Poverty and Parenting in the UK

Kerris Cooper

Supervisors: Kitty Stewart and Lucinda Platt
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Background and Motivation

- By the time children start school there is already an achievement gap between richer and poorer students.
- One explanation for this is differences in parenting.
- This has been the main policy focus in the UK – parenting rather than poverty (e.g. Field report, 2010).
- But the two are very much connected:
  - US causal evidence (Cooper & Stewart, 2013)
  - UK evidence parenting explains 50% of the relationship (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Mensah & Kiernan, 2011).

Diagram:

- Parenting
- Poverty
- Child outcomes
Background and Motivation

- **Research questions:**
  1. What is the relationship between economic hardship* and parenting in the UK?
  2. What mechanisms explain this relationship?

- **UK context:**
  - Increased focus on parenting policy
  - Cuts to benefits
  - Redefining child poverty
  - Increase in child poverty
Data

- Using the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)
- Oversampled areas with high poverty
- Cross-sectional analysis: wave 3 when child aged around 5 years
- Mothers only
- Taking into account: mothers’ education, work status, age, ethnicity, number of siblings, one/two parents
- N= 14,376
### Conceptual framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Meeting physical needs</th>
<th>2. Parent-child relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g. Nutrition, physical activities</td>
<td>How close feel to child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative discipline</td>
<td>Trips out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsh or permissive discipline</td>
<td>Hours of TV &amp; computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine</td>
<td>Play activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement in education</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Rich dataset: use 38 measures of parenting.  
N.B. All self-reported
1. Are poor parents *poor* parents?

- Looking across the full income distribution (rather than binary poverty measure)
- Specifically comparing mothers in the lowest income group and mothers with median incomes
Findings – Are poor parents poor parents?

Parenting measures where low income parents do better

- Probability of 'ideal' parenting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Probability of Ideal Parenting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>take to park</td>
<td>low income (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical activities together</td>
<td>low income (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help with writing</td>
<td>average income (0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help with maths</td>
<td>average income (0.35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings – Are poor parents *poor* parents?

Parenting measures where low income parents are doing worse
2. What mechanisms explain this relationship?

- US evidence for the Family Stress Model (Conger et al, 2000)
- Is this model relevant for the UK?
- Do the pathways differ in relation to different parenting behaviours?
Findings – What mechanisms explain this relationship?

Partially mediated:
- Meeting the child’s physical needs (21%)
- Routine meal and bedtimes (34%)
- Educational activities (37%)

Mother’s: age, education, work status, ethnicity, number of siblings, one/two parents
Findings – What mechanisms explain this relationship?

Fully mediated:
- Closeness to the child
- Authoritative discipline
- Harsh/permissive discipline
- Play activities

Mother’s: age, education, work status, ethnicity, number of siblings, one/two parents
Findings – What mechanisms explain this relationship?

No mediation:
- Trips outside of the home
- Hours of TV and computer games

Mother’s: age, education, work status, ethnicity, number of siblings, one/two parents
Summary of findings

- Not straightforwardly the case that poor parents are *poor* parents – some parenting behaviours where low income mothers doing *better*
- Where there are negative differences many of these differences are not specific to low income parents but part of a broader income-parenting gradient
- The negative relationship between hardship and mother’s mental health explains this relationship for most parenting behaviours
Implications for policy

- No magic bullet in parenting classes
- Importance of economic context in which parenting takes place – protecting family incomes (but also improving housing, local areas, tackling problem debt)
- Significant role of mother’s mental health – another important area for policy intervention, though again influenced by economic context
Email: k.m.cooper@lse.ac.uk
Twitter: @CooperKerris
Motivation

- Explaining the gap between richer/poorer children
- Policy focus on *parenting* rather than poverty e.g. Field Report (2010)
- Poor parents blamed and structural constraints ignored (Gillies, 2007)
- But Dermott (2012): ‘a false dichotomy’
- Current context:
  - Cuts to tax credits & benefits which will affect families with children most (IFS, 2015)
  - Increase in child poverty: +200,000 by 2016 (Resolution Foundation, 2015)
  - Redefining poverty – focus on employment/education
Contributions

1. Include measures of parenting across multiple domains
2. Not just focusing on binary poverty - examines differences in parenting across the income distribution
3. Multiple measures of economic hardship
4. Test whether the Family Stress Model mechanisms are relevant to the UK
Findings 2 – debt, deprivation and feeling poor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hardship measure</th>
<th>OECD equivalised income quintile</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lowest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material deprivation</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective hardship</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowded housing</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damp housing</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor/unsafe area</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative area observation</td>
<td>47.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worst decile Index of Multiple</td>
<td>51.7</td>
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Note: The table shows the percentage of individuals experiencing hardship in different OECD equivalised income quintiles.
### Findings 2 – debt, deprivation and feeling poor

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<th>Play activities</th>
<th>Educational activities</th>
<th>TV/PC hours</th>
<th>Confidence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lowest vs median income</td>
<td>worse</td>
<td>n/s</td>
<td>worse</td>
<td>better</td>
<td>worse</td>
<td>worse</td>
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<td>Persistent poverty</td>
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<td>n/s</td>
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