

Putting Childhood Poverty on the Agenda:

The Relationship
Between Research and
Policy in Britain
1800-1950

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Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

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Abstract

The period 1800 to 1950 in Britain can be seen as a period in which there was a gradual growth in social policy that reached its culmination in the post-war welfare state settlement. In addition, it was a period that saw the development of a much more distinct, rigidly defined and more universal notion of the child and the nature of childhood. The distinct status of the child was itself partly created through the operation of social policy. Furthermore, it was only in the latter part of this period that there was a clear working definition of what constituted poverty. It was only after this point that the measurement and analysis of a specific phenomenon of child poverty became possible.

- This paper charts the developments in research on child poverty and policy responses between 1800 and 1950, and considers their relationship and interaction. In doing so there recur a number of themes, which can be summarised as follows:
- The complexity of the relationship between research and policy. That is, the impacts of research may occur neither at the time of the research, nor in ways that are predictable. The influence of research is not necessarily in the direction in which researchers intend and is mediated by the options available to policy makers at a particular time.
- The need for research to be both radical and to relate to its time and place. That is, the nature of research and its influence will vary with the political complexion of the country and ideological and religious factors. It has both to make an impact but also to accord, at least in part, with existing mores.
- The relationship between child policy and the delineation of childhood. That is, that state intervention on behalf of children feeds into an increasing focus on childhood and the definition of childhood as a distinct status, which itself creates the need for specific, child-related policy.
- The association of child and women's welfare. That is, interventions for children often assume the interconnectedness of both the status and the concerns of women and children. This acknowledges the extent to which mothers' welfare is often bound up with that of their children; but it can also cause child poverty policy to be obstructed, through political resistance to women's concerns.

The paper considers the increasing salience and sophistication of social research. It outlines some of the principal moments and figures in poverty research over the 150 years; and it provides an analysis of the extent to which and the ways in which policy responded to these findings. It argues that labour restriction and compulsory education, while not transparently increasing the well-being of the child, created the conditions under which child welfare research and policy could more fully develop. They did this through constituting a child population, which could be subject to observation and measurement and be accessible to intervention. At the same time, child welfare was never fully divorced from family welfare. This resulted in ongoing tensions between research demonstrating child poverty and the consequent policy imperative to do something about it, and fears about subsidising 'irresponsible' parents. In the end, policy can be seen as being increasingly informed by systematic research on child poverty. Yet policy makers persisted in modifying the conclusions of research, sometimes dramatically, to produce a compromise between concern with child poverty and other political and economic concerns.

I. Introduction

The subject of this paper – the development of research and policy relating to child poverty – has taken a time and place that were marked by striking changes in both empirical research and policy implementation. In Britain from 1800 to 1950 there were extraordinary changes, not least at the level of the nature and use of empirical research. The economic situation was markedly different at the beginning and end of the period with a rise in standards of living by 1950 that would render working class life at that date unrecognisable by comparison with 1800.¹ Changes in the economy and in standards of living additionally made possible and prompted development at the level of social policy, which, in turn impacted on welfare. For this was also a period which started with minimal social policy and concluded not only with a comprehensive welfare state, but one in which a concern with child welfare was central. In fact, the focus on children as a source of concern from this period onwards was partly created by the operations of the state. As Hendrick explains,

the history of children and childhood is inescapably inseparable from the history of social policy. We cannot hope to understand the former without an appreciation of the latter. No other sector of the population has been so closely identified with the expansion and multiplication of these policies since the 1870s, and with the growth of the State and its 'expert' agencies.²

In 1800 there was no state schooling and education was largely a prerogative of the ruling classes; by 1950 schooling was compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 15. In 1800 the only forms of child support operated locally (and variably) through parish poor relief to families. By 1950 universal family allowances had been introduced, as well as a system of National Assistance which contained allowances for children. In 1800 child labour was unregulated and children worked according to their social position and capability. By 1950 there were systematic regulations in place which prohibited work for those aged under 13 and heavily restricted work (by hours, type and time of day) for those aged up to 16.

This paper traces these developments and illuminates how the innovations in empirical work and the rise of the social survey contributed to the changes in policy. The case is made that the very development and utilisation of large-scale empirical research was a product of the ideological, economic, social, religious and political currents that also critically fashioned social policy across the period. While research findings were pertinent to much policy change, there was not a

1 While it is neither possible nor meaningful to compare child poverty rates across the period, an exploration of changes in living standards of the poor in real terms across a more restricted period is provided by D Piachaud, 'Research Note: Poverty in Britain 1899-1983', *Journal of Social Policy* 17: 335-349.

2 H. Hendrick, *Child Welfare: England 1872-1989*. London: Routledge (1994), p.xii.

transparent translation from evidence to evidence-based policy. The relationship between research and policy was, instead, mediated by the ability and willingness of policy-makers to respond to particular findings, and by the forms in which those findings were presented. Thus, ‘evidence’ only became treated as such if it could be made to fit with existing economic and ideological conditions. The arguments from empirical work were convincing only to the extent to which they could accommodate the prevailing political context within which policy makers operated and by which they were informed.

Furthermore, this paper shows that the development of policy itself has implications for research. It changes what research is possible and what direction it takes. For example, the reorganisation of the Poor Law in 1834, with a much stronger emphasis on institutionalisation, rendered paupers a clearly identifiable and distinct body. They could thus be studied and compared and contrasted to the ‘respectable’ poor; and ideas of socialisation versus heredity could be explored and pursued with pauper children. The introduction of compulsory schooling in 1880 enabled investigation of the child population—both their mental characteristics and their physical development—on an unprecedented scale. Claims on health insurance (which was legislated for workers in 1911) revealed the shocking condition of women employees’ health, while the poor condition of non-insured women’s health (including that of most mothers) was only fully revealed by the introduction of the National Health Service 37 years later. Unemployment insurance, also introduced in 1911, enabled the unemployed to be counted, and hence the scale of the problem and the number of child dependants it affected to be evaluated, especially as it was extended to more and more employees in the 1920s and 1930s. The counting and investigation made possible by policy furthered understanding of policy, and stimulated its development.

The final, though related, issue revealed through this paper, is the extent to which policy itself constructs the subject for research. Child poverty research is impossible without a clear notion of the child and why children’s poverty is a particular problem. Through education, child labour restrictions and provision for children by means of family allowances, the state created the space within which ideas of childhood and its unique value could develop. Such ideas, in turn, prompted further investigation and the need for further policy response. These conceptual developments and concerns with child poverty can also be seen as continuing to form both research and policy agendas not only in the UK but also further afield.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the relevant developments in research, and of the context in which they took place. It introduces the principal figures who feature in the paper and a broad chronology of research innovations and influences. Section 3 considers the question of child labour. The argument focuses on campaigns and legislation, which were critical to subsequent developments in child welfare and to the construction of both children and women as dependants in social policy. The campaigns and legislation were little influenced by empirical research as such, but rather reveal the ability of campaigners to mobilise particular sentiments and ideas for a cause. Section 4 deals with the question of education. Education presented an alternative occupation for children in the absence of employment. It was also increasingly regarded as essential to national well being; and yet state intervention was avoided for many years as an undesirable interference. Nevertheless, both the restriction of child labour and the introduction of state education were critical in sanctioning state interference in and responsibility for children's lives.

Restriction of employment and compulsory education had major implications for the well being of the poorest families and their children. At the same time, these interventions contributed to both the identification of poor children and to the recognition of them as having particular calls upon the state. It is therefore only in the later part of the period under consideration that child poverty became an explicit element of research and campaigning. Such mobilisation in relation to child poverty was, however, enabled by developments in broader survey research and by the commitment expressed through existing interventionist legislation. Section 5 considers the central issue of child poverty and child poverty research, alongside the related areas of child (and maternal) health and welfare. It investigates the long-standing tension between increasing research demonstrating the extent and severity of child poverty, and the state's reluctance to take on what it considered to be the role and responsibility of the parent.

Finally, Section 6 summarises the findings of the paper

2. The development of poverty research: chronology, context and principal figures

This section outlines the development of empirical research and the ultimate realisation of the social survey. It connects developments in research to the economic, political and religious currents of the time and to the background of the individual researchers. It describes the contested nature of empirical investigation, which was not simply the preserve of disinterested researchers. It also shows how the development of statistics was concerned with debates concerning the value and quality of human life that came into focus with studies of poverty. It provides the context for the consideration of child poverty and policy, which constitute the succeeding sections.

The end of the 18th century marked a shift in approaches to numbers and counting, whereby numbers became stripped of the Christian Platonic significance that had characterised the 18th century.³ Instead, they began to be regarded as without moral connotation and to hold the ability to support or challenge theoretical positions or presuppositions. For Poovey, it is Thomas Malthus who exemplifies this transition in approaches to argument and the collection of numerical data. She highlights Malthus' 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* in part because it was highly influential and controversial—with its influence lasting well into the twentieth century and the neo-Malthusian movement.⁴ However, she also stresses that it forms a highly pertinent text for consideration because the influence and controversy stemmed not simply from its underlying ideas, but also from the way it advocated and used empirical and observational data.

Malthus was a clergyman living through a period of dramatic demographic and industrial change. The population saw an unprecedented expansion in the late 18th and early 19th century: from around 1750 increased fertility rates were sustained by a younger age of marriage and improved chances of survival for infants. Alongside a decline in the death rate, this resulted in a significant year on year growth of the population.⁵ The British population expanded from 5.5 million in 1700 to 9 million by 1810 and 18 million in 1851. The annual population increase peaked in the 1830s, with a rate of increase of around 1.3 per cent a year. This population increase fed (and benefited from) the processes of industrialisation, but at the same time caused concern about its sustainability. There was at this time increased attention given to understanding the workings of industrial and economic processes and the ways in which industrialisation had come into being and expanded so rapidly.

3 M. Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1998).

4 T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, edited by D. Winch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1992). Malthus's *Essay* ran to six editions in his lifetime.

5 D. Coleman 'Population and Family' in A.H. Halsey and J. Webb (eds.) *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (2000) 27-93, p.32.

One of the most comprehensive and influential expositions of the economic processes at work was offered by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).⁶ Smith's exposition of free market ideology argued that men operated on the basis of self-interest. For Smith, this explains the way that markets work and creates an equilibrium in economic affairs when those markets are allowed to operate freely. He argued therefore that state intervention in markets was detrimental to their efficiency and hence to wider prosperity. Arguments for intervention had to be set against concerns that any such interventions would distort the market and undermine a philosophy based on individual responsibility. Smith can also be associated with the shift in political economy that stressed awareness of observed conditions and a move to greater empirical analysis. The political position known as *laissez-faire* associated with his ideas was a dominant force in government and policy-making throughout the 19th century. Preoccupations with creating perverse incentives, whereby individual self-interest would make people act in a way considered undesirable by the state, continued to be a feature of social policy up to (and beyond) the end of the period under consideration. *Laissez-faire* was not simply a product of an influential text; it was also a way of explaining and understanding the major changes that were taking place in society. It was both produced by these shifts and contributed to their furtherance.

