

Poverty and the indivisibility of child and parental mental health

Growing up in Ireland conference
8th November 2023

Professor Morag Treanor

Outline

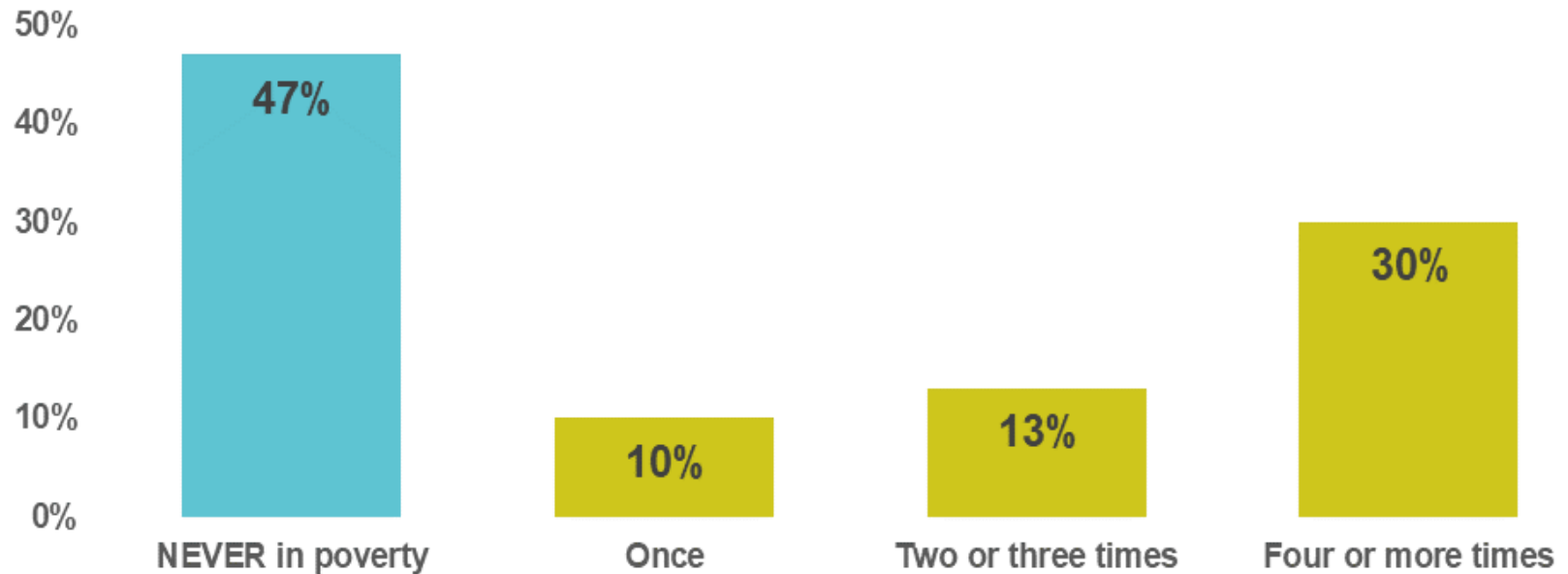
Telling the story

- Incidence of poverty
- Wider measures of socioeconomic deprivation and mental health
 - Work intensity
 - financial vulnerability
- Social connectedness and mental health
- The indivisibility of parental and child mental health
- What governments do
- Next steps: linking administrative data

Incidence of poverty

Poverty is dynamic...

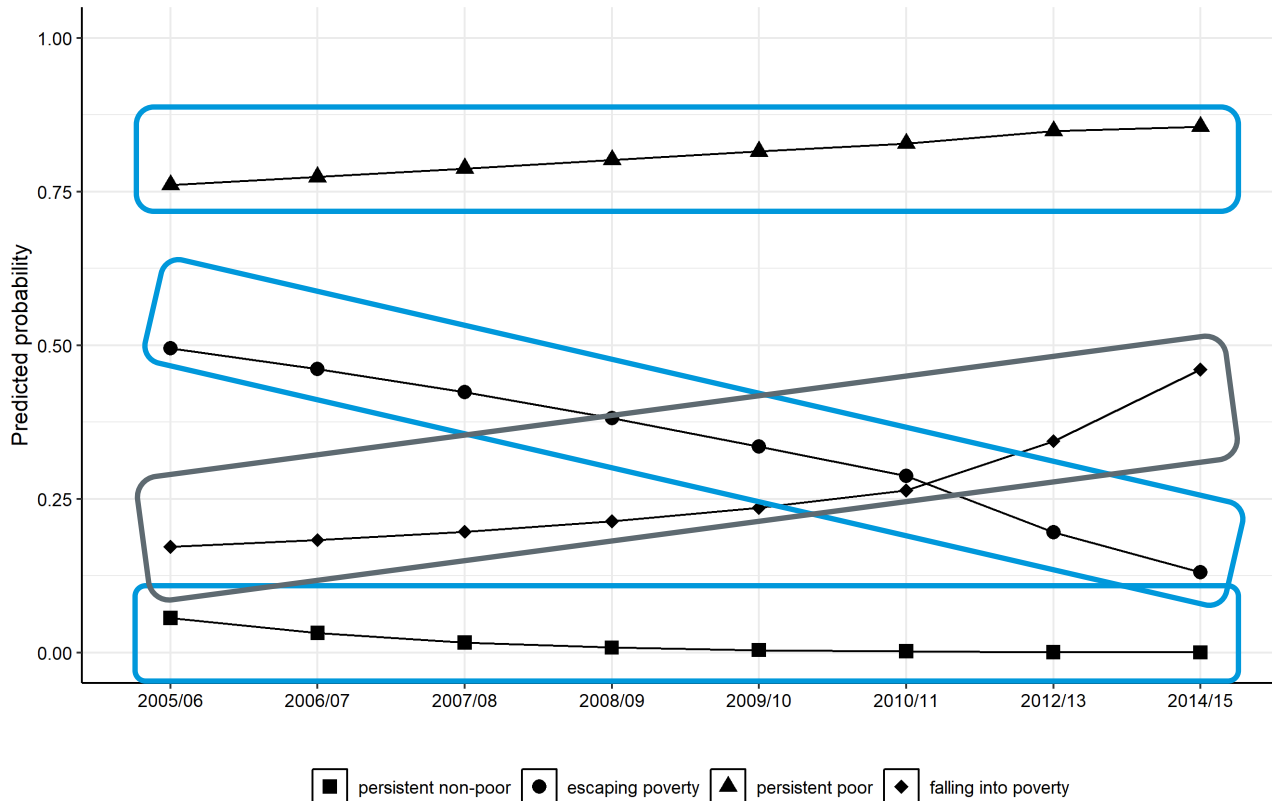
53% of children were in poverty at least once over a 9 year period, in a Scottish study that tracks thousands of children and their families over time.



Source: Analysis of [Growing Up in Scotland](#) data

Not everyone experiences poverty in the same way

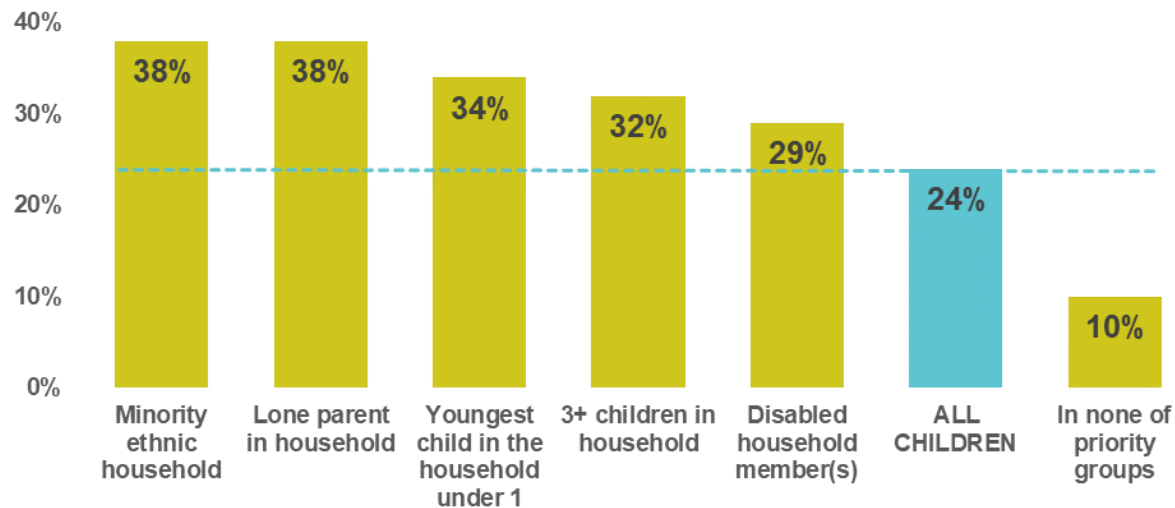
Longitudinal poverty



- Some are never at risk of poverty
- Some are persistently in poverty
- Some are in long trajectory to escape from poverty
- And some are falling into poverty

