

**The
Children's
Society**

Understanding Childhoods: Growing up in Hard Times

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Background



Understanding Childhoods

A qualitative longitudinal study of children living in low-income families:

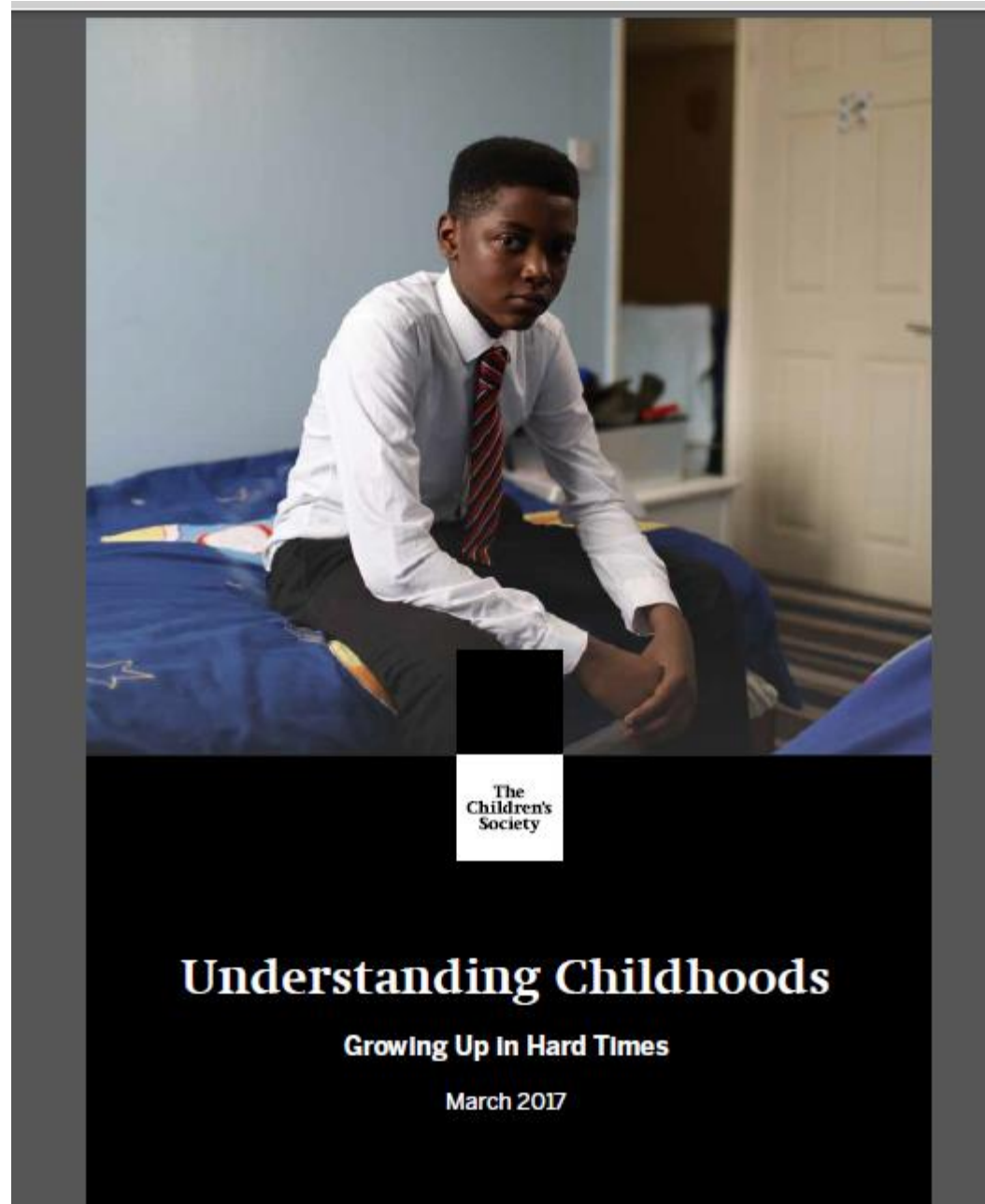
- The Children's Society in partnership with Professor Tess Ridge, University of Bath
- Three waves of data: 2015, 2016, 2017
- Annual, semi-structured interviews
- 60 participants – in 3 locations in England (a rural town, a small city and a large city).
- 2 cohorts of children: aged 9/10 and 11/12 at first interview, with an equal gender split
- All participants living in low-income households, measured using eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM).