Major changes in the organisation and structure of society had come about with the 'industrial revolution'. These included urban expansion, the development of employment cycles, and the separation of home and employment, with the removal of much productive work from the home and a large, concentrated and highly visible poor population. For Malthus and others who were observing these changes, the optimistic tenor of theoretical writings on political economy was unjustified. Instead, the surrounding reality needed to be observed and counted. The awareness of misery in the midst of increasing wealth needed to be accounted for; and its theological meaning also needed to be comprehended. If this were done, Malthus argued, it would be evident that population expansion was unsustainable i.e. it resulted in hardship, as food became insufficient, prices rose and wages fell. Influenced by the ideas of Smith on the operation of self-interest, Malthus argued that remedial attempts to deal with such hardship by parish subsidies to families were counter-productive in that they produced incentives to marry and have children, thus exacerbating the problem. In the first edition of the *Essay*, Malthus merely advocated the importance of empiricism – of systematic observation and measurement to support his argument. In the subsequent editions (from 1803 onwards), however, he supported and modified his argument with recourse to any relevant tables and figures he could access.

⁶ A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by E. Cannan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1976). Smith's *Wealth of Nations* went into five editions between its first publication in 1776 and his death in 1790.

According to Poovey⁷, the use of numerical information not only to support, but also to modify or contradict aspects of Malthus's original argument,

encouraged other advocates of numerical data to imagine that numerical information could be used to challenge their opponents' theoretical presuppositions or to defend their own, precisely because numbers seemed not always to support the thesis one set out with – precisely because numbers seemed to be divorced from theory.

Of course, the numbers that were available for justifying or producing an argument were few and far between; and data were not centrally collected by the state at this time. The first national census took place in 1801, providing for the first time comprehensive population information – but little else. The figures that were available were from individual efforts, which were predominantly local in scope. There was, in the first decades of the 19th century, an increasing interest in amassing numerical data. The foundation of a number of statistical societies and the use of the term statistics at this time took its use from the German meaning of data necessary to inform the activity of the state. It was, fundamentally, an exercise in the collection of 'facts'.⁸ Findings from household enquiries might have been exhaustively counted and tabulated, but without any attempt to crosstabulate or to investigate associations.⁹

It was, however, recognised, for example by J.M. McCulloch, that the formation of a general knowledge in keeping with the ideas of political economy and the ability of the state to sustain and justify a free-market position required the systematic collection of national data.¹⁰ McCulloch did much to popularise Adam Smith's ideas through regular reprintings of *The Wealth of Nations* through the first half of the 19th century. He made the connection between the political ideology of *laissez-faire*, the persuasive power of numerical data and the role of the state.

The state, however, was somewhat slow to collect and use data to formulate policy. Despite the strenuous advocacy of data collection by those such as McCulloch, it was not until the 1832 Royal Commission to investigate the operation of the Poor Law that systematic empirical investigation was used to inform (or at least justify) policy. The findings reported reveal not only the way the existing Poor Law was operating but also the conviction of the investigators of the

7 Poovey, *The History of the Modern Fact*, p.292.

8 S.M. Stigler, *Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press (1999).

9 K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1981), pp.320-321.

10 Poovey, *The History of the Modern Fact*.

perverse incentives built into Poor Law provision and, in particular, in subsidies for dependent children. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act that was the legislative outcome of these investigations can thus be seen as being the first major piece of social policy that was empirically-based. It was a policy directly concerned with poverty and poverty provision, but it took a punitive attitude towards the poor and was based on the conviction that the labouring classes would not work unless they were obliged to do so. It simultaneously invoked and condemned an alienated population. It therefore enshrined what became known as the principle of ‘less eligibility’. This was the principle that those supported by the parish should always be in a worse (or ‘less eligible’) position than those engaged at the most basic levels of the labour market. This principle continued to influence poor relief throughout the next century and beyond and survived the ultimate dismantling of the 1834 Poor Law in 1948. In a sense, then, this legislation justified those who feared that the use of numerical evidence to support a position would simply reinforce the arguments of those in positions of power, who would be able to employ what evidence they needed to support their position.

On the other hand, the centralisation that accompanied the New Poor Law and the institutionalisation which characterised it—and which made it so hated—meant that the state had both taken on the responsibility for determining and supplying poverty relief. It had also created an environment in which the understanding of the causes and conditions of pauperism¹¹ and the effectiveness of policy could be assessed. Furthermore, the attraction of empirical research and numerical evidence was also compelling for those who had perspectives or motivations that differed from the dominant ideology of the state and its officers, such as Marxists or non-conformists.

Weber’s famous narrative on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* links the rise of capitalism with a particular religious ethos and links religion to industrial development¹² - indeed, much of the Christian-influenced literature on the poor emphasises the dominant approaches that stress individual responsibility. However, religious background could also promote both extensive philanthropy and systematic approaches to understanding and explaining poverty that were at odds with dominant ideas. This influence becomes particularly evident in the social surveys deriving from Quaker families that are considered later. In addition, alternative political positions could respond eagerly to the apparently indisputable power of

11 The term pauper was used specifically to refer to someone who made a call on the Poor Law. They were intentionally stigmatised by such an act and were disenfranchised as a result. Paupers were thus distinguished from the poor who could be deemed to be a large proportion of the working population. For a detailed discussion of the New Poor Law and pauperism see Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*.

12 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons. Second Edition. London: Allen and Unwin (1976). R.H. Tawney also pursued this topic though placing less emphasis on the necessary role of puritanism in the development of capitalism in his (1926) discussion of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Harmondsworth: Pelican (1938).

numbers. For example, Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844),¹³ an early exposition of a Marxist historical account is crammed with figures from numerous sources, as well as detailed observations on factory workers, quotations from the statements of Factories Inquiry Commissioners and extensive citations from workers' newspapers. The information contained is extensive and detailed, the argument original and the analysis compelling. Yet, it is noticeable that it does not clearly distinguish between the quality or the type of its sources, only indicating where the shameful conditions are observed *despite* the liberal leanings of the authors. The evidence to be marshalled is therefore comprehensive rather than selective, and the argument comes to seem less a consequence of the facts than the framework within which the various facts have been ordered.

At this period there does not appear to have been a clear differentiation between what constituted research rather than journalism or polemic, just as there were not really recognised social researchers. Nor was there necessarily a greater credence attributed to particular forms of knowledge or campaign bases. Calls to action could be based on conviction, anecdotal observation or systematic observation and tabulation. The development of a clearer social research base can be attributed to the combination towards the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century of three factors. The first of these factors was the development of ways of causally relating and generalising from 'facts', i.e. the rise of statistics. Secondly, there was the creation and expansion of numerous professions directly involved in delivering social policy and with direct and informed experience, (e.g. teachers, midwives, public health officials, factory inspectors), as well as the development of those professions that made children their specific interest, such as paediatricians and developmental psychologists. Finally, this period in British history saw the rise of the social survey itself.

Before these changes occurred, the status of what constitutes research and its ability to draw conclusive policy implications is ambiguous. This can be seen in the journalist and writer, Henry Mayhew's voluminous accounts and descriptions of occupations. His work has been credited as being the first poverty survey, and his personal inquiries and observations have been accorded the status of the earliest English ethnography.¹⁴ The texts on which these judgements are based were a series of weekly 'letters' describing, first-hand, London occupations and their attendant wages, which were written for the *Morning Chronicle* (1849-1850). He also produced a large number of serial publications, most importantly one on *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2), material from which was later published in book form under the same title,

13 F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. London: Panther (1969).

14 See, for example, E.P. Thompson and E. Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew*. London: Merlin Press (1971).

which focused largely on street workers. The detailed accounts give a vivid impression of the working lives in different trades and, often, the miserable insufficiency of wages. The fascination with wages as the critical means to understanding the economics of capitalism was also an ongoing feature of research throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was not only a core element of Marxist theory, but was also the subject of much pioneering statistical work, such as A.L. Bowley's historical studies of wages.¹⁵ Mayhew, however, as Williams has convincingly argued, was seeking to create systematic generalisations from his detailed accounts and yet instead became immersed in ever more detailed classifications and sub-classifications that inhibited the ability to demonstrate larger patterns or causal relationships from his material.

It was only in the latter part of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century that the discipline of statistics really emerged and was able to tackle questions of social investigation, including developing methods for assessing causal relationships or associations. Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, was led to develop the concept of regression towards the mean in the 1860s through his interest in Hereditary Genius,¹⁶ even though the material that the concept was derived from was based on tabulations of fathers' and sons' heights.¹⁷ Karl Pearson worked with Galton initially and went on to make great strides in statistical theory, including developing the chi-square test as a measure of association for categorical data at the beginning of the twentieth century. Both men were also principal figures in the eugenics movement. This common interest was not coincidental to their statistical work, but was the corollary of both trying to develop notions of statistically significant causal relationships and of systematic observation of the social world, where heredity to all appearances played an important role. The interest in eugenics was a widespread interest at the time that covered a range of political positions and implied an equally wide range of 'solutions'. For example, Pearson shared with the socialists, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, (who were vehement critics of the Poor Law),

*a belief in the rational perfectibility of human society, a reverence for the efficacy of scientific empiricism and an acceptance that the state could and should direct its citizens in the means to improve themselves, and a meritocracy as the ultimate goal.*¹⁸

Their differences only came to light when the public outcry over the quality of recruits for the South African Wars prompted (reluctant) government action. Despite their common concern

15 A.L. Bowley, *The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom during the Last Hundred Years*. London: Royal Statistical Society (1898); *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom Since 1860*. Cambridge: The University Press (1937).

16 F. Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (1869). Bristol: Thoemmes Press (1998).

17 Stigler, *Statistics on the Table*.

18 S. Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996), p.184.

for ‘national efficiency’, Pearson and the Webbs were in fact at political extremes. For example, the Webbs supported the extension of the franchise and financial assistance for families with children, while Pearson did not.

The broad-based strength of the eugenics movement and interest in issues of heredity increasingly resulted in a focus on children and child welfare as the critical social policy issue. This occurred in parallel with the increased role of school boards and the increasing numbers of personnel directly employed in relation to social policy concerns in identifying child welfare and poverty issues.¹⁹ It was also exacerbated by a demographic shift, which began towards the end of the 19th century. There were, from this period, rapid declines in fertility, initially among the middle classes but closely followed by the urban working classes, resulting in fertility below replacement rates being established by the 1930s. Concerns about the ‘quality’ of children, especially their nutrition and wider welfare were therefore exacerbated by the reductions in quantity.

The development of the ‘poverty’ survey was dependent on the work of school board members in its initial incarnation. The British poverty survey did not derive from the statistical movement, though its potential was swiftly appreciated and adopted by statisticians such as Bowley in the years after B.S. Rowntree’s survey of 1901. The social survey can be seen to have developed from a large-scale investigation of poverty and employment in London by Charles Booth. Booth himself is regarded as having derived his interest in basing legislation on ‘facts’ from his positivist Comtian background and upbringing. He undertook a major survey in which he used school board visitors to assess the poverty of the households he visited. While they only visited families with children, he extrapolated their findings to the whole population and developed a schema of eight categories of poverty or well being.²⁰ He also classified streets according to the characteristics of their inhabitants on a series of highly detailed maps and by these means implied a novel environmental aspect to poverty. Environmental explanations had been developed by Chadwick in relation to public health in his seminal work of 1842, which made the connection between differential mortality rates and differences in living conditions across areas. Such environmental explanations had, however, up to this point tended to remain of interest primarily to local medical officers of health.²¹

19 On the role of school boards in creating ‘poverty lines’ see A. Gillie, ‘Rowntree, Poverty Lines and School Boards’ in J. Bradshaw and R. Sainsbury, *Getting the Measure of Poverty: The Early Legacy of Seebohm Rowntree*, Aldershot: Ashgate (2000), pp.85-108.

20 Booth published his first, poverty findings in 1889 as *The Life and Labour of the People in London*, Volume 1. The full survey, in 17 volumes did not complete its publication until 1903, by which time he had incorporated, in addition to his survey work, numerous additional sources of information, including the returns from the 1891 Census.

