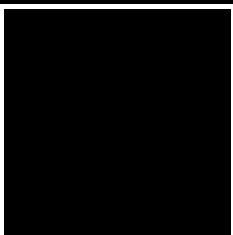


# The Good Childhood Report 2019

**The  
Children's  
Society**





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HOUSE





# Foreword

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## **I am so proud to be writing the foreword for my first Good Childhood Report as Chief Executive of The Children's Society.**

This is our eighth report capturing the very latest information on the state of children's well-being. It provides new and important insights into a wide range of issues affecting children's well-being including family finances and children and young people's feelings about the future.

Modern childhood is complicated. The vast majority of children are happy with their lives, but since 2009, children and young people have become increasingly unhappy with their lot. Our figures suggest about a quarter of a million children could now be unhappy with their lives. This is really concerning, but why is it happening?

Our research points to a variety of important factors. Children are increasingly unhappy with their friendships. For years, we have reported girl's struggles with how they look, but this year we report a significant decline in boy's happiness with their appearance since 2009.

The evidence about school is also concerning – surprisingly this is not necessarily to do with schoolwork and learning. Instead our findings point to wider issues like school culture, the experiences of those with low or strained family finances, and whether or not some children actually feel safe during the school day.

Too many children are struggling with their lives right now, and large numbers are also anxious about their future. Large proportions of children are worried about everything from money and getting good grades at school, to wider issues like crime and the environment.

I'm so proud to lead this incredible organisation but I am conscious of how much we need to do to enable children to thrive not just survive. How do we solve problems like rising mental ill-health, millions living in poverty and the scandal of far too many young lives being lost to knife crime and exploitation?

We must start by listening to young people. I mean REALLY listening. We need to stop side-lining young people and harness their enthusiasm and radical energy for change. We must then, together, create a movement that speaks out and speaks up for young people, working with those in power to change the systems that stop young people thriving.

The Children's Society is passionately committed to listening to young people. This year, I ask you to join us in standing with young people, and to really listen to what they have to say.

If we really listen to young people then I am confident we can achieve amazing things together. We can overcome the complicated challenges of modern childhood and ensure that every child can walk tall and face their future with hope and confidence.

It's time to listen. It's time to show young people they matter. And then we need to act on what young people tell us, so we can change their world. Please join me on this mission, and pledge your support. We can and we must make a difference. #IHearYouth



**Mark Russell**  
Chief Executive, The Children's Society



# Chapter 1:

## **The current state of children's subjective well-being:**

Overview, variations  
and trends over time

## Introduction

**The Good Childhood Report 2019 is the eighth in a series of annual reports focussing exclusively on the well-being of children in the UK. Since 2005, initiated through a partnership with the University of York, we have carried out a substantive programme of research with children to explore their own views on what improves and what hampers their well-being. We have monitored trends in well-being over time, explored the available international, national and local data sources, and assessed the impact of a variety of experiences and characteristics on children's well-being.**

This edition of the report draws together children's views on a range of issues from a variety of different sources, and includes:

- An overview of the latest statistics and trends in subjective well-being, including variations by gender.
- An exploratory analysis of potential child-centred measures of disadvantage and their relationship with well-being.
- A new analysis of the associations between two aspects of poverty (income poverty and financial strain) and different measures of children's well-being.
- Children's thoughts about their future, including their priorities and worries, and how they relate to well-being.



## What is well-being?

'Well-being' is a commonly used term which, in everyday life, can refer to a range of things including happiness, not being ill, or having enough money. Not surprisingly, this array of definitions is also reflected in the way that well-being is measured. There are a range of different measures in use which focus on the recent past, present and future. While some focus on outside measures or social indicators relating to different aspects of life (so-called objective measures), such as physical health and education; others collect people's views about how their life is going (known as 'subjective well-being').

Commonly a mix of these measures is used (eg by UNICEF in measuring children's well-being in different countries<sup>i</sup> and by ONS in Children's Well-being Measures), with children's subjective well-being considered alongside a range of other so-called objective indicators about children's lives. The ONS, for example, combine data on health (such as the number of children of low birth weight and who are overweight), personal finances and education with self-reported information on personal well-being.<sup>ii</sup>

The Good Childhood Reports focus primarily on measures of children's subjective well-being, prioritising children's own views of what makes a good childhood and how they see their lives.

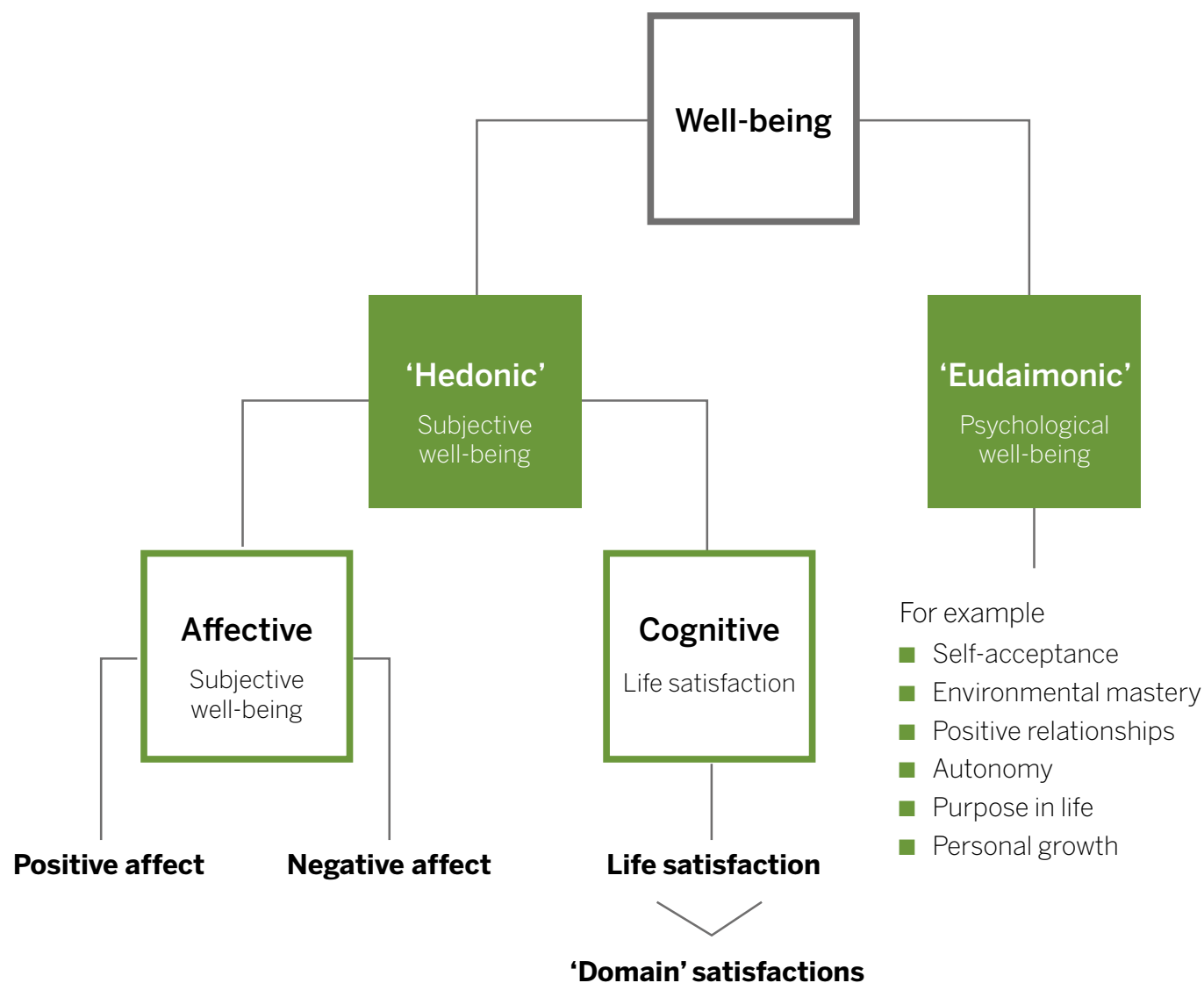
## What is subjective well-being?

Figure 1 summarises the different components of self-reported well-being reflected in the research literature. It distinguishes between questions that ask about positive and negative emotions or how happy people feel (also known as affective well-being) and those that ask about the quality of people's lives overall or certain aspects of their lives (also known as cognitive well-being and measures of life satisfaction).

Children's responses show that life satisfaction is similar on different days of the week, suggesting it is a stable concept; while feelings of happiness and sadness vary (for example, children are generally happier at the weekend).<sup>iii</sup> Our Good Childhood Reports therefore focus mostly on more stable measures of life satisfaction so that we can understand how children are doing in the longer term and respond better to their collective needs.

Figure 1 also distinguishes between feeling good, happiness and satisfaction (hedonic well-being) and functioning well, personal development and growth (eudaimonic well-being). As reflected in the differing proportions with low scores in Figure 5, children give slightly different answers to questions about how happy they are (positive affect), how satisfied they feel with their life (life satisfaction) and whether they feel that life is worthwhile (eudaimonic well-being). These variations in their responses show there is value in measuring different aspects of children's well-being to learn more about how they feel about their lives.

**Figure 1: Components of self-reported well-being**



## **Measuring children's subjective well-being**

Historically, parents or teachers were asked to assess well-being on behalf of children. However research has shown that children's and parents' responses to the same sets of questions about emotional and behavioural difficulties are not the same.<sup>1iv</sup> Indeed, the Good Childhood Report 2018 found that a single-item measure of subjective well-being completed by a cohort of children aged around 14 years was a stronger predictor of self-harm than a 20-item measure of emotional and behavioural difficulties answered on their behalf by a parent.<sup>v</sup> Adult proxy measures are no longer considered adequate and, as a result, there has been a move towards asking children themselves how they view their lives, with children's self-reported well-being now considered the gold standard.

In the UK, there are a number of robust longitudinal studies that include measures of children's life satisfaction. The British Household Panel Survey (now Understanding Society) has, since 1994–5, been asking children about their happiness with life as a whole and five aspects of their life: family, friends, appearance, schoolwork

and (since 2003) school. The Millennium Cohort Study has also asked these questions of a cohort of children (born in 2000/2001) when they were aged around 11 and 14. However as studies covering a range of other issues, there are necessarily some limitations in the way that they measure subjective well-being. The limitations of measurement for these studies include their use of a seven-point rather than the preferred 11-point ('0–10') scale; a single rather than multi-item measure (the research has found the latter to be more reliable);<sup>vi</sup> and a limited number of domains of well-being, which excludes others (eg health, autonomy, time use and money/possessions) known to be important to children's well-being.

In 2010, The Children's Society therefore developed The Good Childhood Index, which contains a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction and 10 single-item domain measures of happiness with different aspects of life.<sup>vii</sup> The latest figures for the Good Childhood Index are shown in Figure 4 and Figure 6 of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Lamping & Ploubidis (2010) report 'low to moderate' correlations between child and parent reports of the sub-scales of the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire.



## Figure 2: The Good Childhood Index

The Good Childhood Index contains the following 16 items:

Please say how much you disagree or agree with each of the following statements						
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't know
1. My life is going well						
2. My life is just right						
3. I wish I had a different kind of life						
4. I have a good life						
5. I have what I want in life						

Please tick one of the boxes to say how happy you feel with things in your life	
<p>These questions use a scale from 0 to 10. On this scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0 means 'very unhappy'</li> <li>5 means 'not happy or unhappy'</li> <li>10 means 'very happy'</li> </ul> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div>Very unhappy</div> <div>Not happy or unhappy</div> <div>Very happy</div> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"> </div>	
How happy are you with...	
6. ...your life as a whole?	
7. ...your relationships with your family?	
8. ...the home that you live in?	
9. ...how much choice you have in life?	
10. ...your relationships with your friends?	
11. ...the things that you have (like money and the things you own)?	
12. ...your health?	
13. ...your appearance (the way that you look)?	
14. ...what may happen to you later in your life (in the future)?	
15. ...the school that you go to?	
16. ...the way that you use your time?	

Research shows that measures of subjective well-being are remarkably stable,<sup>2</sup> but that there are variations between differing groups of children. For example, previous Good Childhood Reports have found that children with difficult family relationships report lower subjective well-being than children with supportive family relationships;<sup>viii</sup> children who have been bullied report lower subjective well-being than those who have not;<sup>ix</sup> and in this report we find that children currently or historically in families under financial strain or in income poverty are more likely to have lower subjective well-being. Domain measures also show important gender differences for children in the UK. For example, Figure 8 shows that girls are unhappier with their appearance than boys, and boys are unhappier with their schoolwork than girls. These differences highlight the importance of measurement in understanding children's experiences and the different challenges they can face.

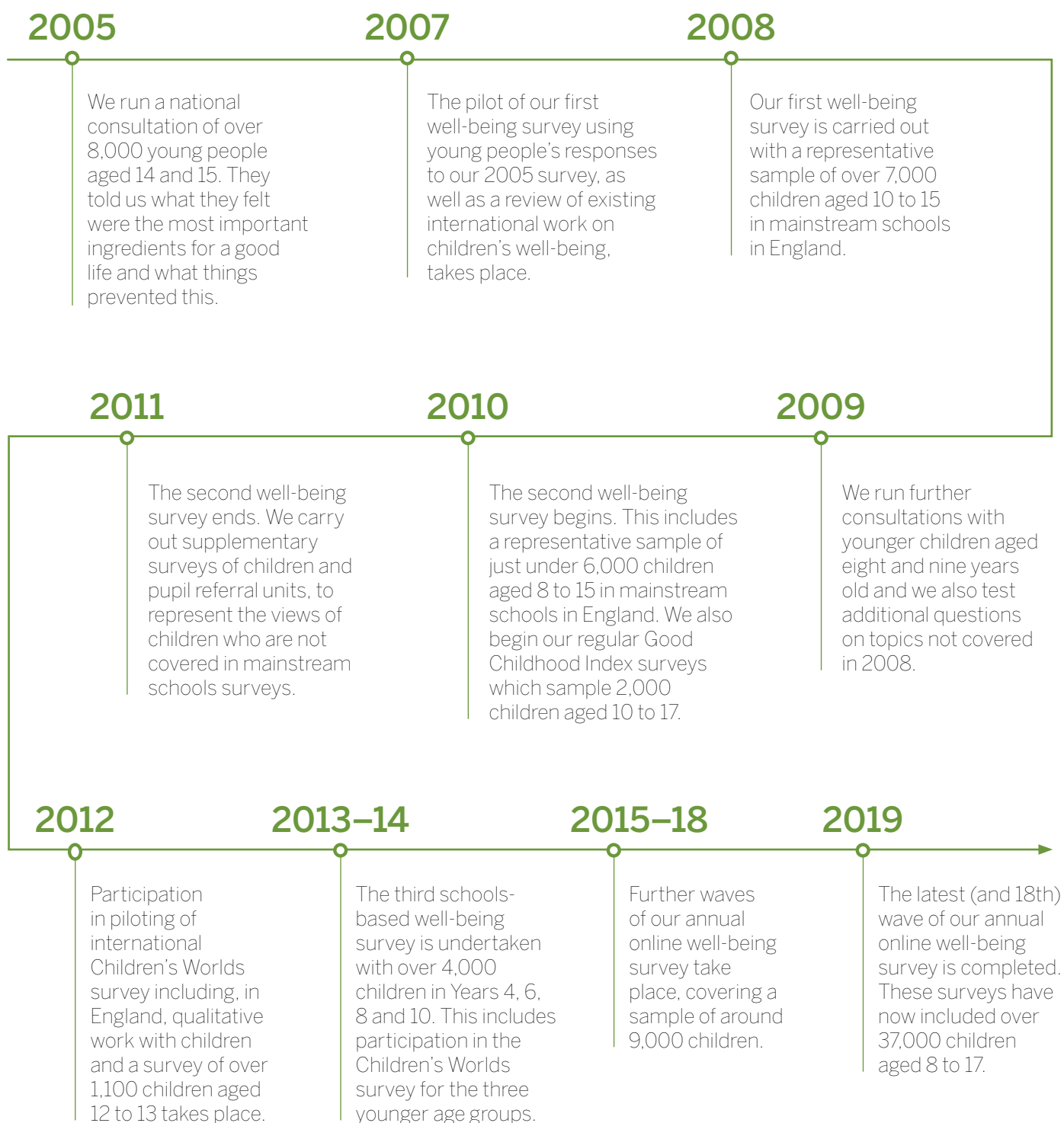
While comparisons between the subjective well-being of children in different countries are more challenging, international studies, such as Children's Worlds, the International Survey of Children's Well-Being,<sup>x</sup> can also reflect differences in children's lives, and bring particular groups of children that are in greatest need of support to the attention of professionals and policy makers.

### **Well-being and mental ill-health**

Research suggests that well-being and mental ill-health are related, but not simply the opposite of each other. In last year's Good Childhood Report we found that of those children who had low life satisfaction, nearly half had high depressive symptoms (and vice versa). The overlap between those who had low life satisfaction and a high emotional and behavioural difficulties score was lower (at less than 1 in 5). Children may thus have low subjective well-being without symptoms of mental illness, and high subjective well-being despite a diagnosis of mental illness. Outcomes can be equally poor for both those with low subjective well-being and those with mental ill-health. One study found children with low subjective well-being had lower engagement in school than those with higher well-being (including a group who had symptoms of mental illness at the same time as high subjective well-being).<sup>xi</sup> It is therefore important to measure both mental ill-health and well-being to ensure that vulnerable children who have low subjective well-being without symptoms of mental illness are not overlooked.

<sup>2</sup> For example, as reported in The Good Childhood Report 2017, the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction shown in Figure 2 has good internal consistency overall (a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.84) and for males, females, 8 to 11 year olds and 12 to 15 year olds (a Cronbach's Alpha > 0.80 in all cases). A test-retest shows that it also has good reliability, with an intra-class correlation coefficient of 0.84 ( $p < 0.001$ ). For further details of the psychometric properties of The Good Childhood Index see pages 11 to 13 of The Good Childhood Report 2017.

**Figure 3: The research programme**





## **Data sources used in this report**

This report makes use of the most robust and up to date data sources on children's subjective well-being. As well as presenting measures from our own research programme, we also use other available sources, such as Understanding Society and the Millennium Cohort Study.

### **The Children's Society household surveys**

Since 2010, The Children's Society has conducted household surveys with parents and children from age 8 to 17 years. The surveys collect data on children's well-being together with data on the household, such as income, and a range of other issues that children have told us are important to them, including gender stereotypes in 2018 and children's views about their future in this year's survey. The 2019 survey was completed in June–July 2019. It covers parents and children aged 10 to 17 from almost 2,400 households in England, Scotland and Wales, who were selected to closely match the socio-economic make up of the wider population of these countries. The survey was also adapted in 2019 to ensure better spread across the 10 regions of Great Britain.

### **Understanding Society**

(See [understandingsociety.ac.uk/about](https://understandingsociety.ac.uk/about) for further details)

Understanding Society is a longitudinal study covering 40,000 households in the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). The survey is conducted annually and covers a representative, random sample of households, collecting the responses of adults and children aged 10 to 15. The youth questionnaire contains questions on subjective well-being and other aspects of children's lives, and, in 2016–17, achieved a sample of over 3,200 10 to 15 year olds.

### **Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)**

(See [cls.ioe.ac.uk](https://cls.ioe.ac.uk) for further details)

The MCS is a survey that follows the lives of over 18,000 children born in the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) in 2000–01. It employs a random sample, stratified to ensure representation of all four UK countries, deprived areas and areas with high concentrations of Black and Asian families. Seven waves of the survey have been conducted to date, when the children were aged around nine months, three, five, seven, 11, 14 and 17 years. The data analysed for this report are from the sixth wave undertaken in 2015 when the children were aged 14 (data for the seventh wave is not yet available).

### **The Children's Society Year 10 School Survey**

In 2018–2019, The Children's Society conducted an exploratory survey of Year 10 students to look at the possibility of asking children themselves about their experiences of disadvantage. Survey responses are presented from over 650 Year 10 children from 14 schools in England, which were selected using a randomised stratified sample based on Free School Meal eligibility. This original sample was then boosted with a purposeful sample of schools in strata that were not well-represented to secure wider coverage.

### **Children's Worlds**

Children's Worlds is an international study on children's subjective well-being. The study is currently in its third wave. Data in this report are from Wave 2 (data from the most recent wave are not yet available) of the survey, which was completed in 2013–2014 and involved representative samples of children aged 8 to 12 in over 20 countries. The data drawn upon in this report relate to children aged around 12 years.

## **Overview of data sources and methods by chapter**

In this eighth Good Childhood Report, the data sources and methodology for each chapter are as follows:

**Chapter 1** presents the latest weighted data from The Children's Society 2019 household survey for our Good Childhood Index, the ONS measures of well-being, and overall life satisfaction for children aged 10 to 17 years (based on the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction outlined in Figure 2). The chapter concludes with the most up to date weighted findings on overall time trends and trends by gender for the six measures included in Understanding Society, which focusses on children aged 10 to 15.

**Chapter 2** is an exploratory analysis of the unweighted responses to our Year 10 survey on disadvantage. Responses to individual questions are examined to identify questions that children may find difficult/not feel comfortable to answer, and to look at the relationship between individual disadvantages and the overall life satisfaction measure (derived from Huebner), which is also used in our household survey.

Responses from those children completing the whole survey are examined to provide insights into children's experiences of multiple disadvantage.

**Chapter 3** makes use of weighted data from the sixth wave of the Millennium Cohort Study (conducted when children were aged around 14 years) on indicators of well-being and poverty included in the survey. This includes information from children themselves on their satisfaction with life and depressive symptoms; and information from their parents on two aspects of poverty (income poverty and financial strain).

An analysis of the poverty histories of just under 9,000 children included in all six waves of the Millennium Cohort Study was also undertaken to look at the implications of long-term poverty on well-being.

