

**Childhood in poverty: a disturbing reality. Some theoretical
and empirical Considerations.**

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Intoduction

There are many different definitions and concepts of the well-being of children. This presentation focuses on children in multicultural societies and childhood in poverty. It is an attempt to outline some of the theoretical and methodological problems of childhood poverty research.

In a word, childhood poverty is a very complicated and challenging issue. We are well aware that we wade in muddy waters but we hope to cast light on at least some of its aspects.

Children in disadvantage have become a disturbing reality world wide and particularly in the E.U. Poverty and social exclusion were hot issues in the political agenda of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 setting among other things a child poverty elimination target. The EU has agreed on an Open Method of Coordination (OMC) designed to allow member states to learn from each other in monitoring the problem of social exclusion and evolving more effective policies against it (UNICEF, 2005:22). Social exclusion is now an important part of mainstream political rhetoric and policy that is primarily directed towards a notion of social exclusion from the labour market and has little to tell us of children experiences of social exclusion within the immediacy of childhood, among peers (Ridge, 2002:6) or exclusion from social activities. If social exclusion is a poorly understood concept so too is the idea of ‘childhood’ and ‘poverty’.

Thus, in order to identify measure and alleviate childhood poverty we do not only need to define ambiguous and contested concepts like poverty, inequality, childhood and social exclusion but we also need to deal with methodological deficiencies, especially in large-scale surveys measuring poverty. Taking all in mind,

we will highlight some of the methodological shortcomings of childhood poverty research by reviewing some major **very sophisticated** longitudinal studies and we will present some empirical findings with respect to citizenship status and poverty.

What is poverty?

Many studies have shown that those who are at risk of poverty are the unemployed, families with ill or disable children, **migrant families** and lone parent families. In other words there are strong links with worklessness, ethnicity, lone parenthood, sickness and disability (Ridge, 2002:3). But what is poverty? And how possible is to create effective indicators accurately measuring the concept?

There is no general agreement on a standard definition of poverty. This is because there are different perceptions of poverty between the theorists who study the phenomenon, the researchers who measure poverty and the political elites that design policies in order to combat poverty (Karagiorgas, et. al., 1999:34). There are mainly two methodological and economic approaches of poverty- ‘absolute’ and ‘relevant poverty’ (see (Balourdos, 2005:133). ***Absolute poverty*** is defined as a condition where an individual or family has insufficient income and resources to ensure what is ‘absolutely necessary’ for maintaining and reproducing physical strength (see Karagiorgas, et. al., 1999:35). In other words, a person is poor when his/her nutrition, clothing and dwelling are such that may have harmful impacts on his/her health (*ibid*). This definition suggests a biological dimension of poverty.

Peter Townsend was the first to contest the previous definition and instead he defined poverty as: insufficient resources that can practically exclude a person or family from the customs and ordinary standards of living and from participating in social activities (Karagiorgas, et. al., 1999:42). This is more or less the definition of the concept of ***relative poverty*** which suggests that are our needs are not biological but they are socially and culturally defined (*ibid*). In that last regard, poverty is interpreted as ‘inequality’ (Balourdos, 2005). In the developed capitalist countries economic poverty is principally measured in relation to ‘relative poverty’ (see Balourdos, 2005:133).

There is a lot of debate going on around these two concepts absolute and relative poverty. But our understanding of deprivation or inequality cannot be restricted to these merely economic concepts. Is poverty simply a lack of economic resources that do not satisfy basic needs of our human existence as social and cultural

beings? From a social justice point of view, doesn't the notion of poverty also include lack of human or civil rights, lack of educational and labour market opportunities, lack of skills, lack of protection and lack of freedom to enjoy decent living standards? (see also Balourdos, 2005). If all of the above are also included in the notion of human poverty then how can we really measure deprivation or how do we assess poverty? Also "*if poverty is defined as a relative poverty, what is the most useful basis of comparison?*" Should poverty be measured in relation to the median of the nation state, or the OECD, or the EU? Or should it be defined more locally in relation to the particular province, city, or community in which the child lives?" (UNICEF, 2005:30).

