REPORT | CHILD POVERTY

Poverty in Scotland 2025

Poverty is still too high, people are feeling overlooked and ignored by politicians — the next Scottish Parliament is vital for a better future for children in Scotland.

Published on: 6 October 2025
Written by: Chris Birt, Carla Cebula, Jack Evans, Annie McKenzie

Reading time: 57 minutes

Executive summary

This year's Poverty in Scotland is published in the context of people feeling overlooked and ignored by politicians. It is a context in which the economy is not working and in which low-paid, insecure work is entangled with high costs.

It is time for trust to be rebuilt in our political institutions. With nearly a quarter of a million children still experiencing poverty in Scotland, there is no better place to start than building a better future for every child.

This report shows the results of today's failures. Nearly 1 in 4 children are living in poverty, and poverty rates amongst the Scottish Government's so-called priority families remain particularly high. While there are signs of hope, in terms of the impact of the Scottish Child Payment (SCP), there is much more to do.

We have also, for the first time, incorporated analysis of child poverty in Scotland's local authorities. This is a crucial insight for politicians who seek to represent these areas in Holyrood or in the local government elections that follow in 2027. As has been the case for some time, much of the central belt, and Glasgow in particular, has the most work to do. Nevertheless, there are glimmers of hope in that the vast majority of local authority areas have seen a fall in child poverty rates, again thanks to the SCP.

Our report also confirms some of the endemic features of poverty in Scotland. The latest data tells us:

1. Poverty is deepening: nearly 1 in 10 people in Scotland are in very deep poverty with incomes below 40% of the median (the standard poverty line is below 60%).
2. In-work poverty is increasingly more common: 6 in 10 people in poverty live in a household where someone works and nearly three-quarters of children in poverty do.
3. Poverty amongst disabled people remains high: when disability benefits are excluded from the income of households where someone is disabled, the poverty rate for people in a family where someone is in receipt of a disability benefit is 38%. Over half of all children in poverty live in a household where someone is disabled.
4. Universal Credit (UC) rates are too low to escape poverty: 42% of people in a family in receipt of a low-income benefit, such as UC, were trapped in poverty.
5. Housing costs are causing poverty, particularly for renters: 1 in 10 people in rented accommodation (private or social rents) are pulled into poverty due to their housing costs.

We also continue to be concerned about the quality of the Family Resources Survey, with both the Scottish Government and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) needing to take immediate remedial action.

This report also re-examines the state of play for the Scottish Government's 'priority families'. With nearly 9 in 10 children in poverty in these groups, the road to reaching the Child Poverty Reduction targets runs through improving the lives of these families.

