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Families living in hard times

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The need for transformative change

It is to the collective interest of a nation that its children should flourish. (Pember Reeves 1913, 227)

These words were written in 1913, yet today the outlook for children in low-income families remains bleak in one of the richest countries in the world. A third of all children in the UK – around 4.5 million – are living in relative poverty, that is, below 60 per cent of average (median) income (Social Metrics Commission 2019), with rates projected to rise: by 2021, 5 million children (about 40 per cent of children) will be living in relative poverty (CPAG 2017; Hood and Waters 2017), with an extra million children likely to be living in poverty by 2023–4 (Corlett 2019). It is well documented that poverty in the early years is associated with increased likelihood of poor outcomes related to learning, behaviour and health (Children’s Commissioner 2015). Yet UK government figures published in March 2019 show that poverty is rising fastest among the under 5s (DWP 2019). This constitutes a health and social crisis (Marmot 2019).

Child poverty in the UK is worsening in the context of the so-called ‘austerity’ measures imposed since 2010, which have introduced progressively harsher cuts to social spending. These have not only reduced collective and household resources but also changed the normative expectations of the post-war welfare state. As the United Nation’s Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, said, following his visit to the UK in November 2018, a ‘harsh and uncar ing ethos’ and a ‘punitive, mean-spirited and often callous approach’ have characterised welfare policy since 2010, leading to ‘great misery’.
He argues that the basis of this change is ideological rather than economic, designed to achieve social re-engineering and to restructure the relationship between the people and the state (Alston 2019, 5).

Our aim in this chapter is to examine how the UK’s changing policy landscape and the associated public and policy discourses have affected families living in constrained circumstances. We do this by focusing on the case of a particular family that has been selected from a wider study of ‘Families and Food in Hard Times’ to exemplify some of the conditions in which families with younger children are currently living in the UK. We begin by introducing the case: a household consisting of a lone black British mother and her three children who live on a low income in an inner London borough. Following a brief recap of the wider policy context of austerity and welfare retrenchment, our discussion of the case analyses some of the social causes of the mother’s lack of resources, including welfare reform and the inadequacy of benefits, the continued deregulation of the labour market and inadequate housing. We discuss her lived experiences of ‘getting by’ in the context of ‘austerity’, the rise of charity and the consequences for her, personally, of individualising poverty and shame. We conclude by making some suggestions towards transformative change.

The study: ‘Families and Food in Hard Times’

The study from which the case is drawn was based at the Thomas Coram Research Unit in the UCL Institute of Education, University College London (IOE) and funded by the European Research Council (2014–19). Through a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, it sought to examine and compare the extent and experience of food poverty among young people between 11 and 15 years old and their parents in three European countries in an age of austerity – the UK, Portugal and Norway.

Between 2015 and 2017, we carried out qualitative interviews with children and parents in 45 low-income families in England. Thirty families lived in an inner London borough and 15 were in a coastal town in the south-east of England, both areas of social deprivation and high rates of child poverty of over 40 per cent (endchildpoverty.org.uk). Around half the parents in the sample were in paid employment while almost half were reliant on benefits. In a handful of cases, parents’ legal status meant they were unable to work and had no recourse to public funds, that is, social security benefits, meaning they were destitute and dependent on charity.
Relative to the overall UK population, people living in households headed by someone in the Asian, Black or Other ethnic groups are disproportionately likely to be on a low income (Cabinet Office 2017), and there are wide variations in poverty rates between different ethnic groups (Kenway and Palmer 2007). In both study areas, around half the mothers were originally from the UK and were British citizens. In the inner London borough, the British mothers (18/30) included white British, black British and British Asian mothers, while a third (10/30) had migrated from outside the European Union (West and North Africa). In the coastal area, all the British mothers (8/15) were white. In the total sample, parents in 7 of the 45 families were migrants from mainland Europe. Reflecting wider evidence about poverty and food poverty, lone parent families were overrepresented (O’Connell et al. 2019).

