

Key Findings



Persistent Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

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This paper presents the key findings of research commissioned by Save the Children and is based on the report “Persistent Child Poverty in Northern Ireland” written jointly by researchers from Save the Children and ARK.

Introduction

Research to date on child poverty in Northern Ireland has focused on measuring child poverty using point in time methods and distinctions have not been made in terms of length of time in poverty. From existing analysis we are not clear how long children remain in poverty and whether it is a few children for whom poverty has a long term impact or whether it is a relatively mobile phenomenon with children and their families moving into and out of poverty. Studies in Great Britain (Jenkins, 2001; Adelman et al, 2003) and in Ireland (Layte et al, 2006) have tracked the progress of children living in poverty over the last decade or more. Due to a dearth of data this has not previously been possible in Northern Ireland and so little is known about the persistence of child poverty. The introduction of the Northern Ireland Household Panel (NIHPS) survey in 2001 enables researchers and policy analysts to study, for the first time, the duration and dynamic nature of child poverty. Four years of data are now available for analysis which allows the study of persistent poverty, defined as being poor three years in a four year period. The research findings summarised in this paper enable us to better identify policy solutions targeted to assist children and their families living in persistent poverty.

Children in poverty 2001-2004

This Research Update uses net income data from the first four waves of the NIHPS to examine persistent child poverty in Northern Ireland. The NIHPS is a panel survey where the same respondents are followed up each year, enabling researchers to study the duration and dynamics of poverty which is not possible through repeat cross-sectional surveys such as the Family Resources Survey. The income data were equalised using the OECD (before housing) scale. The number of children who were living in a responding NIHPS household throughout the four years of the survey and whose families provided full financial information in all four years is 550.

Children were first defined as being in severe poverty, in non-severe poverty or not in poverty in each of the four years using the following criteria:

- **No poverty** – households living on incomes 60% and above the UK median net household income;
- **Non-severe poverty** – households living on incomes which are 40% or more but less than 60% of the UK median net household income;
- **Severe poverty** – households living on incomes below 40% of the UK median net household income.

The proportions of children in no poverty, non-severe poverty and poverty in Northern Ireland across the four years of available data are shown in Table 1.

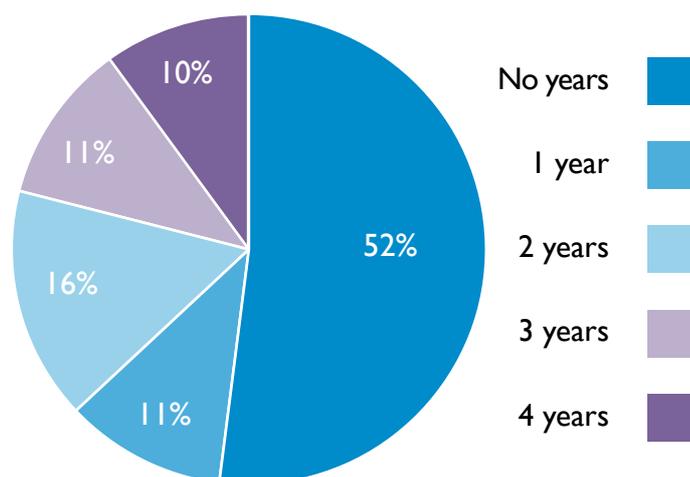
Table 1: Poverty Type

Row%	Proportion of children in:		
	No poverty	Non-severe poverty	Severe poverty
2001	73	18	9
2002	66	25	9
2003	72	17	11
2004	72	20	8

Number of years in poverty

As Figure 1 shows, more than half of all children (52%) were not in poverty in any of the four years while 10% of children were in poverty in all four years of the survey.

Figure 1: Number of years in poverty



Persistent and severe poverty

Using the data from each of the four years, children were allocated to one of five groups:

- **No poverty** – not in poverty in any of the four years
- **Short-term no severe** – in poverty in either one or two of the four years but no severe poverty
- **Short-term and severe poverty** – in poverty in at least one or two of the four years and at least one year in severe poverty
- **Persistent no severe poverty** – in poverty in at least three of the four years but no years in severe poverty
- **Persistent and severe poverty** – in poverty for at least three years and at least one year in severe poverty.

As Table 2 shows, just over one half (52%) of all children in Northern Ireland had not experienced poverty in any of the four years while 9% of children were in persistent (no severe) poverty and 13% were in persistent and severe poverty. This compares with 68%, 4% and 5% respectively in Great Britain.