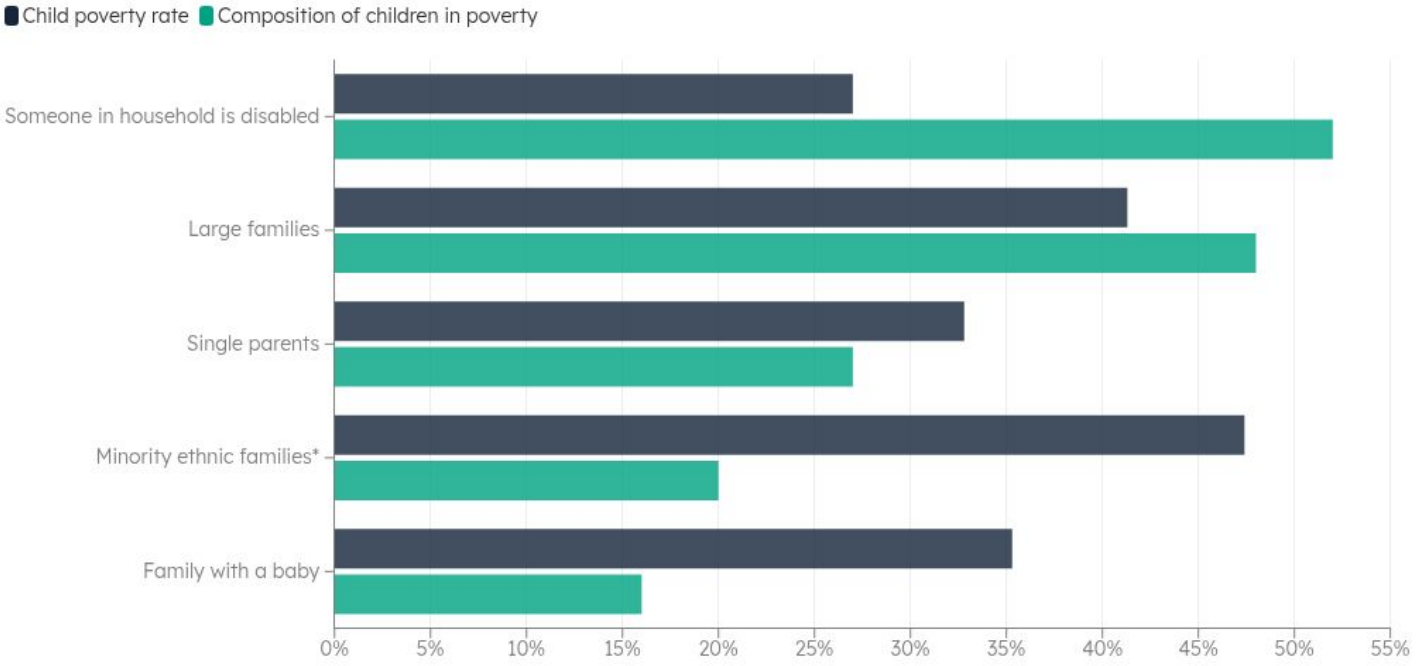
But we also look in detail at the intersecting nature of these groups. We show that in the latest data, the majority of children in poverty (58%) were in 2 or more priority groups. This is a big increase in the proportions of children in poverty that are in multiple priority families: 16 percentage points, compared to 1994–97.

This highlights the point that each family is unique and that designing services that adapt and flex to the individual needs of families is crucial.[1] Each type of family will have unique challenges:

- **Families where someone is disabled:** children in poverty where someone in the household is disabled are much less likely to have a parent in work. Less than 2 in 3 children in households in poverty where someone is disabled have someone in work (62%) compared to nearly three-quarters of all children in poverty.
- **Single-parent families:** almost 70% of children in single-parent families are also in another priority group. Over 80% of children in a single-parent family are in receipt of a low-income benefit, and more than half of children in single-parent families in poverty have no one in work.

- **Families with a baby:** child poverty amongst families with babies has risen from around 24% in 2010–13 to 35% in the latest figures.
- **Large families:** children in large families have seen a steep rise in poverty rates since the introduction of the two-child limit, up to 41% in 2021–24 from 30% in 2013–16. They now make up nearly half of all children in poverty.
- **Minority ethnic families:** these families make up just 1 in 10 children in Scotland in 2021–24. However, they have the highest risk of child poverty of all of the priority groups, with nearly half (47%) trapped in poverty in 2021–24. This means that they make up 1 in 5 children in poverty.

Figure 1: Poverty rate and share for children in the priority families 2021–24



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
*Our definition of minority ethnic does not include people from an 'other white' background.

As we highlight in our Introduction, there is much to be done in the next Scottish parliamentary term to ensure that every child in Scotland has the childhood they deserve. It is a crucial investment in them, and in all of our futures.

1. Introduction

People are feeling ignored and overlooked by decision-makers in Scotland, and it is crucial that the next Parliament focuses on the things that matter to people, like tackling child poverty. This report sets out where we are just now, but there is so much we can do to make things better. We can build a better future where everyone has a decent affordable home, where work gives us enough to get by on and where we all have enough to pay the bills. The next Parliament should be about getting decisions right today, decisions that build a strong future for all our children.

2. Meeting the moment

Earlier this year, we set out a toolkit (https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/meeting-the-moment-scottish-election-2026) (Evans et al., 2025) which showed the level of ambition and scale required to meet the Scottish Parliament's child poverty reduction targets.