Methodological Concerns

How do we assess poverty?

A fundamental issue in panel studies is how to establish a reliable line where deprived groups can be differentiated from those that are not. Hence we can conceptualize the poverty line as a methodological tool in the economic analysis of poverty that is meant to delimit the population of interest. This entails a dichotomous perception of the population's living conditions and well-being. Generally, the controversies surrounding poverty statistics are well-known: there is a lot of criticism as to the attempts to fix "poverty line" in relation to average income or average expenditure; measures tied to social assistance have obvious weaknesses and no one has come up with a method for measuring poverty among isolated or homeless children (Robbins, 1994:59-60), undocumented migrants -minority children in the case of Greece- (because they simply disappear from the official "count"). It is also difficult to measure poverty among children residing in remote rural areas or in run-down inner cities, on the margins of societies (see also Robbins, 1994:59-60).

There is considerable consensus within the EU that the income poverty line should be drawn at 60% of each country's median income (UNICEF, 2005:22, Sakelis, 2005:116). However, "there is also wide agreement that social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty and that direct measures of deprivation and exclusion are required in addition to income data. In total, 18 such indicators have so far been developed, all of them intended to be compatible and comparable between member states of the EU" (UNICEF, 2005:22). In sum this analysis includes the following:

- Employment income

- Property income
- Social provisions and pensions
- Money transfers from other households /Transfers paid to other household

(Sakelis, 2005:116). However, the distribution of income and poverty are influenced by welfare which is affected by many factors (see Litchfield, 1999) and it is difficult to be assessed (Sakelis, 2005:116). Taking a step further, population and childhood poverty can be influenced also by topographic and geographical factors which are not always taken into consideration in large-scale studies. For example, Epirus in North-West Greece, which is considered to be the poorest area in the EU has a complex topography that in relation to other socio-demographic and historical factors has influenced the economic and cultural life of the local population. For a better assessment of the EU-SILC results, the National Centre for Social Research suggested an additional top-up sample of households (2,763) (initial sample=8,167), from Epirus, West Greece and Peloponnese that particularly suffer social exclusion (response rate:81,62%) (Sakelis, 2005:116).

Generally, the standard view is of poverty as a household-level phenomenon but little is known about the distribution of resources within the household (Sutherland, 2000:3)

Most cross-national studies and household panel surveys do not provide a clear picture of children's lives. **“Poor children”** and especially **“poor migrant or minority children”** are invisible social categories which tend to be ignored or excluded from statistical accounting (see Ridge, 2002). Children often appear as an adjunct to adult data, or in data concerned with the impact of children on adult lives and family economies (Ridge, 2002:3). Generally, the target population in most large-scale studies is all persons aged 16 and above residing in households of the survey area. *In other words, children are merely passive members of households* (Ridge, 2002).

Studies as for example National Child Development Study (NCDS) give actually voice to children. NCDS is a British birth cohort study that offers a well designed questionnaire covering major topics like lifelong learning, employment and income covering also periods of unemployment, job histories, family, parenting and housing, health and health behaviour, child development, education and citizenship. Nonetheless, NCDS is a very difficult and costly type of survey research that suffers

from problems of sample attrition (drop-outs) (Sapsford, 1999). Most important it indicates under-representation of '*disadvantaged*' groups that may lead to biases in survey errors in proportions up to ten percent (Nathan, 1999:23).

Goldstein (cited by Nathan, 1999:23) carried out a study of the non-response effects for the third follow up and previous waves. By comparing a large number of educational, socio-economic and health categorical variables Goldstein concluded that children who belonged to 'disadvantaged' groups at seven and eleven years were more likely not to respond at the age of sixteen. Also an analysis of response for the fifth follow up in 1991 indicates under-representation of up to 50 per cent in Caribbean ethnic groups (Nathan, 1999:24). In addition, we cannot monitor the well-being of children and instances of poverty as NCDS does not offer information on an annual basis.