Table 2: Poverty type over four years (Northern Ireland and Great Britain)

Col%	Northern Ireland	Great Britain
	%	%
Poverty type		
No poverty	52	68
Short-term no severe	15	14
Short-term and 1+ severe	12	8
Persistent no severe	9	4
Persistent and 1+ severe	13	5
	100	100

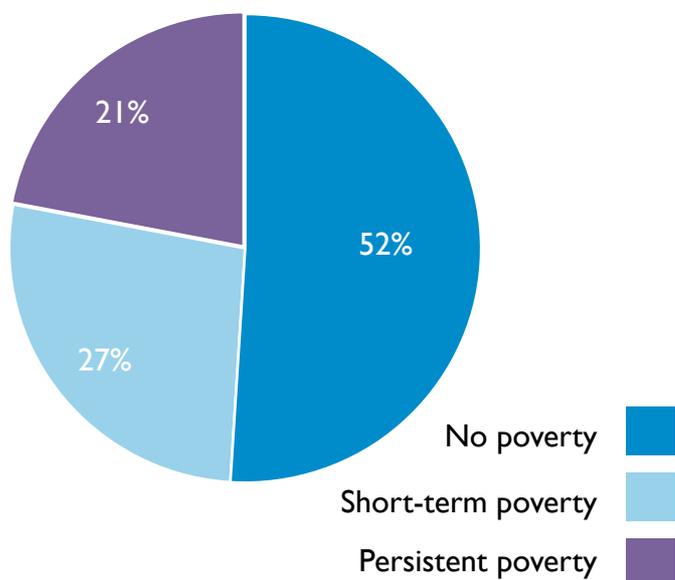
Base: NI- 550; GB-2385

As can be seen from Table 2, in Northern Ireland the number of children in some of the poverty types is too small for further meaningful analyses to be carried out. For this reason, the data were recoded into three groups:

- **No poverty** – not in poverty in any of the four years
- **Short-term poverty** – in poverty for one or two of the four years
- **Persistent poverty** – in poverty in at least three of the four years

While most of the analyses in this update will be carried out using these three groups, significant differences that emerge in relation to the severity of poverty will be highlighted although these results should be treated with caution.

Figure 2: Poverty type over four years



As Figure 2 shows, just over half (52%) of all children in Northern Ireland had not experienced poverty in any of the four years, 27% were in short-term poverty and 21% of children were in persistent poverty.

Characteristics of children in poverty

It is clear that the circumstances of children can change over time and that these changes may trigger entries into or out of poverty. It is, of course, also possible that a change in poverty status could lead to changes in family circumstances and act as a catalyst for family breakdown for example. This means that the direction of causation cannot be established conclusively; however, the NIHPS provides a means of examining at least some of the circumstances that are related to transitions into and out of poverty.

Using data from Wave 1 of the survey, children were categorised as living in households with particular characteristics previously associated with poverty (Adelman et al, 2003) and these variables were analysed with the children's poverty status across the four years of the survey.

Employment status of adults in the household

Information was available on the employment status of the adults in the household and children were categorised at Wave 1 as living in a household with no workers, one worker or two or more workers. As Table 3 shows, children who lived in households that were not in poverty in any of the four years were much more likely to have two or more workers than those who had experienced some poverty. Four out of

Table 3: Number of workers in household (at wave 1)

Col%	Types of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
No workers	4	33	80
1 Worker	32	40	15
2+ Workers	64	27	5
All children	100	100	100

five children who had experienced persistent poverty lived in households that had no workers in Wave 1. This compares to one third of those who had experienced short-term poverty and only 4% of children who had not experienced any poverty in the four years.

of the survey lived with two parents. This compares with 65% of children who had experienced short-term poverty and 34% of children in persistent poverty. As Table 5 shows, almost three quarters (72%) of children in persistent and severe poverty lived with a lone parent.

Changes in the number of workers in the household

Over half (53%) of all children experiencing persistent poverty lived in households with no workers in any of the four years of the survey (Table 4). Children living in short-term poverty were more likely than their peers who were in persistent poverty to have 2 or more workers and to have experienced transitions between one and two or more workers. However, children in persistent poverty were most likely to have experienced transitions between having workers in the household and having no workers.