**Chapter 4** uses weighted responses from The Children's Society 2019 household survey to look at children's thoughts on their own future and wider society, and how they vary depending on well-being and other characteristics.

The chapter also draws on weighted data from the sixth wave of the Millennium Cohort Study on children's expectations of going to university; and on data from the international study Children's Worlds, looking at how the positivity of children (aged around 12 years) in England compares with that of their counterparts in other European countries.

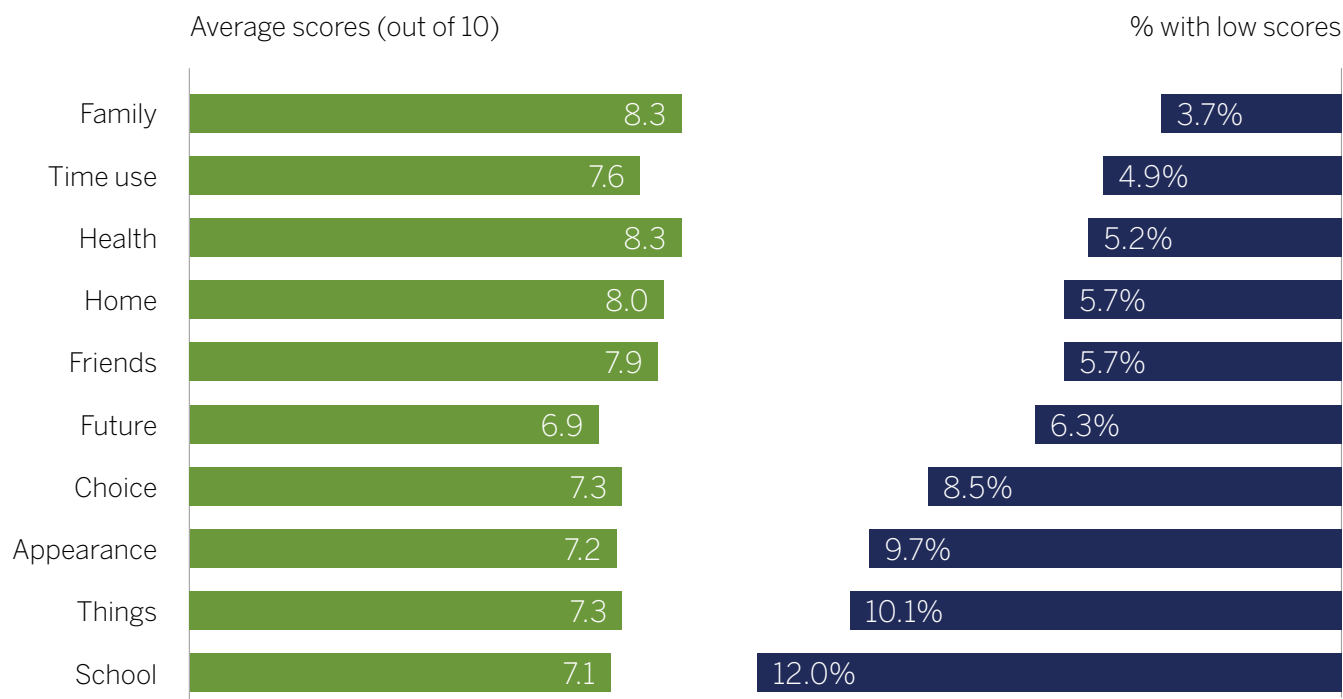
## **Statistical testing**

A range of appropriate statistical tests have been conducted to support the findings presented in this report, using a 99% confidence level to test statistical significance (unless otherwise stated). Weighted data sets have been used for analysis of the Understanding Society survey, The Children's Society's household survey and the Millennium Cohort Study. As this is a non-technical report, minimal technical language about statistical analysis has been presented in the main text, although some basic explanatory information can be found in footnotes. Further details on the technical aspects of the research are available from The Children's Society's Research Team (see contact details at the end of the report).

## The Good Childhood Index

Figure 4 presents the latest figures for The Good Childhood Index from a survey of almost 2,400 children conducted in June–July 2019. Both the average scores and the proportion of children who score below the midpoint of the scale (who we describe as having ‘low well-being’) are provided for each of the 10 aspects of life. As found in previous years, children are most happy on average with their relationships with their family and least happy (as shown by the higher percentage with low scores) with the school that they go to.

**Figure 4: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index**

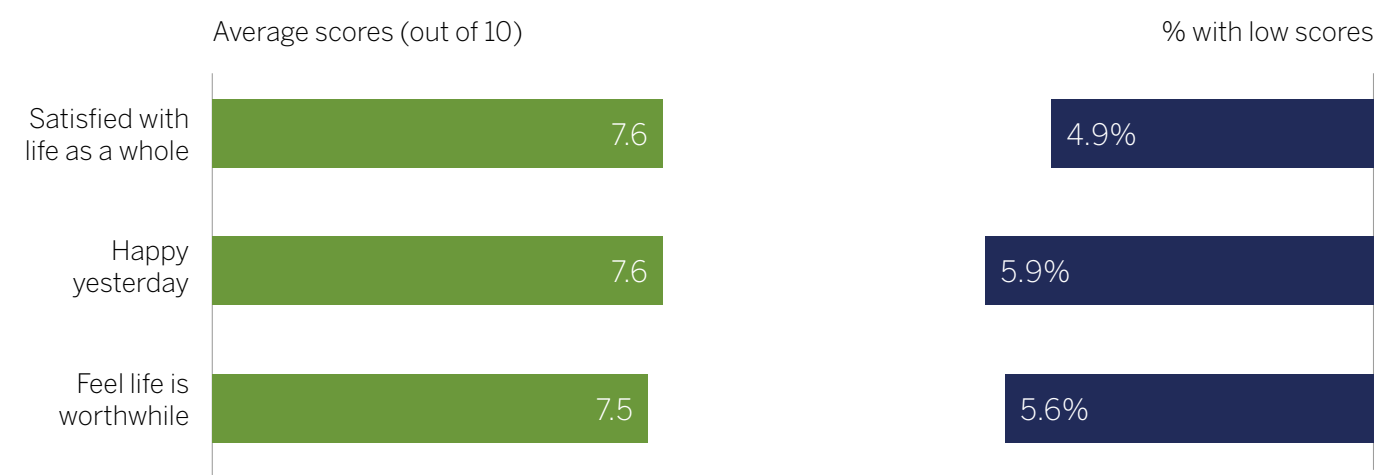


The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June–July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.



Figure 5 shows children’s responses to three questions we ask about their ‘personal well-being’. These questions are a key data source for the ONS Children’s Well-being Measures compendium referred to on page 9, which focusses on children aged 10 to 15.<sup>xii</sup> The graphs that follow show responses for children aged 10 to 17 years.

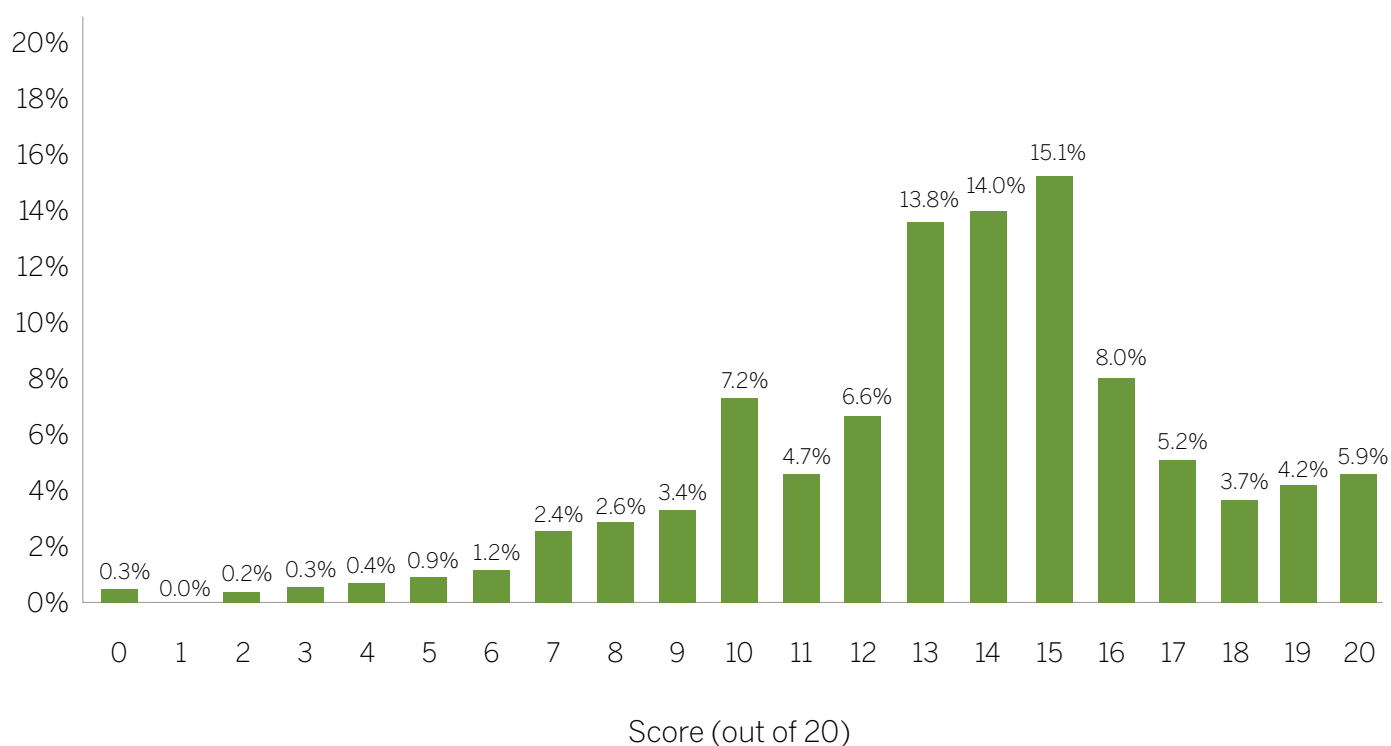
Figure 5: Latest ONS measures of overall well-being



The Children’s Society’s household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

In addition, we collect annual data for a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction (outlined in Figure 2). Figure 6 shows the distribution of scores for this measure. The majority of children score on or above the midpoint of the scale (10 out of 20). Understandably, given The Children's Society's history of working with some of the most disadvantaged children, we are primarily focussed on improving well-being for those children who are experiencing difficulty than increasing the well-being of children who are already doing well. Figure 6 shows that in our 2019 survey a minority of children (almost 12%) reported low well-being (scoring below the midpoint).

**Figure 6: Latest figures for children's overall life satisfaction**



The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June–July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

## Time trends

From the Good Childhood Report 2013 onwards, we have drawn on available data from the Understanding Society survey to present trends in children's well-being over time. Trends in particular domains of well-being, or for particular groups of children, can help us to focus our attention when trying to improve children's lives, and to identify areas for further exploration in our research.

The Understanding Society survey has been asking 10 to 15 year olds about their happiness with life as a whole and five different aspects of life (family, friends, appearance, school and schoolwork) every year since 2009. The Good Childhood Report 2018 highlighted a decrease in satisfaction with friends and life as a whole, and an increase in happiness with schoolwork for those completing the survey between 2009–10 and 2015–6.

In the current report, we present the most up to date findings from all available waves of Understanding Society to explore the latest trends in children's well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 7 shows mean happiness scores for each of the six measures, across eight waves of the survey.<sup>4</sup> The solid line reflects the mean scores and the grey areas are the 99% confidence intervals. While many of the trends have continued, there are also some changes from The Good Childhood Report 2018.

Statistical tests,<sup>5</sup> comparing 2009–10 and 2016–17, show that (as in last year's report) there was:



**A significant decrease in happiness with life as a whole and with friends.**



**No significant change for happiness with family or with appearance.**

There was also:



**A significant dip in happiness with school** (not seen in last year's report) in 2016–17. While not reflective of a long-term downward trend (as the dip is in the latest set of data), it will be important to monitor any changes in this measure next year.



**No significant change for happiness with schoolwork.**

The increase shown in previous years was counteracted by a decrease in 2016–17.

<sup>3</sup> All figures have been produced using the most recent dataset for each Wave and data for all waves, except Wave 1, have been weighted using the cross-sectional youth interview weight. As a result, there are some small differences between the mean scores presented here and those shown in previous Good Childhood Reports.

<sup>4</sup> The 7-point scale (1–7) used to measure well-being in Understanding Society, where higher values represent lower happiness, has been reversed and converted to an 11-point scale (0 to 10) for the purposes of this report to ease interpretation and comparison with the other measures presented in this report.

<sup>5</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores between 2009–10 and 2016–17 were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The statistically significant differences identified between Wave 1 and Wave 8 were also replicated using non-parametric tests.

Figure 8 shows the mean happiness scores obtained in each wave of the survey for girls and boys. Statistical tests<sup>6</sup> showed that:

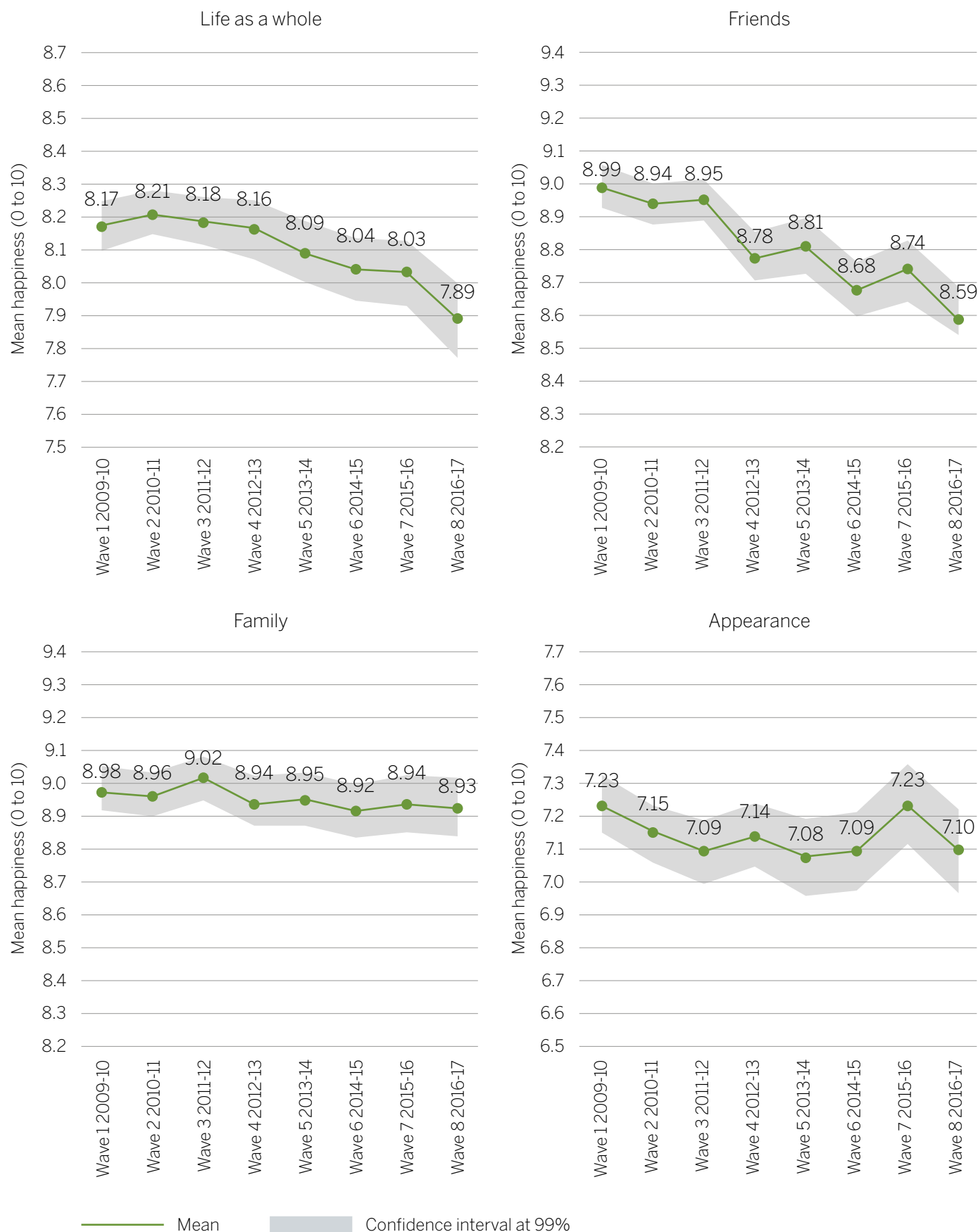
- **Life as a whole:** Boys were significantly happier than girls in 2013–14 and 2014–15 only. In all other years, there were no significant gender differences in happiness with life as a whole.
- **Family:** There were no significant gender differences in happiness with family in any year.
- **Friends:** There were no clear trends by gender for happiness with friends. The only year when there was a significant difference was 2013–14, when boys were significantly happier (ie had a higher mean score) than girls.
- **Appearance:** The mean happiness score was significantly higher for boys in all years. The narrowing in the gender gap identified for this measure in 2015–16 continued in 2016–17. It will therefore be important to continue to monitor trends for this domain next year.
- **School:** There were no consistent trends by gender for happiness with school. The only significant difference was in 2010–11, when the mean happiness score for girls was significantly higher than that for boys.
- **Schoolwork:** Girls were significantly happier (ie had higher mean scores) than boys in all years.

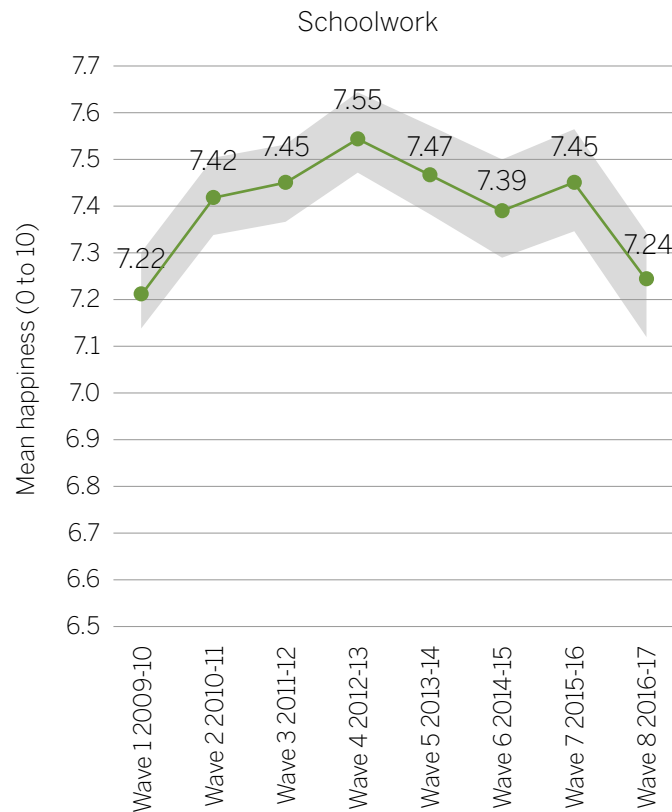
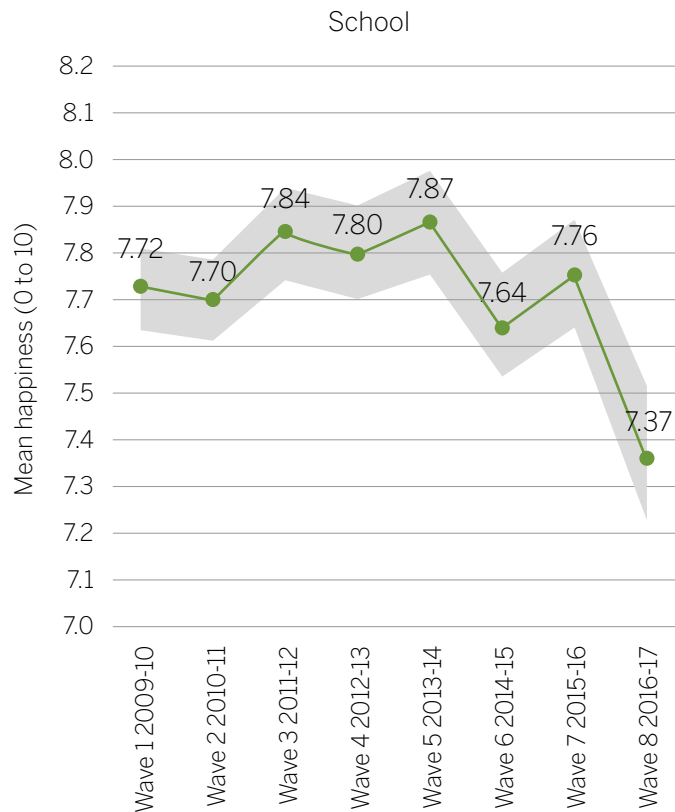
<sup>6</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores for boys and girls were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The Understanding Society variable ypsex was used to conduct the analyses by gender.