Understanding Childhoods: a qualitative, longitudinal study

Four themes:

1. Residential transience
2. School
3. Neighbourhood
4. Money and possessions

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Money and possessions



Money and possessions

Key sub themes:

- Children's awareness of financial hardship
- Desire to 'fit in' with peers
- Protecting their families
- The resourcefulness of families
- Wider networks of family

Awareness of financial hardship

“Because mum’s buying all of this stuff for us, she never knows when she might run out of money.” Boy, 11

“We go to Aldi or Pound Stretchers, because Pound Stretchers is only, like, for food, it’s £1 per decent meal.”
Girl, 9

“We still get, like, a couple of holidays off, but we just have a staycation, like, have a couple of tents into the house and then we just try to have an outside campfire that my dad builds that’s really big...” Girl, 9

Fitting in

“I don’t want to have too much money where we just think that we’re snobs and really rich...and we don’t care about anyone else and I start falling out with my friends because I’ve got loads of money. I just want like money, just normal money.” Girl, 11

“If [I’m looking for] the new Adidas shoes and if I’m like ‘they’re a bit expensive’ and they could, say, have a little offer on them and when they have an offer on them, I’m like ‘oh yes.’” Boy, 11

Technology

“I do have a phone but it’s not like one of those modern ones; it’s just simple.” Boy, 11

“The screen [on the tablet] is cracked like that and you can’t press anything in the cracked part.” Girl, 9

“We don’t have a computer at my mum’s and our TV is broken... The computer homework is quite hard because I don’t have a computer.” Boy, 11

Protecting their families

“Well, I kind of know [not to ask mum for money] because my brother was like, ‘oh, I wanted to go football’...and he asked my mum to go yesterday and he said, ‘Mum, can I have £2?’...and then my mum said, ‘No, I haven’t got any money.’” Girl, 11

“Sometimes I save [my pocket money] up but sometimes I spend it on shopping like, I don’t know, food, toilet roll, butter, bread, stuff like that, yes.” Boy, 11

Protecting their families

“If my friends say ‘Can I stop at yours tonight?’ and my mum says yes but then they say ‘Will you ask your mum if you can buy loads of munchies for us so we can have like a proper munch out’ and then I say ‘Yes, of course, I’ll ask her, I’ll go ask her’ and then I’ll just walk downstairs, sit downstairs, watch TV for five minutes then come back and tell them that I’ve asked her and she said no...because I don’t really want to ask her for loads of things because if she says no, I’m going to feel bad.” Girl, 11

The resourcefulness of children and families

“My mum don’t mind how much it is...she would say ‘okay’ but she don’t have enough money for it, she’d be like ‘I’ll get it for you tomorrow’ and make sure.” Girl, 11

“My mum got a new phone, because this one is like not working properly [so she gave hers to me].” Girl, 11

Extended networks of family and friends

“I get pocket money from my nan and she gives me £5 every week but now she’s putting it in my bank account, so now I’ve got lots of money at my house now and I’m just saving it and saving it and saving it and saving it.” Boy, 11

“I’d ask my dad [for money] and my dad says ‘I’m going to send it to you on Saturday’ and then I wait until Saturday, he doesn’t send it. That’s what he’s done to me lots of times...My sister’s dad always sends her money and I sometimes feel a little bit embarrassed...There are so many trips that I’ve missed because...I haven’t got money and stuff.” Girl, 11

Longitudinal insights



Case study: Penny

Wave 1: Mum long-term illness; Dad doing informal, low-paid work; sister has a violent boyfriend; unfriendly neighbours; begging:

“We try to beg people for money because we only have £10. And mostly my dad picks whose turn it is to try to see if they can get someone to give us, like, £10 a month.”

Waves 2 & 3: Better feelings about neighbourhood, sister has new boyfriend:

“I go round [to our neighbours] and they come round mine. They have like little kids as well that I can play with and like whenever I come round there I get treated.”

“[The shopkeeper] would say alright I’ll save you however much money [if they don’t have enough] and then like they mostly care and watch out for us and like if my mum was like really bad and like I was still at school they would offer to put it in the car, drive it there.”

Case study: Penny

Waves 2 & 3: Dad and sister have better jobs, more money around, even went on holiday

“[Things] are quite a bit better because my dad gets paid more [...] he works extra hours and he also has three jobs if you count the work he has currently over night.”

“It feels better, like, now I can afford like the things that I need, like, new shoes if I needed them”

“Sometimes [my sister is] the one that gets me the phones. She’s the one that earns the money, like, she would save up for like ridiculous amounts of weeks and then if it was like my birthday or Christmas she would get me like, a massive present [like a phone].”

Case study: Andrew

Wave 1: Mum long-term illness and single parent; very little money around, and few possessions:

“Everybody else has a phone. Loads of people have phones. Everybody in my class has a phone.”

“We don’t have a computer at my mum’s and our TV is broken...”

“I know that [Mum] has no money at all most of the time so I do sort of, if I see something, I will sort of ask and if she says no I sort of [don’t] go on because I know that she’s got no money.”

Grandmother plays an important role:

“[Nan’s house] is kind of different because my nan’s got quite a lot more money than my mum and it’s sort of like I go from one house to another and it’s like completely different environments.”

“Each week I get a fiver from my nan.”

Case study: Andrew

Waves 2 & 3: Financial situation is the same, role of extended family continues to be critical

“My brother bought me a Wii U... Wait... He bought me the game for Christmas, and he also took me to see the new Star Wars film for Christmas.”