Booth's survey provoked wide interest, including from B. S. Rowntree, son of the Quaker chocolate manufacturer, Joseph Rowntree. B.S. Rowntree's background fitted him for survey investigation: his father had himself carried out social investigations into temperance habits and was committed to philanthropic activities and, in particular, being a good employer. The concern for the labourer and the condition of his or her life was therefore, a religious prescription that Rowntree had seen exemplified during his upbringing. In addition, the Quaker attitude to children and their welfare was very different from the evangelical Protestantism that stressed their incipient waywardness. Attention was thus more easily focused on children's physical well being, rather than their potential moral degradation. Rowntree pursued an attempt to replicate Booth's London poverty survey in York.²² In the process, he adopted Booth's methodology in part, but also developed the notion of a 'poverty line': an allowance of income which met strictly defined minimum needs and therefore below which a family was undeniably in poverty, regardless of how they actually spent their income. This methodological innovation enabled Rowntree to demonstrate that poverty was (or could be) a consequence of lack of money rather than of dissolute behaviour. Though this claim did not go uncontested, Rowntree's poverty line and its clear linking of income and poverty was the final element in a process of the development of a certain commitment to state action. Acknowledgement of crucial 'facts', when presented in ways that combined statistical advances in sampling and measuring association with systematic forms of collection, became much more likely. From this point onwards, the methods of persuasion in the twentieth century began to take on a form more immediately recognisable today as 'research' and more susceptible to acknowledgement as such by the state.

Such research still combined the twin aspects of observation and counting that Malthus had so controversially emphasised—but not necessarily in the same direction. The social survey, as pursued by statisticians such as Bowley, had a tendency to become a demonstration of the possibilities of sampling and generalisation as it moved away from meaningful poverty lines.²³ On the other hand, the interactive observational strand of Mayhew's work was sustained by exercises such as the Fabian Women's Group's investigation of life among 'respectable' but highly stretched working class wives in the period 1909 to 1913. In the account of this study it is impossible to identify, for example, the sample size.²⁴ However, the work is full of detail which

21 E. Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*. 1842. Edited by M.W. Flin. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (1965).

22 B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*. Second Edition. London: Macmillan (1902).

23 A.L. Bowley and A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and Poverty: a Study in the Economic Conditions of Working Class Households in Northampton, Warrington, Stanley and Reading*. London: G. Bell & Sons (1915); A.L. Bowley and M.H. Hogg, *Has Poverty Diminished?* P.S. King and Son (1925).

conveys not only the vivid reality of the women's lives but also their relationship with the 'investigators' who visited them and collected the information from their budgets.

Those who were campaigning for particular social policy change would draw on both observational and statistical research as a means of creating a persuasive argument. Campaigners would also employ sentimentality about and the acknowledged vulnerability of children when campaigning around child welfare, elements crucial to the development of child poverty policy, as I discuss below. However, there was also increasing acknowledgement of the need to demonstrate relationships and to argue from research findings. Eleanor Rathbone, for example, in her tireless (but resisted) campaigning for family endowment utilised both vivid impressions of women's lives and the latest evidence from surveys and administrative data. The arguments were persuasive and convinced many influential persons, including the economist, John Maynard Keynes, and William Beveridge, the architect of post-war social insurance and social assistance. Nevertheless, the persuasion was resisted at government level as long as economic and political argument rendered family allowances inexpedient.

This last point illustrates the continuing issue that research on its own, however well-conducted, compelling, or urgent, does not translate into policy promptly – or even at all – if powerful ideological, political or religious sentiments are in opposition to the findings. An increasing role for the state and increases in national prosperity provided greater potential for public expenditure; but actual decisions about where such spending should be applied and what areas were deemed affordable, would continue to be subject to the positions and perspectives of those in positions of power.

It is clear from this discussion the extent to which the research process developed between 1800 and 1950. Nevertheless, the impact of the increasing sophistication of research-based findings was erratic and change was induced as much by political factors as by 'hard' research. Against this broader backdrop, in the field of child poverty and child welfare policy the triggers of and constraints on change took particular forms, which will be discussed here.

3. Children and work

It is now widely recognised that the concept of childhood is a social construction rather than a universal absolute, the development of which can be traced historically and which varies across time and space.²⁵ This section argues that child labour legislation (along with education, discussed in the next section) was critical in establishing a relatively bounded childhood and a privileged status for children—even poor children—which was to make state support and intervention in other areas of child welfare increasingly hard to resist. The legislation itself had little basis in the facts of child employment or in detailed empirical research. Instead it was a product of campaigner's mobilisation of sentiment around children combined with arguments that operated within the prevailing discourse of liberal individualism and laissez faire. Nevertheless, the introduction of legislation and the creation of a distinct child population both rendered the ultimate introduction of state educational provision almost inevitable and created a particular constituency for wider poverty research.

The development of a particular notion of childhood as a separate space was first explicitly explored in the work of Ariès;²⁶ and Ariès's unique contribution continues to be influential despite substantial criticism of some of his specific claims.²⁷ Following this, Elias famously linked the separation of the child's and adult's spheres with the 'civilising process'; and Stone, somewhat contentiously, charted changes in the nature of families and family roles.²⁸ As Davin explains,

Childhood, like the family, or marriage, or adolescence or old age, is lived in a cultural and economic context; its character and ideology cannot be assumed.... In any culture or society... childhood is ultimately defined in relation to adulthood. Adults approach or reach adult status by leaving childhood; and frequently their adult authority is confirmed through their control or support of children (or both).... The duration of that period of dependence and subordination, however, is not fixed (not even by the biological benchmarks of puberty or mature growth), and nor is its content.... In England the transition to a prolonged and sheltered childhood happened, unevenly, between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, along with other long-term economic, political and social transformations.²⁹

25 See, for example, D. Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*. London: Routledge (1993); H. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*. London: Longman (1995); H. Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1997).

26 P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*. Harmondsworth: Penguin (1979).

27 See for example, L.A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent Child Relations from 1500 to 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1983).

28 N. Elias, *The Civilising Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilisation*. Oxford: Blackwell (1994); L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson (1977).

29 A. Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home School and Street in London, 1870-1914*, London: Rivers Oram (1996), pp.2-3.

In the development of social policy in relation to children, the state has responded to the recognition of childhood as a separate space and of children as having specific needs *as children*. In turn, the state's responses to and interventions in the lives of children have increased both the recognition and distinction of that separate space, and thereby the need to continue responding. So intervention creates responsibility and thence the need for further intervention. Within the visibly poor population of industrialised England, the existence of a large body of children without conventional occupation and for whom 'being useful' was much more narrowly limited to industrial labour was particularly noticeable and created both concern for them and fear of them. The processes of urbanisation and the creation of this concentrated poor population were connected with the major demographic changes described above. One conclusion that could be drawn from the situation was that adopted by Malthus in his *Essay*. He argued that:

*With regard to illegitimate children, after the proper notice has been given, they should on no account whatever be allowed any claim to parish assistance....The infant is, comparatively speaking, of no value to the society, as others will immediately supply its place.*³⁰

Yet, the failure to fully realise such draconian proposals, alongside continuing young marriages and large (legitimate) families meant, as Hair explains, that '... the Victorian era was the first in British history to find itself forced to take thought about a flood of children'.³¹ Faced with this 'flood', the status of children as a specific social group was problematic for the state. Children could both be seen as too young to be engaged in adult employment and yet too old to be being cared for or to be unoccupied, especially in the increasingly urban settings in which they were found, settings which themselves were expanding with both immigration from the countryside and reproduction.

Traditionally, the boundaries of childhood were established by custom and the situation of the child rather than specific age. They also varied from place to place and according to the issue at hand. The situation paralleled that described by Illich, where,

*In the Andes, you till the soil once you have become "useful". Before that, you watch the sheep. If you are well nourished, you should become useful by eleven, and otherwise by twelve.*³²

30 Malthus, *An Essay*, pp.263-264.

31 P.E.H. Hair, 'Children in Society 1850-1950' in T. Barker and M. Drake (eds.) *Population and Society in Britain 1850-1980*. London: Batsford (1982), p.36.

32 I. Illich, *Deschooling Society*. London: Calder & Boyars (1971), p.27.

Custom and status continued to be important in defining the limits of childhood, but increasing state intervention increasingly required simpler ways of identifying who was referred to. Protective intervention, educational provision and financial subsidy all tend to require ages to be identified at which the individual is a child and so is subject to the particular policies deemed to apply to children. At the same time, as Davidoff *et al* have illustrated, at the end of the nineteenth century the different boundaries between adult and childhood could work in contradictory directions for two teenage girls – servant and middle class daughter – living in the same household:

*A girl of 14 or 15, her undernourished body still far from puberty, was expected to do a full day's work, to put her hair up and lengthen her skirts. Yet she might be living under the same roof as the daughter of the house, of a similar age but still regarded as a child in the schoolroom, hair down her back, skirts still only to the knee, yet physically tall, well built and most likely past first menstruation.*³³

We find, therefore, both research and legislation increasingly attempting to demarcate both the end of childhood and different stages within it (i.e. infancy, childhood, youth), using a combination of arguments based on convention, physical characteristics and pragmatism. Thus, we find, for example, the Royal Commission which advised the government on the Factory Act of 1819 attempting to legitimate a particular age for the end of childhood by stating that,

*in general at or about the fourteenth year young persons are no longer treated as children; they are not usually chastised by corporal punishment, and at the same time an important change takes place in what may be termed their domestic condition. For the most part they cease to be under the complete control of their parents and guardians. They begin to retain a part of their wages. They frequently pay for their own lodging, board, and clothing. They usually make their own contracts, and are, in the proper sense of the words, free agents.*³⁴

Critically, here, we see that one of the determining features of what separates a child from an adult or at least a young person is the issue of the point at which they can be considered a 'free agent'. This highlights the relevance of the dominant *laissez-faire* ideology to the development of social policy in Britain over much of the period. In fact, this ideology still informed much political thinking at the time of the establishment of the British welfare state in the late 1940s.

33 L. Davidoff, M. Doolittle, J. Fink and K. Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960*. London: Longman (1999), p.169.

34 Quoted in Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p.140. Ultimately, three statuses came to be identified for the purposes of policy and which were typically used for the purposes of research also: those of infant (under 8 years old); child (from 8 to 13); young person (from 14 to 18) and adult (from age 18).