**Figure 7: Trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009-10 to 2016-17**



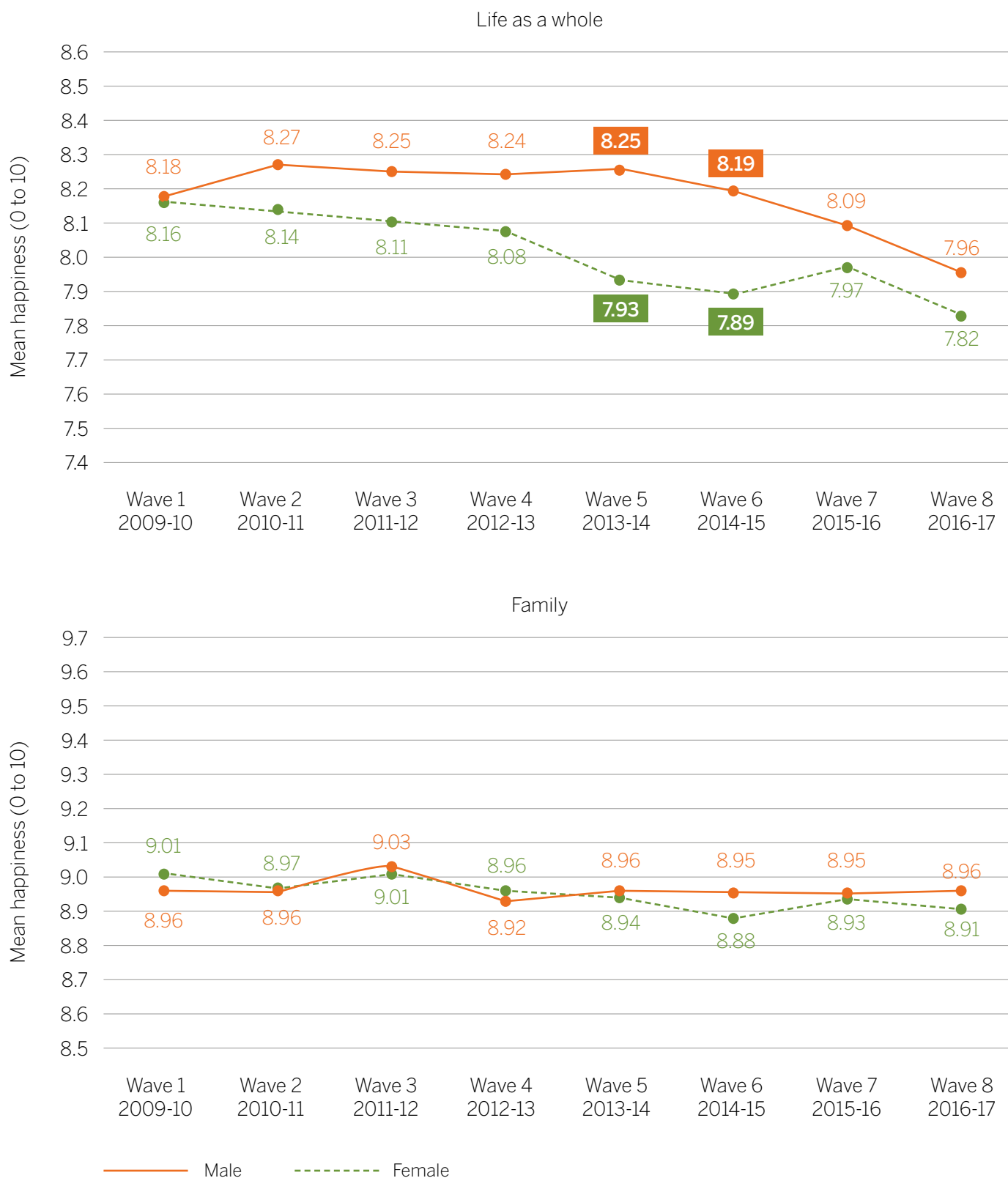


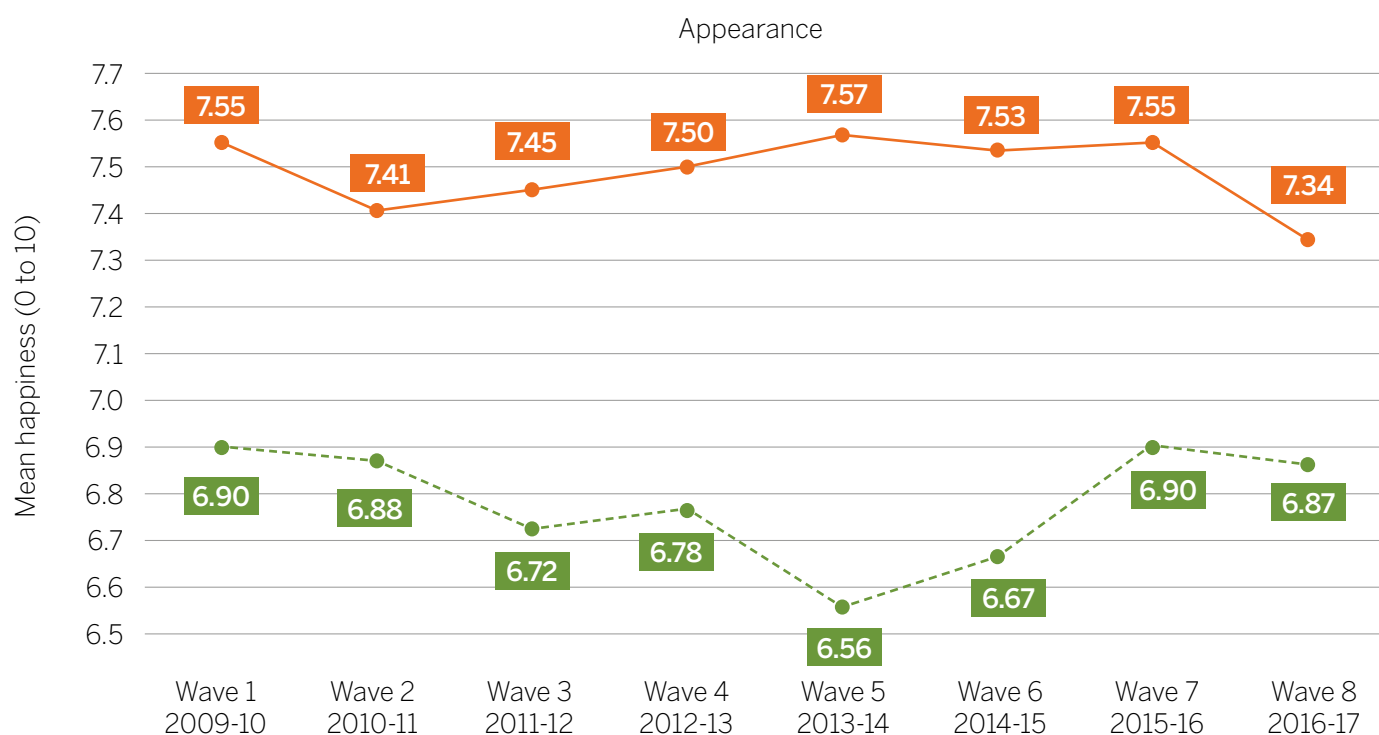
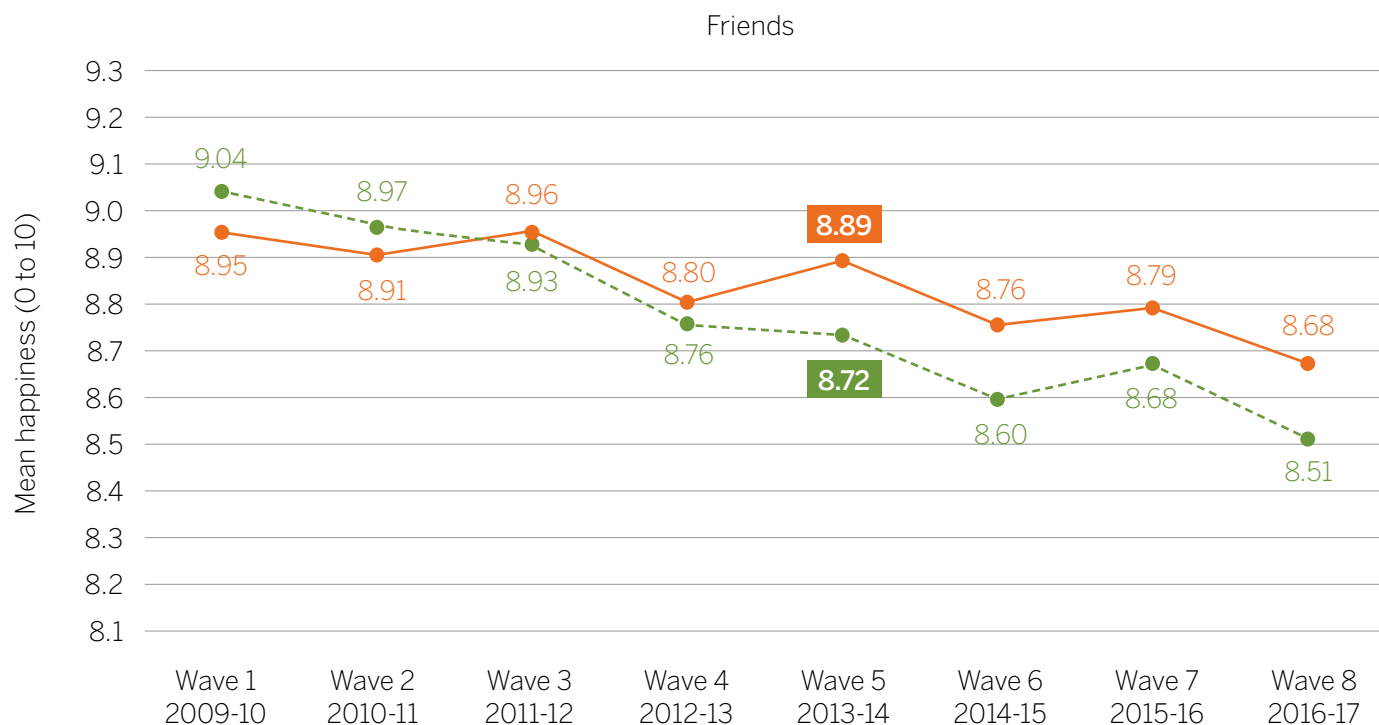
Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect)<sup>7</sup>

Presentational note: All graphs use the same size range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis uses weightings provided in the Understanding Society data set to ensure that the samples are as representative of the general population as possible.

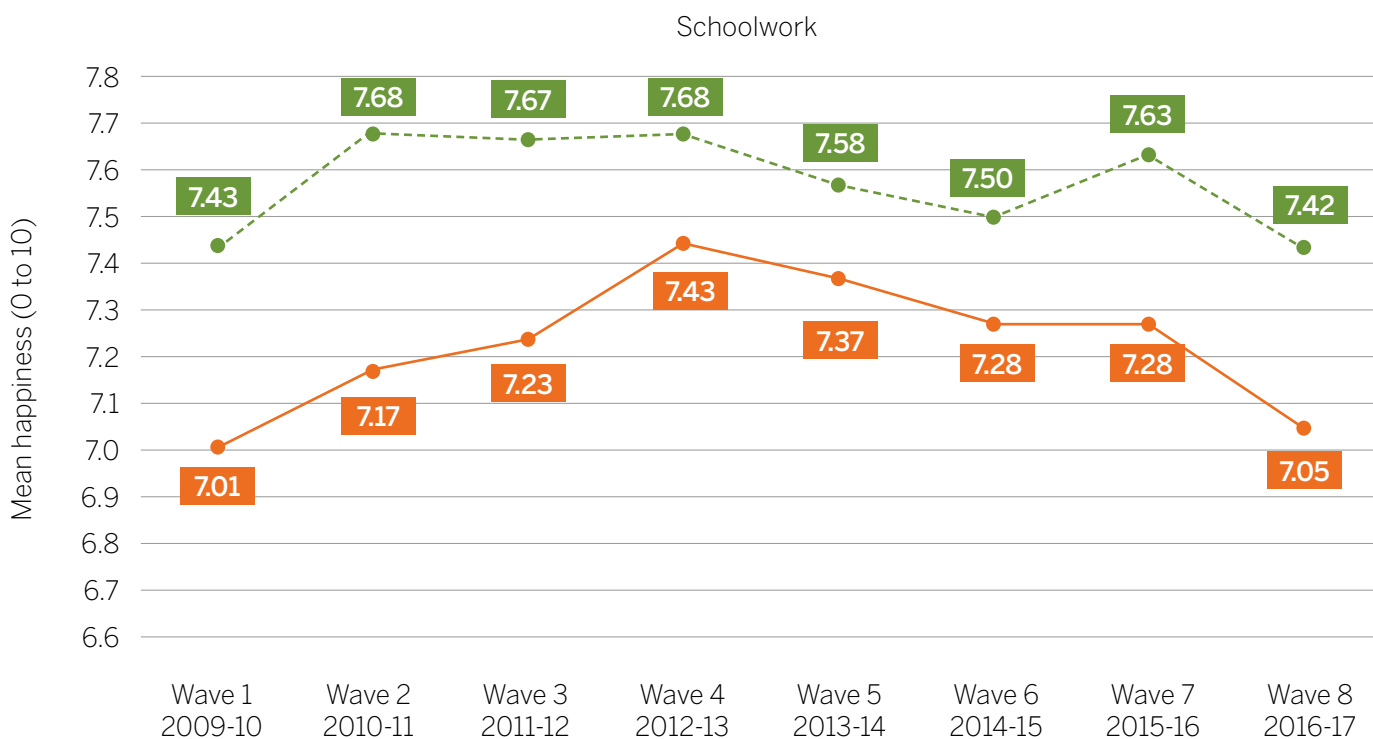
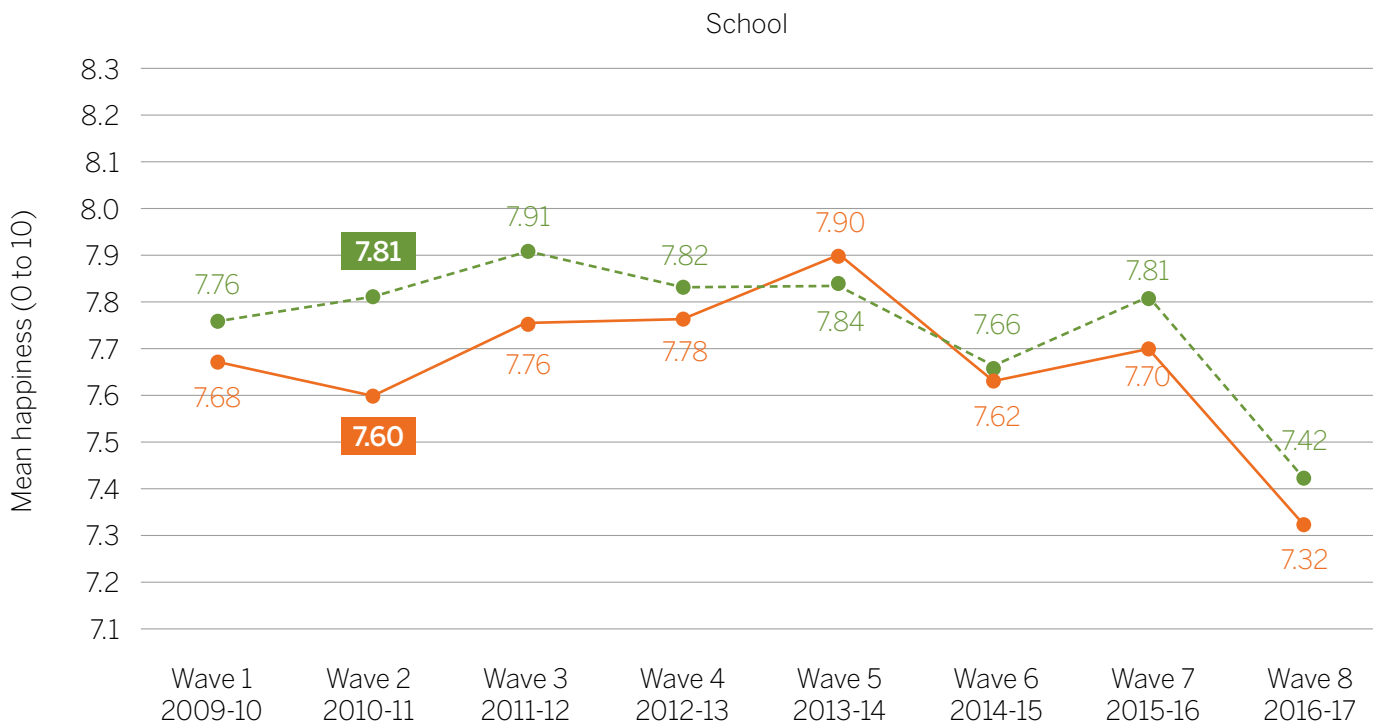
**Figure 8: Trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009–10 to 2016–17**





**Note:** Data highlighted in a coloured box denotes scores where the differences between boys and girls are statistically significant at 99% confidence level.





Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect). University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research, NatCen Social Research, Kantar Public. (2019). Understanding Society: Waves 1-8, 2009-2017. [data collection]. UK Data Service.

## Summary

**The Children's Society has shown a long-term commitment to measuring the well-being of children, and there is now widespread consensus that children can and should be asked directly about their experiences. Measuring children's well-being can bring to our attention areas of life children are finding difficult, and groups of children who are experiencing difficulties that are most in need of our support.**

The latest trends for children aged 10 to 15 show that, between 2009–10 and 2016–17, there has been:

- A significant decrease in happiness with life as a whole and friends.
- No significant change in happiness with family, appearance or schoolwork.
- A dip in happiness with school in 2016–17 compared with other years. This change needs to be monitored to see if this is the start of a longer term trend.

The data also show the following gender differences for children aged 10 to 15 across the same period:

- Boys were consistently happier with their appearance than girls.
- Girls were happier with school work than boys.
- There were no consistent gender differences for happiness with life as a whole, family, friends or school.



Chapter 2:  
**Exploring children's  
self-reported  
experiences of  
disadvantage**



**Research has long shown the cumulative effects a number of disadvantages can have on a young person's life<sup>xiii</sup> and that some young people may be at particular risk of low well-being as a result of their experience of cumulative negative factors.<sup>xiv</sup> A range of terms are used to refer to this clustering of experiences, including 'multiple disadvantage' and 'complex needs'.<sup>xv</sup> For the purpose of this report, we use the term multiple disadvantage to refer to those young people who have experienced more than one difficulty in their lives.**

In 2017, we asked the children and parents completing our annual household survey about their experience of a list of 27 types of disadvantage over the last five years. As the survey was conducted online, we felt it more ethically acceptable to ask some of the questions of children's parents (rather than children themselves). For example, in 2017 we asked parents about whether the family had moved multiple times, and about homelessness. We also asked them about domestic violence.

In 2018–2019, we have expanded on this previous work, conducting an exploratory school-based survey with Year 10 pupils<sup>8</sup> where we tested the possibility of asking children about their experiences of disadvantage without requiring input from adults.<sup>9</sup> A child-centred approach to multiple disadvantage is important in ensuring that we understand children's experiences and how these affect their self-reported well-being.

<sup>8</sup> To align with the grouping of pupils in one school, we allowed one class of Year 9 pupils to complete the survey. All other students were in Year 10.

<sup>9</sup> We felt that it was ethically acceptable to ask these questions of an older age group and in the school environment where additional support could be offered.

Furthermore, as services designed to support children often focus on one issue, the multi-faceted nature (together with the invisibility of some disadvantages) means that the extent of these experiences can remain hidden. There will also be children who are experiencing numerous disadvantages that are not receiving services. A recent report by the Office for the Children's Commissioner estimated that more than one third of children living with risk because of a vulnerable family background were 'invisible' or not known to services.<sup>xvi</sup> By identifying a set of questions that we can ask children – and how these experiences affect their outcomes (including protective factors) – we will be better equipped to identify and support those most vulnerable.

The list of disadvantages included in the Year 10 survey inevitably differs from that examined in 2017, as we only wanted to ask children questions they could be expected to answer, and therefore did not include questions about their parent's income, health and other issues. Our considerations in developing the list of disadvantages for the Year 10 survey were thus:

- Pre-existing evidence from our programme of research and the wider literature that the difficulty was associated with negative outcomes for children/lower well-being.<sup>xvii, xviii, xix, xx</sup>
- Whether or not children had been asked about the disadvantage previously.
- Whether children could be expected to answer a question on that difficulty and, if so, whether it would be ethical for them to do so.<sup>10</sup>

As in 2017, we included a balance of items affecting children directly (eg neglect) as well as indirectly (eg through the material environment).

This chapter examines responses from over 650 pupils who took part in the survey.<sup>11</sup> While this is a small group for statistical purposes, it is sufficient to explore what questions we can ask of children and how well these questions worked. It is also sufficient to provide an initial indication of which questions might be important in terms of children's well-being, with a view to informing future measurement.

<sup>10</sup> We did not ask any questions that we felt might be unethical, such as experiences of domestic violence.

<sup>11</sup> The analysis of those experiencing two or more difficulties is based only on those that completed all questions, and the sample sizes are therefore much smaller than for individual items, regressions etc.



### **What questions can we ask children about multiple disadvantage?**

Table 1 shows the 24 types of disadvantage asked about in the Year 10 survey, and whether or not they were included in our previous analysis of multiple disadvantage.

On the whole, questions were well-completed by pupils who took part in the survey. However, there was a high drop-out rate as the survey progressed, suggesting that young people experienced fatigue and that a shorter list of questions should be used to measure multiple disadvantage in order to maximise response rates.

The findings from this survey also shed light on the type of questions that children do and do not feel comfortable answering. Where completed, the questions with the highest proportions of 'Not sure'/'Don't know' responses were:

- How often there were fights between people in the local area (31.3% responded 'Don't know').
- Whether child has more, less or about the same money as friends (23.5% responded 'Don't know').
- How often there were fights at school (19.6% responded 'Don't know').
- Whether child had experienced bullying in the past 3 months (12.6% responded 'Not sure' and 3.8% 'Don't want to say').