The risk of harm from child poverty is not equal


Children in some types of households are at higher risk of poverty. These households were recognised as **priority group households** in Scotland







Wider measures of socioeconomic deprivation and mental health: Work intensity



Poverty, parental work intensity and child emotional and conduct problems

[Morag Treanor](#), [Patricio Troncoso](#)  


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Referred to by **[Methods for analysing the relationship between poverty, parental work intensity, child emotional symptoms and conduct problems over time](#)**

MethodsX, Volume 10, 2023, Pages 101940

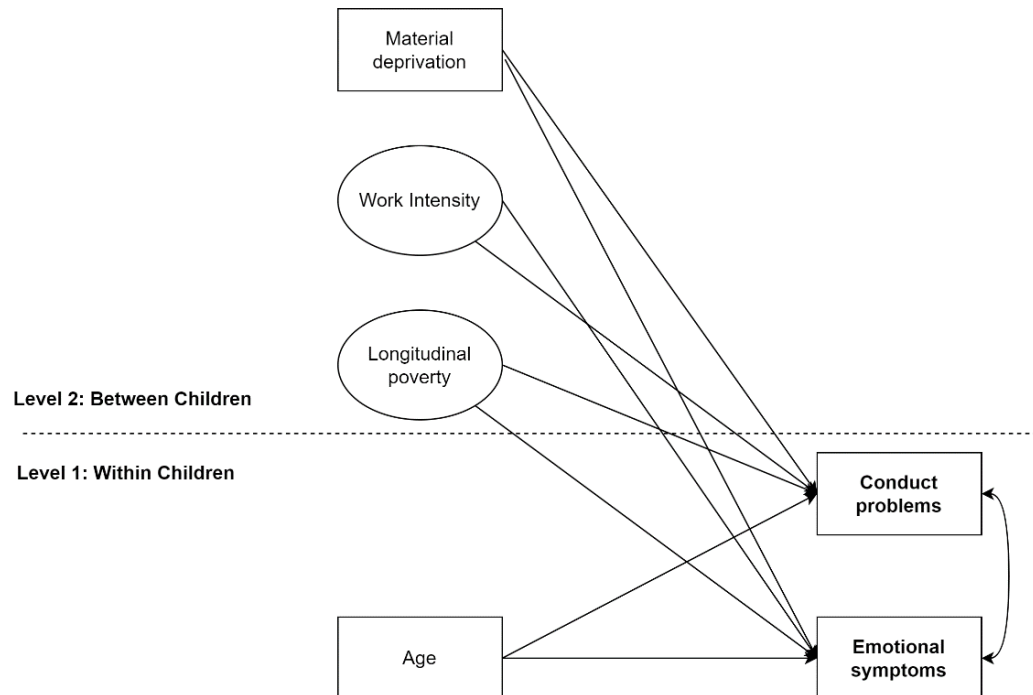
Patricio Troncoso, Morag Treanor



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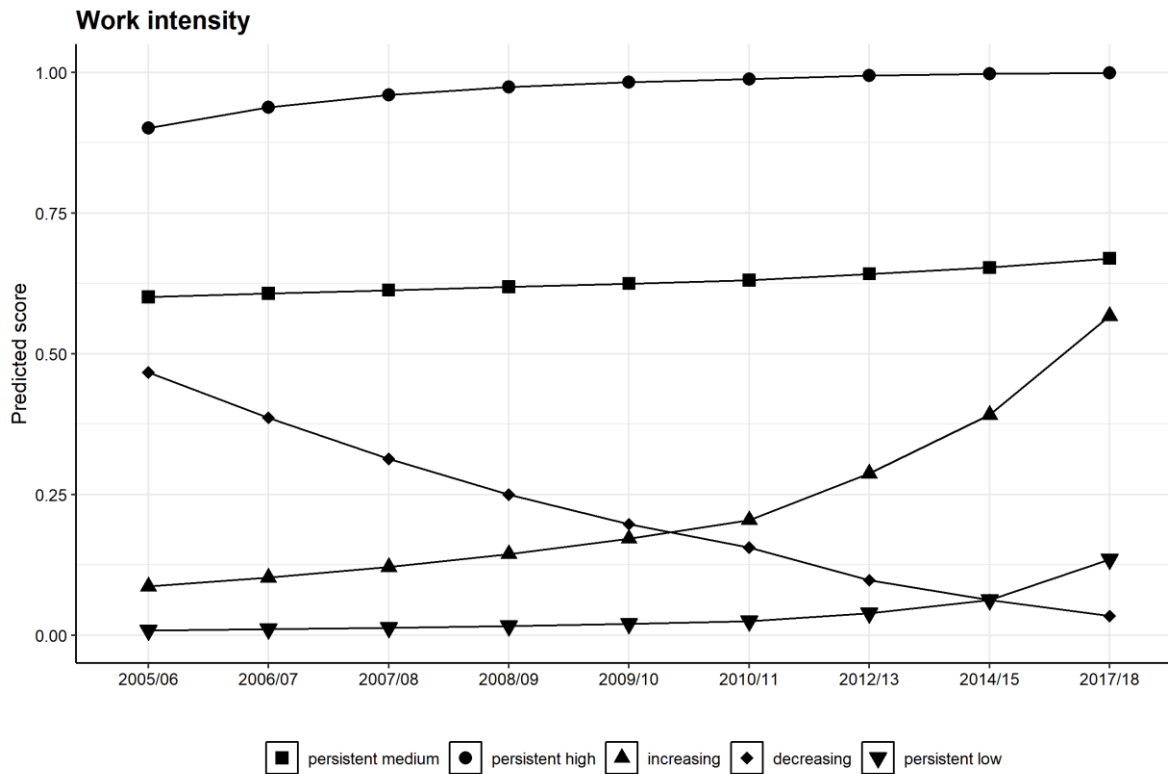
Methods

- Multivariate Multilevel Model for change in children's wellbeing over time.



