

2006

Evaluating Sure Start

Edward Melhuish
University of Wollongong, melhuish@uow.edu.au

Jay Belsky
University of London

Alastair Leyland
MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit

Angela Anning
University of London

Zarrina Kurtz
University of London

See next page for additional authors

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Recommended Citation

Melhuish, Edward; Belsky, Jay; Leyland, Alastair; Anning, Angela; Kurtz, Zarrina; Tunstill, Jane; Ball, Mog; Meadows, Pamela; Barnes, Jacqueline; Frost, Martin; and Botting, Beverley, "Evaluating Sure Start" (2006). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 1165.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/1165>

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Abstract

Sure Start local programmes are a cornerstone in the Government's effort to break the inter-generational cycle of disadvantage. Their principal goal is to enhance the functioning of children under four years and their families by improving services provided in over five hundred small communities that are among the 20 per cent most deprived in England.

Keywords

evaluating, sure, start

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

NESS Research Team (2006). Evaluating Sure Start. *Poverty*, 123 3-4.

Authors

Edward Melhuish, Jay Belsky, Alastair Leyland, Angela Anning, Zarrina Kurtz, Jane Tunstill, Mog Ball, Pamela Meadows, Jacqueline Barnes, Martin Frost, and Beverley Botting

Child poverty figures

Besides its many individual statistics, *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2005* offers a number of analyses of subjects of particular importance. With the next set of official poverty figures (due to be published in the spring) providing a definitive answer, at last, to the question of whether the Government has reached its target of reducing child poverty by a quarter by 2004/05, child poverty is set to move back to centre stage.

The latest figures, for 2003/04, show child poverty standing at 3.5 million. The Government's target for 2004/05 represents 3.1 million children. When the target was set in 1999, child poverty stood at 4.1 million. This means that child poverty is down 600,000 from the start date, leaving a further 400,000 to go.

Leaving aside pensioners, the main reason for the fall in poverty since 1997 is that many more people have now got jobs. Thanks to this, there has been a fall in the number of working-age households in those groups facing the highest risk of poverty – the unemployed and 'other workless' (chiefly lone parents and sick and disabled people) – and a rise in the number in those groups where the risk is lower – ie, where someone in the household is doing some paid work.

But though it is rising employment that has brought poverty down, employment, even with the help of tax credits, does not guarantee an income above the poverty line. This is to be seen most starkly in the fact that no fewer than half of the children in poverty are living in households where someone is doing paid work.

'All working' households, where at least one person works full time and any other adult does at least some work, face only a very small risk of poverty (around 5 per cent). 'Part-working' ones, where either the only work being done is part time or where one adult is not working at all, face a much larger risk (around 20 per cent).

The UK stands out in Europe for the proportion of its children living in workless households. What makes it

stand out like this is the high number of lone-parent households who are workless. Even though the employment rate among lone parents has risen over the last decade, most of the half million reduction in the number of children in workless households has been among children in two-parent families. Despite steady progress, the sheer scale of worklessness among lone-parent households means that it remains the principal reason why children who live with just one of their parents suffer from income poverty.

These developments are leading to a sharpening distinction between the situation of children in poverty in lone-parent and two-parent households. In short, whereas most of the children suffering from 'in-work' poverty are in two-adult households, most of the children in 'out-of-work' poverty are in lone-parent ones. ■

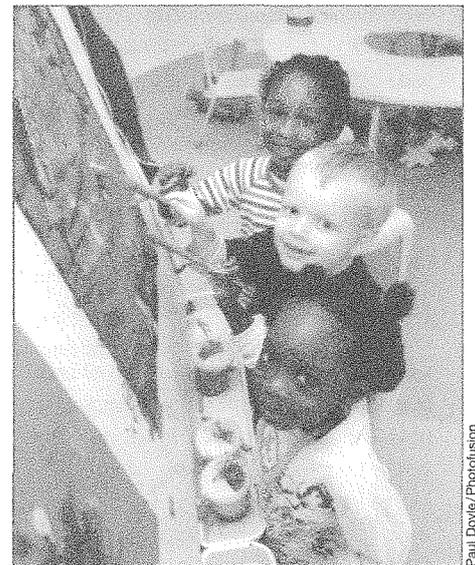
Peter Kenway

Evaluating Sure Start

Sure Start local programmes are a cornerstone in the Government's effort to break the inter-generational cycle of disadvantage. Their principal goal is to enhance the functioning of children under four years and their families by improving services provided in over five hundred small communities that are among the 20 per cent most deprived in England.

Programmes are area-based, with all children under four and their families in a prescribed area being the 'targets' of intervention. By virtue of their local autonomy, and in contrast to more narrowly delivered early interventions, they do not have a prescribed set of services. Instead, each programme has had extensive local autonomy on how it fulfils its mission.

As a first step in assessing the impact of Sure Start, in 2003/04 (ie, after local programmes had been in existence for at least three years) the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) gathered



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extensive information on more than 19,000 nine- and 36-month-old children and their families living in 150 Sure Start areas and in 50 comparison communities designated to become Sure Start local programmes later. Four core questions were addressed from the data.

