

Child Poverty in Malaysia: What Do Malaysians Think?

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Abstract

Multidimensionality of child poverty discloses the complexity of poverty across a range of aspects. Children are vulnerable to many unfortunate possibilities that include material and social deprivation. In this context, most children faced insufficient monetary resources, limited access to food, education and quality healthcare. This eventually would lead to the long-term damage on children's opportunities and development. The dynamics of child poverty therefore have driven many governments to establish appropriate measures in addressing the needs of children in poverty. Unfortunately, in Malaysia the issue of child poverty has not received the policy attention it deserves. Current measures of battling poverty are usually directed to poor households with little attention devoted to the needs of children specifically due to the fact that they were not classified as a separate group for policy consideration. As a result, there has been insignificant allocation of funds for the improvement of children's well-being. To provide sufficient insights on the issue of child poverty, the study examines the policy problem from public perspective. Policy debates over how best to help poor children in Malaysia have prompted the study to assess public perception on adequacy of policy measures and forms of deprivation faced by children living in poor households. The findings reveal that children are deprived materially and socially. School dropouts (92.1%), lack of electronic devices for online learning (87.3 %), lack of attention from parents due to the need for overtime work (86.5 %), growth problem (79.7%) and the lack of nutritious food (87.2 %) are strongly perceived to be associated to child deprivation. Given its importance, majority of the respondents believed that bold and decisive actions are pivotal to construct more salient policies for fighting child poverty in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Child Poverty; Deprivation; Public Perception; Multidimensional Child Poverty*

INTRODUCTION

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Child poverty is an emerging issue in Malaysia. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2018 revealed nearly 11 percent of children in Malaysia live in urban poverty with 15 percent of children below the age of five are underweight. About 22 percent of children are stunted and only 50% of five- to six-year-olds attend pre-school enrolment (UNICEF, 2018). It is truly staggering to discover many of our children live in poverty. Children living in poor households with limited access to nutritious food and education experienced real deterioration in their living standards. They are vulnerable to many unfortunate possibilities that include material and social deprivation. Poor children have many needs; however, it is money which matters the most. In many cases, those

needs are often left unattended due to poor parental and household characteristics (Lindquist and Lindquist, 2010; Chou, 2013; and Saunders, Brown, Bedford and Naidoo, 2019). Coming from an unfortunate family background, many of these children suffer material hardship and underachievement in school (Madrick, 2020). According to the report, the number of registered students in schools decreased despite an increasing number of children in the current population (Joseph Chin, 2017). This is a worrisome situation as deprivation starting from childhood could lead to many problems including underachievement, illiteracy, juvenile delinquency and more (UNICEF, 2018). Poor living conditions have taken a great toll on the lives of children, thus limiting their life opportunities in all aspects.

The issue of child poverty has been a long-standing issue in Malaysia and sadly remains ongoing. The number of children in poverty in Malaysia has been growing to worrying proportions with one out of three children living in poverty (Farhana and Mohd Husni, 2018). It should be asked just how well are our children protected? Some groups have argued that the issue of child poverty has not received the policy attention it deserves. As such, the nature of child poverty is largely hidden within the lines of conventional poverty policies. Current measures of battling poverty are usually directed to poor households with little attention devoted to the needs of children specifically since they were not classified as a separate group for policy consideration. As a result, there has been insignificant allocation of funds for the improvement of children's well-being. The implementation of the National Family Policy (NFP) by the Ministry of Women, and Family Development resulted in recognition of different family structures which led to creation of differing needs. However, the needs of the children living in poverty has been neglected for far too long. Recent policy developments have led to an increase of funding allocation for children from poor families with a maximum of RM 1,000 per family. However, money-metric poverty measurements are inadequate in tackling child poverty. The scope of the policy fails to consider the varying poverty gap between recipients with five and more children compared to those with one child. This was evidenced in a number of poverty alleviation programs - including cash assistance programs - outlined in the national development policies.