Conceptually, the study draws on the pioneering work of sociologist Peter Townsend in adopting a relative deprivation approach to understanding poverty (Townsend 1979). That is, we are interested in the material and the social dimensions of poverty and exclusion from what is customarily regarded as an adequate standard of living, due to a lack of resources. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1974) and Walker (2014), we are also interested in the discursive context that stigmatises social groups living in poverty, the ways in which individuals internalise stigma as shame and the ways in which they seek to protect themselves from being labelled ‘poor’ and try to ‘save face’. Following Lister (2004), we are concerned with the ways in which people living in poverty enact agency and the constraints and possibilities for everyday practices of ‘getting by’ as well as more strategic and coordinated action of ‘getting organised’. As sociologists of the family we are interested in children’s, as well as parents’, contributions to households and their experiences of living on a low income.

The Davis family

Sandra Davis is a black British lone mother with three children, aged 11 years, 5 years and 11 months. The family lives in an inner London borough. Two of the children are disabled – the 5-year-old boy is on the autism spectrum, while the baby girl has sickle cell anaemia. The eldest child, Danisha, is a ‘young carer’ who routinely looks after her siblings, administers their medicines and helps with the cooking. Sandra has a very strong work ethic and until two years ago was employed by a security firm as a ‘bouncer’. 
Life has not been kind to Sandra in recent years. After experiencing violent domestic abuse from her son’s father, she and her children were moved to a women’s refuge; they lost their former home and their possessions as a result. When the council housed them in their current flat, Sandra stopped working and became pregnant with her youngest child. She delayed applying for benefits. When she did apply, the advice of a victim support officer was to get rid of her car, but the car is vital to enable Sandra to get the baby to hospital for frequent appointments. Unsurprisingly, Sandra accumulated debts that she is now struggling to pay off. Sandra would prefer to be working and is worse off financially on benefits. She sees it as her job to provide for her children but childcare for her youngest child, who has a long-term condition, would be difficult to find, as well as expensive. The benefits that Sandra relies on are so inadequate that she struggles to feed her family. Consequently, she has turned to charity.

The family lives on the ground floor of a high-rise local authority block on a main road. The flat has no bath in which to wash the children, only a shower. There is no carpet and the floors are covered in cold, vinyl flooring. It is important to keep the baby warm, so Sandra applied to a charity (Family Fund) for financial help to get floor coverings. The household income is £185 a week, made up of income support, child tax credit, child benefit and disability living allowance. Some of the costs of milk are covered by Healthy Start vouchers. Danisha is entitled to and receives free school meals at her secondary school. The cost of the rent is covered by Sandra’s benefits, but her main outgoings include a very high weekly gas bill of £60, around a third of her total income, due to the need to keep the baby warm. The car is also a major expense.

Sandra has to meet the cost of debt repayments, including those she built up after she moved on to a zero-hours contract when she was last in work and parking fines accrued when attending medical appointments. Some debts are for arrears on childcare, from when she used to work nights and dropped her son off at nursery in the morning so that she could sleep. However, her claim for these costs was rejected as ineligible and she is paying back around £1,800 debt at a rate of £10 per week, ‘because it’s like that’s another problem. When you’re doing shift work and nobody understands that part to it.’ She has had support from Citizens Advice in making the loan repayments manageable.

Sandra spends about £35–£40 a week on food for the family. The range of local shops includes Iceland, Tesco, Savers, a bakery, Poundstretcher, Paddy Power and a few market stalls selling fruit and veg at £1 per bowl. About a mile away there is a street market. Sandra manages
by spending her limited budget at the market, by bulk buying and by cooking low-cost African and Caribbean meals such as oxtail, mutton and goat, as well as ‘English’ foods such as pasta and meatballs. She uses her car to search out the cheapest deals and to drive to bulk-buy discount stores for which she has a membership card. In order to manage food expenditure better, Sandra took the advice of a food bank worker to cook just enough ‘for the day’, and says ‘I’ve learned as well how to minimise it, so instead of doing this whole big cooking, I now minimise it. That’s for the day.’ Danisha sometimes helps her mother with the cooking.