This model allows us to understand simultaneously:

- The interrelated longitudinal trajectories of children's conduct and emotional problems.
- The effects of several covariates



- Derived from Employment status of both partners for couple families or just one for lone parent families
- Ranges between 0-1:
 - 1 = full time
 - 0 = not in paid work

Impact of disadvantage on children's mental health (2)

- Unstable parental work is linked to raised children's conduct and emotional problems

Fig. 2A

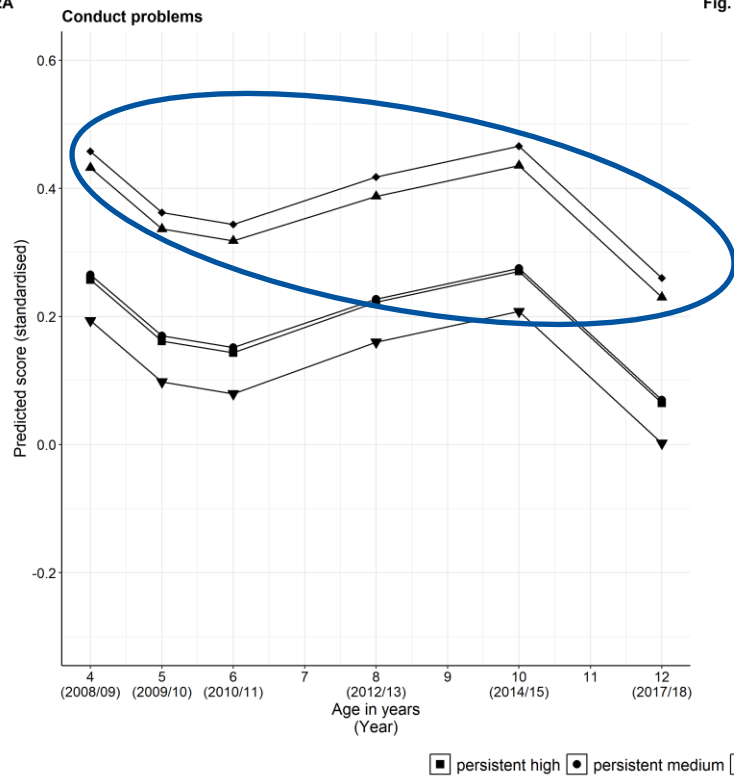
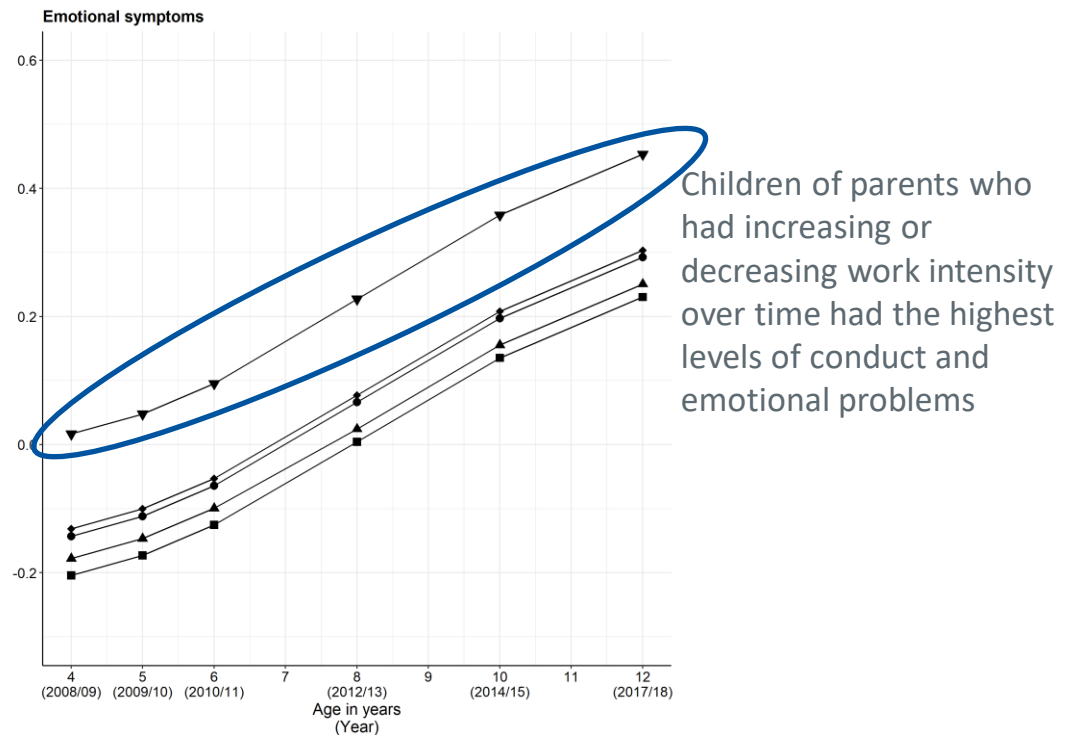


Fig. 2B



Note: No data collected at ages 7, 9 and 11

Wider measures of socioeconomic deprivation and mental health: financial vulnerability



Article

The Effects of Financial Vulnerability and Mothers' Emotional Distress on Child Social, Emotional and Behavioural Well-Being: A Structural Equation Model

Morag Treanor
University of Edinburgh, UK

Sociology
2016, Vol. 50(4) 673–694
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Financial Vulnerability

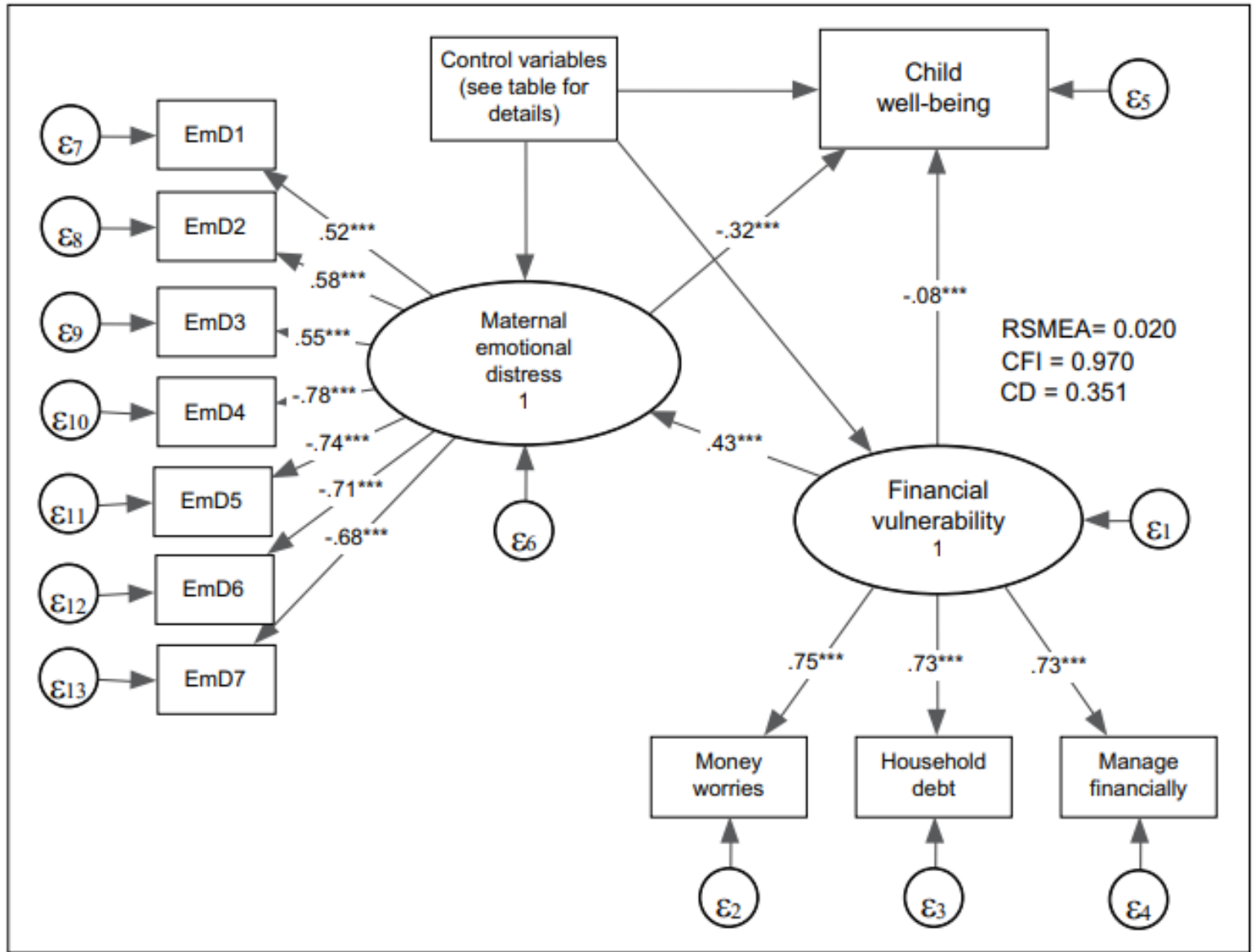
GUS collects data in sweep 5 on financial vulnerability. The exact wording of the questions and their possible responses are set out below (Bradshaw et al., 2010):