Table 4: Changes in number of workers in household

Col%	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
Always no workers	2	18	53
Always 1 worker	16	16	5
Always 2+ workers	53	21	5
Between 1 and 2+ workers	26	22	0
Between workers and no workers	3	23	37
All children	100	100	100

Household Type

According to the NIHPS, in Wave 1 25% of all households in Northern Ireland with dependent children were headed by a lone parent. Previous research has indicated that children living in lone parent families in Great Britain are more likely to be in poverty than those who live in couple households (Adelman et al, 2003). As Figure 3 shows, this is also the case in Northern Ireland. Almost nine out of ten (87%) children who were identified as not in poverty in any of the four years

Figure 3: Household type

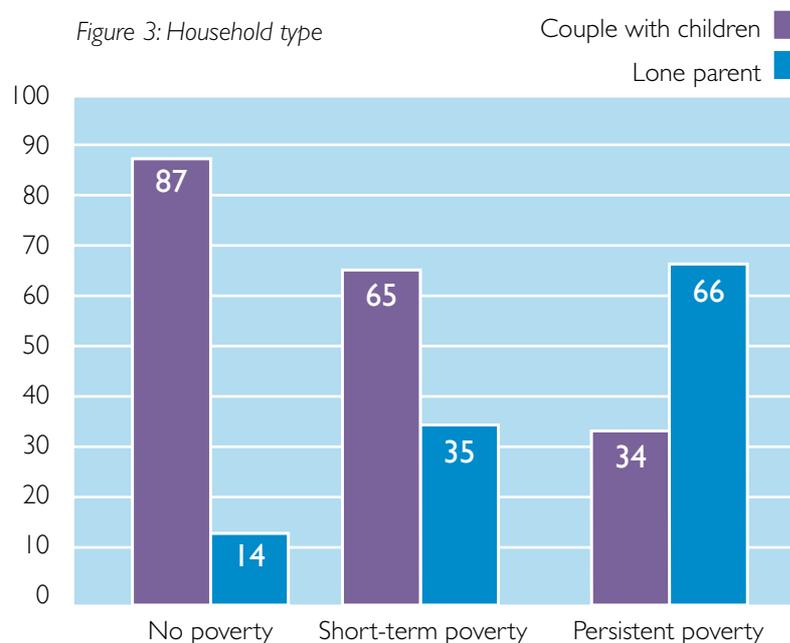


Table 5: Household type and persistent and severe poverty

Col%	Types of poverty				
	No poverty	Short-term no severe	Short-term & 1+ severe	Persistent no severe	Persistent & 1+ severe
Couple with children	87	52	83	44	28
Lone parent	14	48	18	56	72
All children	100	100	100	100	100

Changes in Family Circumstances

Most children lived in households that remained stable over the four years of the survey while 11% experienced transitions between lone parent and couple households. Children in poverty were much more likely to have experienced transitions in household type than their peers who were not in poverty; 18% in persistent poverty, 15% in short-term poverty and 6% in no poverty (Table 6).

Table 6: Transitions between household types

Col%	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
Always a couple	81	57	26
Always a lone parent	12	28	56
Transitions between couple and lone parent	6	15	18
All children	100	100	100

Elderly or disabled people living in the household

The NIHPS contains a question which asks adult respondents whether they care for someone living in their household who is elderly or disabled. Using this question, it was possible to identify children who lived in households in which at least one person (either a disabled or elderly adult or a disabled child) was being cared for: Six per cent of children who were not in poverty lived in households in which at least one person was being cared for but this figure rose to 11% for children who had experienced short-term poverty and to 17% for those who were in persistent poverty (Figure 4). As Table 7 shows, children living in persistent and severe poverty were most likely to have someone in the house who was elderly or disabled and who needed care (23%).