When the baby was born, Sandra withdrew from the world. Such was her distress, she could not ask for help. Her great fear was that her children would be taken away. This withdrawal from the outside world is mirrored by Danisha who talks about ‘forgetting’ to go to a party to which she was invited and never having friends home. It was only when social services became involved, through the baby’s health visitor, that Sandra opened up and asked for help: ‘because it was affecting my kids and I weren’t able to hide it no more … because my kids they were hungry.’

The family was referred to a food bank, to a place to get baby equipment and to a children’s centre for clothes for the baby. While Sandra describes her experience of the food bank as positive, she also says she felt ashamed of having to resort to charity:

It felt, to be fair with you when I first went I was like ‘Oh God I feel so ashamed … This is the standard I’ve got to.’ Like working and earning so much years ago I never had a problem in the world. I could go in any shop and spend as much as I wanted to and it was never credit cards.

Sandra’s identity as a (lone) mother is strongly tied to being a ‘good provider’ for her family (Duncan and Edwards 1999): ‘I’m supposed to protect them and guide them and look after them ‘til they’re mature enough to do … I’ve never had to ask for help and that’s what I’ve learnt this year.’ She cannot work because of the high costs of childcare, for which she blames the government:

I’m just saying when it comes to the childcare, there’s no point telling people to go to work and the childcare is not sufficient enough to work. It is never … as I say I’ve never had a problem getting a job. Most interviews that I go to more likely I would get the job. Um, because it’s like it’s that I know that when it comes to having kids, putting them in childcare is ridiculous. I was paying £280 a week.
Sandra hates the stigma attached to being on benefits:

I can’t do benefits. I don’t know how people stay on it for so long because to me it’s draining. It’s like people look down at you, people deal with you differently and it shouldn’t be like that and a lot of my arguments has always been about that, like who are you to judge because you’re working?

The wider context of austerity and welfare retrenchment

While the Davis family is unique in many respects, it is also representative of families living in similar circumstances in the UK. A number of linked life events propelled Sandra into poverty: job loss, a violently abusive relationship that broke down and resulted in homelessness, coupled with the demands of parenting young children, one with a long-term illness and the other with a disability. These events caused depression. In turn, depression and the shame of being unable to provide for her children made it hard for Sandra to turn to others for support.

At a structural level, Sandra’s experiences as a black lone mother reflect long-standing economic, race and gender inequalities in the UK. They are also underpinned by a number of social and labour market policies that mean work does not pay, benefits are inadequate, and responsibility for poverty is individualised and farmed out to charities. Before looking at these areas in turn, we briefly provide a historical backdrop to the social policies shaping the Davis family’s situation, which are crucial in understanding the changing role of the welfare state and its impact on the lives of children and families.

The welfare state: Historical context

The UK’s post-war welfare state, implemented following the Beveridge Report (1942), began to be dismantled in 1979. The Thatcher and Major governments (1979–97) promoted free market economics and sought to shrink the size of the state and make reliance on benefits increasingly unsustainable. The subsequent Blair and Brown ‘New Labour’ governments (1997–2010) also subscribed to these neoliberal politics (Taylor-Gooby and Larsen 2004). In promoting the marketisation of public services, they wanted to address concerns about ‘welfare dependency’, while at the same time aiming to increase ‘equality of opportunity’ (Deacon 2002). Blair’s Third Way politics (Giddens 1998) involved a redefinition and ‘rebalancing’ of rights and responsibilities.
In New Labour’s ‘social investment state’, children were conceptualised as adults-in-waiting and positioned as central to securing the social order and economic success (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, 4–5). In 1999, Blair pledged to end child poverty in the UK within 20 years. The Child Poverty Act 2010 legally committed the UK government to eradicate child poverty by 2020. In the period between 1997 and 2010, welfare benefits were increased, particularly those for children, and more help was given to raise earned income among families living in poverty and to improve children’s services. Child poverty rates fell significantly: between 1998/9 and 2011/12, 800,000 children were lifted out of poverty (CPAG 2012, 2017).

