

Childhood experiences and the risks of social exclusion in adulthood



Using longitudinal data, John Hobcraft has examined how far childhood experience and parental factors are linked to a wide range of outcomes in adulthood. Specific attention was given to childhood poverty, family disruption, and contact with the police.



The four (of 12) most powerful and consistent childhood predictors of adult outcomes are childhood poverty, family disruption, contact with the police, and educational test scores.



There are frequent specific life-course and intergenerational continuities in the transmission of social exclusion:

- Social housing is more common if parent lived in local authority housing
- Poor children have lower income as adults
- Parental interest in schooling is a powerful predictor of educational success
- Anxious children experience more malaise (risk of depression) as adults.



Family disruption is most clearly related to demographic outcomes:

- Children born out-of-wedlock are more than twice as likely to have extra-marital births
- Multiple partnerships are over three times as frequent for men whose parents divorced
- Boys with step-parents are nearly three times as likely to be homeless between 23 and 33
- Care/fostering is linked to a wide range of much worse adult outcomes for females.



Social and parental factors (parental interest in schooling and family disruption) are more related to adult exclusion for females, and external and structural factors (social class and housing tenure) more related to exclusion for males. Early parenthood, extra-marital births, and receipt of benefits are examples.



Low educational test scores are powerful correlates of a wide range of adult outcomes:

- A three-fold difference in the incidence of early parenthood
- A doubling of malaise
- A three-fold difference in social housing
- A four-fold difference in low male earnings.

Further Information

A more detailed account of sources, methods and findings can be found in CASEpaper 15, *Intergenerational and Life-Course Transmission of Social Exclusion: Influences of Childhood Poverty, Family Disruption, and Contact with the Police* by John Hobcraft.

Copies are available free of charge from Jane Dickson, CASE, at the address below, or can be downloaded from our internet site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/Case>.

Questions Posed

How far is social exclusion and disadvantage transmitted from parents to their children and from childhood into adulthood? In particular, how far do childhood experiences of poverty, family disruption, and contact with the police link to adult outcomes? What associations are there for a range of other parental and childhood factors - social class of origin, social class during childhood, housing tenure, father's and mother's interest in schooling, 'aggression', 'anxiety', and 'restlessness', and educational test scores? And how do these factors link to outcomes by age 33, including three indicators of demographic behaviour, one of psychological well-being, three of welfare position, two of educational qualifications and three of economic position? This study used data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a longitudinal study of children born in 1958, to examine these questions.

Because of the wide range of childhood factors considered, the associations found are probably more robust than is usual for such studies. Moreover, measurement of the childhood characteristics occurred during childhood and is thus prior to the outcomes. The wide range of adult outcomes examined enable identification of common antecedents which have pervasive associations with many outcomes, but also show which continuities are specific to certain adult outcomes. Even so, care must be taken to avoid inferring direct causation from the observed continuities and linkages.

Childhood Poverty, Family Disruption, and Contact with the Police

These three factors are themselves inter-linked:

- 44% of the poorest boys had contact with the police by age 16 (13% for the non-poor).
- 47% of children with divorced lone-parents experienced childhood poverty, defined by family financial difficulties and free school meals (8% in intact two-parent families).
- Childhood experiences of poverty, family disruption, and contact with the police are all powerful antecedents of adult disadvantage: among the ten negative male and nine negative female adult outcomes, childhood poverty is clearly linked to 15 of 19, contact with the police to 15 of 19, and family type to 14 of 19. This pervasive association with social exclusion is only rivalled by educational test scores among the other nine control variables (with 15 of 19), with the next most pervasive being father's interest in schooling (8 of 19).

Childhood poverty

- Children who experienced consistent poverty were two and a half times as likely to have no qualifications by age 33.
- Boys who were poor were over four times less likely to have gained degree-level qualifications.

Contact with the police by age 16

- Clear evidence of contact with the police by age 16 more than tripled the odds of lack of qualifications by age 33 for men and doubled it for women. Missing information on contact with the police at age 16 is also linked to doubled risk of being unqualified.
- Contact with the police is also associated with a doubling of the risks of early parenthood and homelessness for men, and of early motherhood, living in social housing and receipt of benefits for women.