It provided a series of different modelled scenarios whereby those targets could be met. It is a vital source of insight and accountability for the parties that look to be elected in next May's election.

The next Parliament is a major litmus test for Holyrood as an institution. A Scotland in which less than 10% of children live in relative poverty is a much better country than the one we have today. It is one in which every child has the chance to explore their potential, and in which they can learn, play, explore and create.

It is a Scotland with a healthier and happier population, where people have a decent affordable home, where work provides a fair return, where household bills are manageable and where public services are equipped to deal with the challenges that life throws at all of us.

In just a couple of weeks, people can take to the streets of Edinburgh in an event called Scotland Demands Better (https://www.scotland-demands-better.com/).

This report sets out why we must demand better. Our toolkit and the demands of that march show how we can do better.

Ultimately, making sure all children have a decent start in life is the best investment we can make in our country's future prosperity.

3. Poverty rates and progress on targets

Poverty rates over time

Poverty in Scotland fell rapidly over the decade from 1999–2002 to 2009–12, from 24% (1.2 million people) to a low of 18% (900,000 people). Over the following decade, the trend in the after housing costs (AHC) relative poverty rate has reversed, creeping back up to a level of 20% in 2021–24 (1.1 million people). However, there is a slight fall from 21% in 2020–23.

Since the early 2000s, Scotland has consistently had a lower poverty rate (AHC) than the rest of the UK. We know the primary driver of this is lower housing costs and more social housing in Scotland compared to England (Congreve, 2019). While Scotland and the rest of the UK saw a similar overall decrease in poverty between 1994–97 and 2020–24, there have been some distinct differences in the trends between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

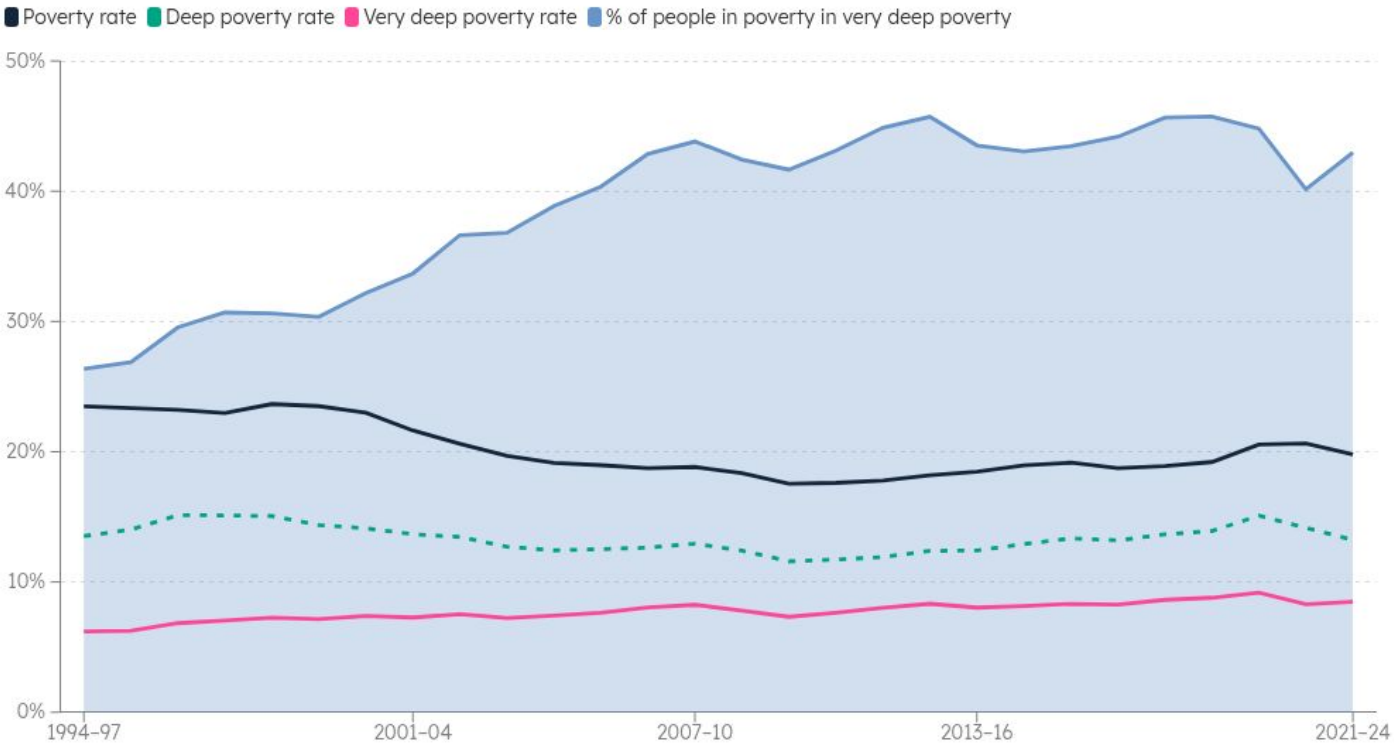
In the rest of the UK, there was no significant decline in poverty for 20 years, but between 2000–03 and 2009–12, Scotland saw a steady reduction in poverty rates. Scotland made more significant progress in reducing poverty, but it has also seen an increase since 2010–13. Work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) suggests that with no further policy changes, poverty rates in Scotland and England are set to diverge, with Scotland seeing poverty reduce