State intervention, then, marks out the boundaries of childhood in relation to age and physical space. The beginning of intervention in factory and labour legislation took the state down the road of demarcating a constituency of (poor) children whose welfare would be subject both to increasing interest and increasing intervention. The first Factory Act that attempted to limit the labour of children was that of 1802, which was aimed at apprentices in textile mills. A further Act followed in 1819, which prohibited children under nine years old from working in cotton mills. It is not possible, however, to observe a single point at which the differentiation of children from adults began; and to claim that there was no sense of children as a distinct group nor as distinctly vulnerable at the beginning of the period under consideration would be an overstatement. The mobilisation of public campaigning for factory legislation around the plight of children demonstrates that they already occupied a differentiated status in the public mind, even though the extent and nature of the work they were engaged in at this time shows that it was not a universally held attitude. It is clear that the boundaries of childhood in terms of age were fluid, and its susceptibility to sentimentalisation varied in relation to particular contexts, and in relation to the status or class of the children. This led to policy approaches that were contradictory at times. Similar contradictions are still apparent today in the simultaneous demonisation of children as truants and potential criminals, alongside the inflexible (and uncontested) policy aim of the elimination of poverty among ‘innocent’ children.³⁵

The campaign for child labour legislation also reveals the ideas concerning the set of circumstances under which intervention could be justified. The campaign for the restriction of child labour was the form taken by a campaign for a 10-hour day. This campaign was associated in particular with Richard Oastler, who employed persuasive language and the fruits of his own observation and experience as a working man to conduct a long and energetic campaign. This campaign was little based on what we would now deem to be empirical research—but as the previous section showed, such ‘research’ still had an ambiguous status and content at this time. For example, Engels’ account of the pitiful (and, in his view, corrupting) conditions prevailing in factories in the 1840s draws on the words of factory commissioners investigating and reporting back, but equally he cites statements from polemical ‘letters’ published in popular newspapers.³⁶ Instead of clear-cut research backing, the campaign for factory legislation had a broad base of philanthropic, sentimental and pragmatic support. It both made calls to sympathy for the vulnerability of the child and attempted to distinguish what made the child’s status particular, in order to achieve a reduced working day.³⁷ Mobilisation around children was, therefore, used to attempt to force a restriction in working hours across the board. To make his case, Oastler used

35 See also Hendrick, *Child Welfare* for a discussion of children as simultaneous victims and threats.

36 Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*.

the press, which was much more an organ of popular debate than it is today. In his most famous ‘open letter’, he employed the language of slavery alongside an emotive account of the plight of small children to create an argument designed to rouse public outrage and make appeal to the principles of *laissez-faire*. By those committed in other respects to the ability of the free market to adjust itself, it was assumed that adult wages would adjust to the removal of a cheap ‘secondary’ labour force. Restriction of the labour of those not free to sell it would, therefore, ensure the more effective working of the market for those who were free to sell their labour. Oastler traded on such beliefs as follows:

Thousands of our fellow-creatures and fellow-subjects, both male and female the miserable inhabitants of a Yorkshire town...are this very moment existing in a state of slavery, more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system “colonial slavery”...

Thousands of little children, both male and female, but principally female, from seven to fourteen years of age, are daily compelled to labour from six o’clock in the morning to seven in the evening, with only – Briton, blush while you read it! – with only thirty minutes allowed for eating and recreation. Poor infants! Ye are indeed sacrificed at the shrine of avarice, without even the solace of the negro slave; ye are not more than he is, free agents; ye are compelled to work as long as the necessity of your needy parents may require, or the cold-blooded avarice of your worse than barbarian masters may demand! Ye live in the boasted land of freedom, and feel and mourn that ye are slaves, and slaves without the only comfort which the negro has. He know it is his sordid, mercenary master’s interest that he should live, be strong and healthy. Not so with you. You are doomed to labour from morning to night for one who cares not how soon your weak and tender frames are stretched to breaking...your soft and delicate limbs are tired and fagged, and jaded, at only so much per week, and when your joints can act no longer, your emaciated frames are instantly supplied with other victims, who in this boasted land of liberty are HIRED – not sold – as slaves and daily forced to hear that they are free.³⁸

Here, the radical, the sentimental and an appeal to the fundamentals of liberal philosophy are carefully orchestrated in a public document. Oastler’s contribution was a major component of a wider coalition of interests around the introduction of limitations on child labour, which resulted in Factory Acts in 1833, 1844 and 1874. These acts marked out restricted working

37 D. Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*. Basingstoke: Macmillan (1984) has charted in detail the campaign for the ten hour day.

38 Richard Oastler, Letter on ‘Yorkshire Slavery’, *Leeds Mercury* 16 October 1830, in Fraser *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, Document 1.

hours for 9 (and later 8) to 13 year olds and more limited restrictions for those aged 14-18, establishing defined periods of infancy, childhood and youth. They also linked the provision of education to the limitation of work, binding the two issues together. For Hendrick, 'the campaign to reclaim the factory child for civilisation was one of the first steps in what might be described as the creation of a *universal* childhood'.³⁹ The second step in this direction was the development of education, introduced as a provision to provide training for children of the poor to be the workforce of tomorrow, but which ultimately came to affect all children. Initially it was schooling that was to be fitted into the child's working day, as the first compulsory elements of schooling were incorporated into child labour legislation. But employment was generally restricted by the gradual introduction of schooling in conjunction with employment legislation. For example, in 1875 the minimum age for all half-time employment was raised to 10, and for full-timers to 14.

Factory legislation was more important in creating the conditions for political interference in industry than for its level of impact on children's lives. While there were undoubtedly some children working in extreme conditions who benefited from the Acts, they initially only covered certain industries. Thus, the factory acts did not completely put an end to children's work. This was probably more effectively achieved by the introduction and gradual enforcement of compulsory education. Nor was child factory work, prior to control, a universal urban phenomenon or a substantial contribution to family budgets. Children may have been useful in certain circumstances, but they were rarely a financial asset to their parents before the age of around 14 or 15. While the financial burden of children increased over the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, this was not only due to the elimination of their earning power. On the other hand, agricultural child labour was relatively neglected by campaigners and in legislation, despite the fact that it was probably more widespread.⁴⁰ However, subsequent legislation in 1867 and 1873 proscribed children under eight years old from working in rural pursuits.

The establishment of the principle of protection where freedom to contract could not be assumed was extended from 1844 to include women. They were perceived to be in an analogous position to youths, by being substantially under the control of their husbands. The question of whether women needed protection or simply a level playing field was a source of conflict within the feminist and women's movements throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and

39 Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p.26.

40 See I. Pinchbeck and M. Hewitt, *Children in English Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1973); though the extent of child labour even in rural areas has been contested by H. Cunningham, 'The Employment and Unemployment of Children in England c.1680-1851'. *Past and Present* 126 (1990), 115-149.

beyond.⁴¹ It is certainly the case that children's and women's concerns could be at odds with one another, just as women's interests could vary with their situation. The increasing requirement for children to attend school, by removing potential child-minders and sources of support could simply add to the weight of mothers' domestic responsibilities.⁴²

Current child employment law was effectively established with the Employment of Children and Young persons Act of 1933. This Act restricted children's work to accord with school hours and terms. It also defined children according to age distinctions that fitted with school age groups (compulsory school leaving age was 14, but those taking the school certificate stayed on to 16), with conceptions of youth and with the recognised distinction of younger and older children at the age of 13. It thus drew on conventions that both preceded and stemmed from the construction of the child as the schoolchild. It restricted the amount of work children could do on schooldays and Sundays to two hours and also limited the times they could do it in relation to a 7am to 7pm day.⁴³ It also restricted the age at which children could begin to work to 13, with a distinction made between 13 to 14 year old schoolchildren who could only work 5 hours on Saturdays and in school holidays and 15 year olds, who could work 8 hours. We see here the completion of the attempt to set out boundaries and limits in relation both to educational provision and to notions of physical development and conventional practices.

41 See J. Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf (1984).

42 Davin, *Growing up Poor*.

43 See B. Pettit (ed.) *Children and Work in the UK: Reassessing the Issues*. London: CPAG (1998).

4. The education of children

This section outlines the arguments that were presented in favour of the introduction of state education, governments' tardiness in responding to them, and the consequences of the ultimate introduction of state education from 1870. School is not simply a place where skills are acquired (and whether it is even the best place for this is not universally acknowledged). Rather, schooling also provides containment, institutionalisation and the mediation of appropriate forms of knowledge. It also, potentially, provides the means for the lower classes to access what is deemed to be 'undesirable' knowledge – to acquire subversive beliefs. It has also been widely regarded as having a religious function in relation to the care of children's souls. Then, as now, therefore, justifications for state involvement or lack of state involvement took place at the level of belief and argument, rather than through reference to empirical research. Even those in favour of pauper education were not necessarily in favour of the state providing it. At the same time, education is not a direct panacea for child poverty. In fact, in the short term, it may create it. The trade-off between child (or youth) labour and education pertinent at the period of this paper continues to be an issue throughout the world today. Although, as opportunities for labour, either among children or school leavers are reduced the trade-off becomes less costly.

The history of state education in Britain is therefore not a story of the translation of unequivocal research into policy. Instead, it illustrates the way in which the apparently obvious connection of childhood and school, of the identification of the child with the schoolchild, was neither necessary nor self-evident. The introduction of state education was not a response to issues of child welfare, but it nevertheless produced the conditions under which child welfare could become a subject of investigation and a source of concern, leading to the need for social policy intervention. That is why this story is important to this paper's discussion of the development of child poverty policy.

The increasing regulation of child labour not only increased the pool of unoccupied children who were regarded as a source of concern and potentially threatening, it also reduced the possible options about what should be done with them. If they could not be at work, and were not wanted on the streets, then an obvious place for them was in the schoolroom. A commitment to the value of education for children also came from across the political, ideological and religious spectrum, in widely-read and influential texts. For example, at the beginning of the 19th century, the popular novelist and pedagogical author, Maria Edgeworth—herself influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau – was advocating the importance of education in children's intellectual and moral development. Her popularity was itself outstripped in subsequent decades by the writings of the evangelical Christian, Hannah More, who stressed the religious functions of

education in inculcating Christian moral values. The development of educational provision, in the absence of employment, also provided an alternative means of producing a disciplined workforce. Both Malthus and Smith emphasised the benefits to the state (and the economy) to be derived from a comprehensive system of state education. Smith additionally emphasised that such a project would represent value for money.⁴⁴ Nor did they see such proposals as being at variance with their commitment to *laissez-faire* and ideas of individual responsibility and their general opposition to state intervention. Indeed, Malthus makes the connection between education and liberal philosophy an essential and urgent one. Government intervention in education would, in his argument, illustrate the very impotence and destructiveness of state intervention. The benefits to the state would be ‘doubled’

*if they were taught, what is really true, that without an increase of their own industry and prudence, no change of government could essentially better their condition.*⁴⁵

Nevertheless, while intervention in industry on behalf of the child dated to the beginning of the 19th century, it was another 70 years before the state took on responsibility for provision of education. In the meantime, the limited education for the poor was provided by churches, the different denominations taking care of the souls of their charges according to their particular beliefs. It was also provided through the ‘ragged school’ movement, which supplied basic education and containment for impoverished children. Finally, for pauper children consigned to the workhouse, it was provided within those institutions, where a fundamental element was to separate them from the supposedly invidious influences of their parents and to inculcate a more desirable moral ethos of individual responsibility.

As the ways in which children were educated and the rationale for education came from different positions and aimed for different outcomes, it is therefore hardly surprising that these providers resisted the involvement of the state in a standardised education programme. The nation-building role of education which resulted in much greater and earlier state intervention in other countries (e.g. Germany and France) was also at odds with the principles of voluntarism and individualism that accompanied the philosophy of the day.⁴⁶ The different churches resisted encroachment on their care for children of their denominations; in particular, the non-conformists feared the imposition of a Church of England education on the nation’s children.

44 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 2, p.305.

45 Malthus, *An Essay*, p. 278.

46 See A. Green, *Education and State Formation: The Rise of Education Systems in England, France and the USA*. Basingstoke: Macmillan (1990) for a discussion of the contrasts in educational policy between Britain and France.

The churches continued to be one of the chief powers to be engaged with up to the negotiations surrounding the Butler Education Act of 1944. Proponents of state education were equally vehement in their concern of the bias that a religious education might bring to bear.⁴⁷ For what was at stake was recognised increasingly as being of great significance. Children as a distinct and distinguishable body, who were increasingly rigidly defined, contained within them the material that would make up the next generation's adults. They were the future. In addition, however, the recognition of their vulnerability and 'innocence' together with their lack of agency, rendered them apparently susceptible to being moulded in whatever form their educators chose. Education of the poor was important; but what was more important was that it should not be misconceived.