**Table 1: Types of disadvantage included**

Type of disadvantage	Asked of children in GCR 17
<b>Family factors</b>	
Emotional neglect: Child has experienced emotional neglect	Yes
Supervisory neglect: Child has experienced supervisory neglect <sup>12</sup>	Yes
Young carer: Child is a young carer	Yes
Child does not live with family (ie is in care)	No
Child does not feel safe at home	No
Residential transience: Child has moved house more than once in past two years	No
<b>Material factors</b>	
Unemployment: No adults in household are in paid employment	No
Free school meals: Child receives free school meals	Yes
Child deprivation index: Child is missing three or more items <sup>13</sup>	No
Child has less money than friends	No
Child worries about how much money family has often or always	No
Child does not have enough food to eat each day (ever, sometimes, often)	No
Overcrowding: Child shares a room	Yes
Overcrowding: Child shares a bed/doesn't have a bed	Yes
Homeless in the last two years	No
<b>School factors</b>	
Experienced bullying in the last three months <sup>14</sup>	No
Fights at school every or most days	No
Child does not feel safe at school	No
Transience: Child has moved school in past two years	No
<b>Neighbourhood factors</b>	
Child does not feel safe on way to and from school	No
Child does not feel safe when walking in the area they live	No
Fights in local area every or most days	No
Safety of Neighbourhood: Experienced two or more neighbourhood problems	Yes
Safety of Neighbourhood: Experienced crime/anti-social behaviour	Yes

<sup>12</sup> Questions on Emotional and Supervisory Neglect were taken from The Children's Society, 2016. Understanding Adolescent Neglect: Troubled Teens. London: The Children's Society. Those children who scored 0 to 4 for each set of questions were classed as experiencing emotional/supervisory neglect.

<sup>13</sup> The questions used for this index were a revised version of those included in The Children's Society (2012) which was developed by the original authors. They included: weekly pocket money, monthly savings, shoes/trainers to fit in with other people of that age, a smartphone (with internet access), a Smart TV or iPad (with access to the internet), a garden/somewhere nearby to play safely with friends, a family car, clothes to fit in with other children, at least one annual family holiday, and monthly family day trips/outings. Children who responded 'I don't have this but I would like it' or 'I don't have this and I don't want or need it' to a question were deemed to be missing that item for the purpose of this analysis. Main (2013) identified four groups of children in her analysis of the original scale: those lacking none or one of the items ('not deprived'); those lacking two items ('deprived'); those lacking three or four items ('very deprived'); and those lacking five or more items ('severely deprived'). In this report, we focus on those lacking three or more items (the very or severely deprived).

<sup>14</sup> Although bullying is often school-related, we used the overall measure here due to the smaller sample size.



These responses suggest that children do not always know about issues related to school/neighbourhood safety and how their family finances compare to others. The proportions responding 'Not sure' to the bullying questions suggest that further work may be needed to define this concept/assist measurement.

There were also a small number of questions that had low numbers of young people (eg less than 30) reporting having experienced a disadvantage. These were as follows:

- Child does not live with family (ie is in care).
- Child does not feel safe at home.
- Child lives in a household where no adults have a paid job.
- Child shares a bed/does not have own bed.
- Child has been homeless in the last two years.
- Child has experienced supervisory neglect.

A child not living with their family has been excluded from further analysis because of the very low number of children that reported this disadvantage ( $N < 10$ ).

### **How do individual measures of disadvantage relate to children's well-being?**

Given the exploratory nature and the smaller sample size of the Year 10 survey, the purpose was not to produce prevalence measures (which were presented in the 2017 Good Childhood Report), but to examine the relationship between measures of disadvantage not previously asked of children and children's well-being.

Figure 9 looks at the relationship between individual disadvantages and the life satisfaction measure, derived from Huebner (outlined on page 12):

- My life is going well.
- My life is just right.
- I wish I had a different kind of life.
- I have a good life.
- I have what I want in life.

It shows whether there was a significant difference in children's mean subjective well-being depending on whether or not they reported a disadvantage (the names of these items are shaded in Figure 9), and the proportion of variation in children's life satisfaction (on a scale of 0 to 10) explained by each measure, after taking into account variations in age and gender.<sup>15</sup> The former measure (whether there are significant differences based on whether or not a child experienced a difficulty) has been presented as an alternative to the 'difference' figure presented in the 2017 report due to the smaller sample sizes. It allows us to identify difficulties which are rarer and therefore have less capacity to explain variation in overall well-

<sup>15</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess differences in mean scores for those young people experiencing/not experiencing a disadvantage. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the proportion of explained variation for each individual binary measure, after controlling for gender and age.

being, but effect the small number of children that experience them. The proportion of children reporting each disadvantage is also presented in brackets to help the reader to easily identify those difficulties that were more/less commonly experienced (more care should be taken in interpreting findings reported by less than 5% of children).<sup>16</sup> As these proportions are based on the small sample of Year 10 pupils, they are indicative only and should not be used to generalise to the wider population.

Concentrating on those disadvantages that were not affected by low numbers, the analysis suggests that the top three individual measures that explain the largest proportion of variation in life satisfaction are: experiencing bullying, not feeling safe at school, and having three or more missing items (based on a child deprivation index). Our previous research has highlighted the strong association between being bullied and lower well-being.<sup>xxi, xxii</sup> The relationship between individual items and well-being was also a key consideration in developing the missing items index, which was utilised in the Year 10 survey.<sup>xxiii</sup> As none of these measures were included in the 2017 survey, these findings are important in informing future measurement. Interestingly, some of the measures that explain larger proportions of the variation in life satisfaction – such as bullying – are also those that suffered issues with completion, which highlights the importance of working jointly with children to produce revised measures that children find easier/more comfortable to answer.

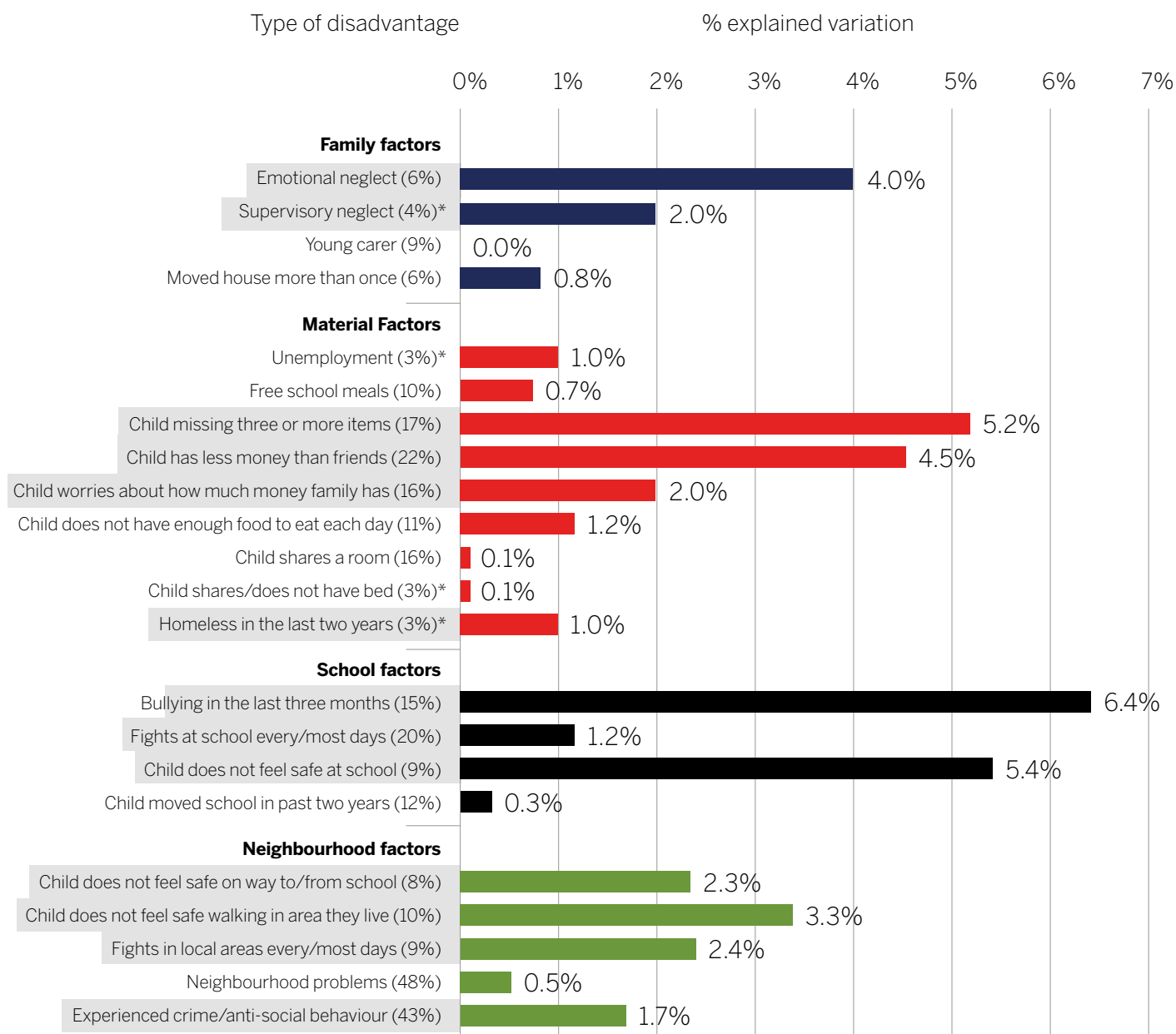
As noted above, focussing exclusively on the proportion of explained variation ignores disadvantages that may occur more rarely but

have a large impact on those effected. Figure 9 also highlights significant differences in subjective well-being for those who experienced disadvantages with lower explanatory power. For example, while homelessness explains only 1% of overall variation, there is a statistically significant difference between the mean well-being scores of those who have and have not been homeless in the last two years, showing this experience had a big impact on the relatively few young people who reported it. This is also the case for supervisory neglect. Both of these findings are consistent with our 2017 report.

Items that may be less useful as predictors of children's life satisfaction include being a young carer, a child sharing a room, and a child sharing a bed. The low proportions of variation explained by these variables is consistent with The Good Childhood Report 2017. It is possible that these experiences may not always be negative for children. Some children may, for example, like sharing a room with their sibling and may not feel adversely affected by caring responsibilities if they are well supported. Indeed, research has shown that some young people do not identify with the term 'young carer' and are keen to stress the benefits associated with their caring responsibilities.<sup>xxiv, xxv</sup> Further investigation with a larger sample size would allow separation of those children who felt negatively about sharing a room or being a carer, and an assessment to be made of the relative impact of feeling negatively/positively on the well-being of these children.<sup>17</sup> Use of a different question (eg specifying the proportion of time a young person cares for someone) to assess the number of young carers may also provide different results.

<sup>16</sup> These proportions are based on those reporting that they did/did not experience difficulties only, and exclude missing/don't know responses.

<sup>17</sup> A question was included in the survey that asked young carers about whether or not looking after someone stopped them from undertaking a number of activities (eg doing homework, going to school, seeing friends, taking part in activities they would like to do). While this further breakdown was not used here because of the small sample and to allow comparability with 2017, these questions could be used to further explore associations with children's well-being in future studies.

**Figure 9: Individual disadvantages and children's life satisfaction**


Denotes a statistically significant difference between the mean life satisfaction score of those who reported experiencing a disadvantage and those who did not.

\*Disadvantages reported by less than 5% relate to a small number of young people (N<30). Findings for these disadvantages should be treated with more caution.

The life satisfaction score was only available for a small number of those who said they did not feel safe at home (N<15). The results of regression and significance testing have therefore been excluded from this table, although this disadvantage is considered in the cumulative analysis presented below and should be explored in future studies.

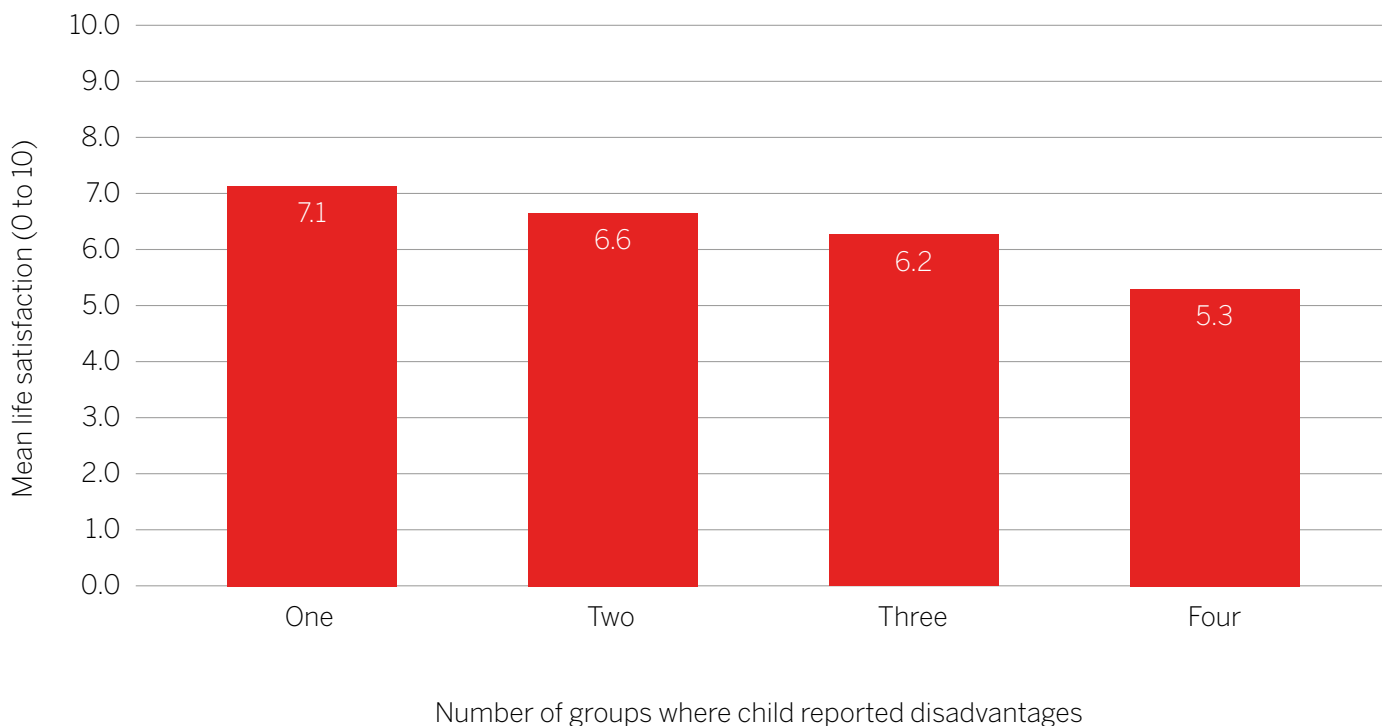
### Exploring combinations of disadvantage

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, multiple disadvantage refers to those children who have experienced more than one difficulty in their lives. In spite of the comparatively small sample size for the Year 10 survey, there were a number of children who could be considered to fall into this group. Overall, those children completing the whole survey reported experiencing between 0 and 16 disadvantages, with almost two-thirds experiencing more than one difficulty in their lives.

Further analysis showed that, overall, of those experiencing two or more items, the largest proportion of young people (over two-fifths) reported disadvantages in two of the four groupings outlined previously. A small minority (10%) reported disadvantages in all four areas (family, material, school, and neighbourhood).

As highlighted in our 2017 report, combinations of disadvantages that spanned different groups/parts of children's lives were associated with lower average well-being than when they clustered in the same area (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Well-being of children with two or more disadvantages across a number of groups**



There is potential overlap between the different measures included within each of the four areas of children's lives considered in this chapter. In developing a measure or index of multiple disadvantage, it would be helpful to remove overlapping items and to identify those with the strongest relationship with well-being within each of the groups. While this is beyond the scope of the data presented in this chapter, responses to the survey show a number of areas of overlap which can be used to guide future analysis. By far the most common items to co-occur were experiences of two or more neighbourhood problems and crime or anti-social behaviour (over one-third of those experiencing two or more disadvantages reported both items). As experience of crime/anti-social behaviour was found to have higher explanatory power in both this and the 2017 report, this measure may be more important for children's outcomes. No other measures co-occurred anywhere near as frequently, but other more commonly co-occurring categories within the groups were: child does not feel safe walking in area lives and two or more neighbourhood problems; child does not feel safe walking in area they live and experience of crime/anti-social behaviour (both also in the Neighbourhood category); and child has less money than friends and child worries about how much money family has (within material factors).

Many of the other commonly co-occurring categories within the four groupings involved low numbers ( $N < 30$ ) and it was therefore not possible to look further at their relationship with well-being. There is clearly some overlap between the wording of some measures, which need to be prioritised to produce a short list of items that effectively measure multiple disadvantage. For example, it makes sense that, if a child has less money than friends, they may be worried about how much money their family has, and have more missing items. Both this and the 2017 report have suggested that material factors or difficulties related to poverty are an important element of multiple disadvantage, and the links between different types of poverty and children's well-being are considered in more detail in the next chapter of this report.

Further investigation would be needed, drawing on the findings from the 2017 report and Year 10 survey, to further develop a list of child-centred questions (or an index):

- Further qualitative work could be undertaken with children to redevelop those questions that suffered higher numbers of 'don't know' responses in the Year 10 survey but seemed to work well as predictors of well-being, and to assess which items children themselves see as most important.
- A larger scale, representative survey could then be conducted. This could use a shorter list of items to identify which measures are most strongly related to children's outcomes (eg self-reported well-being) and to each other (allowing overlapping items to be removed), and which combinations of items best explain variations in children's well-being. Analysis could also be undertaken to assess transferability across social groups to ensure that the resulting index had cross-cultural relevance.



## Summary

**The Year 10 survey focussed on children's experiences of a list of 24 disadvantages. The results obtained suggest that it is possible to measure older children's experiences of multiple disadvantage based on their own reports, allowing a move away from parent-based measures. They also provide insights into the items that may be more closely related to children's well-being.**

- Questions that did not seem to work quite so well and might benefit from some further attention included how often there were fights between people in the young person's local area; and whether they had more, less or about the same money as friends.
- Items that seem to most strongly predict well-being among the sample (on a scale of 0 to 10) as a whole included experiencing bullying in the last three months, not feeling safe at school and missing three or more items from a previously tested index of material deprivation. There were also more rarely reported disadvantages, such as homelessness and supervisory neglect, which seemed to have a big impact on the small numbers of children experiencing them (although they have less explanatory power for children's well-being overall). It is essential that these rarer occurrences are also considered when developing measures of multiple disadvantage.
- As found in the 2017 report, children experiencing disadvantage in multiple areas of their lives had lower average well-being than those experiencing more than one disadvantage in one area, suggesting an index spanning different domains may be more effective.
- There was some overlap between some of the disadvantages reported in the four areas of children's lives examined. For example, experiencing crime/anti-social behaviour and reporting two or more neighbourhood problems. It is possible that some of these measures are tapping into similar concepts and that a shortlist of disadvantages (based on these findings and our 2017 household survey) could be further developed and tested in a larger scale study with a view to building an index.



# Chapter 3:

## **Poverty, financial strain and children's well-being<sup>18</sup>**

<sup>18</sup> Some parts of this chapter are an expanded version of an analysis previously published in Poverty magazine (see Rees, 2019 'Poverty and Children's Well-being at 14 Years Old'. Poverty 162, pages 8-10). Some statistics may differ from the previous publication due to a different application of income poverty thresholds and a different set of control variables.



**Our previous reports have shown that household income poverty is a significant but not particularly strong predictor of children's subjective well-being.<sup>xxvi</sup> On the other hand, different approaches to defining poverty lead to a different conclusion. For example, we have shown that children who experience greater material deprivation (using a child-centred measure) have much lower subjective well-being.<sup>xxvii</sup> This provides an important insight. Many children will not be aware of their household income. They will be aware of whether their basic needs are being met. They will also experience strains in family relationships that may stem from parent's worries about money.**

In this chapter, we consider two different ways of looking at household economic circumstances – based on (a) income and (b) how well the family is coping financially. We look at information about economic circumstances in the present and in the past, as persistent poverty may have a particularly corrosive effect on children's lives.

We compare the messages that these different approaches provide in terms of links with two measures of children's subjective experience: life satisfaction, and depression (see Box 1). By means of providing a broader context, we will also make some comparisons with patterns for two other child indicators: their emotional and behavioural difficulties<sup>19</sup>, and a test of their vocabulary skills (based on their ability to identify the correct definition of 20 words of varying complexity).<sup>20, xxviii</sup>

The data we use is from the Millennium Cohort Study, a major UK study that has followed the lives of a large sample of children born soon after the start of the new millennium. Over 18,000 children aged nine months old were included in the first wave of the study. Later waves were conducted when children were three, five, seven, 11 and 14 years old.<sup>21</sup> At the sixth wave, there were still over 11,000 children involved in the study. Data is gathered from various sources including the parents at each wave and the children themselves from the age of seven upwards.

<sup>19</sup> Based on the parent-reported Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> See Institute of Education (2017) for further details.

<sup>21</sup> A seventh wave undertaken when the children were 17 years old has also been completed but data is not yet available.

### Box 1: Two measures of child well-being

1. **Life satisfaction:** a single question asking children how happy they are with their 'life as a whole'; answered on a seven-point scale from 'Not at all happy' to 'Completely happy'. This can be viewed as a measure of children's overall cognitive subjective well-being, similar to the measures of this aspect of well-being outlined in Chapter 1 (see page 10).
2. **Depressive symptoms:** measured using the short Moods & Feelings Questionnaire which consists of 13 items answered by children about how they've been 'feeling or acting recently'. An example is 'I didn't enjoy anything at all'. Response options for each item are 'Not true', 'Sometimes' and 'True'. A high score on this measure can be regarded as an indicator of greater levels of depressive symptoms.<sup>xxix</sup> 'Depressive symptoms' represents a measure of children's mental health, as referred to in Chapter 1 (see page 13).

The Pearson correlation coefficient between life satisfaction and depressive symptoms was around -0.59. This is a moderately strong relationship. As discussed in our previous reports, children who were more depressed also tended to have lower life satisfaction and vice versa, although it is also possible to have low well-being on one aspect and not the other. For example, a child could not be depressed but could still not be feeling very satisfied with their lives.