British Household Panel Youth Study that started in 1994 as an extension of the British Household Panel Study that has been systematically carried out since 1991 with annual follow-ups provides a good example of a more child-centred data (Ridge, 2002:111:169). More specifically, BHPYS provides an opportunity to explore the difference between children who are living in low-income families (receiving Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance) with those who are living in families with adequate incomes (Ridge, 2002:111-112).

These and other studies provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of child poverty, nevertheless, these are mainly snapshots that can capture only a moment in time while the effects particularly of long-term poverty are most severe. In a nutshell, survey type research is not focused on children's everyday life experiences. Large-scale surveys provide insights into some of the outcomes of poverty for children, including poor health, poor cognitive development, low self-esteem, poor educational achievement (Ridge, 2002:3) emotional and behavioural outcomes and teenage out-of-wedlock pregnancy. All of the above are indicators of well-being based on the assumption that family income affects child outcomes but other indicators are not included. For example, we have insufficient or no information about child abuse/neglect, child labour, child care, good schools, quality of school life, safe neighbourhoods, crime etc. Poor children do not only have less access to material resources but also they have less access to community resources. Large and important gaps in child poverty research continue to exist, especially with regard to comparative studies of child welfare and studies of the situation of immigrants and ethnic and

racial minorities (OECD, 2003:3). Also there are substantial gaps in our knowledge of the impact of migration on children (see Unicef, 2004: 32). In particular, foreign born children or those born to immigrant parents are only beginning to receive attention in the research literature (OECD, 2003:23). "Some research is beginning to emerge regarding the impacts of ethnic and racial minority status on children" (OECD, 2003:24). For example, the Danish longitudinal study of children born in 1995 that is being carried out by the Danish National Social Research Institute includes special attention to children whose mothers are immigrants or refugees from three major and immigrant refugee nationalities in Denmark; similarly the Millennium birth cohort study in the U.K. that is being carried out by the National Centre for Social Research will include data from areas with high proportion of ethnic minority families and children (OECD, 2003:24-25). However, no data will be available for analysis for several years (see Arber, 2001:276).

Immigrant and Minority Children

As we have already noted, the risk of poverty is very significantly affected by citizenship status (see UNICEF, 2005: 25). It seems that there is a correlation between poverty and citizenship status that reminds us that general economic development does not reach all social groups evenly.

The OECD 2003 (24) report reveals that "there is a growing concern in Germany about the differences between native born German children and those born to immigrants, foreigners and ethnic Germans (those who migrated from Eastern European countries to Germany). Foreign born children have a higher poverty risk and tend to be on less favourable educational tracks than native-born German children". In particular, for children living in households headed by non-citizens the probability of poverty almost tripled from about 4 per cent in the early '90s to 15 per cent at the end (Corak, Fertig and Tamm, 2005:8). Additionally, children of the older guest worker generation of immigrants have about *10 per cent, higher poverty rates than citizens but at the same time lower poverty rates than all non-citizens (ibid).*

The same report also unveils similar problems in France "children from non-European immigrant backgrounds often have difficulties mastering the French language and integrating into French schools" (OECD, 2003:24).

In Greece immigrants were only recently recorded in the Census of 2001 though there was under-recording of undocumented immigrants up to almost 10% . Basically,

there are no formal retrospective data (past work, family and immigration histories) or figures related to demographic characteristics and processes (i.e. fertility, mortality, household and family structure).