- *Money worries*: how often would you say you have been worried about money during the last few weeks?
 - 1 almost all the time,
 - 2 quite often,
 - 3 only sometimes,
 - 4 never

- *Household debt*: thinking back over the past 12 months, how often would you say you have had trouble with debts that you found hard to repay?
 - 1 almost all the time,
 - 2 quite often,
 - 3 only sometimes,
 - 4 never

- *Manage financially*: taking everything together, which of the phrases on this card best describes how you and your family are managing financially these days?
 - 1 Manage very well
 - 2 Manage quite well
 - 3 Get by all right
 - 4 Don't manage very well
 - 5 Have some financial difficulties
 - 6 Are in deep financial trouble

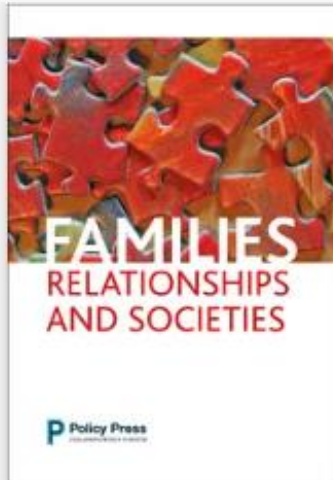
These three variables form the latent construct 'financial vulnerability' estimated in the first measurement part of the structural equation model discussed in the methods section.



Results

- Maternal emotional distress had the largest negative effect on child mental health, accounting for almost a third of a standard deviation decrease ($\beta = -0.32$).
- Financial vulnerability had a direct ($\beta = -0.08$) and an indirect ($\beta = -0.14$) negative effect on child mental health through the pathway of maternal emotional distress (total effect size = -0.22).
- Income, direct $\beta = 0.05$ and indirect $\beta = 0.06$ negative effect on child mental health.

Social connectedness and mental health



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Issue Journal

Social assets, low income and child social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing

Author: Morag Treanor

Article Category: Research Article

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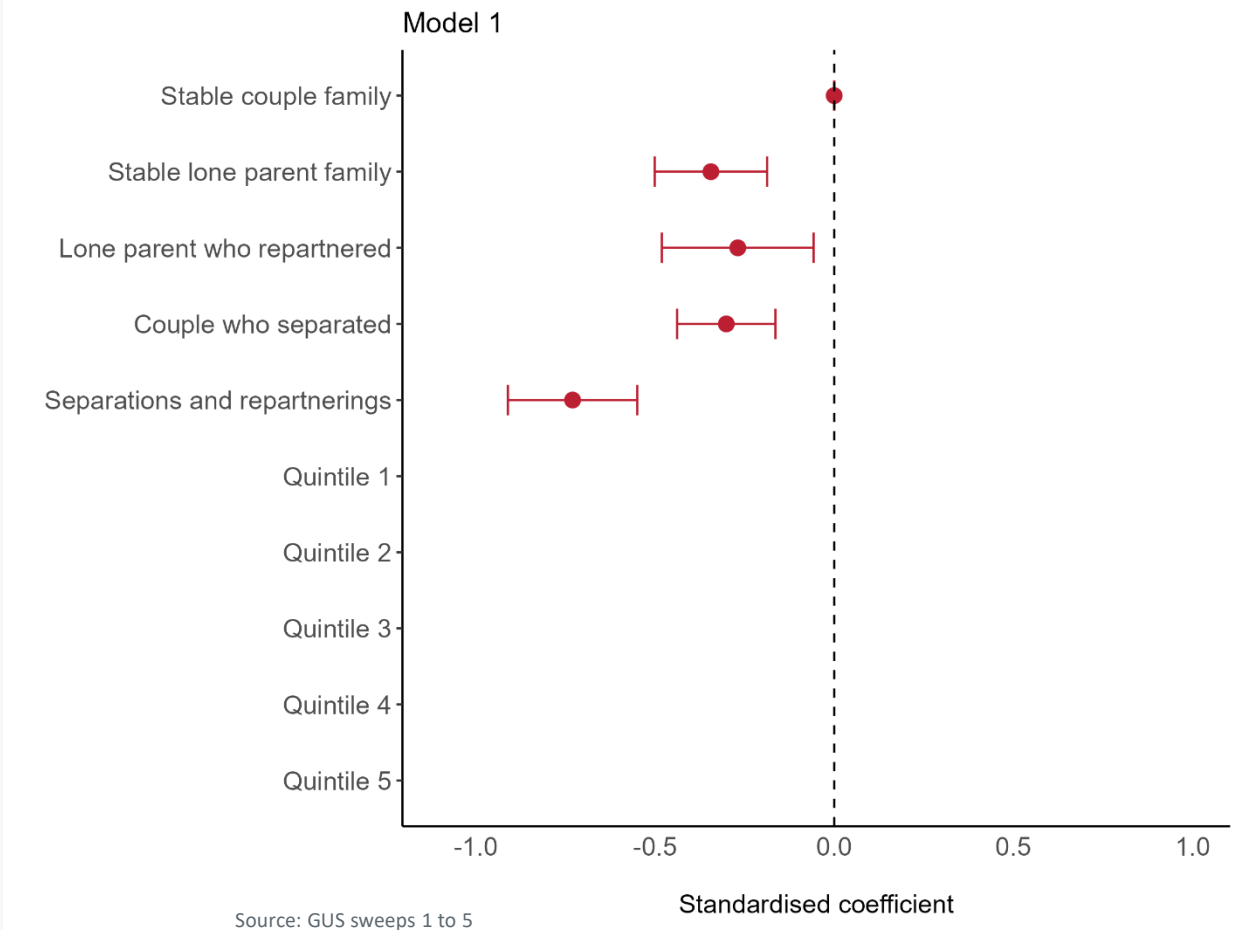
Pages: 209–228