The complex nature of child poverty suggests varying approaches to measuring deprivation faced by children. It is past time for the government to recognise multi-dimensional child poverty, especially during this ongoing pandemic. Covid-19 pushed

many hundreds of thousands of families into poverty, with thousands more children living in poor households. In this context, proper consideration should be given to children living in poor households due to parental characteristics-educational attainment, family structures - single vs. two parent families and unemployed parents as well as children who have lost their parents to the pandemic. These children have been deprived in life due to economic insecurity and face major difficulties to continue their livelihood. As of this moment, over a million children lost either one parent, both their parents and custodial grandparent due to Covid-19. This signals the need for the government to rebuild new strategies by addressing the special needs of children who belong to this category. The vulnerabilities faced by children warrant policy approaches from the government based on the rights of these very children as their needs must be adequately attended, especially during the pandemic.

Recognizing multidimensional child poverty begins from the public perception of child poverty and it should be addressed. Since this is a newly recognised issue in Malaysia, this study therefore seeks to assess the public perception on child poverty and the rights of children. Given its importance, the study also seeks to evaluate public perceptions on existing measures employed by the government in addressing the need of children living in poor households to ascertain protection of the children's constitutive rights. As such, the objective of the study is twofold: to evaluate public perception on multi-dimensional childhood poverty in the context of deprivation faced by children and how Malaysians perceive government initiatives in mitigating the issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children are vulnerable to many possible situations including deprivation of their childhoods. For example, children in some parts of the world live below the poverty line. They have been deprived in life due to economic insecurity and face major difficulties regarding their standard of living (Mohaqeqi and Seyed, 2019). Many studies have identified the causes of poverty and identified policies focusing on child poverty. Key family characteristics such as an unemployed household, poor family, family breakdown, failure in education, addiction, and debt have been identified as the main causes of child poverty in the United Kingdom (Bastos and Machado, 2009; UK government, 2014). Children from large families are particularly at risk and stand greater chances of being deprived (Bastos and Machado, 2009). In the case of the UK, the government is firmly

committed to battling child poverty by providing assistance to poor families in order for them to have sustainable income. Measures introduced include supporting families into work and increasing their earnings, improving living standards by improving the national minimum wage law, helping single parent families, and preventing poor children from becoming poor adults through raising their educational attainment (UK government, 2014). Through these policy initiatives, the government aims to end child poverty in the UK by 2020.

In the United States, more than 2.4 million children live in poor households. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), the youngest children stand greater chances of living below the poverty line (NCCP, 2018). Most of these children have parents who are employed, however low wages and an unstable employment situation leave their families struggling to make ends meet. Proactive action by the government in this context is essential since children who lived in poverty are most likely to be poor in early adulthood. The study reveals there is a high possibility for them to live in poverty if the cycle is not broken. The chances of being poor increase tremendously in relation to the time they spent living in poor condition increases (Wagmiller, Jr and Adelman, 2009). To improve the well-being of poor families, the American government has implemented several policies including childcare subsidies, the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, Minimum Wage, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), etc.

In New Zealand, child poverty can be attributed to higher unemployment and an increase in the number of single parent households. This led to a substantial increase of those who receive social assistance from the government. The broader economic costs and higher unemployment resulted in greater deprivation for children living in poor households. Accordingly, 48 percent of poor children in New Zealand are in families with low incomes (Boston, 2014). In some countries like India, childhood deprivation is quite common, especially for those children who live in the slums. Slum children suffer greatly and are less likely to receive better water supply, sanitation and drainage services compared to children in the more affluent areas (Indranil and Tirthankar, 2016). Slum children suffer from urban poverty and are more susceptible to malnutrition, disease, and a lack of access to better health services and education; yet support is limited. Other studies show that minorities in nearly every nation are one of the most vulnerable groups who experience child poverty. In Hong Kong, the highest poverty rates are recorded among all minority ethnic groups. As a result, the minority groups from Pakistan and

Nepal have a higher child poverty rate than Chinese households who constitute the majority of Hong Kong's population (Cheung and Chou, 2018).

In Malaysia, the phenomenon of child poverty is not new, but it is largely understudied. The news, reported by UNICEF in 2018, came as a complete shock to all Malaysians especially upon learning that urban poverty among children stood at 11 percent (UNICEF, 2018). This percentage signifies both the intensity of the issue in Malaysia and the current policy gap since children were not classified as a separate group for consideration in poverty alleviation programs. However, there are continuous measures by the government to support children from poor households and financially vulnerable families. This can be seen through several provisions which include school aids and other welfare assistance schemes set-up by the government. In 2015, more than 90,000 students were included in the poor students' trust fund, more than 500,000 received food assistance, and more than 1 million enjoyed the school milk program (Department of Statistic Malaysia (DOS), 2016). This is one part of the government's initiatives to alleviate poverty by providing support for children at school. However, despite concerted efforts, policy responses in addressing child poverty in Malaysia remains inadequate and scarce.

