

Understanding Inequalities Symposium

The impact of inequalities in the early years on outcomes over the life course: Using international evidence to identify creative policy solutions

March 11th 2019, Scottish Parliament
09.00 – 16.30

This event will bring together an international group of world leading scholars, who are actively researching the impact of disadvantage and inequality in the early years, with senior policy makers from different jurisdictions who have a shared interest in developing creative and effective solutions. The participants include academic speakers from the UK, Ireland, US, Australia, New Zealand and Israel and senior policy makers from the UK and the US.

Aim of the symposium

Our aim is to share a wealth of current international evidence on the impact of inequalities in the early years on outcomes at all stages of the life course and have a full and frank discussion of the implications of this for policy decision making and developing effective modes of practice. By bringing together academics and policy makers from a range of international jurisdictions, we hope that this event will lead to cross-fertilisation of ideas, co-production of new research questions, opportunities for international impact on strategic and operational decision making, and open up possibilities for policy learning. It will also be helpful in identifying whether the research findings are context specific or may be generalizable to a range of countries and cultures.

Academic presentations

The event will be organised into three sessions according to different stages in the life course:

1. Inequality and adversity in early childhood

A growing number of studies show that early inequalities and disadvantage (across a range of social and economic dimensions) can have a profound impact on early developmental, behavioural and neurological outcomes. This, in turn, can effect early transitional stages, such as moving from pre-school into primary education, and development of conduct disorders. The first session of the symposium will examine the differential effect of important factors that impact on life chances in early childhood; for example, cognitive and non-cognitive deficits, living in poverty, adverse childhood experiences and the other problematic individual and family circumstances. The papers in this session will be:

The transition to primary school: How family background and childcare experiences influence children's skills on school entry (Professor Emer Smyth, ESRI, Dublin)

Mind the gap – unequal from the start: Addressing inequalities using evidence from Growing Up in New Zealand (Professor Susan Morton, University of Auckland)

Poverty, problem behaviour and policy: conduct disorder among ten-year olds in Scotland (Dr Kath Murray, University of Edinburgh)

2. The effect of childhood inequality and adversity in adolescence

Longitudinal studies increasingly show that the negative impacts of different forms of adversity and inequality experienced in childhood are likely to continue and exacerbate in adolescence, especially if early and effective interventions are not put in place. This can have a particularly detrimental effect on key stages of educational attainment (in secondary school) and neurological development.

The second session of the symposium will examine how inequalities in terms of poverty, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), brain development and early academic deficits that occur in childhood can impact during adolescence on outcomes such as scholastic achievement, delinquency, substance use and experience of victimisation. The papers in this session will be:

Poverty in early childhood and later cognitive achievements in Israel (Professor Yossi Shavit, Tel Aviv University)

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adolescent Development in a High-Risk Sample (Dr Abigail Fagan, University of Florida)

3. Longer term impacts of early inequality and adversity into adulthood

Research into the lived experience of inequality and adversity during the early years has consistently shown that the detrimental effects can last long into adulthood. Longitudinal studies are increasingly enabling researchers to disentangle and test the cumulative impact of specific social, economic, environmental and structural factors in early childhood on outcomes over the rest of the life-course. Such outcomes include attainment in tertiary education, success or failure in the labour market, likelihood of contact with the adult criminal justice system and general life success and wellbeing. The third session of the symposium will examine the long term effects of inequalities experienced in childhood and adolescence on adult outcomes, specifically likelihood of attainment in higher education, pattern of criminal conviction, and broader life success including factors such as housing and relationship stability, employment, violence, substance use and mental ill health. The papers in this session will be:

Inequalities in achieving a university degree: Using a sibling design to disentangle the importance of individual and family factors (Professor Cristina Iannelli, University of Edinburgh)

Adult life success and the impact of poverty (Dr Tara Renae McGee, Griffith University)

How do early inequalities and adverse experiences impact on criminal convictions over the life course? (Professor Susan McVie, University of Edinburgh)

Policy discussions

After the presentations in each session there will be generous time allocated for responses from policy makers and discussion on implications of the research evidence for policy and practice across different jurisdictions. The respondents include Louise Scott from the Children and Families Division at Scottish Government, Lauren Supplee, Chief Operating Officer at Child Trends in the US and Leon Feinstein, Director of Evidence with the Children's Commissioner for England.

The final session of the symposium will be led by Professor Adam Gamoran President of the William T Grant Foundation, who will share insights from the policy context in the US. This session will involve a dedicated discussion of the importance of the research base for developing future policy, the potential for creating strategies to reduce inequality gaps in childhood, and the challenges and possibilities of effecting real change through effective interventions at different stages of the life-course.