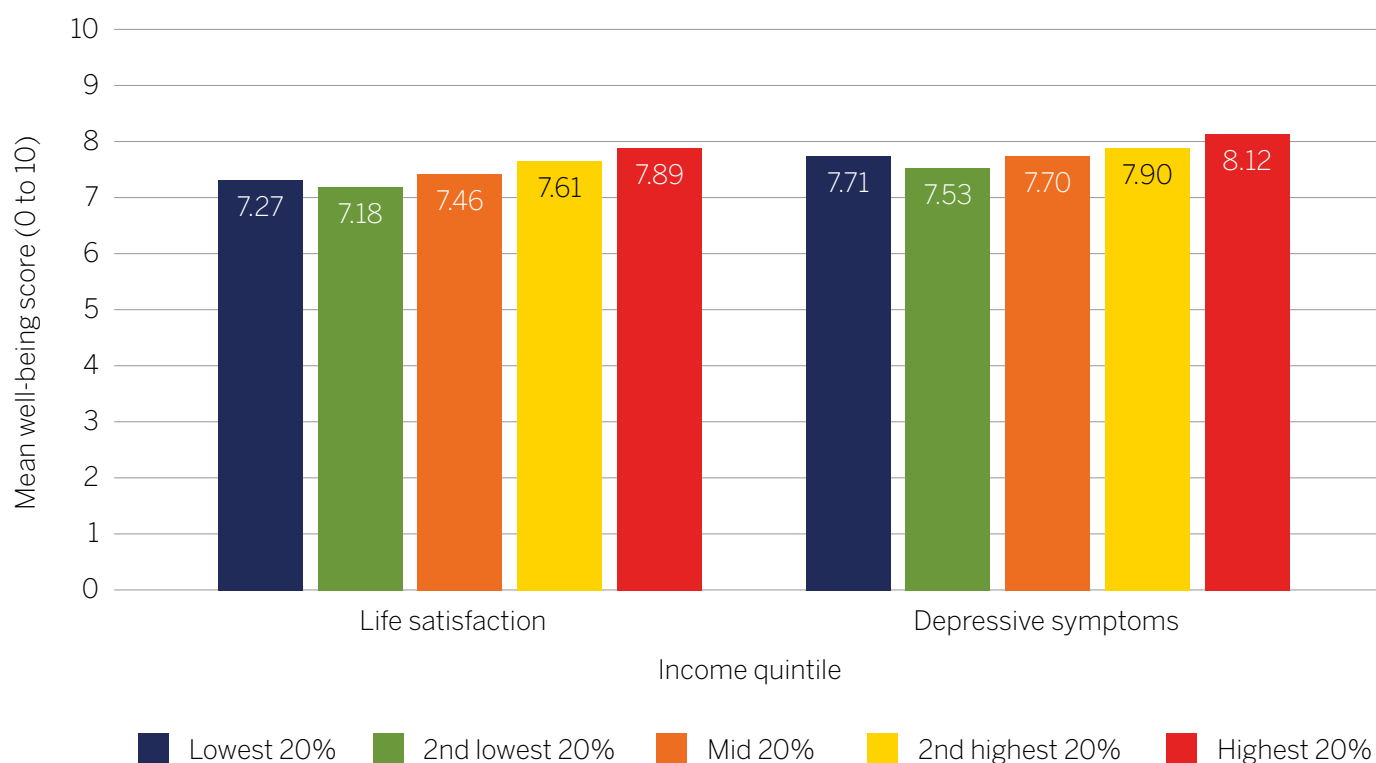
The relationship between current household income<sup>22</sup> and each of these measures is shown in Figure 11 and is as would be expected from our previous research. Children living in the poorest households did have significantly lower life

satisfaction and significantly higher depressive symptoms than children living in the richest households. However, as the chart illustrates, the patterns are not that strong. After taking account of children's age, gender and ethnicity, household income explains only around 1% of the variation in children's life satisfaction and less than 1% of the variation in depressive symptoms. In contrast, we also calculated the explanatory power of income in terms of emotional and behavioural difficulties (over 8%) and vocabulary skills (over 5%). This illustrates the important point that different factors, such as family economic circumstances, are related to varying degrees with different child indicators.

<sup>22</sup> The measure of household income we use throughout this chapter is 'equivalised' to take account of different family sizes but does not take into account variations in housing and other costs.





**Figure 11: Variations in well-being indicators based on current household income**

In the rest of this chapter, we simplify the presentation by using the percentage of children with particularly low well-being on each measure. For this purpose, around:<sup>23</sup>

- 11% of children had low life satisfaction (a score below the mid-point on the scale).
- 14% of children had high depressive symptoms (a score of 13 or more out of 26).

All analysis controls for the age of the child (tenths of a year) at the time of the survey, their gender and their ethnic group. Analysis uses weightings and information about survey design. It includes all children (or the first-born child in the case of twins and triplets) participating in the sixth wave of the MCS for whom data is available for both indicators. The total sample size that meets these criteria was 11,726, although the effective sample size is lower due to missing data for the predictors. A 99% confidence threshold was used for statistical significance unless otherwise stated.

<sup>23</sup> These are the percentages for all children who answered the questions in the survey. Percentages in the following analysis may differ due to missing data for other variables.

## **Current poverty and child well-being at 14 years old**

### **Income poverty**

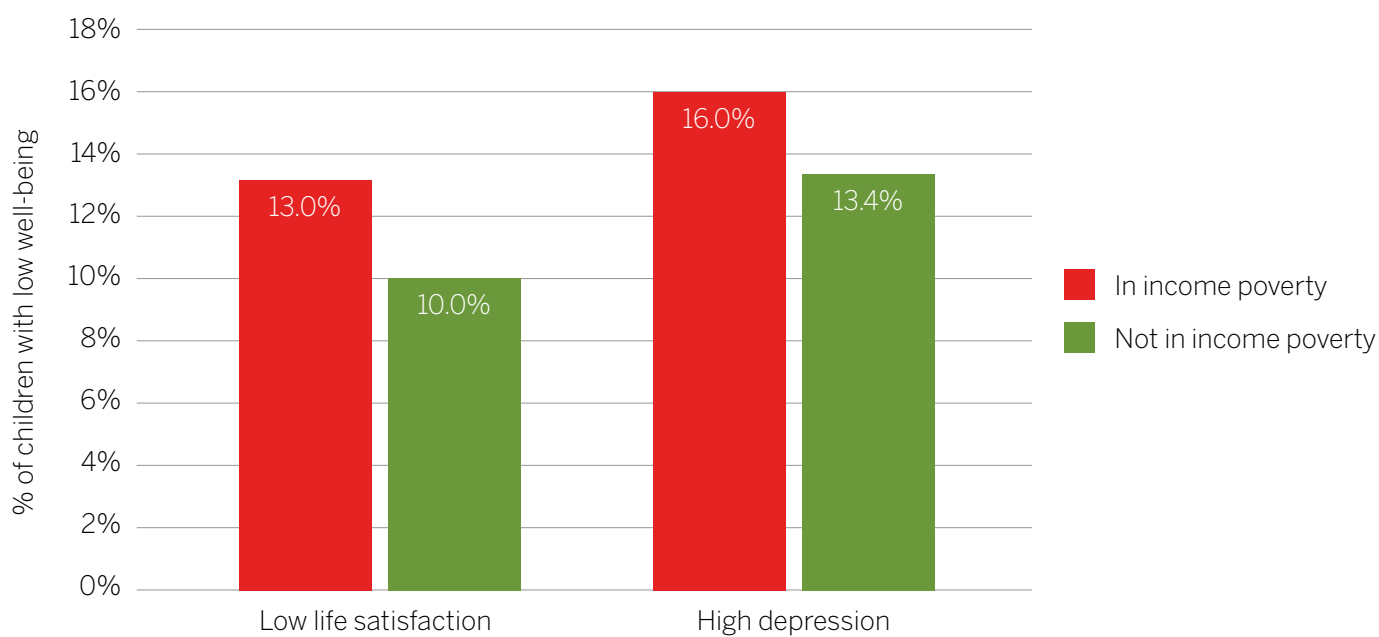
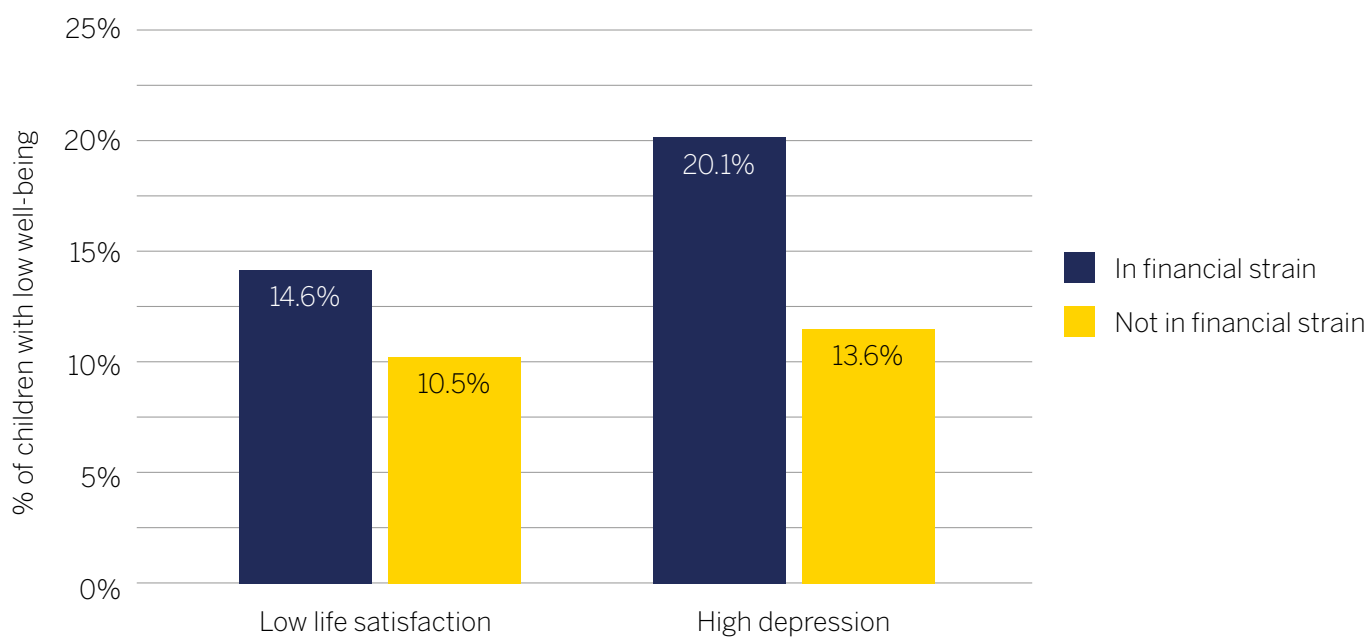
Over a third of children included in the MCS at 14 years old were living in income poverty, based on the widely used income poverty threshold of up to 60% of median equivalised income before deduction of housing costs.<sup>24</sup> A comparison of the percentage of poor and non-poor children with low well-being on each measure is shown in Figure 12. Children living in income poverty were significantly more likely to have low well-being on both indicators.

### **Financial strain**

An alternative view of family economic circumstances is to ask people how they experience these circumstances. In the MCS, the main parent was asked how well they were managing financially. There were five response options – living comfortably, doing alright, just about getting by, finding it difficult, and finding it very difficult. Around 11% of parents said that they were finding it difficult or very difficult. We define these families as being in financial strain. Figure 13 shows the percentage of children with low well-being on each measure based on this measure of financial strain. Here also, there was a statistically significant difference in the likelihood of low well-being.

A comparison of the patterns in Figures 12 and 13 shows that the well-being gap is larger, particularly for depressive symptoms, when we consider financial strain rather than income poverty. This may be partly explained by the fact that the group of children living in financial strain is smaller and therefore the differences are more pronounced. On the other hand, financial strain may be a more direct and relevant measure of how children experience household economic circumstances. We will return to the merits of these two approaches later.

<sup>24</sup> The exact figure in the MCS data is 34%. This analysis makes use of a variable provided in the MCS data set that is based on the 60% threshold and uses the OECD equivalised poverty adjustment which counts a 14 year old child as an adult. In earlier waves, the same children would have been counted as a child (which assumes a smaller burden on household resources). This measure does not take account of housing costs. In the later section where we calculate histories of poverty, we adjust the equivalisation so that a 14 year old is counted as a child so that there is consistency in definitions across waves. Although there have been some recent criticisms of this income poverty measure, it is still widely used both in the UK (eg <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/articles/persistentpovertyintheukandeu/2017>) and at a European level.

**Figure 12: Income poverty and low well-being****Figure 13: Financial strain and low well-being**

## Poverty and domains of subjective well-being

We can also use data gathered from children in the MCS to look in more detail at the links between family economic circumstances and five different aspects of children's subjective well-being – their satisfaction with family, friends, appearance, school and schoolwork. Each of these aspects is measured by a single question on a seven-point scale. Table 2 shows the percentage of children with low well-being (a score below the mid-point on a seven-point scale) in each of the five aspects according to the two different measures of poverty presented above.

Children tended to have lower well-being related to family and appearance if they were in income poverty or financial strain. There was no evidence of a variation in satisfaction with friendships. On the other hand, there were stronger patterns in relation to the two variables about school

experiences. In particular, children living in income poverty or in financial strain had rates of low school well-being around five percentage points higher than children not living in these situations.

These patterns provide some indications of pathways and factors that may link poverty with children's subjective experience. We can think about the different aspects of life considered here as different routes through which family economic circumstances may affect children's overall subjective experience (life satisfaction or depressive symptoms). In this context, hypothetically, a key way of mitigating the negative impact of poverty on children's subjective experience might be through improving their experiences at school.

**Table 2: Poverty and children's low well-being in five aspects of life at 14 years old**

		% Low	% Low	% Low	% Low	% Low
		Family	Friends	Appearance	School	Schoolwork
In poverty at 14	No (ref)	7.1%	6.4%	20.4%	11.4%	11.4%
	Yes	10.1%*	8.0%	23.9%*	16.9%*	16.9%*
Family financial strain at 14	No (ref)	7.8%	6.9%	21.2%	12.7%	12.7%
	Yes	9.7%	6.7%	23.8%	17.6%*	16.1%

\*indicates a statistically significant difference



### **Histories of childhood poverty and child well-being at 14 years old**

We can build up a fuller picture of the connections between experiences of poverty and children's subjective experience by looking at histories of income poverty and financial strain across the six waves of the MCS up until the child is 14 years old. As this represents six measurement points across childhood, it cannot provide a comprehensive picture of children's poverty histories. A child could move in and out of poverty between the waves of data collection. It does, however, provide a much richer picture than relying solely on current information. It can help to answer questions such as whether persistent poverty is more strongly associated with lower well-being than one-off experiences of poverty. This analysis is based only on just under 9,000 children who were included in the survey in all six waves, as it requires complete data on poverty histories.<sup>25</sup>

### **Histories of income poverty**

Just under half of children in the analysed sample had not lived in a household in income poverty at any of the six waves of the MCS. The remainder were fairly evenly distributed (Figure 14). Around 1 in 10 children had been in income poverty at all six data collection points.

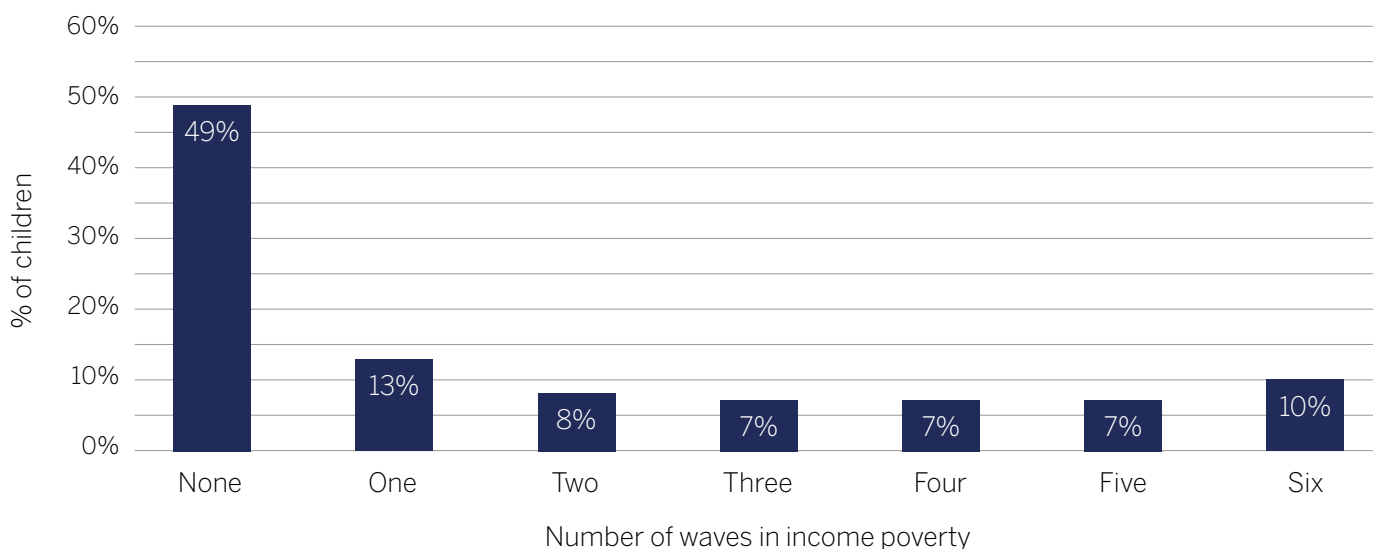
Due to the relatively small number of cases with low well-being in some of these categories, several of the categories have been combined to create a more coherent picture of patterns. So children experiencing two to four episodes of poverty are grouped as 'intermittent' poverty, while children experiencing five or six episodes are grouped as 'persistent' poverty.

Using this categorisation, Figure 15 shows the results of analysis comparing the percentage of children with low well-being based on their poverty history. The group with the highest risk of low life satisfaction and high depressive symptoms scores were those who had experienced two to four episodes of poverty. This group had significantly greater risk of low life satisfaction than those with no experience of poverty and also a somewhat<sup>26</sup> higher risk than those with one experience of poverty or those in persistent poverty. The group in intermittent poverty also had a significantly greater risk of high depressive symptoms than those with none or one episode of poverty, but were not significantly different to those in persistent poverty.

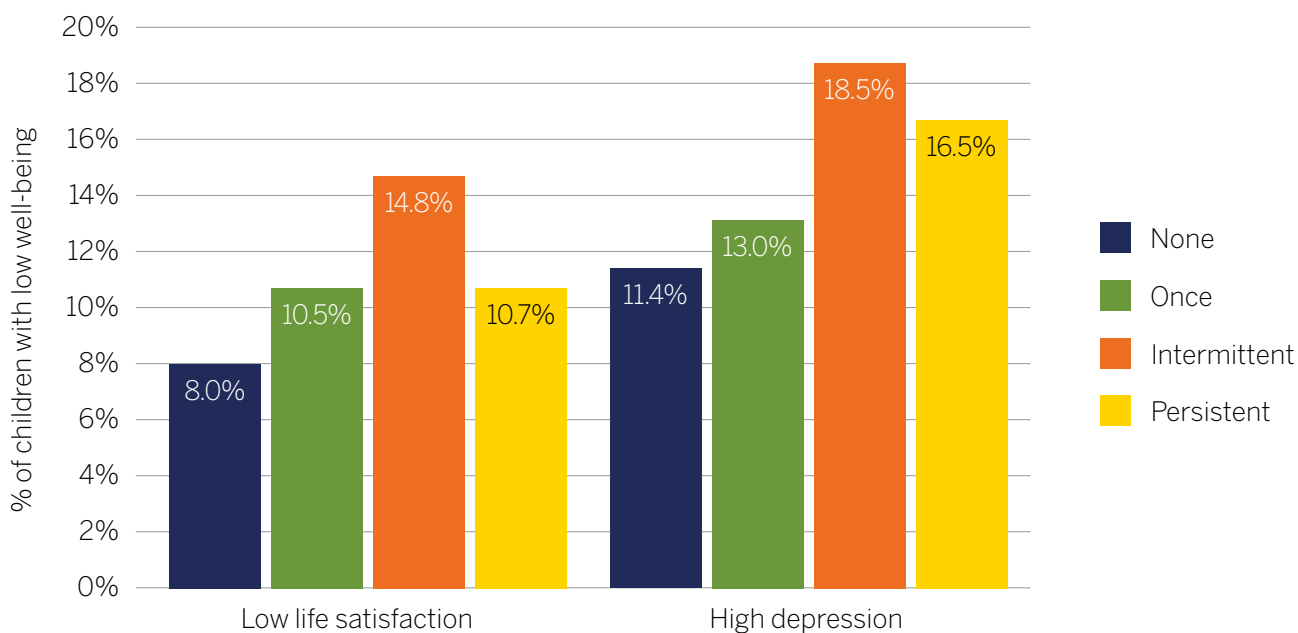
<sup>25</sup> This means that the picture is not entirely representative, because the households with missing data are likely to be different to those with complete data. Despite this limitation, it is informative to look at links between different poverty histories and child well-being.

<sup>26</sup>  $p < 0.05$

**Figure 14: Number of waves in income poverty (complete cases)**



**Figure 15: Histories of income poverty and low child well-being at 14 years old**



The reasons for this pattern are unclear at this stage. One plausible hypothesis is that a pattern of intermittent poverty is associated with substantial life changes (eg changes in family composition). In this case, the reasons for lower life satisfaction and higher risk of depression may be rooted in instability (albeit including income instability) rather than patterns of income poverty. This topic would warrant further investigation. It is another example of the complexity of the linkages between children's circumstances and different indicators of 'well-being'. We also undertook the analysis to predict emotional and behavioural difficulties and vocabulary scores. We found a more predictable relationship where a larger number of experiences of poverty were associated with greater EBDs and lower vocabulary scores.