Publisher: Policy Press

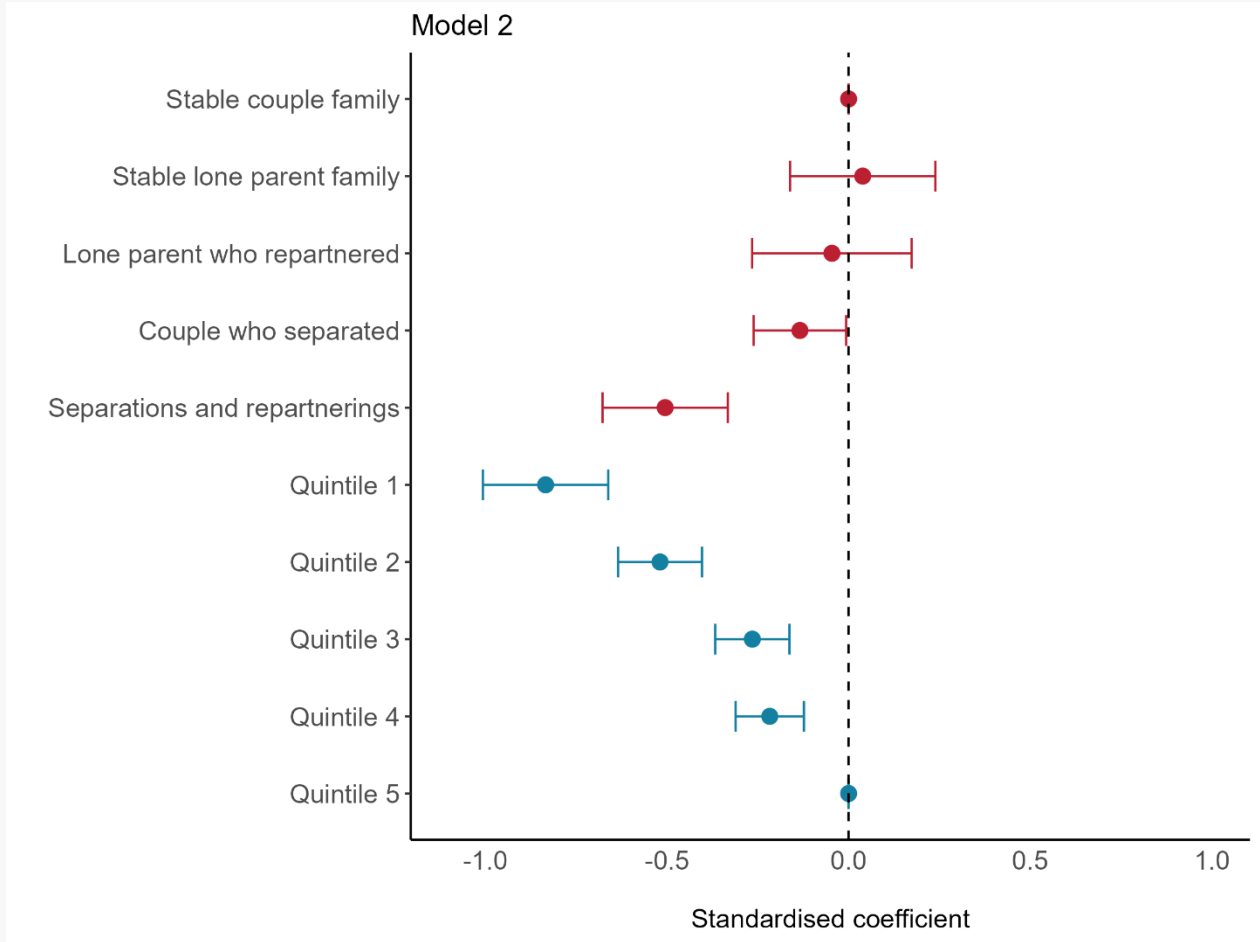
Volume/Issue: Volume 5: Issue 2

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14281323517164>



Source: GUS sweeps 1 to 5
Sweep 5 longitudinal weight and survey weights applied





Source: GUS sweeps 1 to 5
Sweep 5 longitudinal weight and survey weights applied







Original article

The Indivisibility of Parental and Child Mental Health and Why Poverty Matters


Morag Treanor Ph.D., Patricio Troncoso Ph.D.  


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Background:

Parental and child mental health: Which comes first?

- Parental depression is one of the best-established risk factors for young people's mental health problems.
- Poorer maternal mental health is associated with increased child conduct problems and emotional symptoms
- But the literature tends to focus on the effects of parental mental health on children's mental health.
- A small and growing literature suggests that this relationship may also work in the other direction: children's mental health affects parental mental health too, especially in low-income families.

Research Questions

How do familial/parental socio-economic circumstances affect children's wellbeing?

To what extent do familial socio-economic circumstances, parental mental health and children's wellbeing inter-relate over time?

Potential pathways

- **Family investment model:**
 - the impact of income comes about through a family's ability to invest monetary resources in experiences, resources, and services that improve children's development
- **Family stress model:**
 - the stress induced by low income has adverse impacts on parents' emotional wellbeing and parenting capacity, which affect the child and the parent both directly and indirectly
- The models are not mutually exclusive and the pathways interact with each other

Methods and Data



Growing Up in Scotland

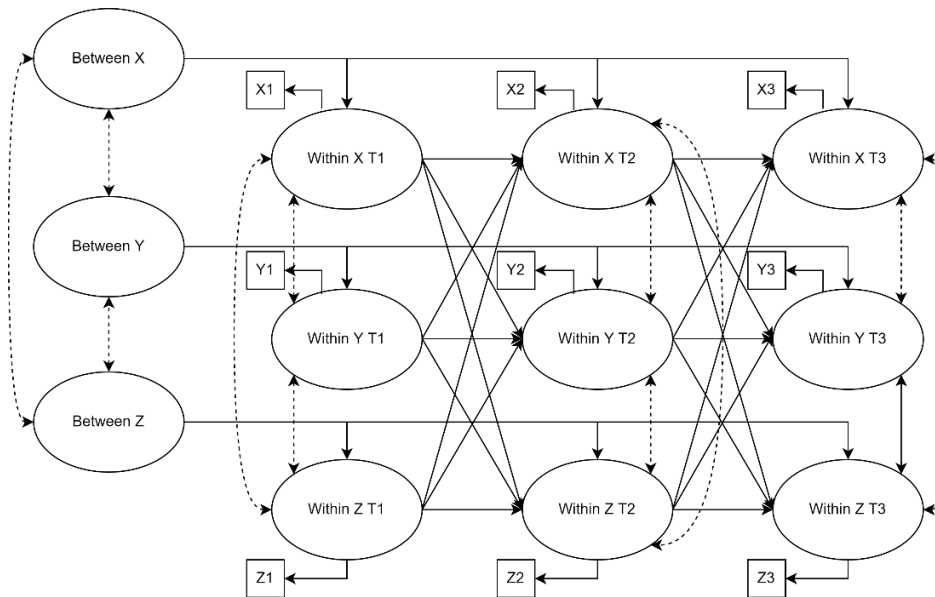
Growing Up in Scotland is a longitudinal research study, tracking the lives of thousands of young people & their families from the early years, through childhood and now as they move into adulthood.

GUS provides a free, unique resource for anyone carrying out research into the lives of children and their families in Scotland. Our data is being used by academics and other researchers, politicians, policy makers, charities and lobbying organisations, health boards and education organisations.



- Growing up in Scotland:
 - Nationally representative
 - Birth cohort of 5,217 children
 - 9 waves of data (2005/06 to 2017/18)
 - Outcome Measures:
 - SDQ's "Conduct problems" and "Emotional Symptoms" subscales
 - SF-12: Mental health related items
 - Covariates of interest: Longitudinal poverty and Material Deprivation
 - Control variables: age, sex, ethnicity, mother's education, mother's age at birth,

Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models (RI-CLPM)

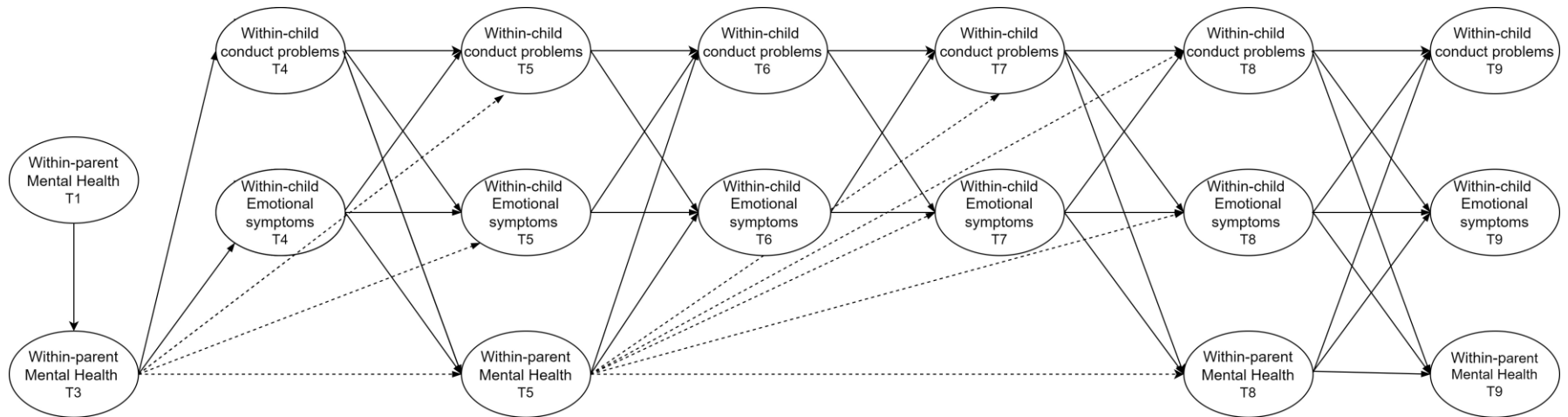


This is an autoregressive model that accounts for the multilevel structure of multiple measures of an individual over time.