Do children/families in Sure Start areas receive more services or experience their communities differently than children/families in comparison communities?

There was little evidence that local programmes increased service use, and/or families' impressions of service usefulness or of their communities. This poses a challenge for understanding how the limited effects of local programmes can be explained.

Do families function differently in Sure Start areas than in comparison communities?

Local programmes appeared to benefit family functioning to a modest extent, with families of nine-month-olds experiencing less household chaos, and mothers of 36-month-olds engaging in less (observed) slapping, scolding and physical restraint. There was a further benefit for non-teen mothers of 36-month-olds, who comprised the majority (86 per cent), in that they showed less negative parenting when living in Sure Start rather than comparison areas.

Do the effects of local programmes extend to children themselves?

Both beneficial and adverse effects on children were detected, though these

were restricted to 36-month-olds and varied across sub-populations. Three-year-olds of non-teen mothers exhibited fewer behavioural problems and greater social competence when living in local programme areas than in comparison communities, and these effects on children appeared to be mediated by the effects on the parenting of non-teens (ie, less negative parenting). Adverse effects of Sure Start programmes emerged in the case of children of teen mothers (14 per cent of the sample), however, as they scored lower on verbal ability and social competence and higher on behavioural problems than their counterparts in comparison areas. Children from workless households (40 per cent) and children from lone-parent families (33 per cent) also scored significantly lower on verbal ability when growing up in Sure Start areas than did comparison community counterparts.

Are some local programmes more effective than others?

Efforts undertaken to illuminate variation across programmes in their efficacy revealed that health-led programmes produced somewhat more beneficial effects than did others. Moreover, the more programmes were implemented in a manner consistent with the basic principles of the Sure Start initiative, the more likely they were to achieve better outcomes for both parents and children. Although the link between implementation and programme effectiveness is modest, this result highlights the means by which less effective programmes may become more effective in enhancing child and family functioning. Further work on what differentiates effective programmes is currently underway.

Conclusion

Overall, the effects of Sure Start local programmes on children and families proved to be limited and small. The differential beneficial and adverse effects for sub-populations suggest that among the disadvantaged families living in the deprived Sure Start areas, those with greater human capital were better able to take advantage of Sure Start services and resources than those with less human capital (ie, teen parents, lone parents, workless households). Those with the least human capital may also have felt

overwhelmed or turned off by the support that local programmes offered.

Health-led programmes may have exerted a few more beneficial effects than other programmes because they found it easier to establish contact with families with children under four and they had a ready-made system of health visitors in place. Health agencies may also be more experienced in multi-professional working with large budgets and large populations, thereby facilitating service integration and delivery.

The findings indicate that the programmes take around three years to become fully operational. The fact, then, that some had been in existence for only three years when children/families were studied and perhaps not entirely 'bedded down' in some cases, cautions against drawing too strong conclusions. More substantial beneficial effects may need more time to emerge, highlighting the importance of the longitudinal follow-up of children first studied when nine months of age and their families. ■

NESS research team

Early Impacts of Sure Start Local Programmes on Children and Families, Surestart Report 13, Department for Education and Skills, 2005. Available at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/activities/impact/1183.pdf; *Variation in Sure Start Local Programmes Effectiveness: early preliminary findings*, Surestart Report, Department for Education and Skills, 2005. Available at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/activities/impact/1184.pdf The findings are summarised in J Tunstall *et al*, *Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: an integrated overview of the first four years*, Surestart Report 10, Department for Education and Skills, 2005. Available at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/activities/implementation/1185.pdf

in Scotland were among five hundred overwhelmingly positive respondents to a recent consultation on a new free school meals Bill being proposed by Frances Curran MSP. This proposes to introduce free, nutritious school meals in all of Scotland's primary schools, as well as statutory nutritional standards, a complaints and enforcement scheme, powers to ban the promotion of junk food in schools and guaranteed access to water and milk.

While the Scottish Executive continues to reject the call for universal free school meals, pressure has helped lead to the announcement of consultation on an Executive Bill to regulate nutritional standards and ban junk food in schools. Furthermore, Education Minister Peter Peacock MSP has approached CPAG in Scotland and other leading anti-poverty and children's organisations to discuss a range of options that could see a substantial extension of free school meal provision north of the border.

At the same time, the first HM Inspectorate of Education report into the implementation of the Scottish Executive's 'Hungry for Success' strategy to improve the quality and take-up of school meals has found 'good progress overall'. However, the report also highlights outstanding problems with systems that reinforce the stigma associated with free school meals, the need for continuing work to improve school meal uptake, and the impact of cost and price information on the meal choices young people make.

CPAG in Scotland welcomes the fact that ministers are talking seriously about the need to extend free school meal entitlement and are willing to legislate on the quality of food in schools. However, while access to healthy food in schools continues to be means tested, the campaign for universal free school meals continues. ■

John Dickie, Head of CPAG in Scotland

School meals in Scotland

Significant developments are underway in the fight to improve access to nutritious food in Scottish schools.

CPAG supporters, teachers' unions, health boards and leading children's charities Save the Children and Children