Figure 4: Person cared for in household

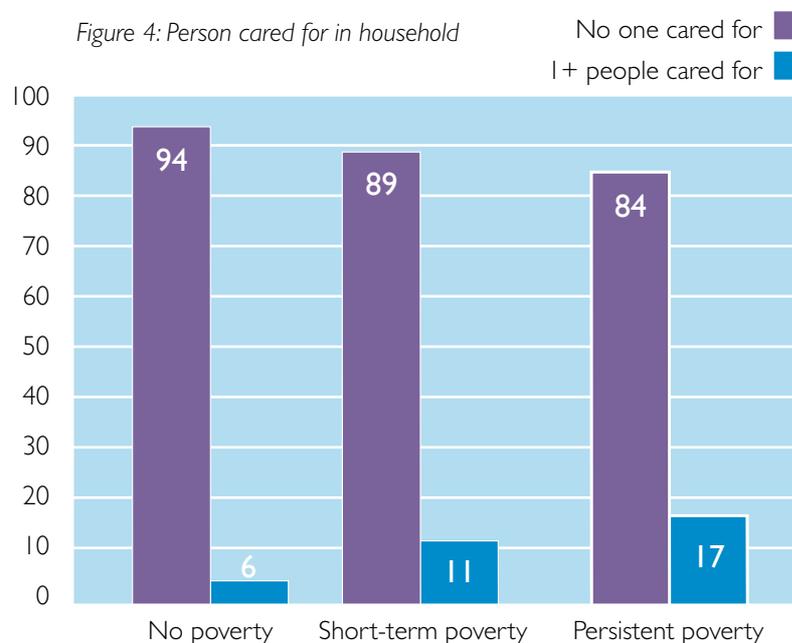


Table 7: Person cared for in household

Col%	Types of poverty				
	No poverty	Short-term no severe	Short-term & 1+ severe	Persistent no severe	Persistent & 1+ severe
No one cared for	94	84	97	93	77
1+ people cared for	6	16	4	7	23
All children	100	100	100	100	100

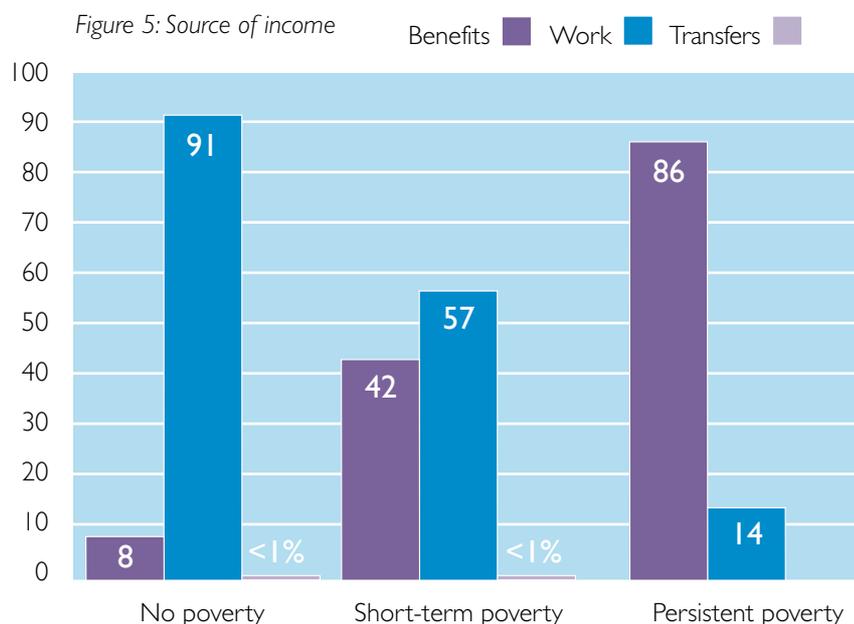
Main source of income

Being in poverty for even one of the four years of the survey significantly increased the likelihood of families relying on benefits as their main source of income: only 8% of children who had not been in poverty lived in families whose main source of income was benefits compared with 42% of children who had experienced short-term poverty. The figure rose to 86% for children who had experienced persistent poverty (Figure 5).

Changes in main source of household income

Children living in households that had been in poverty were more likely than those who had not been in poverty to have experienced changes in their main source of income over the four years. Twelve percent of children (12%) living in short-term poverty and in persistent poverty had adults in the household who had moved from benefits to work or transfers (ie income transferred from other sources e.g. investments/absent partner) as their main source of income compared with 3% of children who were not in poverty. Nine percent of those in short-term poverty had moved from work or transfers as their main income source to benefits. In contrast, 5% of children in persistent poverty and 3% of children who were not in poverty had adults in the household who moved from work to benefits. Children living in short-term poverty were most affected

Figure 5: Source of income



by the number of transitions; 13% had experienced 2 or more transitions in the four years compared with 4% of children in long-term poverty and 3% of those who were not in poverty (Table 8).