“Within” is level 1
“Between” is level 2

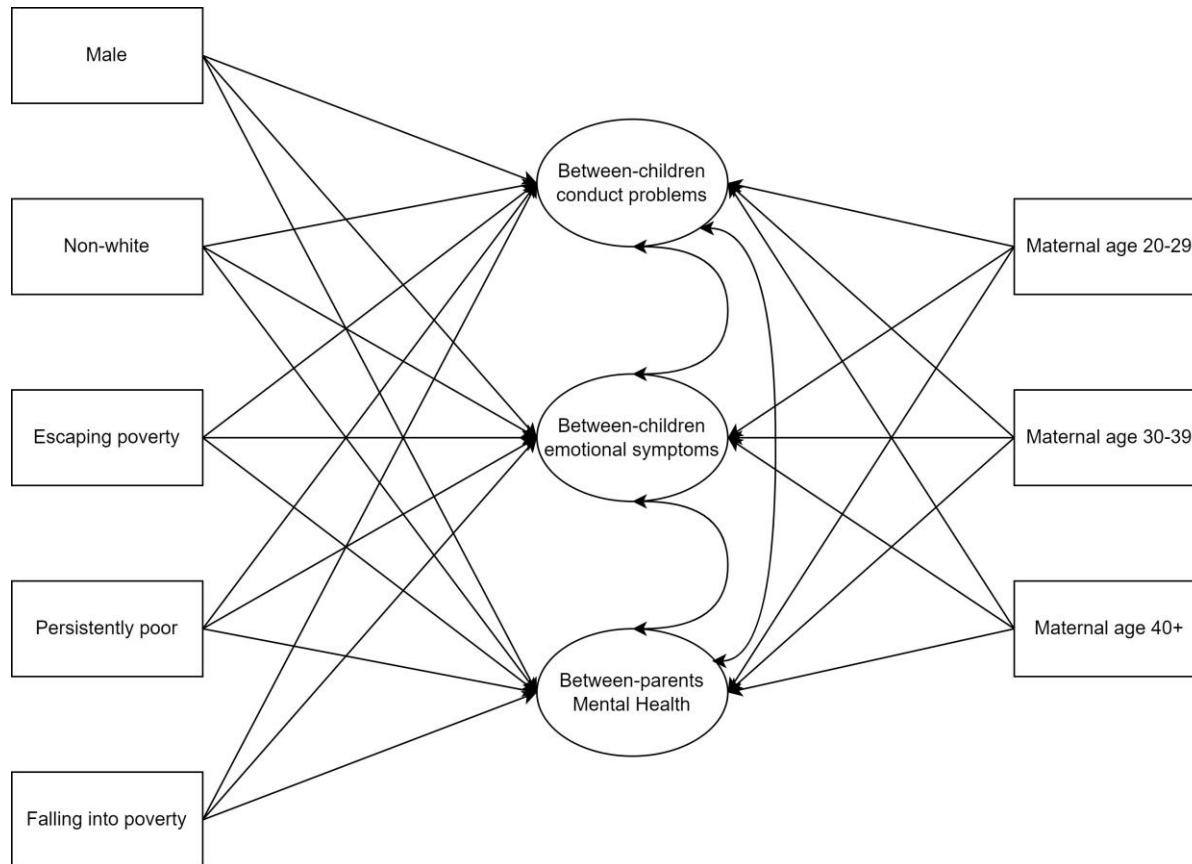
This model was fitted in R using the package “lavaan”

RI-CLPM for the relationship between parental and children's mental health (within part)



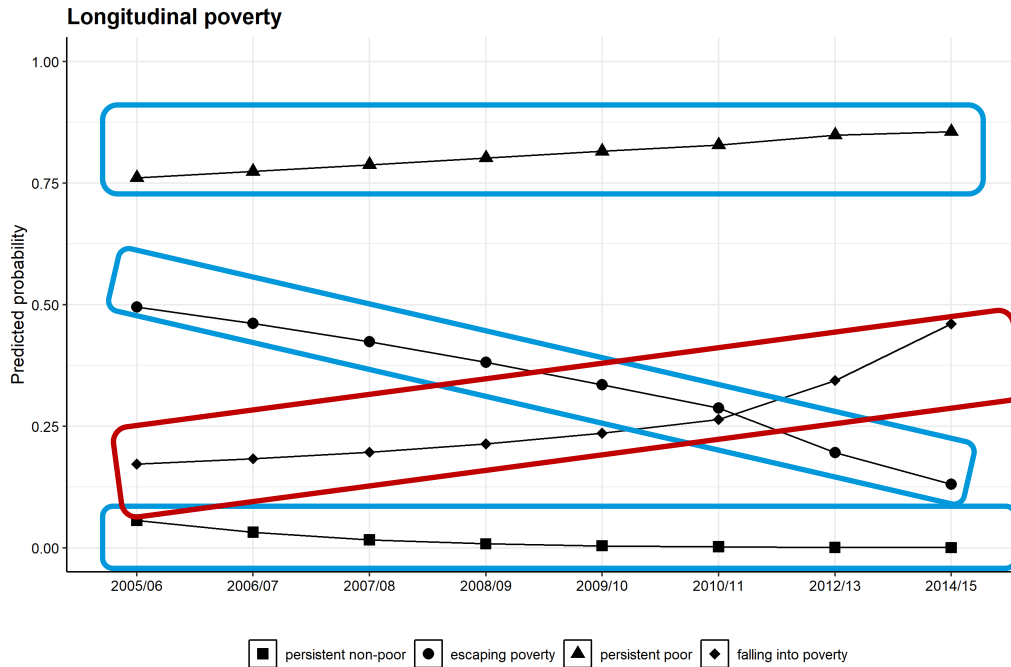
This is the “level 1” of our model, where we make use of all the available mental health information for children (waves 4-9) and parents (waves 1, 3, 5, 8 and 9)

RI-CLPM for the relationship between parental and children's mental health (between part)



This is the 'level 2' of our model, where we included sex, ethnicity, maternal age at birth and longitudinal poverty as time-invariant covariates for the 'stable traits'.

Methods (4)



Not everyone experiences poverty in the same way...

- Some are never at risk of poverty
- Some are persistently in poverty
- Some are in a long trajectory to escape from poverty
- And some are falling into poverty

Longitudinal poverty is a key covariate in our models.

These are predicted trajectories of the probability of being in poverty over time derived from income information in GUS using a growth mixture model.

Results

Impact of disadvantage on children's mental health (1)

- Difference in experiences of poverty are associated with conduct but not emotional problems