Added to this was resistance to state provision from some sections of the middle classes, who feared that education and the ability to read radical texts would encourage subversion and unrest. This attitude was hard to dislodge, despite strenuous (but of course unprovable) arguments that state education quells rather than exacerbates public disorder. For example Smith explicitly engaged with this fear when he said,

*The more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders. An instructed and intelligent people besides, are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one ... [and are] less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the measures of government.*⁴⁸

Further reluctance to support a collectivist programme of education came from proponents of individualism. It may also have been that governments recognised the longer-term implications of taking on the charge of the care of the young, and the responsibility for wider welfare that the universal institutionalisation of poor children would involve them in.

Concerns about the subversive elements of education can reveal a parallel here between the attitude towards (poor) children and towards women. While appropriate education for women was endorsed by many relatively conservative writers, demands for equality of education for women was associated with feminism and subversive influences which threatened to undermine

47 See for example Malthus' statement that 'It is surely a great national disgrace, that the education of the lower classes of people in England should be left merely to a few Sunday schools, supported by a subscription from individuals, who of course can give to the course of instruction in them any kind of bias which they please....' (An Essay, p.276).

48 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*. Vol. 2, p. 309.

the natural order. For example, an energetic proponent of women's education at the end of the 18th century was Mary Wollstonecraft. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792 she wrote that,

*Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can a woman be expected to co-operate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthens her reason till she comprehends her duty, and sees in what manner it is connected with her real good?*⁴⁹

Wollstonecraft's plea for education of women in order that they should be better able to avoid vice can be seen to parallel Malthus's arguments in favour of education of the poor. The association, however, between provision of education and subversion of the 'natural order' continued to create further anxiety about state endorsement of education.

Gradually, though without explicit independent research making the case for it, state education became inevitable. The increasing anxiety about the unoccupied or partly occupied masses of children led to an increasing acceptance that the state had a role in providing some sort of occupation for them. Cunningham has described how the unemployment of children presented the nation with a far greater problem than the exploitation of their labour had done.⁵⁰ We can also find in Mayhew's vivid descriptions an association between youthful gangs of vagrants and inappropriate or inadequate education. In fact, Mayhew tried to develop an argument that the ragged schools contributed to delinquency. However, his research was not adapted to making such causal inferences, and the argument was easily disputed.⁵¹ The developing ideas about eugenics and the quality of the nation discussed in Section 2 also contributed to the impetus. Even the Churches began to acknowledge that they could not provide sufficient education to keep pace with their recognition of the need for it.

In addition, as Britain ceased to be the pre-eminent industrial power it was felt that it needed a more skilled workforce. Thus, pressures from a number of sources (among which disinterested campaigners formed only a small part) finally won the case against ongoing resistance. 1870 saw the first Education Act which 'established in principle the right of every child to some form of

49 M. Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited by M. Brody. Harmondsworth: Penguin (1992), pp.86-7.

50 Cunningham 'The employment and unemployment of children'.

51 Williams, From *Pauperism to Poverty*,

schooling'.⁵² And the subsequent period has been seen as marking a crucial shift from the rest of the nineteenth century, with Thane writing that

From the 1870s there was a discernible shift from the traditional notion that children were the responsibility of their families and that no one should intervene between parents and child: a shift associated with wider changes in attitudes towards both children and the family. The evangelical belief, much disseminated in the mid-nineteenth century, that children should be protected from the rigours of the adult world and educated and assisted to be morally good adults, was joined by the end of the century by a belief in the economic and military importance of building, from birth, a strong and stable race.⁵³

The momentum started by this change of heart was continued, and in 1880 schooling was made compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 10, while in 1891 it was made free. An Education Act of 1902 enabled local authorities to introduce and subsidise secondary provision. Thereafter, with some fits and starts, educational provision by the state was sustained and expanded across the 20th century, though critically subject to concerns about cost. For example, the 1918 Education Act raised the school-leaving age to 14, and advised raising it to 16. However, cost constraints meant that this did not in fact occur till 1972, while it had been raised as an interim measure to 15 in 1947. The grammar schools (in which either places could be paid for or scholarships could be given to those who passed an exam) kept pupils until the age of 16 to take the National Certificate. However, this meant that working class children who went to work at 14 could easily leave school without qualifications. Although it was recognised that if working class children were not forced to stay on till 16 then they could never compete with children who had this opportunity, it still took 48 years to remedy that problem.⁵⁴

In fact, while the implementation of state education might have implied that childhood was of equal value for all, the research into comparative outcomes that it enabled continued to reveal that poorer children benefited less in terms of qualifications and positive outcomes. This continued throughout the period, with an early investigation of the impact of the 1944 Education Act revealing strong class differences in selection into the (better-funded, more academic) grammar schools, as well as in how children fared once there.⁵⁵ Education would indeed seem to have been more effective in demonstrating children's 'place' in society to them than in creating a value free period of childhood.

52 Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, p.86.

53 P. Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State 2nd Edition*. London: Longman (1996), p. 40.

54 R.H. Tawney, *Secondary Education for All*. London: The Labour Party (1922).

55 D.V. Glass (ed.) *Social Mobility in Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1963).

Though children may not have been major contributors to family incomes at young ages, older children would often act as child minders to their young siblings or would provide domestic help that would free their mothers for employment. They could also help in times of family sickness. The loss of such help could therefore impact on women's earning ability or effective management of the household. In her discussion of children around the beginning of the 20th century, which draws on biographical sources and contemporary description, Davin illustrates the range of ways in which children could be, or were, usefully occupied outside school and the tensions (particularly for girls) between the requirements of home and school. As she points out,

Compulsory school now, as when it was introduced, amplifies any dissonance between the needs of the family and the demands of society, between an ideal of sheltered, dependent childhood and a reality of poverty and stress where children's help is indispensable.⁵⁶

This is perhaps unsurprising, since education and work-restriction provisions were not intended directly to affect the poverty of the child. While they may have attempted to preserve the child for the enjoyment of childhood, they did not provide the means for that enjoyment outside school. The extension of compulsory school age meant that children were solely dependent on their families for increasing periods.

Education provision, then, established the child as the schoolchild. It also distinguished the realms of education and work. Where early factory legislation had introduced educational provision into factories, the establishment of education and the gradual raising of the school leaving age slowly acted to render work and schooling incompatible. State education also had implications for expectations of children: the skills they were supposed to have; and where they were supposed to be (in school, not on the street). It also had important practical implications for those investigating child poverty, they knew who was a child and who wasn't. For those measuring child welfare, they had an accessible population to study. For those investigating nutrition and hereditary influences on, for example, heights and weights—they could make comparisons across children of different social classes or across areas. Education could standardise to a certain extent the experience of children of school age, and could be used to propagate norms, values and aspirations. Compulsory education also had implications for the income and welfare of poor families and the children within them. Finally, education provision enabled the effectiveness and impact of education itself to be assessed. But such evaluations, if they involved comparisons between classes, did not indicate that claims to meritocracy implicit within the very provision of education were being met.

⁵⁶ Davin, *Growing up Poor*, pp.6-7.

5. Researching child poverty and financial support for poor children

This section focuses on research into child poverty and the policy responses to such research. Gradually, the developments outlined in the previous three sections came to mean that child welfare was more susceptible to systematic empirical research and was, at the same time, a greater potential source of concern. There was, increasingly, a policy imperative to respond to evidence of child poverty and hardship. This imperative continued to be balanced, however, by concerns with the economic implications of action as well as on-going reluctance to intervene either in the market or in what were deemed to be family responsibilities. The development of policy that responded explicitly to child poverty was hard-won and was still, even by 1950, partial in its coverage.

Malthus, in 1803, proposed in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* that:

the clergyman of each parish should, previously to the solemnization of a marriage, read a short address to the parties, stating the strong obligation on every man to support his own children; the impropriety, and even immorality of marrying without a fair prospect of being able to do this; the evils which had resulted to the poor themselves, from the attempt which had been made to assist, by public institutions, in a duty which ought to be exclusively appropriated to parents....⁵⁷

The views expressed here – that the system of parish assistance was detrimental to society; that it created perverse incentives to labourers to produce large families which would justify them in receiving support; and that children were the sole responsibility of their parents – were to dominate the understanding of poor relief in the early years of the nineteenth century. They can be clearly recognised in the writings of the commissioners appointed to investigate the working of the Poor Law, who reported in 1833. Allowances paid from the rates via the Poor Law system were seen as being at odds both with the efficient running of a free market and with notions of individual responsibility and thrift. Comments of the commissioners investigating the operation of the Poor Law illustrate their convictions that it created incentives to those with small property to rid themselves of it, and to those with good incomes in season to squander their earnings so that they should become eligible for poor relief. There is also evident the concern that parish labour with set returns becomes preferred to bargained labour in the market. As far as allowances for the support of children are concerned, the following quotation indicates the unquestioned belief in the inducement to procreation created by the provision of allowances for children:

⁵⁷ Malthus, *An Essay*, p.261.

*A case...of ordinary occurrence, is that of a labourer earning 5s. or 6s. a week in the employ of an individual or of the parish. He must content himself with this wage – **if he is a single man.** But if he has shown foresight sufficient to provide against a rainy day, by getting a wife and six small children, his income rises from **five or six to thirteen** shillings weekly, **seven or eight** of which are paid by the parish.⁵⁸*

For those considering the issue, the need for revision of the poor laws to remove such perverse incentives and to reduce costs to the parish was unquestionable. The result was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which was critical in shaping subsequent forms of assistance and their principles, as discussed in Section 2.⁵⁹ Under the Poor Law Amendment Act, out-relief – support in cash or kind for those outside the workhouse – was abandoned for the able-bodied and allowances for children removed under the principle of ‘less eligibility’ and in order to avoid perverse incentives. Such was the impact of the philosophy which required the rejection of allowances proportionate to family size that it was not till 1945 that a form of support which recognised the extra costs of children and the difficulty of supporting them on a wage was re-introduced.

The New Poor Law of 1834 instead instituted a wider system of workhouses, that is buildings in which those seeking poor relief would reside in highly regulated conditions (including wearing uniforms), undertaking what labour they were capable of, and segregated by sex and age. Under the New Poor Law, there was more evenness of provision across areas and greater centralised control: a price that supporters were prepared to pay for what was deemed an effective response to pauperism.⁶⁰ Those who were driven to or chose to apply for parish assistance would not only be required to undertake labour but would have to be resident in the highly stigmatising workhouses, where accommodation and food would replace subsidies and where families were separated. The initial implementation of the Act was patchy, but with energetic circulars and increased inspection it gradually began to operate as intended, both in the limitations on out-relief and in the disincentives to call on the forms of relief offered. One of Mayhew’s Morning Chronicle Letters provides this account of a young woman’s experience of the ‘house’ from 1849,

58 *Extracts from the Information Received by His Majesty’s Commissioners, as to the Administration and Operation of the Poor-Laws.* Published by Authority. London: B. Fellowes, 1833, p.170.

59 For the history of the poor laws, a detailed but partisan account is given by Nicholls up to 1860 and continued up to 1900 by Mackay (Sir G. Nicholls, *A History of the English Poor Law in Connection with the Legislation and Other Circumstances Affecting the Condition of the People. Vol. 3* by T. Mackay. London: Frank Cass (1898-1904)). See also the informative accounts given by M. E. Rose in ‘The Allowance System under the New Poor Law’. *The Economic History Review* 3 (1966) 607-620, and *The Relief of Poverty, 1834-1914.* London: Macmillan (1972). The 1909 majority report on the Poor Law by the commission set up to investigate its functioning also contains the history up to that point; while D. Fraser’s edited volume, *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century.* London: Macmillan (1976) contains articles on a range of activity that took place within and around the working of the Poor Law.