Table 8: Transitions between the main source of household income

Col%	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
Always benefits	5	25	74
Always work/transfers	86	41	5
Benefits to work/transfers	3	12	12
Work/transfers to benefits	3	9	5
2+ transitions	3	13	4
All children	100	100	100

Note: there were a very small number of families who had income transferred from other sources and these were combined with work as a main source of income here

Highest educational qualification

The survey collected information on the educational qualifications of mothers and fathers and, to ascertain the highest level of education within the household, the highest educational level achieved by either the mother or the father over the four years was used. As Table 9 shows, almost half (48%) of all children who lived in families which had not experienced poverty in any of the four years of the survey had a parent with a degree level qualification or higher. This compares with 16% of those who had experienced short-term poverty and 5% of those who had experienced persistent poverty. The latter group were most likely to live in households in which the parent(s) had no academic qualifications; 47% compared with 21% of children in short-term poverty and 6% of those who were not in poverty in any of the four years.

Table 9: Highest parental educational qualification

Col%	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
Degree	48	16	5
A-level or equivalent	21	11	7
O-level or equivalent	25	52	41
None of these	6	21	47
All children	100	100	100

Housing tenure

The vast majority (81%) of children whose families had experienced no poverty in any of the four survey years lived in owner-occupied accommodation compared with 46% of those in short-term poverty and only 19% of children who had been in persistent poverty, four in five of whom lived in rented properties (Figure 6).

Number of children in household

Children who were in persistent poverty were more likely to live in households with four or more children (29%) than those who lived in short-term poverty (15%) or no poverty (7%). In contrast, 27% of those who had not experienced any poverty over the four years lived in households with only one child compared with 15% of children who lived in persistent poverty (Table 10).

Table 10: Number of children in household

Col%	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
1 child	27	13	15
2 children	47	44	32
3 children	19	28	24
4+ children	7	15	29
All children	100	100	100

Figure 6: Housing tenure

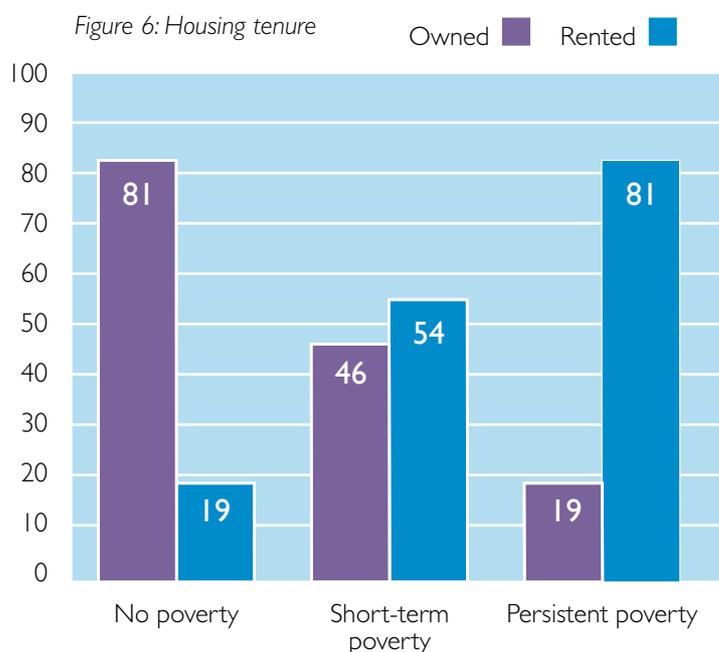


Table 11: Transitions between numbers of children

Col%	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
No change	85	78	79
Increase	12	19	13
Decrease	2	3	5
Other*	1	1	4
All Children	100	100	100

* note this category included those children who lived in families where an increase and a decrease was experienced over the four year period and also a small number of young people who moved from their family home to independent living

Changes in the number of children in household

As Table 11 shows, children in short-term poverty (19%) were more likely to have experienced an increase in the number of children living in their household than those in either persistent poverty (13%) or not in poverty (12%).