by one percentage point compared to no improvement in England if policies were to continue as they are now (Milne et al., 2025).

Depth of poverty

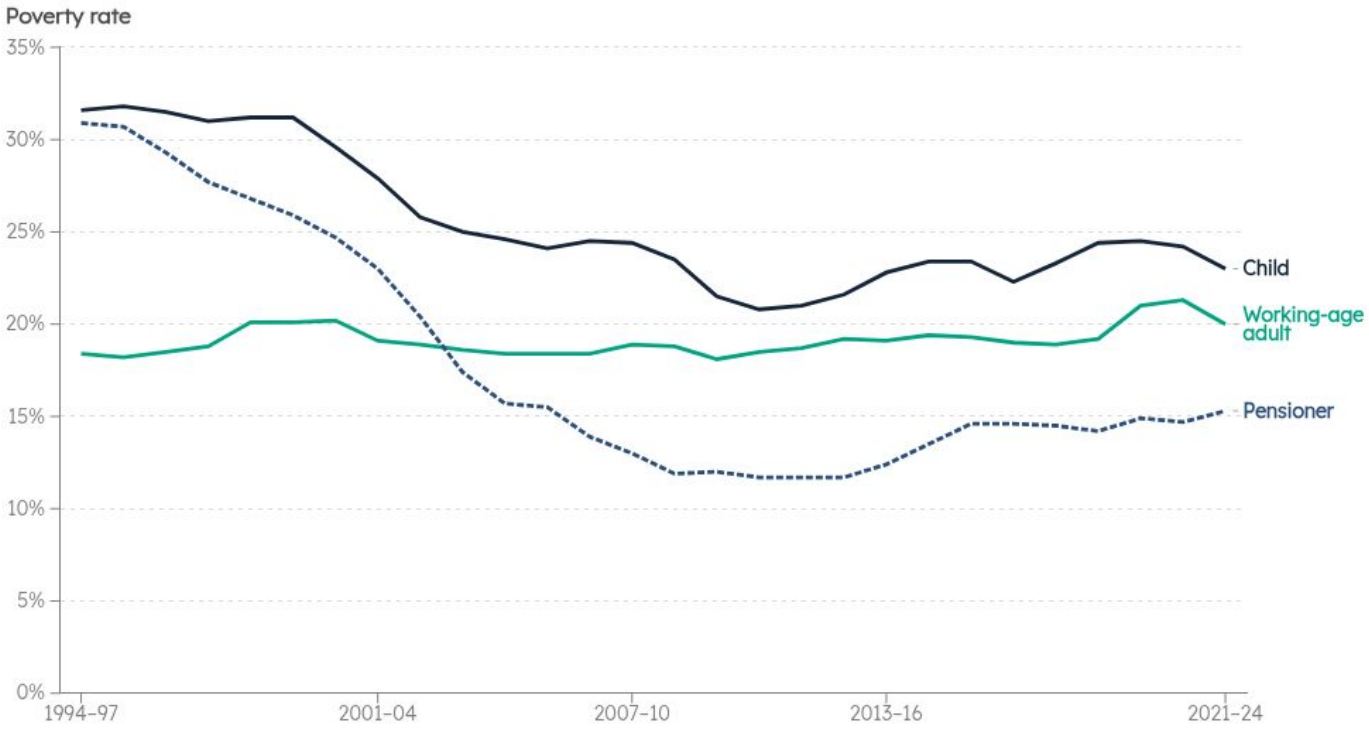
Very deep poverty (less than 40% of median income after housing costs) steadily increased between 1994–97 and 2019–22, when nearly 1 in 10 people (9%) in Scotland were trapped in very deep poverty, making up nearly half (45%) of all people trapped in poverty in Scotland. Last year, we saw a fall of 4 percentage points in the proportion of people in poverty in very deep poverty. However, this has not continued, and the proportion of people in poverty in very deep poverty has returned closer to the value seen in 2019–22, 43% in 2021–24.