60 See Rose, *The Relief of Poverty*, pp.8-9.

and the reluctance to use the only form of poverty relief available:

I have this infant at the breast and another child. I lived with a young man eight or nine years. It is not in his power to make me his wife, because he has not the means to do so. I left him at different times, through sickness and distress, to go into the house. The last time I went in they were going to take the elder child from me and send it to Tooting, and another one that was suckling at my breast then, but I have buried it since. The thought of having my children taken from me was more than I could bear, and I thought I would rather starve. I went before the board. One gentleman wished to assist me, but the others were all against me.... I went out and lived with the father of the child again, and got a little work as well as we could, him and me too. I fell in the family way again, and I lost my second child. We were so poor that we were forced to sell or part with anything that would fetch a penny to get food. Several times I went to the house, but they would not give me a loaf of bread for the children. I thought I would not go in – I would sooner do anything first.⁶¹

The New Poor Law continued to determine the provision of relief to those without other forms of support through the remainder of the century. However it became increasingly under pressure leading to a report into its operation in 1909. Also, its effectiveness in stigmatising its provision meant that there were increasingly more attempts to provide support outside its remit. It was in a sense, a victim of its own success in this particular aspect.⁶² It was finally dismantled in the legislation of 1946 to 1948. Nevertheless, the principle of ‘less eligibility’ was retained even in alternative attempts to provide relief.

Despite the ongoing influence of the principle of ‘less eligibility’, the idea that individuals could, through their own actions and labour, necessarily support the upbringing of their children came under increasing pressure. The pressure stemmed from the establishment of (initially highly contested) evidence that incomes even from full-time employment were insufficient to supply the basic needs of families. It also came from evidence of the poor physical condition of the working classes and working class children; and physical condition was increasingly linked nutritional patterns and levels, especially following developments in nutritional science from the late 19th century onwards. In addition, understanding of children’s development and children’s particular needs were increasing. Further concern was stimulated by evidence that families were increasingly taking steps to reduce the burden of children by limiting their fertility, with

61 H. Mayhew, *The Morning Chronicle Survey of Labour and the Poor: The Metropolitan Districts*, Volume 1. Firlie: Caliban, 1980, Letter XI, p.240.

62 Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*.

consequent declining birth rates. That this evidence coincided with a period in which Britain was facing military and industrial competition, and also a period in which the privileged status of children had broadly ceased to be contested, resulted in extensive mobilisation around the concerns of child poverty and health. However, there was little consensus as to what should be the solution to this problem, and research, campaigning and policy responses took a number of different forms.

In the period up to the First World War, then, child poverty became a publicly acknowledged reality, with increasing admissions that philanthropy on its own was insufficient to deal with it. Social surveys; the increase of professionals directly involved with children and families, such as teachers and social workers, and the scandal over the inadequate supply of recruits for the Boer war, which itself tied into the eugenics movement all tended to establish the need for a response from the state.⁶³

Booth's survey of London study in the 1880s revealed a high proportion of families with children in poverty. Some of these belonged to what tended to be seen as the feckless, deviant or criminal groups. However, his survey also revealed the low wages associated with unskilled labouring jobs, and, more importantly, the problem of interrupted or unreliable work—the class of 'casual workers', deemed to be 'very poor'. The existence of trade cycles and the 'genuine' nature of some unemployment were beginning to be recognised by the end of the 19th century. But, perhaps more problematic was the issue of underemployment, which could provide only a hand-to-mouth existence for the labourers themselves and was inadequate for the maintenance of a family.⁶⁴ For example, earlier in the century, Mayhew's comprehensive and evocative study of the state of wages and employment in London had begun to alert many *Morning Chronicle* readers to the privations suffered as a result of unreliable and low wages and their deleterious consequences.

As mentioned above, Booth's survey took advantage of the existence of school board visitors—those who undertook to ensure the attendance of children at school—to conduct his household survey. He was, therefore, able to capitalise on both the knowledge of the relevant school-age population, necessitated through the introduction of compulsory schooling, and on the existence of body of individuals, which had been created to enforce the legislation. Methodologically, there were many problems with his survey: his attempts to extrapolate from families with

63 See T. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1992) on the relationship between military concerns and the rise of the welfare state (in the USA).

64 See J. Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography*. Second Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1997).

children to all households was purely speculative; and his 'definitions' of poverty of household 'classes' were general descriptive categories that did not equate to specific criteria and were based on the judgement of the visitors. Nevertheless, the survey made an impact on many of those interested in questions of poverty, and indicated some of the possibilities for systematic research into the issue.

B.S. Rowntree, in his 1899 survey of York, attempted to replicate Booth's study in a different town. However, his almost intuitive grasp of fundamental methodological issues meant that he imposed a much more systematic approach on his survey.⁶⁵ His use of relevant professionals to get at pertinent information echoed Booth's, though he also made use of local workers with religious and health-based backgrounds as well as educational ones. And he also employed expert 'researchers' for all his surveys. He surveyed systematically all the households deemed to be living in working class streets. His idea of classifying streets clearly came from Booth, but preceded rather than resulted from the survey. He also introduced a system of checks on the information gathered by those making the household inquiries, to verify their information. He collected details of the chief earner's wages directly from employers in order to obviate any problems of respondents providing inaccurate information about their or their husbands' wages. By his approach he was able to produce the powerful argument that incomes (including incomes from earnings) were simply not sufficient to maintain children. He developed a notional standard which represented the costs of only meeting the most essential needs and compared actual incomes with this standard. By this method, he could calculate the numbers of those whose incomes failed to meet their 'essential needs'. At the same time, he could demonstrate that waste or poor management could not be held responsible for the situation of those in primary poverty, for whom, however frugal, there was simply not enough money to go round. He described what his notional income standard representing 'bare physical efficiency' actually meant in the following evocative terms:

*It is thus seen that **the wages paid for unskilled labour in York are insufficient to provide food, shelter, and clothing adequate to maintain a family of moderate size in a state of bare physical efficiency.** It will be remembered that the above estimates of necessary minimum expenditure are based upon the assumption that the diet is even less generous than that allowed to able-bodied paupers in the York Workhouse, and that **no allowance is made for any expenditure other than that absolutely required for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency.***

65 See J. Veit-Wilson, 'Paradigms of Poverty: A Rehabilitation of B.S. Rowntree'. *Journal of Social Policy* 15: 69-99 (1986).

And let us clearly understand what “merely physical efficiency” means. A family living upon the scale allowed for in this estimate must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus. They must never go into the country unless they walk. They must never purchase a halfpenny newspaper or spend a penny to buy a ticket for a popular concert. They must write no letters to absent children, for they cannot afford to pay the postage. They must never contribute anything to their church or chapel, or give any help to a neighbour which costs them money. They cannot save, nor can they join sick club or Trade Union, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have no pocket money for dolls, marbles, or sweets. The father must smoke no tobacco, and must drink no beer. The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or for her children, the character of the family wardrobe as for the family diet being governed by the regulation, “Nothing must be bought but that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of physical health, and what is bought must be of the plainest and most economical description.” Should a child fall ill, it must be attended by the parish doctor; should it die, it must be buried by the parish. Finally, the wage-earner must never be absent from his work for a single day....

*The fact remains that every labourer who has as many as three children must pass through a time, probably lasting for about ten years, when he will be in a state of “primary” poverty; in other words, when he and his family will be **underfed** [italics in original].⁶⁶*

Rowntree argued on the basis of his research that the working class experienced an uneven life-course of five periods alternating between want and sufficiency. He considered therefore how poverty extended over the life course, with childhood, and the child-rearing years (as well as old age) being particularly vulnerable. He also amplified his findings by carrying out direct measurements of the heights and weights of school children, made possible by utilising workers of the school medical service, which had been established in 1907, and relating them to levels of income.

Rowntree’s work was influential in revealing the extent of poverty, and, particular, child poverty; and in producing a method that could be replicated in other parts of Britain. Combining Rowntree’s income and needs comparison with developments in statistical science and the principles of sampling, a number of researchers carried out similar social or poverty surveys in

towns around Britain in the period up to the Second World War.⁶⁷ Rowntree himself repeated his surveys of York in 1937 and 1950, and used the insights of his methodology to argue for a minimum wage.⁶⁸ Not only did these surveys serve to enumerate child poverty, they explicitly emphasised its importance. Their attempts to create meaningful subsistence scales also involved adapting diets for different ages of children, and once again we can see how ‘scientific’ and conventional notions of childhood interact. The graduation of child costs with age was combined with an acceptance of the standard points at which a change in status took place. Thus, even when initial estimates of costs were made for small, two-year age ranges, in the ensuing poverty line and calculations based on it costs were aggregated and simplified so that they only differentiated at the beginning (5) and end (13/14) of the school life of the child. Similarly, the basic needs of children themselves altered (and their costs changed) with developments in views on appropriate feeding and the balance needed in a child’s diet: from being simply assessed as a proportion of an adult, a child came to have differentiated costs.⁶⁹

At the same time as these statistical household surveys were developing, evocations of the qualitative experience of poverty more in the tradition of Mayhew continued. For example, we find testimonies to the struggle to making ends meet provided by Maud Pember Reeves’ account of the Fabian Women’s Group’s investigation into family budgets. Here, the relationship between the visiting ‘researchers’ and the women they were researching was a critical part of the study; and the detailed descriptions are as much part of the research as is the information on budgets that they contain. The study also reflects explicitly on the way nutritional and practical information is received within families. For example, having promoted the virtues of porridge in terms of nutritional value and low cost, they then explore the reasons why the advice of the visitors is ignored:

67 See the surveys: A.L. Bowley and A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and Poverty: a Study in the Economic Conditions of Working Class Households in Northampton, Warrington, Stanley and Reading*. London: G. Bell & Sons (1915); A.L. Bowley and M.H. Hogg, *Has Poverty Diminished?* P.S. King and Son (1925); B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York*. Second Edition. London: Longmans, Green and Co. (1942); B.S. Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State: A Third Social Survey of York Dealing Only with Economic Questions*. London: Longmans, Green and Co (1951); H. Tout, *The Standard of Living in Bristol*. Bristol: Arrowsmith (1938); D. Caradog Jones, *The Social Survey of Merseyside*. London: Hodder and Stoughton (1934).

68 B.S. Rowntree, *The Human Needs of Labour*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons (1918); B.S. Rowntree, *The Human Needs of Labour*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. (1937).

69 See R.F. George ‘A New Calculation of the Poverty Line’. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 100 (1937) 74-95.

The visitors in this investigation hoped to carry with them a gospel of porridge to the hard-working mothers of families in Lambeth. The women of Lambeth listened patiently, according to their way, agreed to all that was said, and did not begin to feed their families on porridge. Being there to watch and note rather than to teach and preach, the visitors waited to hear, when and how they could, what the objection was. It was not one reason, but many.... Well cooked the day before, and eaten with milk and sugar, all children liked porridge. But the mothers held up their hands. Milk! Who could give milk—or sugar either, for that matter? Of course, if you could give them milk and sugar, no wonder! They might eat it then, even if it was a bit burnt. Porridge was an awful thing to burn in old pots if you left it a minute.... An' then, if you'd happened to cook fish or "stoo" in the pot for dinner, there was a kind of taste come out in the porridge. It was more than they could bear to see children who was 'ungry, mind you, pushin' their food away or 'eavin' at it. So it usually ended in a slice of bread all round and a drink of tea.⁷⁰

Somewhere between the poverty surveys and the Pember Reeves study in style was a comprehensive survey of *Women's Work and Wages* in Birmingham, carried out by interested parties who included a member of the Quaker, chocolate-producing Cadbury family. Religious ethos, a tradition of direct philanthropy, including Sunday school teaching, and a first hand connection with industry, which also provided the funds for the study, again provide the background for a major investigation. This study however, focused specifically on the issue of women's lower wages. It emphasised the hardship and potential degradation caused by paying women less than they could ever be reasonably expected to live upon.