Patterns of childhood family type

- Girls who were in care or fostered were over three times as likely to have had extra-marital births and to have had three or more live-in partnerships by age 33, over twice as likely to have become teenage mothers, and about twice as likely to have experienced adult homelessness, lack of qualifications, and low household income at age 33.
- Children born out-of-wedlock were more than twice as likely to have extra-marital births.

- Children who experienced parental divorce are considerably more likely themselves to have had multiple cohabitational partnerships.
- Sons who lived with a step-parent during their childhood are nearly three times as likely to have been homeless between ages 23 and 33; homelessness is also doubled for daughters who lived with a step-parent following parental divorce.
- Sons who lived with a step-parent following parental divorce are also much more likely to have had extra-marital births.

Other Childhood Factors

Low educational test scores in childhood have a strong and pervasive association with outcomes in adulthood.

- The association with educational outcomes is massive and progressive (the lower the scores, the lower the proportion with any qualifications or with degree level qualifications).
- Low educational test scores also more than double the risk of: early parenthood, adult malaise, living in social housing, receipt of benefits and not receiving high income for both men and women; and of low earnings for men.

Parental interest in schooling:

- Father's lack of interest in schooling is a particularly powerful and progressive predictor of lack of qualifications, with persistent low interest about quadrupling the risk for both men and women.
- Low maternal interest in schooling for daughters reinforces the risk of being unqualified a further two-and-a-half fold. These associations become much sharper still if the educational test scores are removed from the models.
- Low parental interest in schooling is also connected with a halving of degree-level qualifications and a doubling of the risk of extra-marital births.

Social class and housing tenure:

- Women whose father and grandfathers were in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations are twice as likely to be unqualified and to lack degree-level qualifications.
- Men whose fathers were unskilled or semi-skilled are more than twice as likely to have become fathers by age 22 and to live in social housing.
- Men who grew up in local authority housing are more than twice as likely themselves to live in social housing and to have experienced adult homelessness.

Personality Factors:

- Aggressive girls are more likely to have had a teenage birth and to have had multiple partnerships.
- Restless boys are more likely to have no qualifications.
- Childhood anxiety reduces the risks of some negative outcomes but increases the risks for others.
- Anxious boys and girls are *more* likely to experience adult malaise.
- But anxious boys are *less* likely to have become young parents, to have had extra-marital births, and to be unqualified; moreover, anxious boys are more likely to have degree-level qualifications.

Adult Outcomes

Young parenthood: Poorly socialised girls appear more likely to become young mothers (contact with the police, in care/fostering or born out-of-wedlock, aggressive, low performance on educational tests, and lacking maternal interest in schooling are the factors with the highest odds). Young fathers are quite likely to have had contact with the police, to come from a lower social class, and to have performed poorly at school.

Extra-marital births are more frequent for children of either sex who were themselves born out-of-wedlock, for girls who were in care or fostered and, to a lesser extent and less consistently, for men and women who experienced post-birth family disruption; there is also a heightened risk for those of either sex whose parents were less interested in their schooling and who had been in contact with the police.

Multiple partnerships are particularly common for men and women who had experienced parental divorce during their childhood, for 'delinquents' who had childhood contact with the police and for aggressive men.

Adult malaise is more common for anxious children, poor educational performance as a child, delinquent girls, children who were in care, poor children and aggressive and restless males.

Living in *social housing* as an adult is strongly associated with being in local authority housing as a child, coming from a lower social class background, poor performance in educational tests, being poor and delinquent.

Receipt of benefits in adulthood is linked to poor educational testing as a child, poverty and delinquency.

Adult homelessness is most common among those with step-parents in childhood, but also for delinquents, girls who were poor or in care, and boys who were not sons of owner-occupiers.

Adult unemployment is more likely for boys who were delinquent, poor, in care, or had mothers who were not interested in their schooling.

Educational failure is dramatically increased by lack of parental interest in schooling, by childhood poverty, and by delinquency; girls who were in care or from lower social class of origin, and boys who were fidgety or restless also fail educationally.

Educational success is unlikely for children from the lower social classes or whose parents are uninterested in their schooling or who are aggressive; very poor and delinquent boys are also much less likely to achieve degree-level qualifications.

Low income in adulthood is related to poor performance at school and lack of paternal interest in schooling, more sharply for men; and, to a lesser extent, to childhood poverty for both sexes.

Failure to achieve high income is also linked to poor school performance, lower parental interest in education, and a lower social class of origin.

About the study

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