The literature has demonstrated a great deal of variation in the policy options across governments. Though Malaysia has made tremendous progress in eliminating poverty, the childhood poverty problem remains pervasive as not everyone benefited equally, and many unfortunate families and children were still left behind. There is a dearth of study in this area and the issue is under-prioritised. As far as government action is concerned, little attention was devoted to addressing issues regarding child poverty. In this regard, this study aims to examine the issue from the perspective of the public.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was explored quantitatively through the use of a survey questionnaire. The questions are adopted and adapted from extensive literature on child poverty. In order to appropriately reflect the poverty status of children, the research instruments have been adapted from studies by Lindquist and Lindquist, 2010; Chou, 2013; Maryam Abdu and Delamonica, 2018 and Saunders, Brown, Bedford and Naidoo, 2019.

The respondents are required to state their opinions on the policy actions by the government in addressing child poverty in Malaysia in addition to the multi-dimensional deprivations that makes the child poor. Responses to perceptions on the government policies and types of deprivation items were scored on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The questionnaire consists of 29 closed-ended questions that represent three constructs of the research, including demographic data. Survey questionnaires were administered through an online platform. To facilitate the data collection process, the convenience sampling technique was employed and a link to the online survey was sent out via social media. In time, 252 surveys were completed and returned. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS IBM 22 and descriptive statistical analysis has been presented in the form of mean, standard deviation, mode, and percentage to examine public perceptions on child poverty in Malaysia.

In terms of goodness of data, reliability test was performed to measure internal consistency among items that measure each construct. Table 1 presents reliability analysis for two constructs employed in the study. As shown in the table all two constructs have exceeded minimal acceptable levels of internal consistency standards. Evidently, all items that make up the scales are internally consistent with overall Alpha values above .5

Table 1: *Reliability Analysis for Two Constructs*

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	N of items
1. Government Policies	.600	7
2. Types of Deprivation	.767	10

Note: Reliability test indicates that all scales have reliability above $\alpha=.50$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Data

A total of 252 respondents participated in the study, with 71.8% and 28.2% who are female and male respondents respectively. In terms of education, most respondents have pre-degree qualifications (57.5%), 19.0% have a degree, 13.9% have no formal education, and another 9.5% of respondents continued their studies up to postgraduate level. Regarding the employment status of respondents, 44.0% are students, 16.3% are working in the private sector, 17.9% working with the public sector, 13.1% are unemployed, 7.9% are self-employed and 0.8 % are retirees. In terms of household dependents, 34.5% have four to seven dependents, 35.3% have either a dependent or none, another 25.4% have two to three dependents and 4.8% have large number of dependents with more than eight dependents. The study has identified ten (10) household income categories; and the findings show 62.7% of respondents earned less than RM 5000 and thus belong to the B40 group with another 34.5% earning less than RM 2500 monthly. This is followed by the M40 group with 26.2% and another 11.1% belonging to the T20 group. Out of 252 respondents, 26.2% are having unemployed dependents in the household. This signifies a significant drop in household income levels since parents have less to provide for the needs of their children. The pandemic had put a spotlight on in socio-economic trends which led to a dramatic increase in child poverty. A recent Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) report on household income indicated nearly 12.5 per cent of households are earning less than RM 2,500 and thousand more Malaysians are living below the poverty threshold. The increasing number of poor families is due to rising unemployment and reduction of income, resulting in an increased number of households living below national poverty line (Norhaslinda, 2021a).

The UNICEF report implies inadequate policy measures despite the government's relentless assistance in form of the children's well-being program. Continuous endeavors by the government to eliminate poverty through various national development plans seemed deficient, hence hardship faced by children remains oblivious to many especially since children can do very little by themselves to improve their situations. The study shows that 72.6% of respondents believed that children are affected by poverty more than other segments of the population. Another 80.9% believed that children encountered different challenges compared to adults in regard to poverty.