Fig. 1A

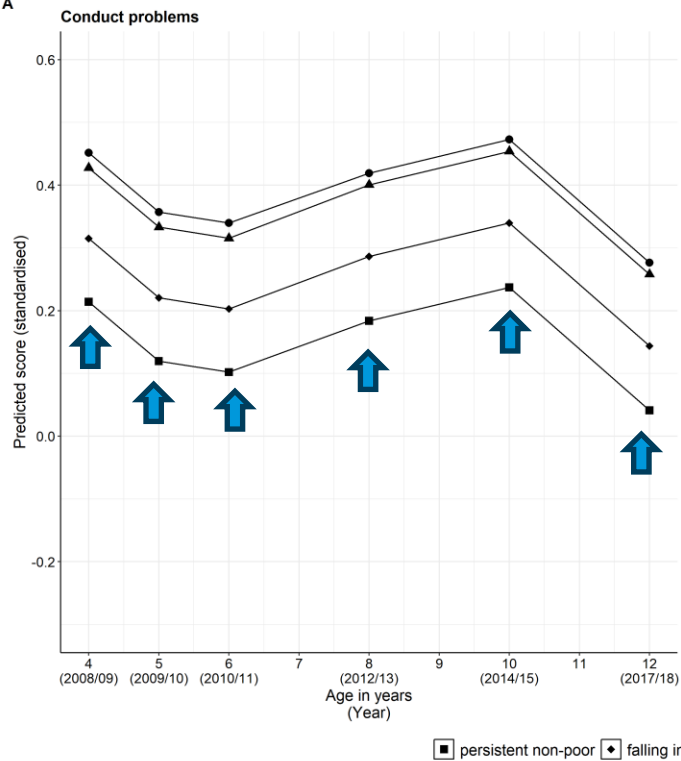
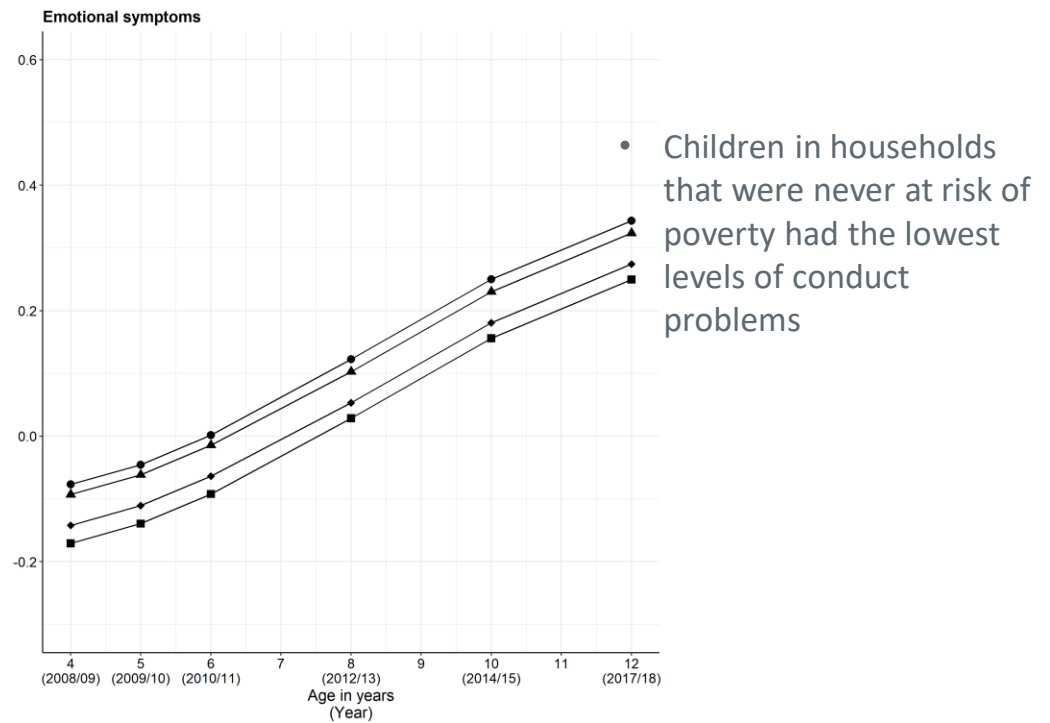


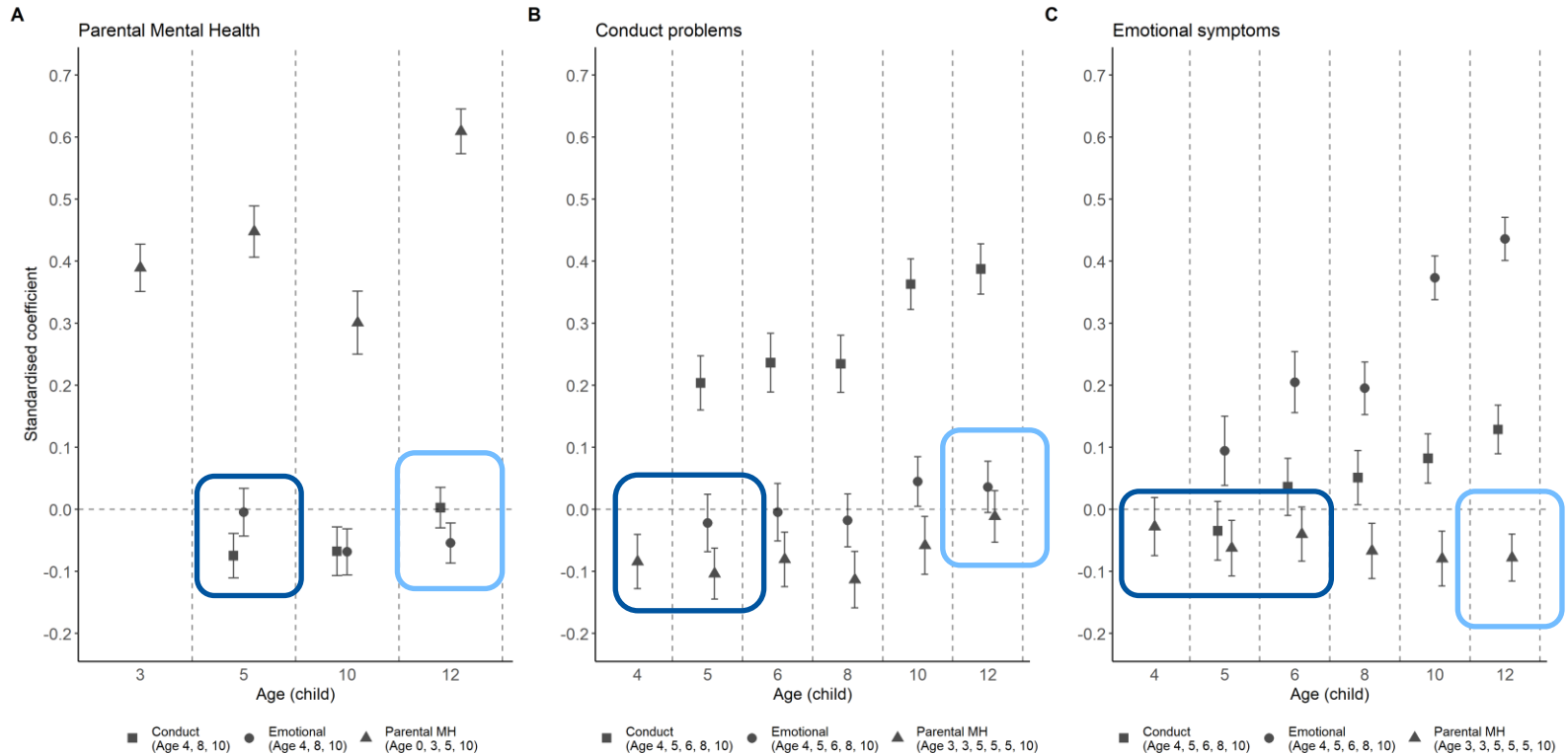
Fig. 1B



- Children in households that were never at risk of poverty had the lowest levels of conduct problems

