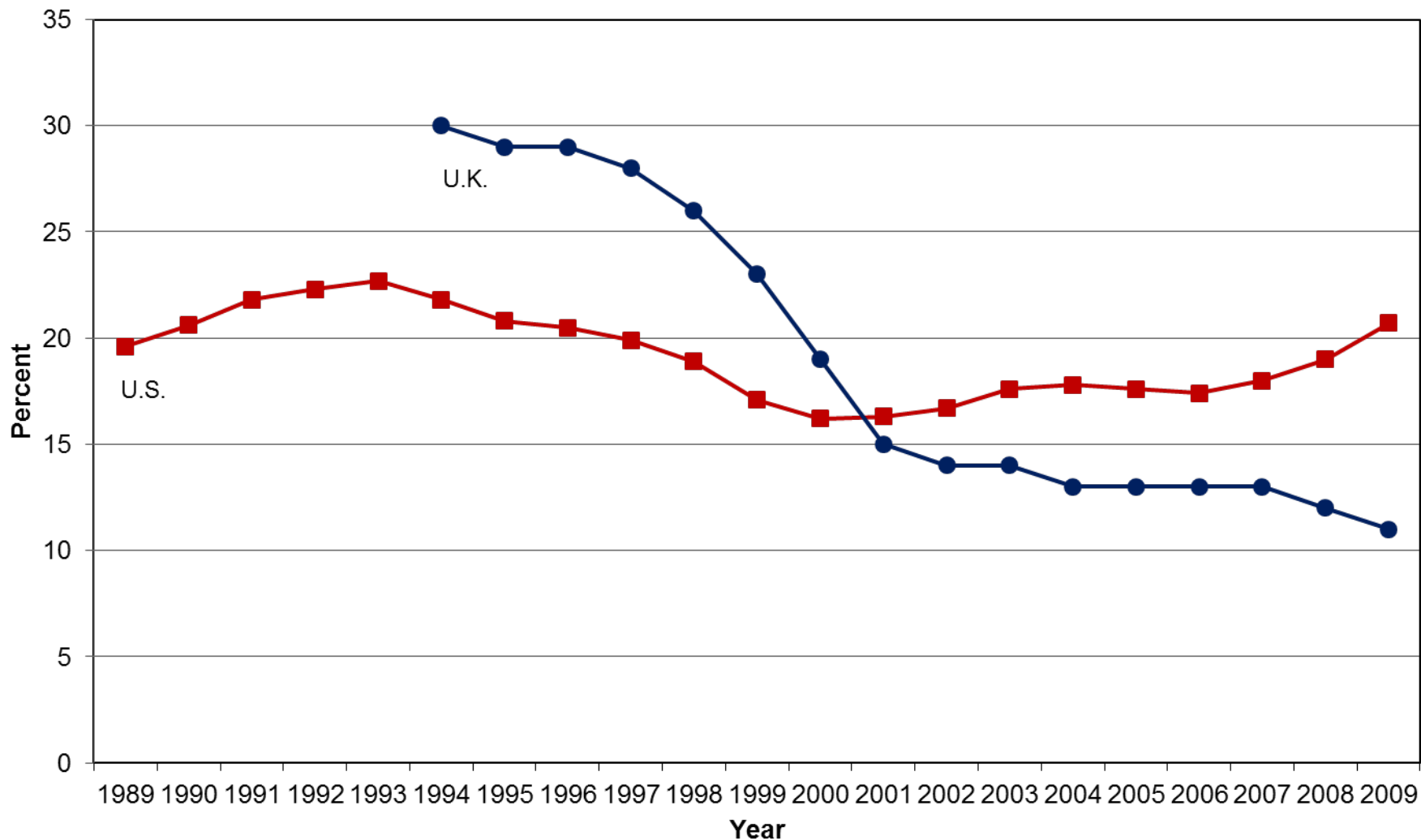
- From 1999 to 2010, I followed the Labour government's ambitious anti-poverty campaign, which included:
 - Promoting work and making work pay (New Deals, national minimum wage, WFTC)
 - Raising incomes for families with children (increases in Child Benefit & Income Support, CTC, Child Trust Funds)
 - Investments in children (paid maternity leave doubled, paternity leave, right to request, universal preschool for 3 & 4 year olds & preschool for disadvantaged 2 year olds, Sure Start, reduced primary school class sizes, literacy & numeracy hours, extended schools, etc.)

Jane Waldfogel. *Britain's War on Poverty*
(Russell Sage Foundation, 2010)

The child poverty record

- Although Blair and Brown did not meet their goal of halving *relative* child poverty, they did cut child poverty by more than half if measured in *absolute* terms as we do in the US.
- Remarkably, the reduction in child poverty continued even into the recession, while child poverty in the US was rising.

Figure 1: Absolute Poverty in the U.S. & U.K. 1989–2009



■ U.S.: Percent all persons under 18 years below official US Poverty Line, 1989-2009 (about 35 percent of median income in 2000)

Smeeding & Waldfogel, 2011

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010); U.K. Department of Work and Pensions (2010); HBAI, 81.

The record on other parts of the agenda

- Yet, evidence on other aspects of the child poverty agenda has been mixed:
 - Sure Start – early studies found some negative results, but later studies were more positive
 - Child care – availability greatly increased but progress on quality and affordability not so clear
 - Education – studies disagree about whether achievement rose, and whether gaps narrowed
- Here the evidence in *Family Futures* is invaluable, telling us from the perspective of real families what worked and did not work

Sure Start & child care

- Parents see Sure Start as an important resource – a support to families and a service for children.
- The message from families could not be clearer – they would like to see Sure Start maintained and indeed extended to families with older children, particularly those with special needs.
- At the same time, in spite of the child care expansions, families still report problems obtaining affordable child care so that they can work. The message from families is clear – more subsidies are needed.

Schools

- While academics and policy-makers may disagree as to whether schools have been improving, families clearly say that schools have gotten better.
- But, parents also say there is room for improvement – particularly with regard to services for children with special needs, and for disaffected adolescents.

Health

- I learned a lot from *Family Futures* about other domains -- housing, crime, neighborhood services – but the biggest surprise for me was about health.
- Families talk about the key role played by their GP, not just related to physical health but also mental health.
- Although there are some problems, families are mostly happy with health services and highly value them.
- So, as the government looks to expand parent support services, local health services, as well as Sure Start and local schools, are promising settings.

In conclusion

- The three biggest policy lessons I draw from *Family Futures* are the importance of:
 1. maintaining Sure Start and expanding child care subsidies
 2. strengthening local schools, and in particular, services for special needs students and adolescents
 3. supporting local health services and using them as a platform for parent support
- But there is much more to be learned from *Family Futures*. I encourage all of you, and particularly those in government, to read it for yourselves!