Figure 2: Proportion of people in poverty by depth
1994–97 to 2021–24



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income

Figure 3: Poverty rate (AHC) for children, working-age adults and pensioners 1994–97 to 2021–24



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income

Children

Child poverty generally fell between 1995–98 and 2010–13. Between 2010–13 and 2018–21, it rose again from around 1 in 5 to around 1 in 4 children in poverty. Child poverty has remained stable since then, at around 24%, which shows the same lack of progress as is seen across the UK, where child poverty has remained at around 30% since 2014–17.

We are starting to see a slight divergence in child poverty rates between Scotland and the rest of the UK, where poverty has fallen by one percentage point in Scotland but has remained stable in the rest of the UK. This could be due to the full roll-out of the SCP in the latest 3-year period, where similar policies have not been implemented in the rest of the UK. While there are some signs that the SCP is having an impact on child poverty levels, we will need to see if this trend continues over the coming years.

Working-age adults

Scotland has seen an overall increase in poverty rates for working-age adults between 1994–97 and 2021–24, from 18% to 20%. The highest rates seen across this period were over the Covid-19 pandemic (2019–22 and 2020–23) at 21%. We have seen a fall of one percentage point in the latest year.

Pensioners

Between 1994–97 and 2008–11, the risk of falling into poverty for pensioners more than halved, from 31% to 12%. This was driven by the UK Government's commitment to reduce poverty amongst older people and the use of the 'triple lock', ensuring pensioner incomes kept up with rising prices and wage inflation. Between 2008–11 and 2013–16, pensioner poverty sat at 12%, and by 2015–18 it had risen to 15% where it remains in the latest year.

At the same time, poverty before housing costs was increasing for pensioners between 2011–14 and 2015–18. This is likely due to lower-income pensioners having less income from private pensions and being more reliant on state pensions and means-tested benefits. The value of these has grown at a slower rate than private pensions, as increases in state pension income mean that some pensioners are no longer entitled to Pension Credit or are entitled to lower amounts. Finally, for those who do qualify for means-tested support, the take-up of pension credit is low, meaning that many of the lowest-income pensioners are being left behind.

Figure 4: Pensioner poverty in Scotland – before and after housing costs
1994–97 to 2021–24

Source: Scottish Government analysis of Family Resources Survey

Child poverty targets

Children in Scotland continue to be at a greater risk of poverty than the rest of the population.

The Scottish Government has not met the interim child poverty reduction targets and remains far from the 2030/31 final targets. Relative poverty, absolute poverty and persistent poverty would all need to close by more than 10 percentage points over the next Scottish Parliament.