The OECD report suggests that immigrant children have to face an educational system to which they cannot easily adapt, since they don't know the language and are often unwelcome among the other children" (OECD, 2003:24-25). Roma/gypsy children are perhaps among the most vulnerable groups facing social exclusion, poverty and segregation. Most of them live under appalling sanitary conditions hazardous to health with no water or electricity supply and no access to community schools and health care. It is estimated that 80-90 per cent of them are illiterate (http://ne-cf.org.uk/core_files/649_dafvol2.pdf) and this is because they begin working early in family business and school drop-out rates are high (see Dorman, 2001:48). This practically means that Roma children are not empowered with educational opportunities and labour market opportunities. As it is the case with other minority groups living in Greece, the Roma are not recognised as an ethnic minority. The Greek state has consistently denied the existence of ethnic minorities thus it is not surprising that there are no official statistics available for ethnic minorities (see Alipranti and Nikolaou, 2005). Roma/Gypsies have a long history in Greece that dates back to the 11th century and although their citizenship was finally recognised in 1975, discrimination from regional authorities deprives them of their civic rights and citizenship entitlements as Greek citizens (http://ne-cf.org.uk/core_files/649_dafvol2.pdf).

In addition, Roma children are overrepresented among street children (along with Albanians and other immigrant children and many end up in prostitution (Dorman, 2001:49). A survey conducted by the Maragopoulos Foundation for Human Rights during 1995-97 identified 2930 youths under 18 in prostitution in Athens 30 per cent of them were of Roma origin (somewhat more than 40 per cent were immigrants, chiefly from Albania and Iraq) (Dorman, 2001:49).

Moreover, Roma/Gypsies and illegal immigrants are seriously under-served in relation to social welfare in Greece (90 per cent of Roma/Gypsies are not insured by public social security systems) (http://ne-cf.org.uk/core_files/649_dafvol2.pdf).

The only formally recognised minority are the Muslims of Thrace as stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) who were excluded from the population exchange (*ibid*). Perhaps the most recent official data on minority groups are those of the 1951

census¹ but the official classification of the population by religion and mother tongue is problematic (*ibid*). For instance, it is hard to separate the Pomaks (Slavic-speaking Muslims) who live in Western Thrace from the Turks and Roma due to the official reticence to give figures for ethnic minorities (Poulton, 1993: 182).

Children of the Muslim minority in Thrace lack any educational opportunities. Pre-school attendance rates are very low (5%) (Katsikas and Politou, 1999:168). Pre-school education would give them an opportunity to start learning the Greek language before entering primary school as most children do not speak Greek at home (see Katsikas and Politou, 1999:168-169). Particularly, Pomak children suffer a ‘linguistic bombardment’ from both their Muslim teachers who teach them Turkish and the Christian teachers who teach them Greek (Katsikas and Politou, 1999:170). Pomak children have to cope with the Greek and Turkish language. The only language that is not being taught is Pomak as the Greek school obviously scorns and rejects their language (*ibid*). It is a major political issue. In brief, the Pomaks in Western Thrace became object of national propaganda and contest between Bulgaria and Turkey because of the ethno-linguistic and religious characteristics of the group (Slavic speaking Muslims) and for the same reason they were regarded with a certain amount of suspicion by Greece (see Tsimpiridou, 2000:38) thus they were left isolated on the fringes of the national society.

Conclusions

Summarizing, as it has been previously illustrated the identification and measurement of children’s poverty constitute a difficult enterprise with many theoretical and methodological gaps. Childhood poverty and more particularly that of immigrant children was until recently ignored. Also the fact that there are different definitions as well as methods of measurement make this pressing issue very complicated. The deficiencies that appear in large-scale studies are related to the validity or even lack of indicators measuring particular concepts, information accuracy as this is affected by timing of data collection, sample attrition and less amount of information of children’s experiences of poverty.

¹ See census results in ONSG, *Résultats du Recensement de La Population*, Effectué le 7 Avril 1951, Volume I. *Aperçu historique-Rapport méthodologique – Analyse des résultats Tableaux par superficie et altitude* (Athènes, 1961), CVII-CXV.

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