Parents’ mental health

Previous research has indicated that being in poverty is associated with poor mental health and wellbeing (Saraceno and Barbui, 1997) and this relationship was assessed among the parents of children participating in the NIHPS. The measure used in the survey to assess mental health and wellbeing was the General Health Questionnaire, which is a standardised instrument used to detect the presence of non-psychotic psychiatric morbidity in community settings. The NIHPS used the 12-item version - the GHQ12 - which the respondents completed themselves. Higher mean scores on the GHQ12 indicate poorer mental health and wellbeing. An average GHQ12 score across the four years of the survey was computed for mothers and fathers separately as previous research in Northern Ireland has indicated that there are gender differences, with females tending to have higher GHQ12 scores than males

Table 12: Parents’ average GHQ12 score over four years

Average GHQ12 score	Type of poverty		
	No poverty	Short-term poverty	Persistent poverty
Mothers	11.36	12.92	14.08
Fathers	10.14	11.23	11.78

(O’Reilly and Stevenson, 2003). As Table 12 shows, both patterns noted above were found in this research – mothers had significantly higher GHQ12 scores than fathers and the parents of children who were in poverty were significantly more likely to have higher GHQ12 scores – and therefore poorer mental health and wellbeing – than the parents of children who were not in poverty. Mothers of children who were in persistent poverty had the highest mean score of all (14.08).

Conclusion

Static measures of child poverty are likely to underestimate the experience of child poverty over time which means the challenge of eradicating poverty is even greater than that suggested in official figures (Smith and Middleton, 2007). In comparison with figures from Great Britain, Northern Ireland has double the proportion of children living in persistent poverty and for these children the impact is likely to be much more serious than for those children who temporarily experience poverty.

We can also see from the data that one in ten children experiencing short term poverty are likely to experience two or more transitions between living in families dependent on benefits and having work as their main source of income. Those policies focused on helping families exit poverty need to ensure that they remain out of poverty and that such an exit is sustainable. As persistent and recurrent poverty is likely to be particularly detrimental to children’s wellbeing government policies need to focus more on the particular experiences of these children and their families.

More needs to be done to alleviate the impact of persistent poverty on children’s lives and policies should be tailored to the particular circumstances of those living in persistent poverty. More knowledge is needed about the barriers which prevent families taking up opportunities and the extent to which opportunities do not exist for these families. In addition, many adults in persistent poverty households have taken on caring responsibilities and further investigation of their particular needs and what it would take to lift these families out of poverty is needed. It is clear that without aiming policies and solutions at tackling persistent poverty in Northern Ireland it is unlikely that the government’s targets for the eradication of child poverty will be met.

Longitudinal qualitative research is needed to further understand the nature of persistent poverty, poverty resilience and coping strategies. This type of research would enable a better understanding of the extent of available opportunities (or lack of them) and the barriers which those living in persistent poverty face, preventing many children and their families escaping poverty.

Key points

- Just over half (52%) of all children had not experienced poverty in any of the four years of the survey while 27% had been in poverty for at least one of the four years and 21% were in persistent poverty.
- Four out of five children who had experienced persistent poverty lived in households that had no workers in Wave 1 compared to one third of those who had experienced short-term poverty and only 4% of children who had not experienced any poverty in the four years. Over half of those in persistent poverty (53%) had no workers in their family throughout the four year period.
- Almost nine out of ten (87%) children who were identified as not in poverty in any of the four years of the survey lived with two parents. This compares with 65% of children who had experienced short-term poverty, 34% of children in persistent poverty and 28% of children in persistent and severe poverty.
- Most children lived in households that remained stable over the four years of the survey while 11% experienced a transition between lone parent and couple type. Children in poverty were much more likely to have experienced a transition; 18% in persistent poverty, 15% in short-term poverty and 6% in no poverty.
- Living on benefits for even one of the four years of the survey significantly increased the likelihood of families being in poverty: only 8% of children who had not been in poverty lived in families whose main source of income was benefits compared with 42% of children who had experienced short-term poverty. The figure more than doubled for children who had experienced persistent poverty to 86%.
- 13% of children living in short-term poverty had families who experienced 2 or more transitions between benefits and work as their main source of income during the four year period.
- Almost half of all children who lived in families which had not experienced poverty in any of the four years of the survey had a parent with a degree level qualification or higher. In contrast, only 16% of those who were in short-term poverty and 5% of those in persistent poverty had a parent with a similar qualification.

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Notes



The Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey is carried out annually. Respondents are interviewed in their own home by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Call Katrina Lloyd at ARK on 028 9097 3585 with any queries regarding the use of the survey. ARK is a joint project between Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. Check the website for more information on ARK at - www.ark.ac.uk

This research project on Persistent Child Poverty in Northern Ireland has been carried out through a partnership between Save the Children and ARK.

The full report and further information about Save the Children's work on child poverty can be obtained by contacting:

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