### **Histories of financial strain**

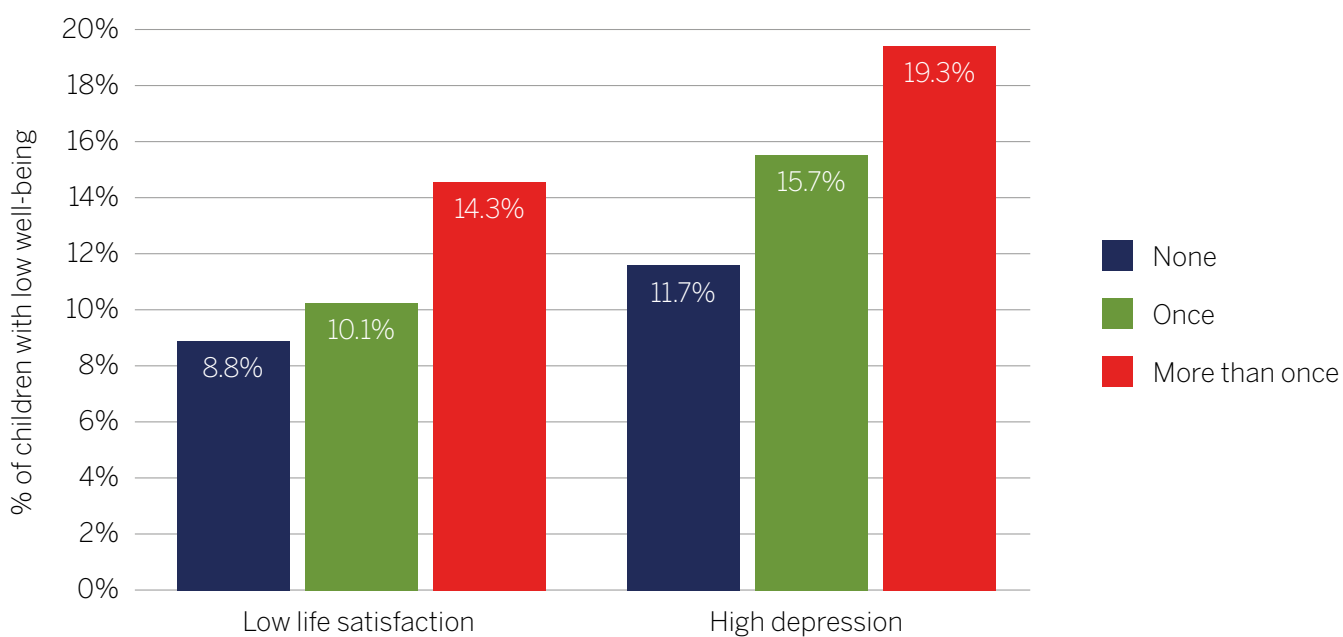
We can take the same approach as for income poverty for the number of waves in which children's parents felt under financial strain. Most children (63%) were in families that had not been in financial strain at any of the six waves; 18% only once; 17% two to four times; and less than 2% more than four times. For this reason, we here consider only three groups – none, once and more than once. Results are shown in Figure 16. Here the patterns are what might be expected: children who had lived in financial strain on more than one occasion had significantly higher risk of low life satisfaction and high depression than children who had never experienced this.

### **Discussion of histories of poverty**

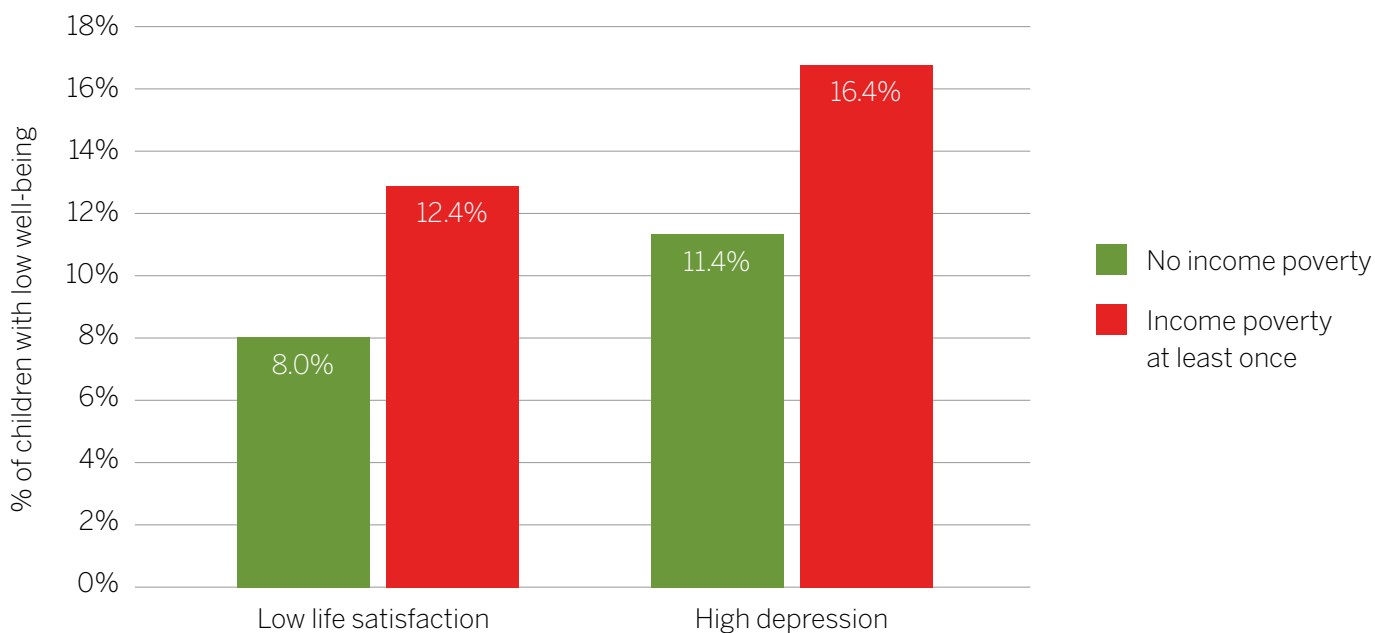
While some of the patterns and distinctions between one-off, intermittent and persistent poverty are interesting and require further exploration, a simpler view of children's histories of poverty provides a starker picture of the far-reaching effects of even a single experience of poverty. Figure 17 simply divides the sample into those children (49%) who had not experienced income poverty at any of the six waves of the MCS survey and those (51%) who had experienced it at least once.

Put simply, any experience of income poverty – even only once in six times – was associated with significantly lower life satisfaction and significantly higher depressive symptoms when the child was 14 years old.

**Figure 16: Histories of family financial strain and low child well-being at 14 years old**

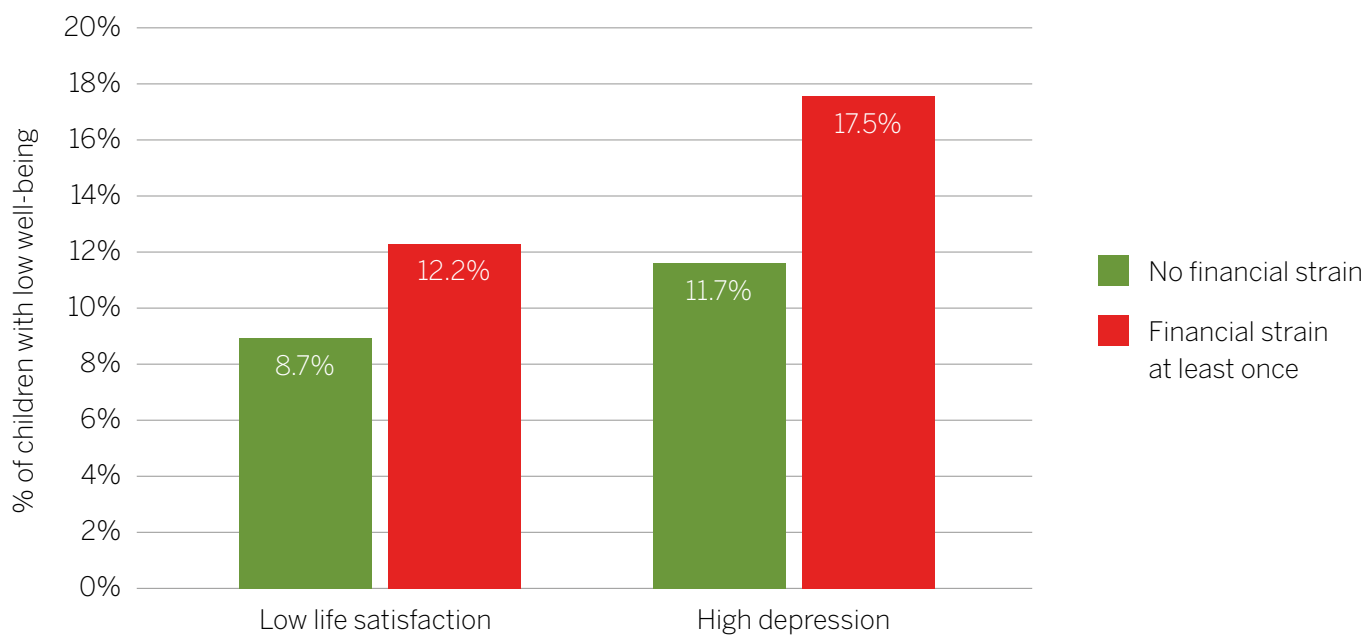


**Figure 17: Any experience of income poverty (across six MCS waves) and low child well-being at 14 years old**



The same picture applies to any experience of family financial strain across the six waves (Figure 18).

**Figure 18: Any experience of family financial strain (across six MCS waves) and low child well-being at 14 years old**







## Summary

**The broad message from the analysis in this chapter is that how one measures family economic circumstances has important implications for the conclusions that are drawn on their link with child well-being:**

- Our analysis started by bearing out previous research findings of a relatively weak link between current income and children's life satisfaction and depressive symptoms.
  - A focus on current family financial strain produces a different picture. Here the links with children's life satisfaction and, particularly, depressive symptoms are more evident.
  - These differences highlight the ways in which economic pressures on households may be an important factor in explaining children's mental health problems. Of course a measure of financial strain may be criticised for being subjective. On the other hand, current income also has its limitations – it does not take account of differences in wealth that may help to insulate some families from drops in income, nor does it take account of variations in costs and outgoings.
  - The patterns we found for histories of poverty are potentially illuminating. It seems that living in intermittent poverty is associated with lower life satisfaction than living in persistent poverty. As we discussed, this may link to other experiences and factors related to fluctuations in income and requires further exploration. Nevertheless, the analysis clearly shows that any experience of income poverty at six points in childhood is associated with lower well-being at 14, compared with no experience of poverty.
  - The findings for histories of financial strain are also clear – any experience of financial strain is associated with lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms at 14.
- In summary, this analysis adds to other existing work that has demonstrated that the link between economic circumstances and children's subjective experience is much more complex and important than is evident from considering only current household income.





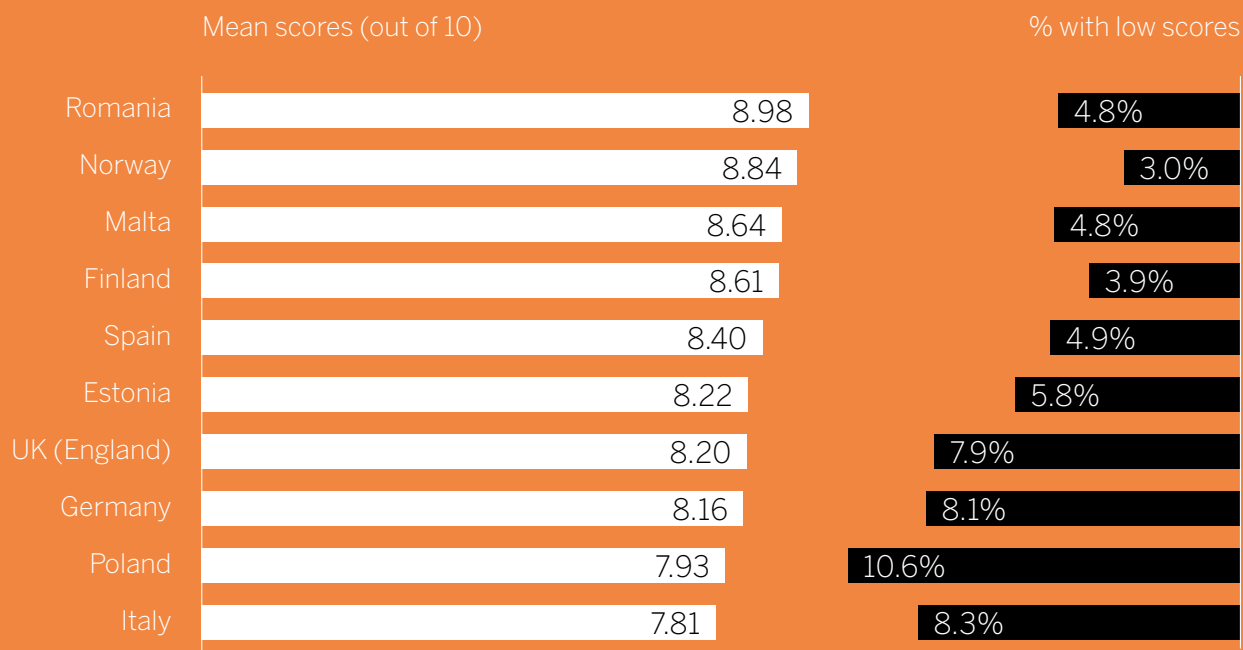
Chapter 4:

# **Children's views about the future**

**Our first Good Childhood Report in 2012 highlighted the link between children's current well-being and how they felt about their future. Of the 10 items that make up The Good Childhood Index, children had the lowest average satisfaction with what may happen in the future. That remains the case in this year's survey (see Figure 4, Chapter 1).**

An international study (Children's Worlds) in 2013–15 that included England asked children aged 12 years old how positive they felt about the future on a scale from zero to 10.<sup>26</sup> On average children in England scored 8.2 out of 10 on this question, and around 8% of children (1 in 12) had low feelings (a score of less than 5 out of 10) of positivity about their future. England ranked seventh out of 10 European countries participating in this survey (Figure 19).

**Figure 19: Children's (age 12) feelings about the future in 10 European countries, 2013–15**



Source: Children's Worlds, Wave 2, 2013–15. Children aged around 12 years old.

<sup>26</sup> The question was in the form of a statement 'I feel positive about the future' and the ends of the scale were labelled 'Not at all agree' (zero) and 'Totally agree' (10).



Seven years on from our first Good Childhood Report, many things have changed. Through digital technologies, children (and adults) can easily access more and more information (and misinformation) about the world. Important issues such as concerns about the environment and Brexit are prominent in public debate, and may shape how children view their futures. Indeed, the school climate protests led by 16 year old Greta Thunberg are a striking example of young people themselves voicing concern about their future. For these reasons, we decided this year to ask children in more detail about how they viewed their own future and how they felt about broader political issues. The questions were included in our annual household survey of children aged 10 to 17 and their parents (See Chapter 1 for further details). The survey was undertaken in June and July 2019 so provides a very up to date view. We also carried out focus group discussions with children and their thoughts and opinions are presented in the accompanying publication 'What children told us'.

### **What children think is important for their future**

In the household survey, children were asked how important they thought a set of issues were for their future. The topics were derived from other surveys and then tested with a group of children in Year 6, after which they were modified.

- Getting good grades/marks at school.
- Being able to go to university.
- Being able to find a job.
- Having enough money.
- Having somewhere to live.
- My mental health.
- Being well (not being ill).

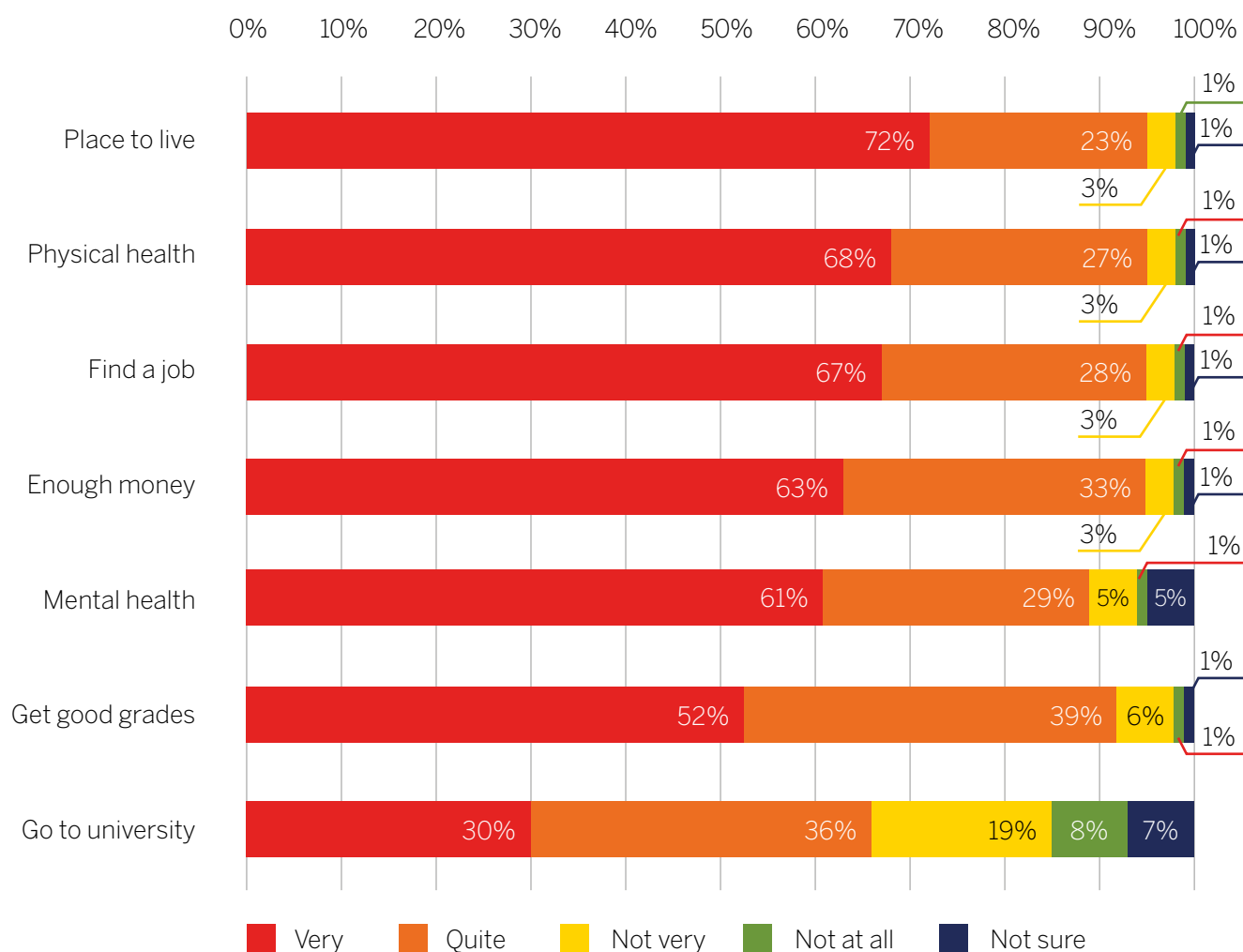
Response options were 'Very important', 'Quite important', 'Not very important', 'Not at all important' and 'Not sure'.

Children's answers to these questions are shown in Figure 20. The aspect which the highest percentage of children rated as 'very important' was having somewhere to live, followed by physical health and being able to find a job. Going to university was rated the least important. Physical health was rated a little more important than mental health.

Girls tended to rate these items as more highly important than boys. Older children also tended to give more importance to each item than younger children. In terms of the importance of getting good grades and the two health questions, there were only small differences according to whether children were living in a household in income poverty.<sup>27</sup> But overall, the rankings of importance tended to be very similar irrespective of gender, age or income group.

<sup>27</sup> Households below 60% of the median equivalised household income in the survey. Around 24% of children were classified as living in households in poverty on this basis. This does not necessarily equate to the median for the whole child population in this age group but is relevant for comparisons within the survey sample.

**Figure 20: Importance of different things for the future\***



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

\*Scores may not total 100% due to rounding.