In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, however, the UK was among those governments that applied ‘austerity measures’, curbing public sector spending with the stated aim of reducing government budget deficits. Since 2009/10 more stringent conditions to access social security entitlements have been introduced in the UK, including through the Welfare Reform Act 2012, outlined below. The Child Poverty Act 2010 was abolished in 2015 by David Cameron’s Conservative government and the government’s Child Poverty Unit was scrapped a year later. Figures from the House of Commons library released in September 2018 suggested that spending on welfare benefits will have shrunk by over a quarter between 2010 and 2021, that is, £37 billion (Butler 2018).

**Welfare reform and the inadequacy of benefits**

A lone mother of three children, one with a long-term illness and another with a disability, Sandra is not able to access the type of childcare or employment that would enable her to work. She is in receipt of child benefit, child tax credits, disability living allowance and income support. These are not enough to make ends meet.

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced harsh cuts to welfare spending, such as the freezing of child benefit for four years and a ‘benefit cap’ on the overall value of benefits a family can receive, including a limit to the amount of housing benefit that can be claimed, despite rising rents. These government policies have disproportionately disadvantaged specific groups, such as women, disabled people, minority ethnic groups and children. Benefit changes, such as the two-child limit for child tax credit, the benefit cap and the stipulation that lone parents have to be eligible for full-time employment when their children are as young as 3 years old, have had a particularly detrimental impact on women. Lone parents
(mostly mothers) are twice as likely to experience persistent poverty as other groups, and, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which is predicted to have negative consequences on the economy, it was estimated that the poverty rate for children in lone-parent households would be 62 per cent by 2021–2 (Portes and Reed 2018).

Perhaps the most controversial part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 is the introduction of Universal Credit, which aims to combine six of the main means-tested benefits, including housing benefit and tax credits, into one payment. Its roll-out throughout the country has been slow, however, and its implementation fraught with difficulties. Accounts of waiting for several weeks between applying for and receiving money leading to severe hardship for families have been well documented. Reports suggest that over 3 million families will be around £50 per week worse off on Universal Credit (Brewer et al. 2017). At the time that the Davis family took part in the ‘Families and Food in Hard Times’ study, Universal Credit had not yet been introduced in their area of London. One wonders how the family fared subsequently under this punitive regime.

The continued deregulation of the labour market

Sandra was moved on to a zero-hours contract that put paid to her chances of accessing sick leave (when she was hospitalised after her ex-partner’s abuse) and led to her depending on credit to provide for her family.

A second aim of Universal Credit was to improve people’s incentives to increase their earnings by withdrawing benefits more slowly as their earnings increase. Yet, despite the ideological mantra that ‘work pays’ (Cooper and Whyte 2017), the largest proportion of households with children living in relative poverty in the UK includes at least one employed adult (Hick and Lanau 2017).

Precarious employment, including zero-hour contracts, engenders considerable anxiety for workers about ‘making ends meet’ and providing reliably for their families (Newsome et al. 2018). Additionally, 10 years after the 2008 crisis, median real earnings were still below pre-crisis levels (Cribb and Johnson 2018). Together with high costs of living, particularly housing and childcare, these factors have led to high rates of ‘in-work poverty’. In fact, as Alston (2019) points out, growth of in-work poverty rates outstripped the growth in employment in 2018.