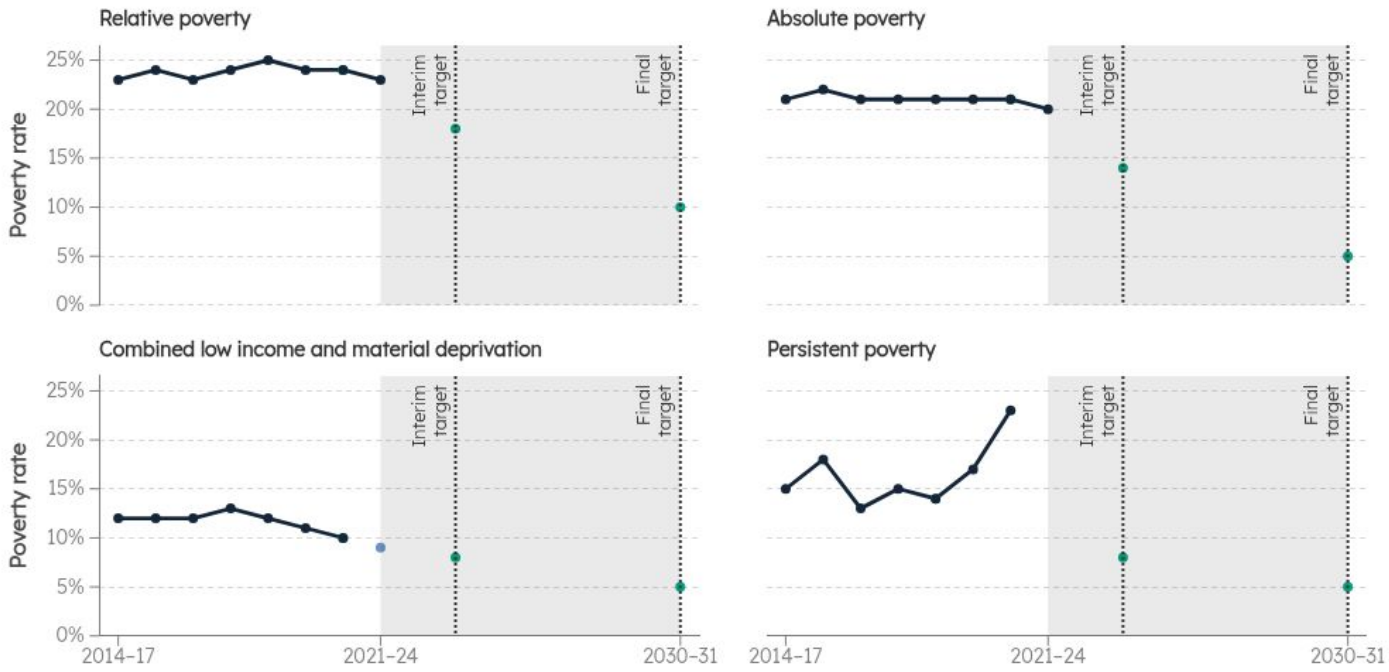
Relative child poverty sits at 23%, 13 percentage points above the final target, having missed the interim target of 18%.

Absolute child poverty fell by one percentage point in the latest year of data, after having sat at 21% since 2016–19. However, it remains 15 percentage points over the final target.

Combined low-income and material deprivation is closest to the final target at 4 percentage points over. There is a break in the series for this measure, meaning it is not possible to compare this year's figure to previous trends.

Persistent poverty has worryingly seen an increase since 2016–19 and is now a massive 18 percentage points over the target of 5%.[2] This increase in persistent poverty aligns with the period following economic shocks such as Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. These shocks can make it harder for low-income families to recover and in turn could have led to longer spells of poverty and increasing persistent poverty over the period.