“If we’re out of money and we don’t have much food, [my brother] will pop to the shops and buy some bread and milk and stuff like that, some essentials.”

“[Mum] really couldn’t afford [pocket money] because basically when it gets to Friday she has no money to do anything. Usually we will run out of electricity, gas and just have to sit in darkness for about an hour before [my brother] gets home and gets the money.”

Summary – Money and possessions

- There were large differences in our sample in terms of children ‘having’ or ‘not having’ money and material possessions
- Some were clearly missing out. Others, on the face of it, were not, although many of these were ‘making do’ e.g. sharing, hand-me-downs, or using items that are broken / not working
- Children and families displayed a range of coping strategies
- Importance of family networks – especially grandmothers – in protecting children from deprivation
- Insights from longitudinal design

Residential Transience



Residential Transience

Defining RT: Qual/ quant approach: multiple moves and/ or moves that are driven by imperative need.

Why explore RT?

The data told us to!

Scope of literature reveals an acknowledgement of it's negative effects on children yet an absence of their voices in the debate.

What does RT look like?

Variety of distances (continents, countries, cities, neighbourhoods)

Most with family unit (albeit reconfigured), a minority without

Variety of timeframes

Residential Transience

Key sub themes

- **Reasons for RT & the manifestation of poverty**
- **Experiences of RT**
 - Positive/ negative/ both
- **Normalisation of RT**
- **Structures, agency & children at the interface**

Reasons for RT, and the manifestation of poverty

“We moved to a rental place... because there wasn't enough room in that house. My mum, because she was having my little brother.” Boy, 11

“I came here because...my other sister...had problems with her [health], so then my mum came here to look for a better life for my sister” Girl, 12

“Some of the houses had a problem, like... there were rats... Then when we moved to [the next place] there was just dead rats, they were just dead and no-one took them out” Boy, 10

Experiences of RT

“So we moved again, we moved to [Area 6] now. It’s fabulous – we can get to football so quickly... we’ve got our permanent home now, so... It’s quite near this school, which is lucky...Around the new area there’s a youth club and an adventure park, my mum might let me go there soon. It feels safe cos there’s other kids around and lots of adults there. My friend Bella lives nearby” Boy, 12

“I was quite upset because I missed all my friends...I really miss my friends...I can’t really like chat to them or Skype them” Girl, 12

“We might be moving soon to a three bedroom house...but that means we have to give [our dog] and [our cat] away...The person who owns the house doesn’t like dogs and cats” Girl, 9

The normalisation of RT



Structures

“I'm just thinking why couldn't they just let us live in one place instead of keep moving around? So it's just, it's just that really, it's like, so in a few months yes it'll be a bit more difficult. Whereas if we stay there for like two, three, four months then we have to start packing again, then we have to leave, unpack. Yes, it just keeps going like that.’ Boy, 11

“My mum’s going to move again but because it’s only temporary they can move her at any time”

Agency

“Well yes, I helped my mum, sort of help her with packing, packing my room myself. Helping sort through stuff and what not to keep and what to keep” Boy, 11

“I’m gonna have a bright pink bedroom in the new house, when we move”. Girl, 11

“my mum said ‘how would you feel to move?’ I said ‘you can choose because you’re the boss’... then after we moved... she said again ‘how would you feel if we were moving to another country?’ I said “I wouldn’t feel fine” Boy, 9

“I wanted to stay at the same school cos all my friends are here and anyway we don’t know where we’re moving to” Girl, 11

Children at the interface

“I wake up about five in the morning... me and my mum leave the house at the same time...we walk from our house to the shopping centre...you can go straight through there to [the train station] and we go from there until [two stops away] and then...I’m going to [one] bus but before I get [it] I like meet my friend...at the bus stop...and then we...pick [another] bus” Girl, 11

Longitudinal insights



Case study: Jared



Summary – Residential transience

- There are **many reasons** for residential transience, but **poverty** seems ever-present in our sample
- Whilst it is linked to negative wellbeing outcomes for children in the wider literature, their own stories tell a more **complex** picture.
- For some, residential transience seems to be **normalised**.
- There is evidence of **structural constraints** around residential transience, but also of young people exercising **agency** in the context of multiple moves
- However, in a context of structural constraint, agency can be **‘negative’**
- Insights from longitudinal design

Some concluding thoughts



Methodological insights

The longitudinal design enabled:

- Growing familiarity between researcher and participant
- More detailed understanding
- Retrospective insights (into past experiences)
- Changes over time
- Key transitions
- Age differences

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**Thank you...
Any further questions?**

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About us

The Children's Society has helped change children's lives for over a century.

We expose injustice and address hard truths, tackling child poverty and neglect head on. We fight for change based on the experiences of every child we work with and the solid evidence we gather.

Through our campaigning, commitment and care, we are determined to give every child in this country the greatest possible chance in life.