In this context, debt has become pervasive and normal, substituting for a living wage and sufficient welfare provisions (Ellis 2017).
Like Sandra, many low-income households use credit to pay for basic living costs and high levels of ‘problem debt’ are commonplace, causing distress and vulnerability to economic shocks (Mahony and Pople 2018). Around a quarter of the lowest-income households are struggling with arrears or high debt repayments (Hood et al. 2018).

**Inadequate housing**

*Sandra’s council flat is cold, and it has no bath in which to wash the children.*

Poor housing, lacking facilities such as a bath, and with cold, damp conditions, has detrimental effects on children’s health and life chances (Quilgars and Pleace 2016). In 2014, around a fifth of homes in England failed to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DCLG 2017). A general shortage of suitable housing and the reduction in social housing since the ‘right to buy’ policy introduced by the Thatcher government in 1980 (Tunstall 2015) have disproportionately affected low-income families with young children. In 2011/12, there were 110 excess winter child deaths. Living in a cold home – like the Davis family – may be leading to an increase in child mortality (Royston 2014; Mack 2017).

**Local authorities in crisis**

*Sandra was referred to a children’s centre by a support worker for emergency help with food and baby equipment.*

Children’s centres and local nurseries are a vital part of England’s ‘social infrastructure’, offering not only care and education but also spaces where children and parents can participate in their communities and form social networks (Klinenberg 2018). While early years settings can mitigate some of the effects of living in social and economic disadvantage (Sylva et al. 2004; Blanden 2006), many are currently in crisis. Real spending per child on early education, childcare and children’s centres fell by over a quarter between 2009–10 and 2012–13 (Stewart and Obołenskaya 2015). Over 1,000 Sure Start children’s centres may have closed since 2009 and others have reduced the number of services they offer (Smith et al. 2018). Recent research suggests the greatest decline in usage of children’s centres has been in England’s poorest areas (Action for Children 2019). This situation has arisen in the context of massive
cuts since 2010 to local authorities’ funding allocations from central government (NAO 2018).

The rise of charity

Sandra applied to a charity to obtain floor coverings for her flat, to keep her disabled child warm. She has had to use a food bank to feed her children.

Families in circumstances like the Davises’ ‘get by’ by borrowing money, juggling bills and, increasingly in the UK, being referred to charities and food banks (Lambie-Mumford 2017). In the past, extra financial support in the form of community care grants or crisis loans, under the Social Fund, would have met the family’s needs for furnishings. But the UK government abolished the Social Fund in 2013 as part of the Welfare Reform Act. In its place, it introduced a new local welfare assistance scheme to provide emergency support. But the funding is £150 million less (in real terms) than that of the Social Fund (Children’s Commissioner 2015) and it is not ‘ring fenced’.

Households’ food needs are increasingly met by charity. Between 2010/11 and 2016/17, the number of food parcels provided by the UK’s largest single provider, the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network, grew from about 61,500 to over 1.18 million (Trussell Trust 2017). Research finds that welfare reform, benefits sanctions and delays are the most commonly cited reasons for food bank referral, alongside recent losses in earnings or changes in family circumstances (Perry et al. 2014); for example, like the Davis family whose inadequate income made them vulnerable to acute crises. However, only a small proportion of households who are struggling to feed themselves use food banks; people may not have access to food banks or do not want to receive charity (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015). Resorting to food aid may further stigmatise and marginalise those who are already materially and socially excluded (Dowler 2014; Riches and Silvasti 2014).

Individualising poverty and shame

Sandra is a case of a mother who speaks about the shame of being unable to provide for her children.

In some respects, Sandra is an extreme example; she became so depressed that she was unable to turn even to her family for help in very difficult
circumstances. However, the widespread stigmatisation of people claiming benefits in the current context is reflected in the treatment and representation of people on low incomes in the media, which largely places the responsibility for poverty on individuals and shames those on benefits (Walker 2014). As studies of the largely right-wing media suggest, an othering blame culture dominates: those in poverty are seen as culpable for their plight; they are described as ‘scroungers’, ‘sponging’ off the state, ‘frauds’, unwilling to work and making the ‘wrong choices’ (Baillie 2011; Chase and Walker 2015; Patrick 2016).