Thus, children have similar views of the importance of future outcomes irrespective of income poverty. Other research, however, indicates socio-economic differences in children's expectations of achieving these goals. A recent report by UNICEF Office of Research (2018) found that in each of 35 of the world's richest countries, children aged 15 years old

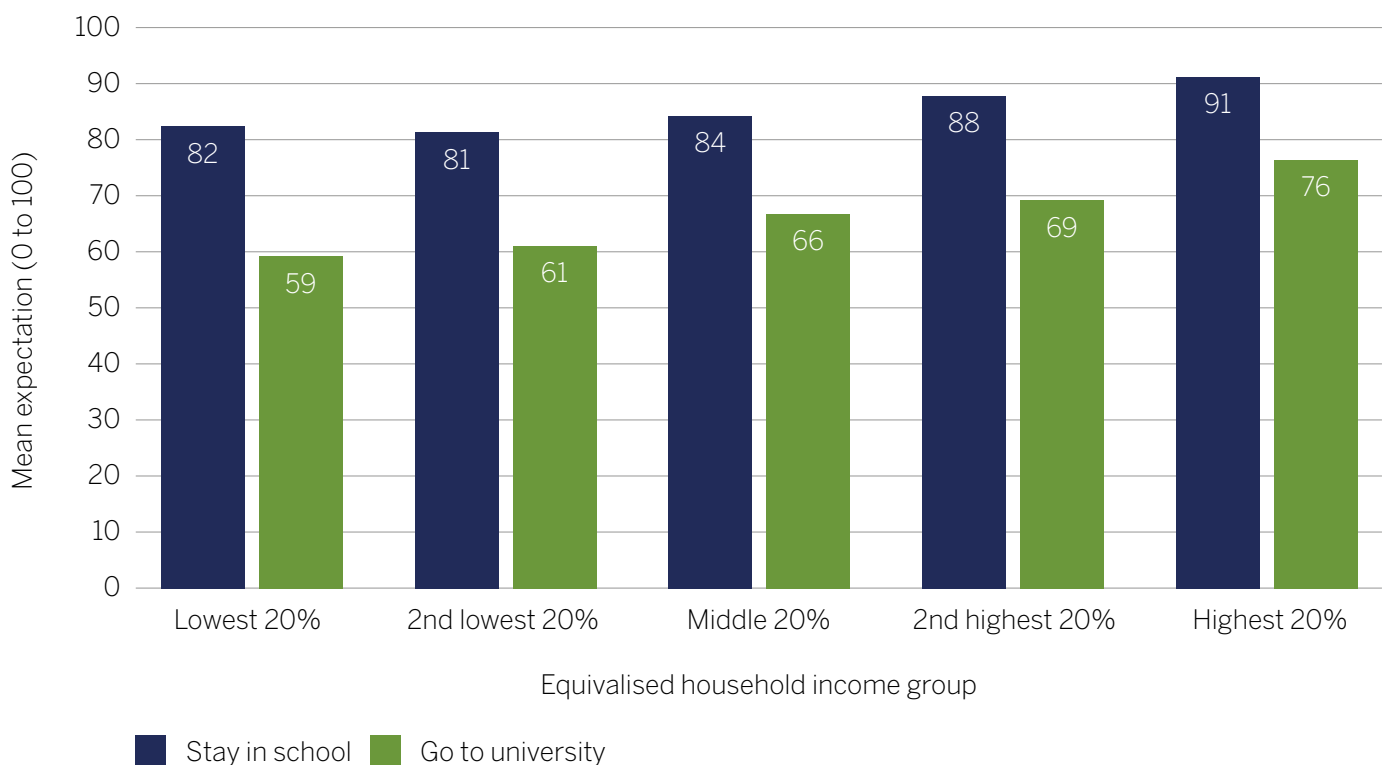
were more likely to expect to go to university and other forms of ongoing education if their parent(s) had a higher status job. Importantly, this difference was still apparent when comparing children who were doing equally well academically. The UK was 16th most unequal out of 35 countries on this basis.<sup>xxx</sup>

Recent data from the Millennium Cohort Study in the UK provides a similar picture. At 14 years old, children were asked to rate their expectation of staying on at school after 16 years old, and of going to university, on a scale from 0 to 100. Children in different income groups had different expectations (Figure 21). Children in better-off families were more likely to expect to stay at school to do A-levels or equivalent; and to go to university. The gap in expectations between the lowest and highest income groups was around nine points out of 100 for staying on

at school; and even larger (17 points out of 100) for going to university. As with the UNICEF analysis mentioned above, these differences could not be fully explained by differences in children's skills.<sup>28</sup>

We should not assume that staying at school or going to university is the preferable route into adulthood, but the fact that children's expectations vary by their family background irrespective of their academic progress is food for thought.

**Figure 21: Expectations of future academic direction by income group**



Source: Millennium Cohort Study, Wave 6, 2015 (when children were aged 14).

<sup>28</sup> In the MCS there is no data available on children's academic progress at 14 years old, but there is a test of vocabulary skills (see Chapter 3) which was used for this analysis.

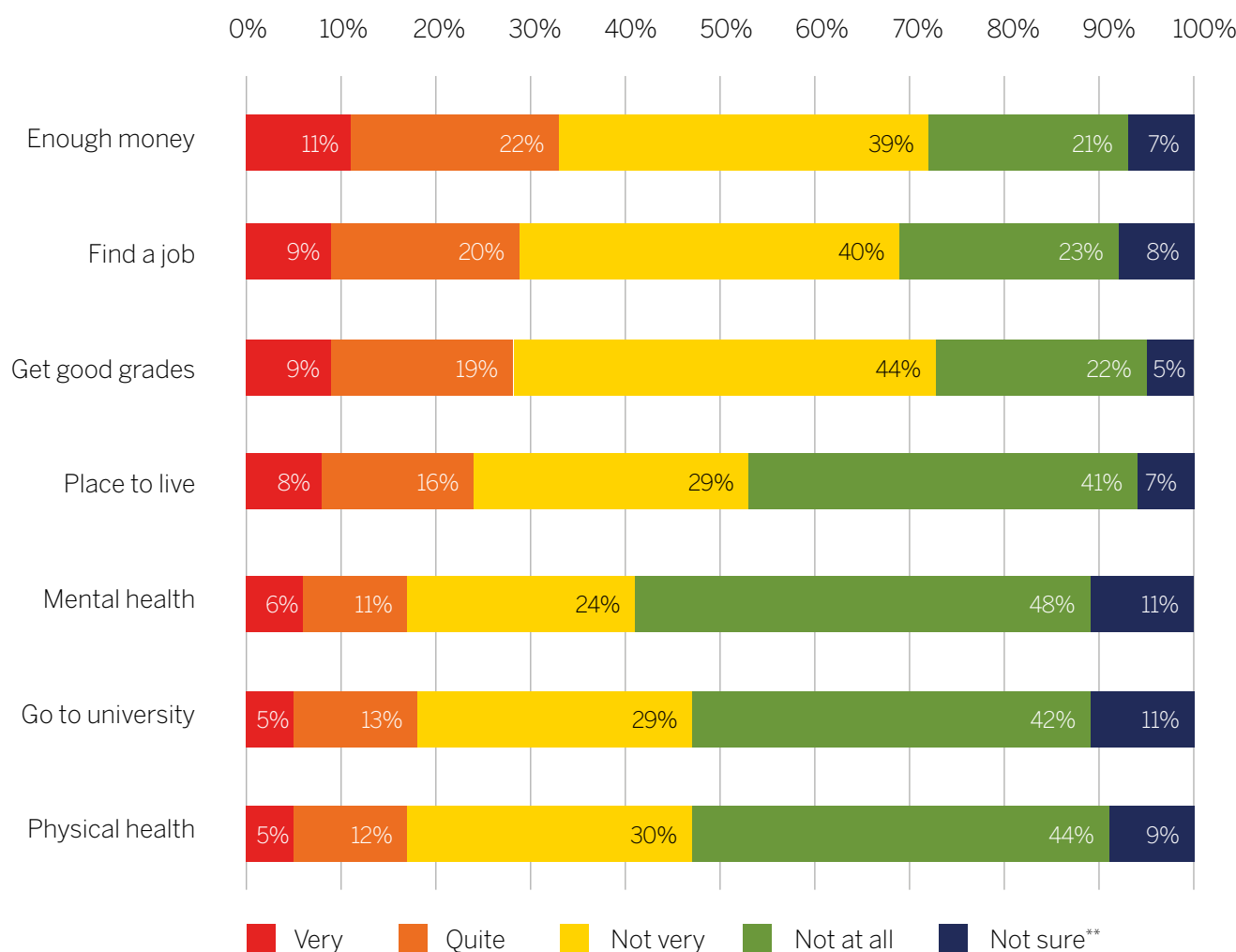


### How much children worry about issues to do with their future

We now turn to a second set of questions that we included in the survey. These asked children how much they worried about each of the seven issues relating to their future discussed above. Response options were 'Very worried', 'Quite worried', 'Not very worried', 'Not at all worried' and 'Not sure/don't wish to answer'.

Children's answers to these questions are shown in Figure 22. Children were most worried about having enough money in the future (33% were 'very' or 'quite' worried about this); followed by getting good grades and getting a job (both 29%). They were least worried about their mental and physical health (each 17% 'very' or 'quite' worried) and about going to university (18%).

**Figure 22: Extent of worries about the future\***



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

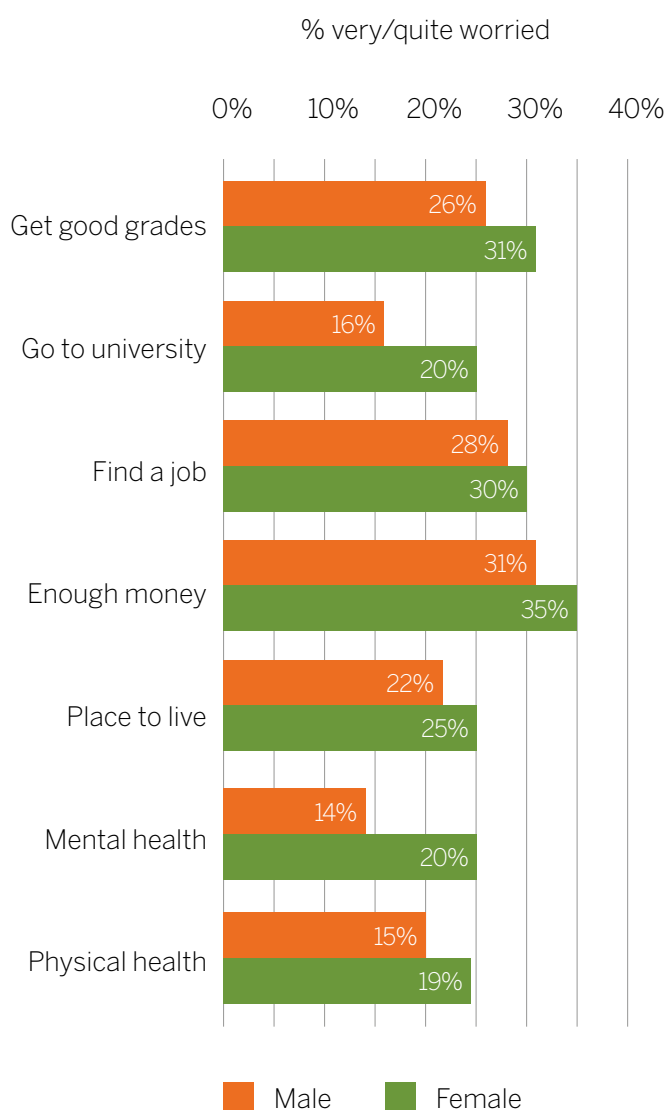
\*Scores may not total 100% due to rounding. \*\*\*'Not sure' is a combination of those responding 'Not sure' and 'don't wish to answer'.



The following analysis is based on comparisons between children who were 'very' or 'quite' worried and other children:

- **Girls were more likely to be worried** about these aspects than boys (Figure 23). The largest gap in worrying was for mental health (6 percentage points). There was no significant gender difference in worrying about getting a job or having a home to live in.
- **Older children (14 to 17) worried significantly more than younger children (10 to 13)** about getting a job, having enough money, having a home to live in and their mental health (Figure 23). The largest age difference was for finding a job (12 percentage points). This age pattern is consistent with our finding that children's overall satisfaction with what may happen in the future declines with age.
- **Children living in a household in income poverty were significantly more worried** about having a home to live in (8 percentage points gap), having enough money (5 pp), and their future mental health (7 pp).

**Figure 23: Children's worries about their future by age, gender and income poverty**



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

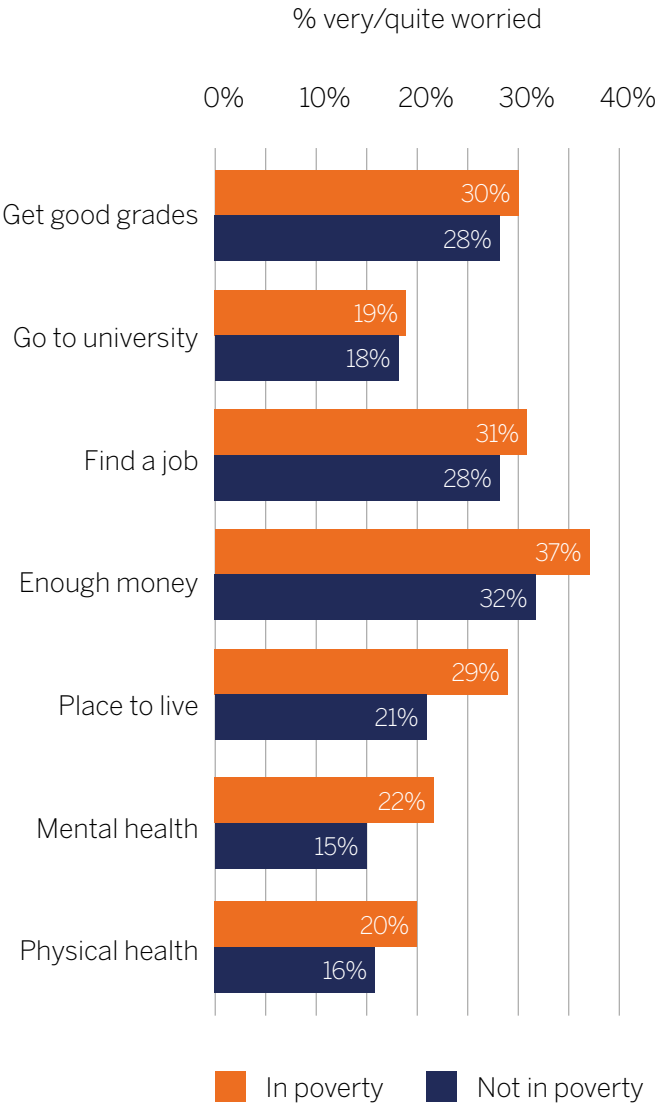
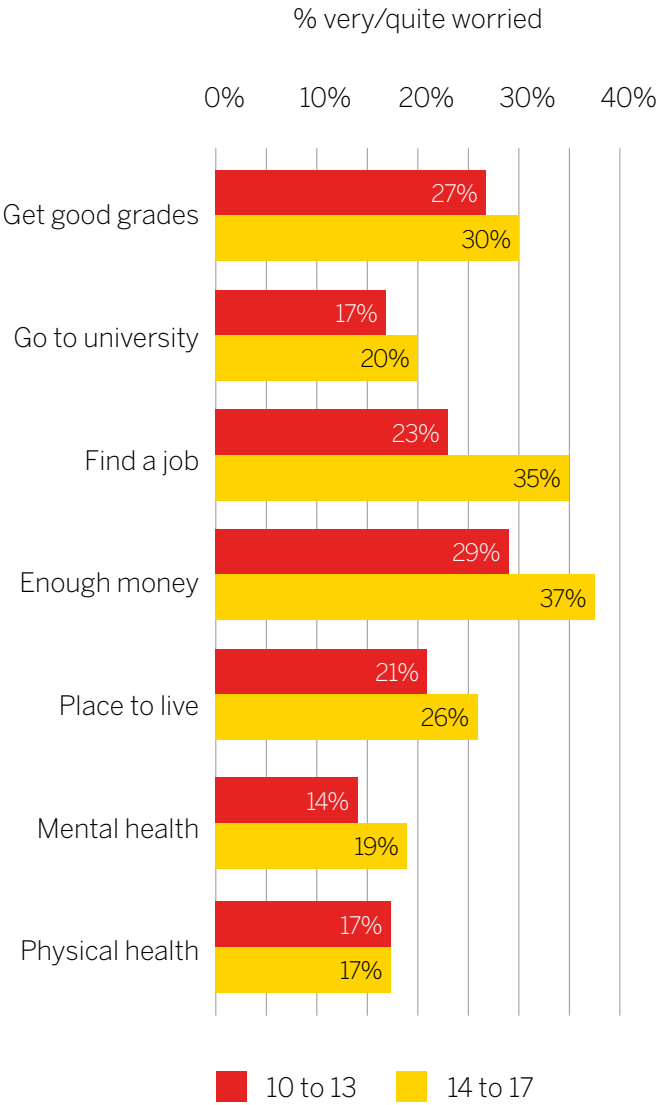


Table 3 summarises the above analysis of gender, age group and income poverty by showing the rankings of worries about these different aspects of the future among different sub-groups. The rankings were mostly consistent across sub-groups. Having enough money was the biggest worry for all groups. There were, however, a few notable differences:

- **Worrying about school grades** was the second biggest worry for girls but third for boys, who worried more about finding a job. This may reflect a gender difference in views about future trajectories.
- **There was a similar difference between younger and older children.** Children aged 10 to 13 were more worried about getting good grades than finding a job, while the opposite was true for the 14 to 17 age group. This makes sense in terms of the question of finding a job being more immediate for the older age group.
- **Children living in poverty tended to be more worried** about their future mental health and about finding a job than going to university (least level of worry), whereas worries about going to university were a little more prominent (5th) for children not living in poverty.

**Table 3: Rankings of worries about the future among different sub-groups  
(Most worried = 1 and least worried = 7)**

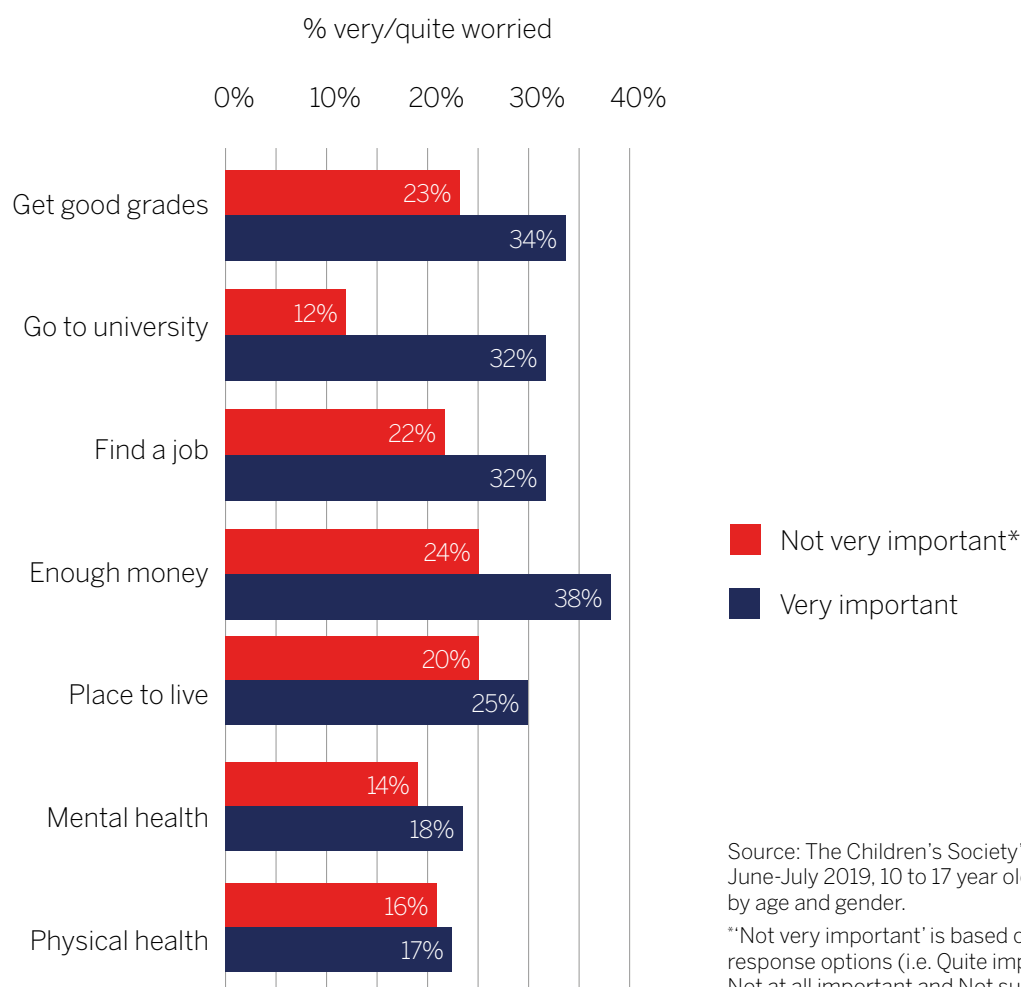
	Overall	Female	Male	10-13	14-17	In poverty	Not in poverty
Get good grades	3	2	3	2	3	3	2
Go to university	5	5	5	5	5	7	5
Find a job	2	3	2	3	2	2	3
Have enough money	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Have a place to live	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Mental health	7	6	7	7	6	5	7
Physical health	6	7	6	6	7	6	6

Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

### The link between the importance of each aspect and worrying about it

In general, children who thought each aspect was very important were also more likely to be worried about it (Figure 24). The biggest difference was for going to university. Among those who thought this was very important, 32% were quite or very worried about it, compared to only 12% of those who did not think it was important. There was no significant difference in worrying about physical health, based on how important it was perceived to be.

