Growing Up in Scotland: Change in early childhood and the impact of significant events

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The Growing Up in Scotland Study

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of several cohorts of Scottish children through the early years and beyond. The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen). GUS provides crucial evidence for the long-term monitoring and evaluation of policies for children, with a specific focus on the early years. While the principal aim of the study is to provide information to support policy-making, it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. GUS collects a wide range of information about children and their families; the main areas covered include childcare, education, parenting support, health and social inclusion.

Background to the report

This document is one of a series that summarises key findings from the fifth sweep of the survey, which was collected in 2009/10 when the birth cohort children were almost 5 years old. It presents key findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) report Change in early childhood and the impact of significant events.

This research focused on identifying key events that happen during childhood and examined whether families who experience these events are more likely to face known drivers of negative child outcomes.

The research looked at four significant events: parental separation; moving home; parental job loss; and the onset of persistent maternal health problems. It explored the association between these events and factors which other research, including GUS, has shown to be related to poor child outcomes. The ‘drivers’ of negative child outcomes covered in this report were income poverty, poor maternal mental health, chaos in the home environment and quality of parent-child relationship.

The research was built around three research questions:

- How prevalent are the events in the first five years of children’s lives?
- Which families are most likely to experience these events?
- How are these events associated with known drivers of poor child outcomes?

The findings have implications for policies focusing on parental employment and child poverty, housing policy and for counselling and support services aimed at families.
How prevalent are the events in the first five years of children’s lives?

- About one in ten children (11%) experienced parental separation in the first five years of their lives. For two-thirds of these families the separation marked a transition into a relatively sustained period of lone parenthood, lasting at least for the remainder of the time studied. The incidence of parental separation was highest in the first two years after the child’s birth.

- Moving house was the most common event identified in this report. Forty per cent of children experienced at least one move in the first five years of their lives and 9% moved twice or more. The likelihood of a house move decreased as the child got older and the most common reason given for the move was to have a bigger home.

- A sustained job loss or substantial reduction in working hours was much more likely among lone parents than couple families: 14% of lone parents compared to 6% of couple families, experienced job loss. Conversely, stable employment was more likely among couple than lone parents. The majority of couple families (82%) experienced a high level of employment throughout the five-year period, while just 20% of lone parents were in stable employment throughout.

- The least common event was the mother developing a persistent limiting health problem during the first five years of the child’s life. Most mothers in GUS experienced good health throughout the study period and the onset of a persistent limiting maternal health problem only occurred in 2% of families.

Which families are most likely to experience the events?

We investigated which characteristics were associated with each of the events occurring, whilst taking into account other potentially influencing factors.

- Families most likely to experience parental separation included those with cohabiting rather than married parents, families living on relative low income and families where the birth of the child was unplanned.

- Families most likely to move, and moving more frequently, included those with a younger mother and private renters. Families living in rural areas, with good maternal-infant attachment and families with children older than the study child were less likely to move house.

- Lone mothers most likely to experience a sustained job loss included younger mothers, mothers with more than one child and mothers with poorer physical health. Couple families most likely to experience a sustained job loss included families in social rented accommodation and families living on low income. In addition, couple families with other children older than the study child, were less likely to experience a job loss.

- Mothers in workless households had a higher likelihood of developing a persistent limiting health problem, as did those mothers with poor mental health.

How are these events associated with drivers of poor child outcomes?

We looked at the association between the events and the drivers of negative child outcomes whilst adjusting for whether or not the driver was already present before the event, and other factors such as family background characteristics. In other words we investigated whether the driver of negative outcomes is exacerbated following the event. For example, the finding that families are more likely to be income poor after parental separation adjusts for the fact that low-income couples are more likely to separate in the first place.

- All four of the significant events investigated in this report are associated with income poverty. For example, compared with 31% of study families overall, low income was experienced by:
  - 55% of separated families,
  - 47% of families who moved twice or more,
  - 47% of couple families, and 81% of lone parent families, experiencing job loss, and
  - 55% of families experiencing the onset of persistent maternal health problems.

- Being without work is clearly a key cause of poverty. Losing a job or significantly reducing hours worked can signal a decline into poverty for many families. The findings further suggest that a parent losing a job or substantially reducing their working hours is also associated with a high level of home chaos and conflict in the parent-child relationship, implying a need for extra
support for unemployed parents, or the whole family, over and above the employment support available to jobseekers.

- Parental separation is associated with poor maternal mental health, in addition to low income. This suggests that more support is needed for families to help prevent relationship breakdown, perhaps targeted at the transition into parenthood, or to cope with the experience of separation when it occurs.

- Moving house is also associated with poor maternal mental health, and private renters were identified in this research as a group of families particularly likely to move and to move more than twice in the early years of a child’s life. The analysis was not able look in detail at the reasons for moves. It is thus unknown whether the higher prevalence of moving among private tenants is due to families being able to take advantage of a more flexible housing market to meet their changing needs or whether it is because of involuntary moves due to a less secure housing situation. However, the negative outcomes associated with house moves (income poverty and poor maternal mental health) suggest that more support or better protection may be needed to cope with the experience of house moves, or possibly to avoid frequent moves.

- The findings suggest that the mother developing a persistent limiting health problem is associated with a high level of home chaos, conflict in the parent-child relationship, and poor maternal mental health, as well as income poverty. This may have implications for funding and provision of different services aimed at supporting parents living with health problems, and their families.

**Conclusion**

The key messages to emerge from this research are that all of the events have multiple negative outcomes and events which happen to parents can have implications for the whole family, including young children. For example, job loss is associated with poverty, but also with chaos in the home environment and high conflict in the child’s relationship with their parent. This suggests that services need to take a holistic approach, looking at the needs of the whole family, not just those who the event is perceived to affect directly. Better joined-up services are necessary with signposting, referral and outreach services to ensure all affected family members have access to appropriate support to address the different ways in which they have been affected by an event.
Further information on the Growing Up in Scotland Study can be found at: [www.growingupinscotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinscotland.org.uk)

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