Such discourse perpetuates a hegemonic narrative that links family dysfunction, worklessness and welfare dependency (Garrett 2015; Lister 2004; Sayer 2017). Significantly, it emphasises individual inadequacy, thereby dismissing the structural social inequality underlying poverty (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando 2016; Knight et al. 2018). No wonder, therefore, that Sandra’s sense of shame, and her fear that her children might be taken from her, had stopped her asking for help.

Towards transformative change

The UK is currently facing a very uncertain future. At the time of writing, the long and acrimonious battle to leave or remain in the European Union has concluded in favour of Brexit. In the meantime, poverty rates are rising and the plight of families with young children like Sandra’s is of great concern.

Although the Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 have argued that austerity is necessary to reduce the country’s financial deficit, the figures tell a different story. A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Bramley et al. 2016) has estimated that the total cost of poverty in the UK is around £78 billion per year, more than twice that of the £37 billion that has been taken from the social security budget since 2010. The additional cost for the state of the effects of poverty includes increased health-care costs (for example, additional use of primary care by people living in poverty), increased expenditure on education (for example, the pupil premium for children living on low incomes) and the extra costs related to crime (such as additional policing in poorer areas) (Bramley et al. 2016).

Despite mounting research evidence from both academic and non-governmental organisations, as well as an extremely damning report from the United Nations on extreme poverty in the UK, the current government remains in denial about the effects of its policies on the material living conditions of large numbers of its population. Its attack on those living in poverty since 2010 is sustained and deliberate.
The projected worsening of child poverty in the UK is not inevitable. But abolishing and preventing poverty requires fundamental change. First, it demands acknowledgement of the existence of poverty. Second, it requires agreement about the causes of poverty: a lack of individual and collective resources to enable access to what is generally regarded as a minimum adequate standard of living (Veit-Wilson 2019). Third, it requires political will, that is, agreement that poverty in one of the richest countries in the world is unacceptable. Defined in this way, those approaches that best tackle poverty then become ‘a matter of functional analysis and tactical judgement’ (Veit-Wilson 2019).

According to an influential report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Bramley et al. 2016), building political will to solve poverty demands telling a ‘new’ story about it, appealing to the values that people have across political perspectives. Maud Pember Reeves’s quotation at the start of this chapter – ‘It is to the collective interest of a nation that its children should flourish’ – is an example of such an approach (see also Nussbaum 1995). The plight of families living in poverty in the UK, such as the Davises, can be transformed. But an ideological shift is required that renews the social contract between people and the state and places human flourishing at its centre.

Further reading

Our book Living Hand to Mouth: Children and food in low-income families (CPAG, 2019), available free at https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/living-hand-mouth, highlights the experiences of children and their families living on a low income in Britain, particularly focusing on the issue of food poverty. It outlines how food poverty is conceptualised and what it looks like in contemporary Britain. Using case studies and children’s first-hand accounts, it explores the ways in which living on a low income affects children and families at home, in school and in the neighbourhood.

Tess Ridge also uses children’s voices and accounts of living on a low income in her book Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a child’s perspective (Policy Press, 2002), to demonstrate the ways in which children experience poverty on an everyday basis. It particularly highlights the ways in which living in poverty affects children’s social participation in different domains, such as school and family life.

Tracy Shildrick, in her book Poverty Propaganda: Exploring the myths (Policy Press, 2018), explores and debunks popular discourses about poverty, its causes and consequences, such as the distinction often
made between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ and generations of worklessness. The way that these popular discourses and ‘poverty propaganda’ sustains class divisions and disadvantage is examined and highlighted and provides an important backdrop to understanding the experiences of families living in poverty and on low incomes.

Note

1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect identities.

References