Many children from B40 families are vulnerable to poverty and deprivation and their needs are more likely to remain unmet due to a lack of funds (Norhaslinda, 2021b). This in turn would impair their growth and development. In Malaysia, the percentage of children under five with impaired growth increase from 17.7 per cent in 2015 to 21.8 per cent in 2019, and the prevalence of underweight children increased from 12.4 per cent in 2015 to 14.1 per cent in 2019 (Norhaslinda, 2021b).

This explains the needs for the government to provide a better social safety net to support poverty-stricken children and families. In Malaysia, various healthcare and welfare aid were provided to disadvantaged families. In order to ensure everyone is provided for, the cash assistance program has continuously been funded to provide support for specific groups such as children. Children from poor households received better allocation of funds with a maximum of RM 1000 per family. However, such measures are far from sufficient. This is grounded on the fact that the elements which satisfy children's needs and rights cannot always be bought in the market. It is imperative to know that children are not only facing material hardships, they are also facing multi-dimensional poverty. This has been recognised by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. Multidimensionality of poverty incorporates indicators relating to dimensions other than income (Saunders, et.al, 2019). Those dimensions would appropriately reflect the poverty status of children. In this context multidimensionality of child poverty covers children access to food, housing, education and health (Maryam, et. Al, 2018).

Bold actions from the government are necessary to reduce the existing high rates of poverty among households with children. There is a great deal of variation in the policy options, indeed early policy intervention will improve child outcomes. Turning to the question of how best to reduce child poverty, experts argued this was not a straightforward task. Recognising multi-dimensional child poverty means much more need to be done, thus inclusive approaches are indispensable. Table 2 presents public perceptions on the government policies to reduce child poverty.

Table 2: *Public Perceptions on the Government Policies to Reduce Child Poverty*

ITEM	Mean	SD	Mode	Disagree %	Less Disagree %	Agree %
1. Public exposure to the issue of child poverty is extremely low	4.18	0.688	4	2.4	7.8	89.7
1. No specific actions taken by the government in dealing with child poverty	3.99	0.851	4	5.2	15.1	79.8
2. The government provides adequate assistance to the poor but limited assistance for children.	3.94	0.868	4	7.2	11.9	80.9
3. The government should allocate a special monthly allowance to families (B40 and below) who have children.	4.27	0.787	4	4.0	5.6	90.5
4. The government is very concerned in providing assistance to children from poor families.	3.46	0.946	4	15.9	29.8	54.4
5. The financial assistance provided to families during the ongoing pandemic is sufficient to cover the expenses of the children.	3.08	1.094	4	30.1	30.2	39.6
6. Better welfare policies need to be developed to better address the issue of child poverty in line with the current Covid-19 situation.	4.35	0.668	4	2.4	2.4	95.2

It is undeniable there has been a lack of political and public attention towards the issue of child poverty. About 89.7% of respondents have indicated that public exposure to deprivation faced by poor children is low. In the context of policy making, an issue can be elevated to agenda setting through public pressure or media attention. Public opinion has much impact on public policy since the more salient the issue the greater the response and vice versa. In this regard, reduced public exposure would reduce the saliency of the problem, thus reduce government responsiveness. The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided, especially children. However, absence of exclusive program targeted to poor children indicates lack of political will on the government side, thus hindered progress toward protecting vulnerable children and families. 80.9% of respondents agree that aid to children is inadequate though the government is very concerned in providing assistance to poor families.

The government has been investing more funds into the welfare assistance scheme but assistance for children is far from satisfactory. 79.8 % opined an effort towards protecting vulnerable children has thus far been lacking. Despite considerable progress by government in protecting children and reducing poverty, the allocation does not adequately address the issues faced by poor children. 60.3 % respondents argue that the cash assistance program to family during the pandemic was insufficient to support their basic needs, let alone the needs of children. More credible approaches are needed in addressing child poverty, especially during the on-going pandemic. About 95.2% of respondents have agreed that it is about time for the government to formulate new strategies that cater to poor and bereaved children because of Covid-19. It is timely move for the government to turn its attention in ensuring a comprehensive social protection for children. Malaysian government should work to ensure that these poor children have access to quality healthcare, education, support, and service.