**Figure 24: The link between thinking an issue is important and worrying about it**



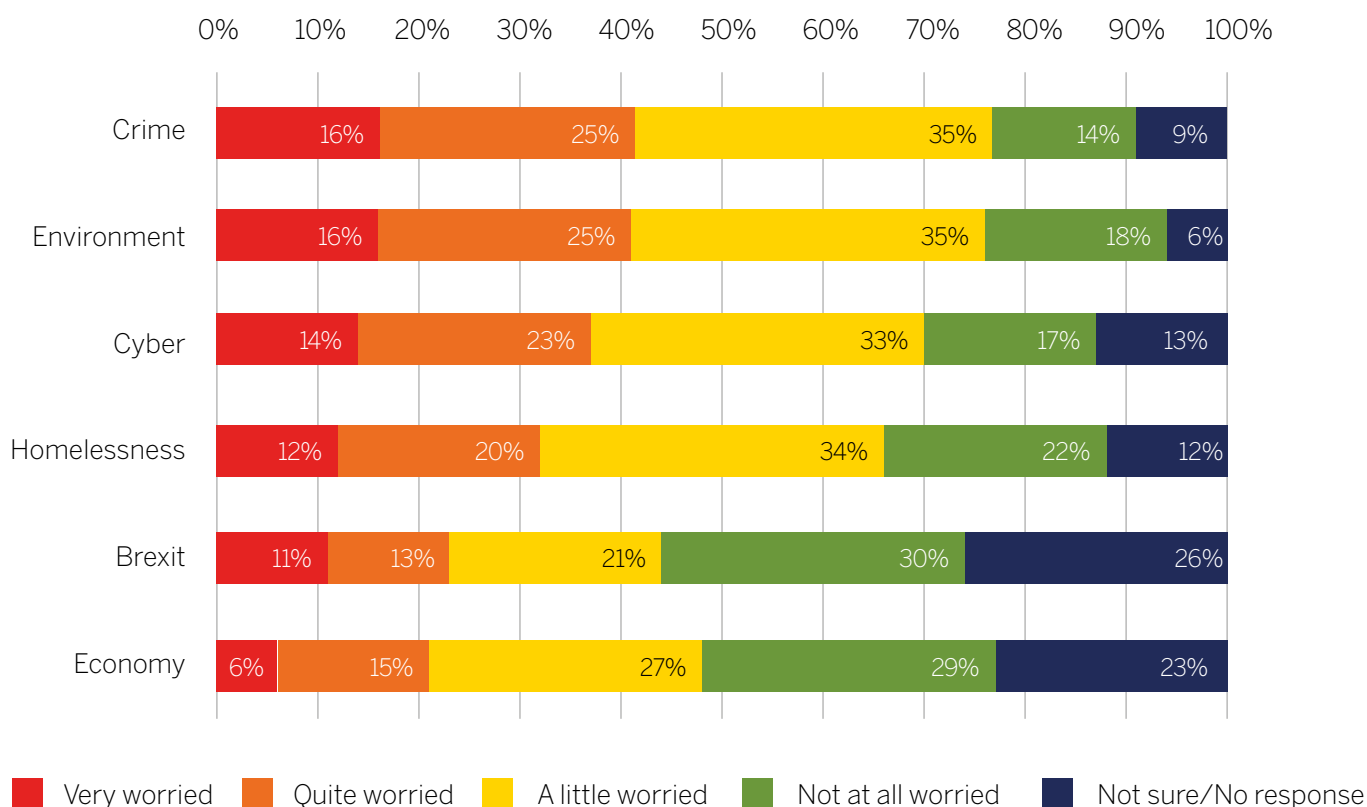
## Worries about broader issues

Children were also asked about how much they worried about six broader issues:

- The environment.
- How money is made and used within this country.
- Leaving the European Union.
- The amount of crime.
- People's information being shared online.
- Homelessness.

Response options were the same as in the previous section and as shown in Figure 25. Levels of worry (quite or very) ranged from 21% for the economy to 42% about crime and 41% about the environment. The figure includes children who answered 'Not sure' or 'Don't wish to answer' to each question. Over 1 in 5 children fell into this category for the questions about Brexit and the economy. There was a strong age dimension to these types of responses. Over a third of children in the 10 to 11 years old age group were unsure or did not provide a response. This in itself is informative about children's levels of knowledge and confidence about these types of broader political issues.

**Figure 25: Extent of worry about broader issues\***



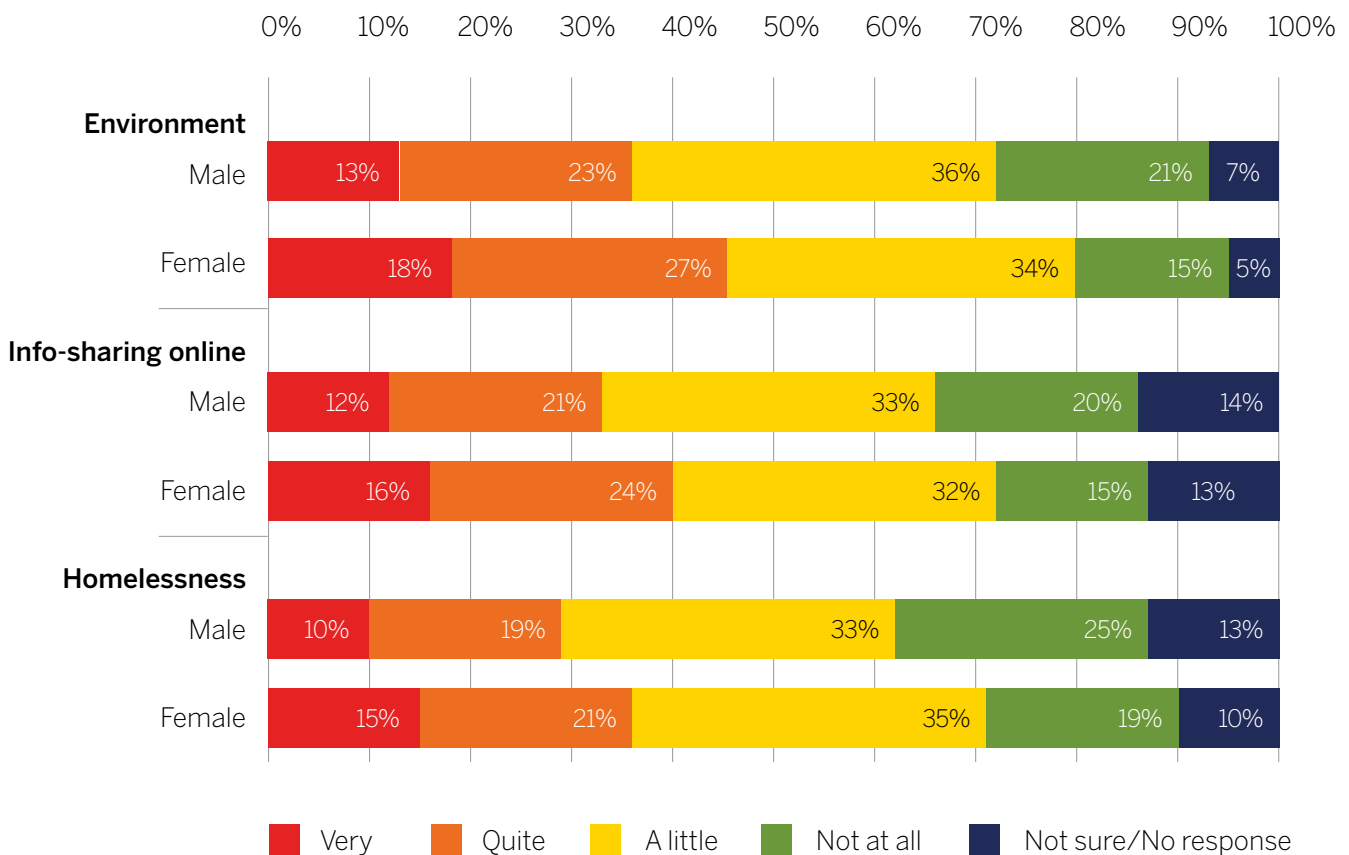
Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

\*Scores may not total 100% due to rounding.



- Girls were significantly more likely than boys to worry a lot (quite or very) about the environment, people's information being shared online and homelessness.** The largest gap was for the environment – 45% of girls were quite or very worried compared to 36% of boys (Figure 26).

**Figure 26: Worries about the environment, online information security and homelessness by gender\***



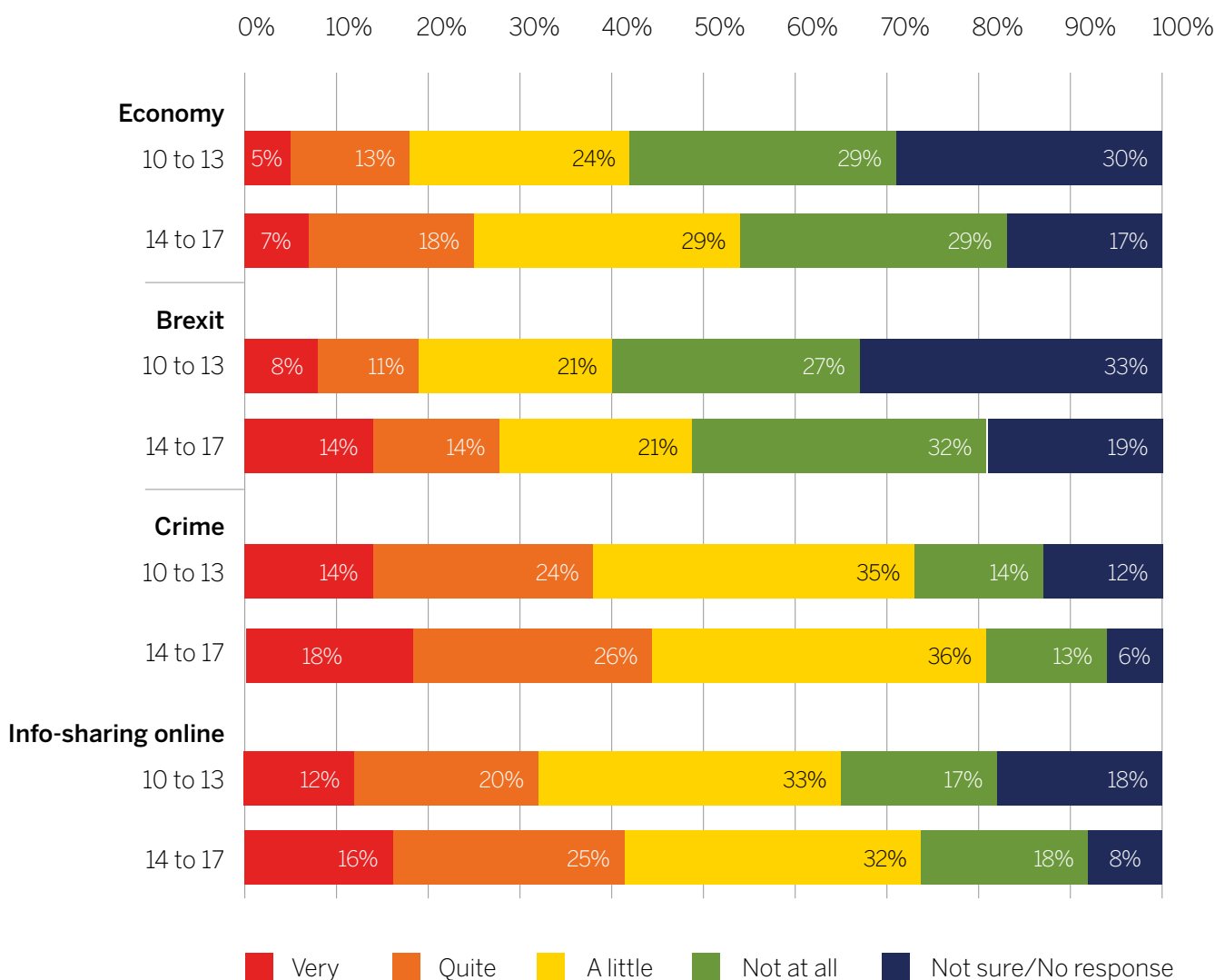
Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

\*Scores may not total 100% due to rounding.

Older children (14 to 17) tended to worry more about the economy, Brexit, crime and information sharing online. However, also a large proportion of the younger age group were not sure about these issues – particularly Brexit and the economy (Figure 27).

There was not a great deal of difference in levels of worry according to income poverty. Children in poverty did worry less about the environment (34%) and Brexit (20%) than other children (43% and 25% respectively).

**Figure 27: Worries about the economy, Brexit, crime and online information security by age group**



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

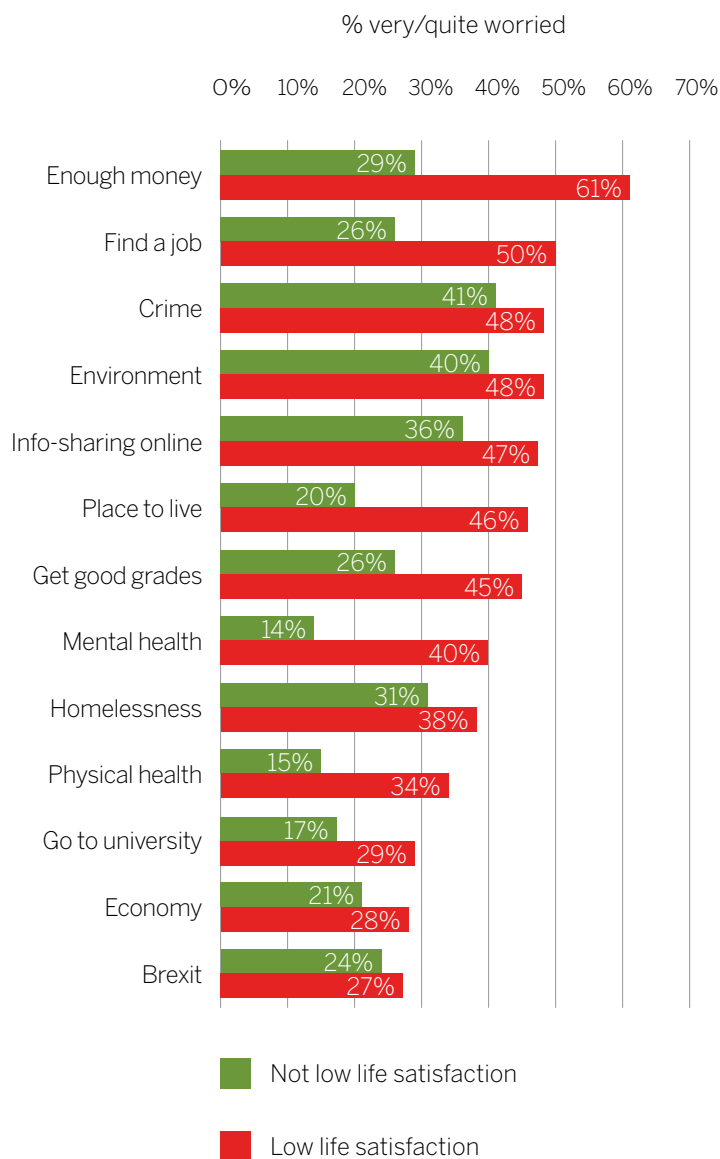
## Worries and low well-being

Figure 28 shows the percentage of children who were quite or very worried about each personal and broader issue, depending on whether they had low life satisfaction (see Chapter 1) or not. It is perhaps to be expected that children who had lower life satisfaction also tended to be more worried; and it is possible that some of this link is explained by other factors such as differences in personality. We cannot assume any particular causal link in either direction between worries and life satisfaction. The chart still provides an important insight into the relative strength of the link between worrying about different issues and life satisfaction.

- The 1 in 9 children who had low life satisfaction were **significantly more worried about all seven aspects of their future** than other children.
- However, for the broader issues they were only **significantly more worried about the environment and the economy**.
- **The largest gap in worries was for future mental health.** Children who currently had low life satisfaction were almost three times as likely to be quite or very worried about their future mental health than other children.
- **There were also large differences for having enough money and finding a place to live** – children with low life satisfaction were twice as likely to be worried about these issues as other children. They were also almost twice as likely to be worried about finding a job in the future.

Regardless of the questions of directions of influence, and personality differences, these patterns provide a clear indication of the level of concerns about the future that children with

Figure 28: Life satisfaction and worries



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 18, June-July 2019, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain. Equally weighted by age and gender.

low life satisfaction have. More than half of them were very or quite worried about having enough money in the future, and around half about finding a job.

## **Summary**

**This chapter has presented an up to date picture of how children and young people aged 10 to 17 in Great Britain view various aspects of their future, and the world around them. It tells us what they think is important and what they worry about.**

- This is an important topic because children's feelings about the future are closely linked to their sense of current well-being.
- We asked children how important they viewed seven different aspects of their future – educational grades, going to university, finding a job, having enough money, finding a place to live, and their mental and physical health. More than half of children viewed all these issues as 'very important'. The exception was going to university, which only 30% of children rated as very important.
- Girls and older children were generally more likely to view these issues as important. There was little difference according to income poverty – children viewed these issues as important irrespective of household income.
- These views about importance are in contrast to evidence about expectations. Children in lower and higher income families viewed going to university as equally important. But other research shows that children in poorer families are much less likely to expect to go to university than other children, even if they are doing equally well at school.
- We also asked children how much they worried about these seven issues. A lot of children had serious concerns about their future financial security. A third were very or quite worried about having enough money in the future. More than a quarter were worried about finding a job, and just under a quarter worried about having a place to live.
- These worries increased with age. Over a third of children and young people aged 14 to 17 were very or quite worried about having enough money and finding a job.
- We also asked children how worried they were about broader issues – the environment, the economy, Brexit, crime, digital security and homelessness. The environment and crime were children's top concerns (over 40% were very or quite worried about each of these).

- Finally we looked at the extent of worries according to children's current levels of life satisfaction. Children who were feeling low about life currently were also ones who had much greater worries about the future. In particular, the majority of children (61%) with low life satisfaction were worried about having enough money in the future and 2 in 5 were worried about their future mental health.
- Although differences between sub-groups according to age, gender and income are important, what is most striking about these findings is the level of worry that children have about important issues in terms of their future and the broader world. It will be important to continue to monitor these levels of concern. They can provide valuable information upon which practitioners and national and local policymakers can act.







# Discussion

## **Time trends in subjective well-being**

In Chapter 1, we presented the latest trends in subjective well-being for children aged 10 to 15 based on data from Understanding Society. Between 2009–10 and 2016–17, children's happiness with life as a whole and friends decreased, while their happiness with family, appearance and schoolwork remained relatively stable. There was a dip in happiness with school in 2016–17 compared with other years, which will need to be monitored going forward to see if this is a one-off occurrence or the beginning of a longer term trend.

The gender differences for children aged 10 to 15 reported in previous Good Childhood Reports continued into 2016–17. Boys were happier with their appearance than girls, and girls were happier with schoolwork. There were no consistent differences between boys and girls for happiness with life as a whole, family, friends or school.

## **Exploring children's self-reported experiences of disadvantage**

It is commonly accepted that some children experience a range of disadvantages, which affects their outcomes in life and makes their support needs more complex. In Chapter 2, we explored the possibility of asking a sample of Year 10 children themselves about their experience of a list of 24 disadvantages relating to their family, economic/material factors, their school and their neighbourhood.

The survey provided a number of insights into the types of measures that work well with children, which can be used in future development of a shortlist/index of questions. Children found it harder to answer questions about the frequency of fights between people in their local area, and how their monetary situation compared to that of their peers. Questions that seemed to best predict well-being (on a scale of 0 to

10) for the overall sample of children related to experiences of bullying in the last three months, not feeling safe at school and missing three or more items from a previously tested index of material deprivation. There were also more rarely reported disadvantages, such as homelessness and supervisory neglect, which seemed to have a big impact on the small numbers of children experiencing them (although they had limited explanatory power). It is essential that experiences which explain overall variation in well-being, and those that have an effect on the well-being of a small number of children, are considered when measuring multiple disadvantage.

As found in our 2017 report, children who experienced disadvantages in more than one area (ie family, material, school and neighbourhood) had lower subjective well-being than those who had experienced multiple disadvantages in just one aspect of their lives. This suggests that children cope better with issues concentrated in one area of their lives, but their well-being is diminished if they experience disadvantages across different areas.

## **Poverty and children's well-being**

In Chapter 3, we focus specifically on the relationship between different measures of child poverty (income poverty and financial strain) and two indicators of well-being (satisfaction with life as a whole, and depressive symptoms). The analysis shows that how one measures family economic circumstances has important implications for the conclusions drawn on their links with child well-being.

While the analysis found both children living in income poverty and those in financial strain were significantly more likely to have lower well-being, the gap was larger, particularly for depressive symptoms, for those in families under financial strain. An analysis of histories of poverty identified some potentially illuminating patterns.

Intermittent poverty was, for example, found to be associated with lower life satisfaction than living in persistent poverty. Any experience of either income poverty or financial strain was associated with lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms at age 14.

### **Children's views about the future**

Children's well-being is intrinsically linked to their hopes and expectations of their future. In Chapter 4, we presented a unique up to date picture of children's current views of the future. A substantial minority of children were either very or quite worried about various aspects of their own future, ranging from their mental health to finding a job. Children were most worried about having enough money – around 1 in 9 children said that they were very worried about this, and a further 2 in 9 were quite worried. Tellingly, children who currently lived in income poverty were more worried than average about having enough money, as well as having a home to live in and their future mental health.

We also asked children about their worries regarding broader issues. Around a quarter were very or quite worried about Brexit. However, the issues that children worried most about were crime and the environment – more than 2 in 5 were very or quite worried about these issues.

Finally, we looked at children's worries according to their current levels of life satisfaction. Most children (61%) who had low well-being worried about having enough money and around half worried about finding a job, crime and the environment. Children who had low well-being were almost three times as likely as others to worry about their future mental health. We argue that ongoing monitoring of children's views and worries about the future, and how these link with and may help to explain their current well-being, is needed.

### **Overall comment**

This report further highlights the importance of children's experiences/histories on their subjective well-being in the present. While experiencing multiple disadvantages in different areas of life seems to be associated with lower levels of well-being, our analysis suggests that even a single experience of poverty or financial strain may be related to lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms at age 14. The report also provides insights into children's key concerns for their own future and how they feel about wider societal issues (eg the environment and Brexit), which are likely to be intrinsically linked to their well-being.

Across the chapters of this report, the theme of school emerges as important for further focus. Not only are scores for the school domain of our Good Childhood Index consistently low, but more recent figures from Understanding Society suggest there may have been a dip in happiness with school. Our analysis on poverty and well-being also highlights connections between income poverty and financial strain and children's feelings about school at age 14. Taking these findings at face value suggests that a key way of improving children's subjective experience may be to improve their experience of school.

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<sup>ix</sup> The Children's Society (2017) The Good Childhood Report 2017. London: The Children's Society. See page 26.

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