Note: No data collected at ages 7, 9 and 11

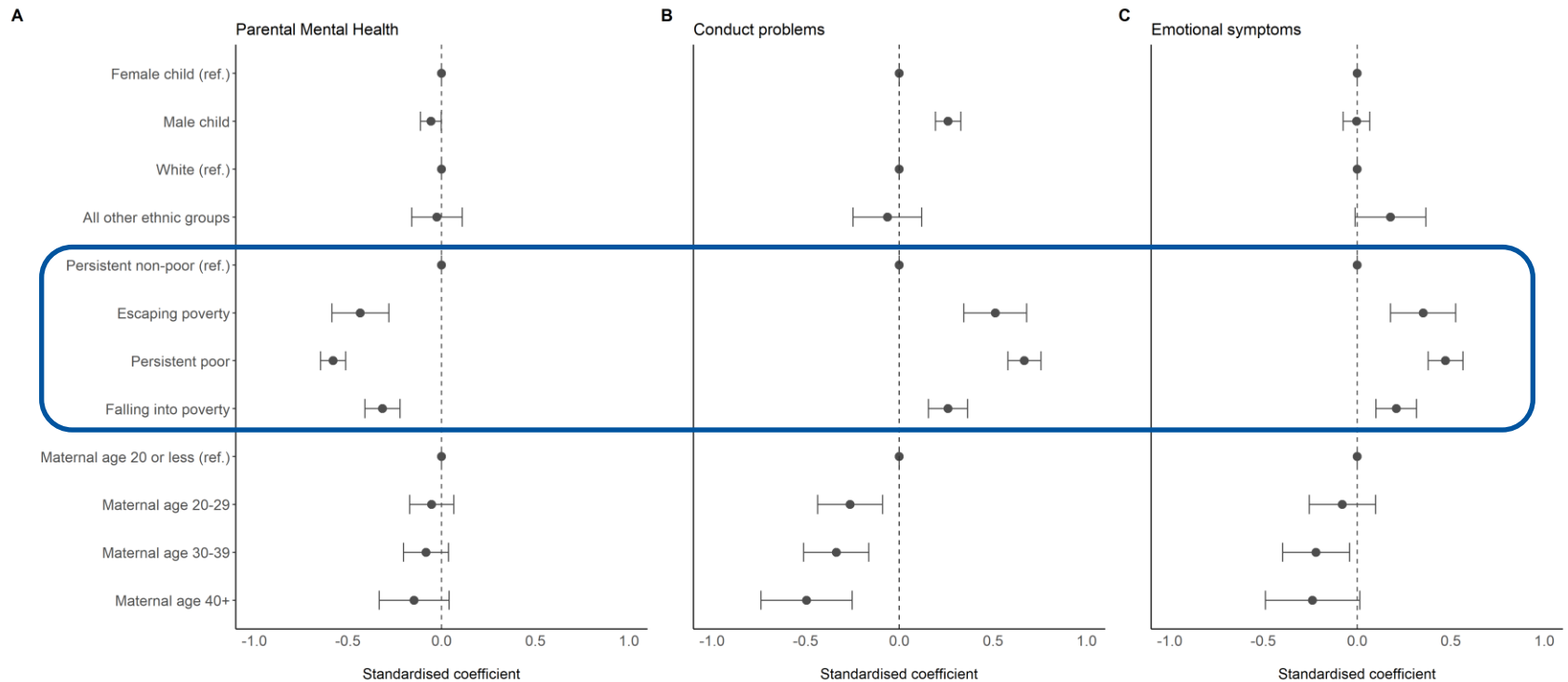
Parents' and children's mental health are indivisible



At younger ages, parents with poorer mental health tend to negatively affect their children's conduct and the conduct problems of a child seem to impact negatively on their parents' mental health.

At older ages, it is children's emotional symptoms, but not conduct problems, that tend to have a reciprocal effect on parental mental health.

The strain of poverty on family mental health



Persistent poverty has the strongest effect across all outcomes, but any experience of poverty has detrimental effects on parental and child mental health.

Conclusions and implications (1)

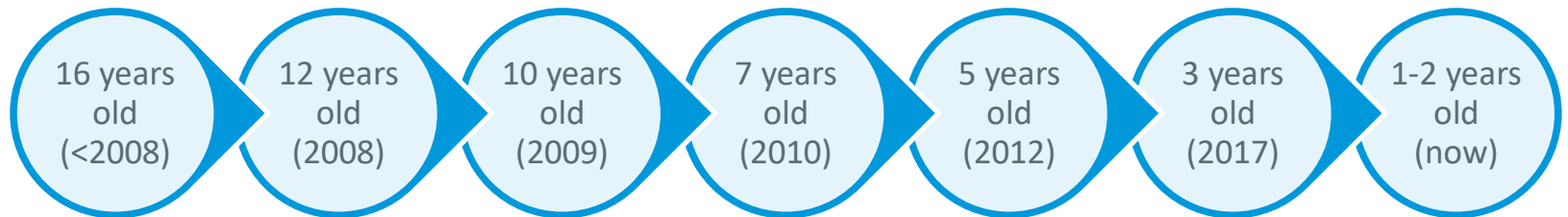
- Children whose parents' jobs deteriorated over time had increased emotional problems as they reached adolescence, compared to children of parents with stable jobs.
- Children living in persistent poverty, or who were in a trajectory to escape poverty, had increased conduct problems, compared to consistently non-poor families.
- Poverty and low-quality jobs affect in/directly children wellbeing in two ways:
 - by limiting parents' capacity to invest on their child's development, and
 - by reducing parents' emotional health via the stress brought on by low income.
- Persistent poverty has the strongest effect across all outcomes, but any experience of poverty has detrimental effects on parental and child mental health.

Conclusions and implications (2)

- Children do not exist in isolation; they are members of families and are directly and indirectly affected by their prevailing economic conditions and structural inequalities
- Children's and parents' wellbeing is an interdependent process that needs to be addressed in policy.
- Interventions that attempt to address mental health in children need to also consider:
 - Mental health of parents, and
 - How to tackle issues associated with poverty as it impacts MH
- This is a cautionary tale about the devastating effects on children's lives we can expect following the COVID-19 restrictions and the current economic turmoil.
- We need to adopt a ***contextualised whole-family approach*** to research and mental health interventions.

What governments do

Age of child at which lone parents in the UK on income replacement benefits are required to look for paid work



Jobseeking rules

- Until 2008, single parents in the UK on income replacement benefits were not required to look for paid work until their youngest child turned 16 years old.
- Now, single parents are expected to prepare for work when their youngest child is one or two years old.
- The penalty for noncompliance is the reduction or loss of benefits in the form of sanctions.

Benefit cap

- The “benefit cap” was introduced in 2013 as an absolute limit on benefit levels.
- The cap was initially set at £26,000, then reduced to £23,000 for families in Greater London and £20,000 for families elsewhere, irrespective of the number of children in a family. (The cap is lower for people without children).
- This change has been particularly punitive for single parents.
- Until May 2020, [72%](#) of families who had their benefits capped were single parents.
- By August 2021, [63%](#) (110,000) of households that had their benefits capped were single-parent families.
- A further exploration into who this hurts most reveals that just over half of all single-parent capped households have a youngest child under the age of five.

Two-child limit

- The “two-child limit” was introduced in 2017 as a limit on the number of children in a family that can receive government financial support. (Twins and triplets were not similarly penalised.)
- This policy is expressly worrying as its full effects are yet to take place and already its [main impact](#) has been to increase the depth and incidence of child poverty.
- Currently, 1.5 million children are affected and their families are thousands of pounds a year worse off.
- 59% of families affected are in work.
- This creates a two-tier system, separating those children who are worthy of our support and those who are not.

Age discrimination

- Since the phased introduction of universal credit from 2013, younger single parents receive £66.13 less a month compared with older parents.
- This is because people under 25 are entitled to a lower allowance of benefits than people aged 25 and over.
- Before universal credit was introduced there was an exemption for single parents in recognition of the cost of caring for a child alone.
- Now, that exemption has been removed.
- That means an income [reduction for the youngest parents of 20%](#).

Devolution

- The devolved nations are trying hard to reverse the damaging impacts of benefit changes.
- In April 2022, the Scottish government announced plans to fully mitigate the benefit cap in Scotland.
- It has also introduced a Scottish child payment, currently £25 for each child a week, payable to **all** children in a family.
- In Northern Ireland families can receive a non-repayable grant of up to £1,500 for upfront childcare costs.
- In Wales a £51m Household Support Fund and extra payments to children eligible for free school meals, the pupil development grant, is in place.
- Children in England are being left behind to face the most dire of circumstances.

Child maintenance

- About half of single parents receive no child maintenance at all, according to the Department for Work and Pensions.
- In 2012 under the Welfare Reform Act, the UK government changed how it would intervene when non-resident parents – most of them fathers – refused to pay.
- It moved from collecting maintenance directly, to requiring parents to agree post-separation financial arrangements between themselves.
- But such private agreements are not legally enforceable.
- Some countries guarantee child maintenance by making advance payments to the resident parent, and recouping the cost directly.
- This is why there is very high child maintenance receipt in countries such as Sweden.

Tories have shamed single parents and heaped financial pressure on them

Morag Treanor

Policies such as the benefit cap have hurt the most vulnerable in society, particularly single mothers

- 'It's hard getting money to stretch': single mothers say they need support
- Half of all children in lone-parent families are in relative poverty
- 'I'm feeling the squeeze': single mothers on the living costs crisis



There are 1.8 million single parents in the UK and nine out of 10 of them are women.
Illustration: Guardian Design

**Next steps: linking
administrative data**

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