The bitter truth is children are exposed to different forms of deprivation. They can be socially and materially deprived. Table 3 presents public perceptions on the different types of deprivation faced by poor children in Malaysia. The respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement on widely acknowledged multiple deprivations faced by children living in poverty. Departing from the conventional monetary approach, scholars recognized various deprivations by measuring the complexity of multi-dimensional child poverty. Some examples of multiple deprivation include limited access to education, sanitation, information, health, and nutrition which constitutes the constitutive rights of the children which are embedded into an overall measure of child poverty.

Do Malaysians agree with the multi-dimensionality of poverty faced by poor children? Poverty impacts children in many ways, the descriptive analysis reveals; school dropouts (92.1%), lack of electronic devices for online learning (87.3 %), lack of attention from parents due to the need for overtime work (86.5 %), growth problem (79.7%) and the lack of nutritious food (87.2 %) are strongly perceived to be associated to child deprivation. Being deprived of any one of these already constitutes poverty. For instance, the absence of parents at home means that children have additional responsibilities (baby-sitting, cooking for themselves, etc). This fact highlights children encounter some challenges in the context of poverty and deprivation, and these challenges are often more acute due to a lack of financial resources.

Table 3: *Public Perceptions on Types of Deprivation Faced by Poor Children*

Item	Mean	SD	Mode	Disagree %	Less Disagree	Agree %
1. Lack of nutritious food is one form of deficiency faced by poor children	4.29	0.810	5	3.6	9.2	87.2
2. The inability of parents to provide proper healthcare (eg. seek treatment at private clinics) is one form of deprivation faced by poor children.	4.08	0.935	4	6.4	16.3	77.4
3. Inadequate bedrooms are one form of deprivation faced by poor children.	4.15	0.847	4	6.0	11.5	82.5
4. Lack of attention from parents due to the need to work overtime is one form of deprivation faced by children.	4.28	0.776	5	3.2	10.3	86.5
5. The inability to buy toys is one form of deprivation faced by poor children.	3.36	1.037	3	17.9	38.5	43.7
6. Dropping out of school is one form of deprivation faced by poor children.	4.42	0.797	5	5.2	2.8	92.1
7. Growth problem is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	4.06	0.914	4	6.8	13.5	79.7
8. Limited internet access is one form of deprivation faced by poor children.	4.21	0.781	4	3.2	12.7	84.1
9. Lack of electronic devices (eg. Laptop, smartphone) for online learning is one form of deprivation faced by poor children.	4.27	0.878	5	6.8	6	87.3
10. Child living in poverty is only 'temporary' (transitory state).	3.11	1.091	3	24.6	34.9	40.4

Meanwhile, there are 56.4% of respondents who believe the parents' ability to buy toys is not related to child deprivation and that the likelihood of living in poverty should not be measured based on this aspect. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents (59.5%) believe that poverty for most children appears to be a permanent state especially since family type, family dissolution, and unemployment consistently push children into poverty. Sadly, this means deprived children may spend their entire childhood in poverty. As it stands, these are just one of the numerous challenges faced by today's policy makers. The findings will shed light on current policy debates over the question of how best to help children living in poverty.

CONCLUSION

The curse of child poverty is detrimental to the development of children. Building on this argument, the result of this study supports the need for early policy intervention through more credible, conscious and sound policy measures in order to improve child outcomes. The current money-metric poverty measurement of child poverty is far from satisfactory. This research finding exposes the reality and public recognised various deprivation faced by poor children. Children are multidimensionally poor, and the pandemic has further exacerbated the situation. To mitigate the situation, policy makers must approach the problem from a multi-dimensional perspective. The multi-dimensional approach towards child poverty recognizes multiple forms of deprivation ranging from education, sanitation, health, and information to nutrition; thus, children deserve a special policy. Undermining the plight of poor children could lead to many problems including underachievement, illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and limit child opportunities in all aspect. Indeed, poverty in childhood is associated with a range of adverse adult socio-economic outcomes. Therefore, the study calls for the government to reframe the policy problem so that child poverty is not perceived as a minor concern but rather as an issue which places the rights and well-being of the children front and centre.

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