And the great crowd of those lower still, who just do not make enough on which to live, who are always underfed and underclothed; what of them? To all who have gone in and out among them it must be a matter of continual marvel that so many of them are so good. There is a heroism rarely seen or recognised in the lives of these thousands who "keep respectable."⁷¹

However, equalisation of wages was never seriously considered by government as a means to improving family incomes. At the same time, the resistance to any action associated with feminism or operating outside the perceived 'natural order' tended, if anything, to delay or impede policy development. Instead, campaigners who used the evidence of the poverty surveys as a rationale for improving family wages argued either for family allowances or for an increase in the 'breadwinner wage'.

70 Pember Reeves, *Round about a Pound a Week*, pp.57-58.

71 E. Cadbury, M. C. Matheson and G. Shann, *Women's Work and Wages*, Second Edition, London: Fisher Unwin (1908), p.190.

Once the reality of child poverty and the necessity of responding to it had come to be generally acknowledged, there were two policy options for responding to it. One, which was implied by the household-based surveys and their income measures of poverty, was to find a means of increasing the amount of money available to the family. The other, which fitted better with the ongoing reluctance to ‘reward’ families for having children, and which was supported by many charitable organisations and workers directly involved with children was to provide direct nutritional support to children. Each of these options was itself seen as being best attained in one of two ways. Arguments for increasing family support focused on either the attainment of a ‘breadwinner’ wage, or on providing a system of ‘family endowment’, which harked back to the days before 1834. Those in favour of direct intervention, particularly relating to nutrition, focused either on the mother and child relationship or on the child apart from the mother. Each proposal was attractive to campaigners for different reasons and had elements that made it both attractive and threatening to governments and to wider, ruling class, opinion.

Direct intervention towards needy children was facilitated by compulsory schooling and by the direct access to children this offered. The fact that school was increasingly perceived as an environment in which children could be weighed, measured and their malnutrition noted also rendered it an obvious site for intervention, especially the feeding of children. There was much charitable feeding of schoolchildren by the end of the nineteenth century (with little genuine effort to recoup the cost from parents, even where that was the principle). The care of schoolchildren was systematised by the formal introduction of free school meals for needy children in the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act and by the creation of a school medical service in 1907. Nevertheless, despite the attractiveness of direct work with schoolchildren from the perspective of accurate monitoring of the future generation and the avoidance of provision to parents, such interventions were still deemed to undermine parental responsibility and to infringe on the role of the family. The influential Charity Organisation Society, for example, consistently resisted the provision of free meals on the grounds that they undermined parents’ duty to look after their own. In addition, cost constraints were very much to the fore in the early years of the 20th century, following the expenses of war. Thus, we see that, despite the existence of medical care and surveillance in schools, the potential to provide directly to all children within such an institutional environment was never fully exploited. During the Second World War, R.A. Butler, president of the Education Board, argued that “if we are out to improve the conditions of childhood the most effective way of doing so would be to provide *free* meals, *free* milk and *free* boots and clothing for all children who satisfy an income test”.⁷² While such

72 Quoted in J. Macnicol, *The Movement for Family Allowances 1918-45: A Study in Social Policy Development*. London: Heinemann (1980), p. 180.

means-tested elements continued to remain part of the school environment and one part of the support to needy children, they were not to play a comprehensive role in the amelioration of child poverty.

On the other hand, it was deemed that if the role (and responsibility) of the family and in particular the mother was central, then child welfare should, and could only, be achieved through working with mothers. Much of such work focused on educating mothers. As Thane puts it:

Medical officers of health (MOHs) and others were convinced that the chief causes of physical weakness and infant mortality were unsuitable feeding and lack of hygiene in the home which could, they believed, be improved by the education of mothers in child care and domestic skills. More intensively in the 1900s, MOHs and such voluntary organizations as the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Infant Health Society gave talks to women, issued leaflets and established schools to train mothers in child care and domestic skills.⁷³

The profession of Health Visiting, where trained visitors would go the homes of mothers of newborn children to offer advice and to check the condition of the children, came into being at the end of the nineteenth century. This practice persists today, though not without ongoing ambiguity for both some workers and some mothers about the precise purpose of the visit: community health promotion, individual support or surveillance. There were also attempts to establish a series of milk depots, with limited success; and mother and baby clinics also began to open in this period.

Maternity payments were regarded as a way of reducing maternal ill-health and infant mortality, where the stress on infant survival was enhanced through a growing awareness within government and the ruling classes that the number of children being born was declining as couples limited their fertility. In order to improve maternal and infant health and survival, and following campaigning by the Women's Co-operative Guild, a maternity payment for the wives of insured men was included in the health insurance provisions of Part I of the National Insurance Act of 1911. The extent of female ill health (among women employees, especially married women employees) was also revealed by claims following the introduction of this act. This demonstrated the large amount of, until then unrealised, illness, which had previously been simply endured. Much ill-health was associated with the negative health consequences of

73 Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*, p.64.

pregnancy and childbirth, and raised the issue of the extent to which pregnancy (or at least the last month of it) should be designated as incapacity:

By these witnesses it is contended that there is in fact more sickness than was expected when the Act came into operation, and that the excessive sickness among married women is a common experience due to illnesses connected with and consequent upon childbirth. The evidence of medical practitioners is overwhelmingly in support of the view that the effect of the Act has been to disclose, especially among industrial women, an enormous amount of unsuspected sickness and disease, and to afford treatment to many who have hitherto been without medical attendance during sickness.⁷⁴

For those working directly with mothers or with children, the relevance of direct improvements in parental income were hard to dispute, especially when supported by the escalating survey evidence of widespread child poverty, which family incomes were insufficient to mitigate. Many therefore began to seek a solution in an improvement in family incomes. The direction of campaigning for family incomes, however, took two forms, which were regularly opposed to each other: to achieve a minimum (family) wage or to establish family endowment.

It is perhaps testament to the successful impact of the social surveys, that support for children was predominantly (and increasingly) constructed in relation to the household in which the child lived and in terms of income assistance. Rowntree himself developed his innovation into an argument about the need for a ‘family wage’ in his *Human Needs of Labour*;⁷⁵ and reiterated this in his second York survey of 1937:

*The fact is that so long as wages are paid which are below the sum needed to enable a family of five to attain the minimum standard, there will always be a number of families living below it, and **these will almost always be families with young children.**⁷⁶*

A family minimum wage was supported by (male) trades unions, and emphasised a family form whereby the wife’s primary role would be childcare, supported by her husband. Rowntree’s work on the *Human Needs of Labour* and the campaign for an adequate breadwinner wage also justified differential wages for men and women. Hence, it chimed with conservative forces, apparently attempting to maintain the social order. Nevertheless the introduction of a minimum

74 ‘Report of the Departmental Committee on Sickness Benefit Claims under the National Insurance Act, 1914’ in Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*, Document 8, p.315.

75 Rowntree, *The Human Needs of Labour* (1918 and 1937).

76 Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress*, p.54.

wage still implied a radical level of intervention in industry, and was resisted by governments through fears about its impact on competitiveness.

On the other hand the campaign for family endowment (that is payments to families in relation to the number of children in the family) offered a potentially more cost-effective policy with no need for intervention in the market or for differential wages between men and women. However, the interests of the campaigners for family endowment allied the movement not just with those concerned for child poverty but also with a range of ‘women’s issues’. These included the recognition of married women’s work in the household, the distribution of income within the household and the disparity between men’s and women’s wages. As Pedersen has pointed out, the movement was therefore subject to suspicion and this substantially retarded its enactment.⁷⁷ Taking her position to its extreme, the research and campaigning around family allowances can almost be seen as having been detrimental to the swifter introduction of allowances.

Eleanor Rathbone is the name most closely associated with the movement for family allowances. She campaigned untiringly on this issue up until 1945, when she ensured that payments finally made under the Family Allowances Act of that year were made to the mother rather than to the father. In a lecture of 1927, Rathbone sets out many of the arguments in favour of family endowment, also demonstrating how many countries had already put some sort of system into existence. As well as marshalling numerous facts and figures that were increasingly available on issues of child nutrition and child poverty, she also organised her argument to take issue with countervailing views, in particular the idea that the state should not interfere with parental responsibility:

The argument that the State must not step in between parent and child has in fact been used against every past measure for safeguarding the welfare of children. Yet few will deny that the standard of parental care has never been higher than at present, and that it has been strengthened by the long series of reforms which have compelled even the most selfish parent to recognize that his child is not merely his creature, but a human being with its own rights and its own value to the community.⁷⁸

But despite her abandonment of the principle of a ‘mother’s’ wage and the fact that she placed her primary arguments around the welfare of children, she could not but reveal that the family

⁷⁷ S. Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France 1914-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993).

⁷⁸ E. Rathbone, *The Ethics and Economics of Family Endowment*. London: Epworth (1927), pp. 50-51.

endowment agenda was also driven by concerns with paid and unpaid women's positions. She suggested that acknowledgement of the work done by mothers in bringing up children could be better recognised through 'family endowment' than through the pay packet. She also noted the extent to which the notion of a breadwinner wage to support the family (such as was supported by Rowntree) was used to justify differential wages to men and women engaged on the same or similar work:

Nor does it seem probable that, even when trade has become prosperous again, anything less than another Great War will break down the opposition of men trade unionists to the free competition of women's labour with men's, so long as men's wages have to bear nearly the whole burden of the maintenance of the children. This almost inevitably results in different rates of pay for the two sexes, even when the value of their work is admitted to be equal. Or if equal pay is theoretically conceded, it is accompanied by a steady pressure to limit the opportunities of the women workers to the lowest-paid jobs.⁷⁹

The parallel (and often heatedly opposed) campaigns for family endowment and for a minimum wage were fought throughout the period leading up to the Second World War. At the same time that these possible solutions for low wages were being sought, the situation of children in families without a worker were, despite the introduction of a limited form of unemployment insurance in 1911, more extreme. Family allowances or a higher wage might resolve the problem for those children in poverty but with a parent or parents in work. They would not necessarily have an effect on the poverty of children whose parents were unemployed or unable to work, since, as happened with the social security provisions of 1948, family allowances would be counted as income for the purposes of benefit assessment and social security payments would be reduced accordingly.

The awareness of trades cycles and the presence of severe recessions, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century made it hard to sustain the principle of the 1834 Poor Law that genuine unemployment did not exist. Instead the problem became that of distinguishing between the genuinely unemployed and the 'idler'. There was also on-going interest in ways of undermining the development or maintenance of an 'idler' mentality, once those who had been committed to work became unemployed. The virtues of separation were espoused through the creation of labour colonies for the unemployed. These settlements, a number of which were established in the first decades of the 20th Century, were intended to provide residential-based

79 Rathbone, *Ethics and Economics*, p.35.

activity to those who were genuinely and temporarily unemployed in order to maintain their work ethic until they were re-instated in a 'real' job. Such colonies sought to separate the well-intentioned unemployed from the invidious effects of their environment. A parallel move to protect children from the deleterious character effects of living with unemployed parents was also attempted through separation. Just as the workhouse had kept children and adults apart; some children's organisations, including, for example, Barnardo's, during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, actively encouraged the emigration of children overseas to an environment deemed to be more conducive to a work ethic. It also physically removed the child poverty 'problem' in these cases.

