Summary

The Dynamics of Child Poverty in Industrialised Countries

edited by Bruce Bradbury, Stephen Jenkins and John Micklewright

Many more children experience poverty than are reflected in the typically available statistics on child poverty. Child poverty rates of 8 to 25 per cent were recorded in the US, the UK, Germany, Spain, Ireland and Hungary in the 1990s, but these figures represent only those children who are poor in a single year. The proportion of children in these countries who are poor at some point over a five-year period is significantly higher. The UK had a rate of 39 per cent over five years, more than twice the figure of 17 per cent in a single year. Similarly, the rate doubles from 8 to 16 per cent in Germany and from 10 to 20 per cent in Hungary. Even looking at only two years the figure goes up by over a third in Ireland and by a half in Spain. Over a ten-year period, one in five of German children and more than two in every five of US children were poor at least once.

The conventional perspective, based on standard calculations of child poverty at one point in time, tells us nothing about how long children stay poor. If one in ten children are found to be currently poor it could mean that every tenth child is in poverty all the time – and the other nine never poor – or it could mean that all children fall below the poverty line from time to time. But until now, governments and policy makers have often been forced to wage war against child poverty using insufficient information about the movement of children in and out of low income.

New research provides the first cross-national comparisons of children’s movements into and out of poverty. *The Dynamics of Child Poverty in Industrialised Countries*, edited by Bruce Bradbury, Stephen Jenkins and John Micklewright, and published by Cambridge University Press, paints a complex picture of child poverty across the industrialised world.

“The whole approach to anti-poverty policy may be influenced by taking a dynamic perspective, emphasising the prevention of entry into poverty and the promotion of exits rather than only paying benefits to the currently poor”, say the editors.

The research, sponsored by UNICEF, provides a unique comparison of the length of time that children spend in poverty in a selection of industrialised countries – ranging from the US to Russia – and a series of in-depth analyses of the dynamics of child poverty for individual countries.
The high numbers of children who are “ever poor” grabs the attention, but it is those children who are “always poor” that give greater cause for concern. Significant numbers of children live in poverty year after year in the industrialised world, with serious implications for their current well being and their future life chances.

The longer a family stays poor, the harder it is to sustain expenditures on a range of goods and services that are important to children’s development by drawing upon savings or by going further into debt. And prolonged low family income can be expected to lead to a more ingrained feeling of social exclusion, which may also have more lasting consequences.

The numbers of children who stay in low income households from one year to the next can be compared most easily across different countries by looking at the percentage always found in the poorest fifth of all children. In Ireland, Spain, Hungary, the UK, Germany and the US at least 6 out of every 10 children found in this poorest fifth in one year are still there the next year. Between five and nine per cent of all children are in the poorest fifth for each of five consecutive years.

Is there more mobility out of poverty in some countries than others? Interestingly the US records the highest figure for persistent low income out of seven countries in the book’s international comparisons, challenging common perceptions about mobility and opportunity in the world’s leading economy. The chapter focusing on the US also shows there to be no evidence that the increase in inequality in the US over the 1970s and 1980s was offset by an increase in children’s mobility out of poverty.

The country with the most movement in and out of child poverty turns out to be Russia. This reflects the turbulent nature of the Russian economy in the 1990s during the transition from a planned to a market system.

By contrast, the 1990s saw a boom in the Irish economy. The chapter on Ireland goes beyond a focus on money income and looks at deprivation of children as measured by such indicators as a restricted family diet and the family’s inability to heat the home. Half of the children in the most deprived fifth in one year were no longer classified as such the next.

The chapter on the UK asks what percentage of children would still be poor if families were able to even out the variation in their incomes from year to year. Using data for the six year period 1991-6 the authors conclude that even if incomes could be perfectly spread out over time the child poverty rate would only be halved – a big reduction but still leaving many children in poverty.

The chapter on Spain looks at poverty among young people aged 18-29. This has special relevance for Spain and other Southern European countries where many children do not leave the parental home until they are aged 30 or more. The chapter on Germany includes a focus on the children of “guestworkers”, an important feature of German society.
The book closes with a chapter that emphasises the policy implications of taking a dynamic perspective on child poverty, co-authored by David Ellwood who served in the first Clinton administration where he worked on issues of welfare reform.

*The Dynamics of Child Poverty in Industrialised Countries* edited by Bruce Bradbury, Stephen Jenkins and John Micklewright is published by Cambridge University Press. Price £18.95 (paperback) and £50 (hardback). Chapter 1, providing an overview of the book’s contents and principal findings, is downloadable, from http://assets.cambridge.org/0521803101/sample/0521803101WS.PDF

For more information contact:

**Australia:**
Bruce Bradbury  
Social Policy Research Centre  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney NSW 2052  
Australia  
Tel: +61 2 9385 7814 (office)  
Tel: +61 2 9560 9847 (home)  
Fax: +61 2 9385 7838  
Email: b.bradbury@unsw.edu.au

**United Kingdom:**
Stephen Jenkins  
Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER)  
University of Essex, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK  
Tel: +44 (0)1206 873374 (office)  
Tel: +44 (0)1206 543319 (home)  
Fax: +44 (0)1206 873151  
Email: stephenj@essex.ac.uk

**Italy:**
John Micklewright  
UNICEF Innocenti Centre  
Piazza SS Annunziata 12  
I-50122 Florence  
Tel: +39 055 2033 350 (office)  
Tel: +39 055 846 301 (home)  
Fax: +39 055 244 817  
Email: jmicklewright@unicef.org