At the same time the issue of 'genuine' unemployment and consequent poverty excited explorations into the development of an unemployment insurance system, modelled on that developed in Germany under Bismarck. The opportunity arose when a Liberal government came to power in 1905, which led to the appointment of a reforming Lloyd George to the Treasury and a young Winston Churchill, socially concerned and determined to make his mark, to the Board of Trade. The substantial Labour party successes also gave additional political impetus to the introduction of reforms; and Winston Churchill recruited to help him develop an insurance system the young William Beveridge, whose lifelong commitment to social insurance was already beginning to take shape.

Part II of the 1911 National Insurance Act was restricted in its scope and coverage: it only covered those employed in certain trades and it did not pay allowances for dependants. It was also intended to keep the costs of unemployment within the working classes rather than to be redistributive. Following the First World War, there arose the acute problem of how to manage the system once major recession hit at the beginning of the 1920s. The inter-war years were wracked by the problem of maintaining and extending an insurance system when demands were exceeding contributions, while nevertheless trying to maintain principles of less eligibility. Although the insurance principles could not be fully sustained, and despite increasing prosperity in some parts of the country, the consequence of pressures to restrict payments was that allowances for the dependants of the unemployed were kept punitively low.⁸⁰ This was despite the fact that there was no evidence of benefit dependency among the population and the problem of overlap of benefits and wages was relatively insignificant.⁸¹ Children, then, or at least families with children, suffered because the ideological and political costs of adequate allowances within unemployment were too high. More generous allowances, it was also feared, would increase the momentum for a minimum wage or at least some wage inflation.

80 See the discussion by P. Hill, *The Unemployment Services: A Report Prepared for the Fabian Society*. London: Routledge (1940), pp.112-117.

81 See Macnicol, *The Movement for Family Allowances*, pp.118, 124.

During the Second World War, however, long-term solutions were sought to avoid a repetition of the experience of the 1930s. Beveridge was invited to look into the issue of *Social Insurance and Allied Services*.⁸² The problem for him was to create a system of insurance entitlements that did not allow for dependants alongside a residual assistance system which did allow for dependants but was still less generous than insurance. His ideas on entitlement and rates, as well as the anticipated effects of his programme, were derived from the survey research evidence; and he was critically influenced by Rowntree's work, in particular. From his perspective, the parallel system of insurance and assistance with differentiated rates accorded with principles of justice, thrift, less-eligibility and dignity, as well as resolving the issue of poverty. Ultimately, though, as he recognised, it could only be ensured by a system of family allowances payable to all but which would be deductible from any social assistance payments.

In the attempt to render the findings of his report politically powerful and to mobilise public opinion behind them, Beveridge orchestrated a highly publicised release of his report. In the days following its publication, 635 000 copies were sold at a price of two shillings each. Observers noted the excitement and the queues that stretched through the streets of London of those trying to get hold of a copy. Beveridge's support for family allowances thus received public endorsement, as well as backing from influential analysts and researchers such as Richard Titmuss and J.M. Keynes. The value of allowances was even recognised by conservative interests due to their potential to keep down wages. In this way, the Family Allowances Act of 1945 became inevitable. It established unequivocally the state's acknowledgement of some responsibility for the welfare and costs of children.

For Beveridge himself, this represented an essential shift in position:

*The failure in spite of so much general progress to abolish poverty has been due not simply to lack of knowledge but also to undue emphasis upon a simple line of progress namely improvement of wages and working conditions as distinct from living conditions. Health insurance itself for thirty years has remained, on the side of treatment, confined to the paid workers in place of embracing all the unpaid working population of housewives and dependants....For improvement of the conditions of people it is more important now to concentrate on living conditions than on working conditions; it is necessary to look away from the workman and his wages at the purpose for which these wages are required. To do so, is to see at once that one indispensable step to abolition of poverty is the adjustment of incomes to needs by children's allowances.*⁸³

82 Sir W. Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Cmd 6404. London: HMSO (1942).

83 Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, pp.289-90.

However, as this account has shown, the drive to family allowances also came from far more conservative and pragmatic pressures. Until the final publication of the Act there also remained concerns that the government would be committing itself and its followers to the substantial maintenance of children and consequently what was perceived as a great burden. This concern was resolved by removing provision for the first or only child from the scheme and thereby halving the cost. The original scheme could have been funded through shifting expenditure from other areas, such as child tax allowances, which predominantly benefited the middle classes; but this did not happen, illustrating that the 'burden' was one of perception and politics, rather than simple resource constraints. There was also a refusal to set the allowances at a level that reflected contemporary evidence on children's subsistence needs. This meant that there was no implication that the government was committed to taking on the full basic costs of children. We can see here, therefore, an acknowledgement that the state had an obligation to respond to the welfare of children; but that its generosity could always be restricted on economic grounds. This balance between state responsibility limited by available financial resources is mirrored in the provisions of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Similarly, the setting of National Insurance rates was heavily influenced by cost containment, so that while these and national assistance rates were directly influenced by Rowntree's ongoing poverty research, they substantially distorted his conclusions downwards. The consequence was that child allowances in National Assistance continued to be substantially lower than the amount it would require actually to support a child of the relevant age. At the same time, the principle of parental financial responsibility for offspring was re-asserted in the National Assistance Act of 1948, which wrote in the responsibility of a parent to maintain his/her children and the possibility of recouping the funds (Section 42).

The 1940s also saw the introduction of a National Health Service in 1948, following the Act of 1946. This opened up possibilities of health care to both women and children that had previously been inaccessible due to the limitations of the insurance system. Maternal and child health improved substantially and particular provision in relation, for example, to spectacles and support for hearing impairments now became possible for many families, transforming lives.

By 1950, there was a widespread recognition that children were a valuable part of society with particular needs that society as well as the parents had a responsibility to meet. There was a recognition that children between the ages of 5 and 15 merited free and compulsory education

to suit their abilities; that all children deserved health care that was free at the point of delivery; and that the state had some responsibility towards sharing the additional costs of children. Nevertheless, the tension between maintaining 'less eligibility' and responding to child poverty meant that despite the fact that by 1950 the state had developed an extensive commitment to the support of children, it had not fully resolved the issue of child poverty. The welfare of the poorest children was to continue to be restricted by political and ideological constraints that had their roots in the previous century.

6. Summary and conclusion

One message that comes over from this survey of poverty studies and policy change over the period 1800 to 1950 is that there exists an oblique relationship between the two. Developments in child poverty research, in child welfare policy and in the conceptual distinction of the child interacted with each other throughout the period. Direct causal relationships, however, remain hard to disentangle as they could work in both directions. Conclusions about the impact of research on policy must remain, at most tentative. Nevertheless it remains undeniable that the world of 1950 was very different from that of 1800. Not only was Britain markedly different both economically and socially by 1950; but economic and social change both contributed to and fed off the extensive policy development that took place between the two dates. Furthermore, the development of systematic empirical research was both associated with the policy developments and was increasingly recognised as an important point of reference for future development.

It is undeniable, for example, that Rowntree's poverty study had a significant and far-reaching impact, which can still be felt in today's welfare state. It was not, however, an impact that derived directly from his research and conclusions. Much of Rowntree's development of his insights into poverty revolved around the notion of a minimum or 'breadwinner' wage – yet it was only in 1999, 100 years after his first research in York, that Britain saw the introduction of a minimum wage as part of a concerted anti-poverty policy. Similarly, while much poverty research and lobbying has been motivated by the existence of child poverty, the realisation of adequate child poverty reduction measures has often been at variance with other policy concerns, in particular concerns around perverse incentives—that is, not making unemployment 'attractive' to parents.

Equally, Eleanor Rathbone's name is synonymous with the movement for family allowances in the UK. Yet, despite her tireless campaigning from after the First World War, Family Allowances were only finally introduced in 1945, and even then with some resistance. Their introduction can be seen to have served a number of alternative policy pressures; for example, wage suppression, as well as solving the conundrum of setting both appropriate but distinct National Insurance and National Assistance rates. In fact, the association of the family allowance movement with the feminist movement and with concerns for some financial autonomy for women resulted, as Pedersen argued, in the limited effectiveness of the highly energetic campaign.

A further finding is that, to create its impact, research not only had to come of age, but, almost paradoxically, it also had to appeal to conservative instincts in order to effect policy change. This is not to downplay the impact of single-issue and radically-based campaigning. The campaign for protective factory legislation can be seen as a highly radical one that mobilised support through its emotive highlighting of child labour. In fact it drew little on what we might see as conventional research. Nevertheless, as this paper has shown, such activism clearly had to locate more traditional power bases of support in philanthropic individuals and organisations and those concerned with church-based education. It also had to accord, at least in part, with wider policy objectives before it could really have effect.

One of those critical shifts that was crucial to the implementation of policy in relation to the education and welfare of children, but which was also born of such policy, was the changing status of childhood over the period. Policy change itself fed into an increasing concern with the situation of the child, which then prompted mobilisation of activity around the issue of child welfare, itself resulting in policy changes and shifts.

Finally, the assumed relationship between the welfare of women and of children led to policy initiatives based on these interconnections. The fact that women give birth to and tended to be responsible for the care of children resulted in health and welfare interventions for children being aimed directly at women. At the same time, mistrust of the capability of working class mothers meant attention was both paid to their 'education' and to identifying spaces (particularly schools) where interventions could be made more directly. Such policy could be embraced or rejected by feminists and by those primarily concerned with the welfare of children. Policy for children and women has also often been connected by assumptions that they are in an equivalent situation: as dependants or as needing protection. Thus, restrictions on women's employment followed restrictions on child labour. In addition, women's responsibility for children was argued to be both a reason for a family wage rather than wage equality between men and women, and for an allowance paid directly to women to enable them to control the family finances more effectively in favour of children.

As this paper has illustrated, the issue of and response to child poverty cannot be separated from those processes (such as education, labour control) by which the boundaries of childhood became fixed in terms of both age and space. Nevertheless, while this marking out of childhood involves the gradual recognition of children as 'children' first and 'poor' second, such recognition

did not result in an unequivocal response to child poverty. The prevailing ideologies of the day, the perception of children as primarily the responsibility of their parents and the emphasis on engendering a responsible public means that active measures to ameliorate the poverty of children can be resisted. Developments in poverty research and understanding of children's needs can represent a breakthrough in approaches to child poverty. But, nevertheless, it may take further developments that shift conventional positions on existing levels of welfare to increase pressure for appropriate responses.

Research has provided the means for pressure groups to pursue their goals and can be seen in the continuing action of, for example, the Child Poverty Action Group, or SCF itself, yet its impact is not predictable and research findings do not lead conclusively to action. Rather, research has to find its place within prevailing (though, obviously not static) ideas and beliefs. In order to move forward, research has had to juggle between a radical agenda that would mobilise interest and action, and more conventional positions, such as on women's claims to equality. Nevertheless, despite this less than optimistic scenario, the role of both key activists and innovative research can be seen to be critical. Moreover, poverty researchers can be seen to have developed and defined a field of research, which is a critical element in enabling child poverty as a subject to be talked about and engaged with as a policy issue. Without the work of research to both define the problem and then to re-iterate it in up-to-date or modified forms, the policy agenda would not advance.

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