Figure 5: What has happened to the child poverty targets since they were announced compared to the interim and final targets



Source: Scottish Government analysis of HBAI and Understanding Society
Note: This analysis uses a 3-year average while the targets use a single-year rate, which is more volatile. The 3-year average indicates that we remain some distance from the interim target. Change in measurement of combined low income and material deprivation in 2023/24. Therefore, the value shown for 2021-24 (in blue) is a single year value for 2023/24, not a 3-year average

Scottish Government's priority families

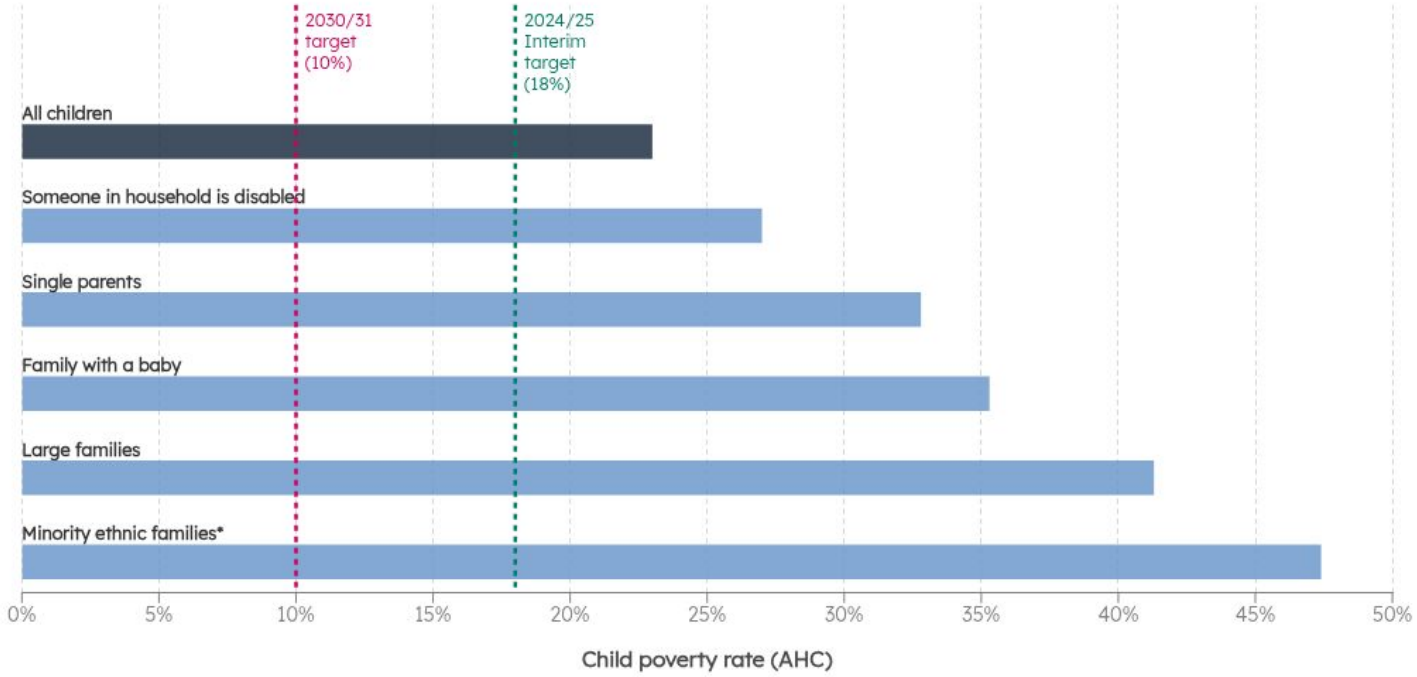
The Scottish Government also identified 6 priority families in which children are at a greater risk of poverty (Scottish Government, 2025a). These families are the focus of the main section of this report.

In 2021–24, out of all the priority families, children in households where someone is disabled have the closest poverty rate as all children in Scotland (27% compared to 23%). However, this group makes up more than half of children in poverty (52%).

Around 1 in 3 children in single-parent families (33%) and in families with a baby (35%) were in poverty. In addition, 2 in 5 children in large families (41%) are trapped in poverty and make up the second largest group of children in poverty (48%).

Just less than half (47%) of children from a minority ethnic background are trapped in poverty. This is a slight fall from previous years, when it sat at over half of minority ethnic children. Minority ethnic children now make up a fifth of children in poverty, but a tenth of all children in Scotland.

Figure 6: Child poverty rates compared to the targets for the Scottish Government's priority families (2021–24)



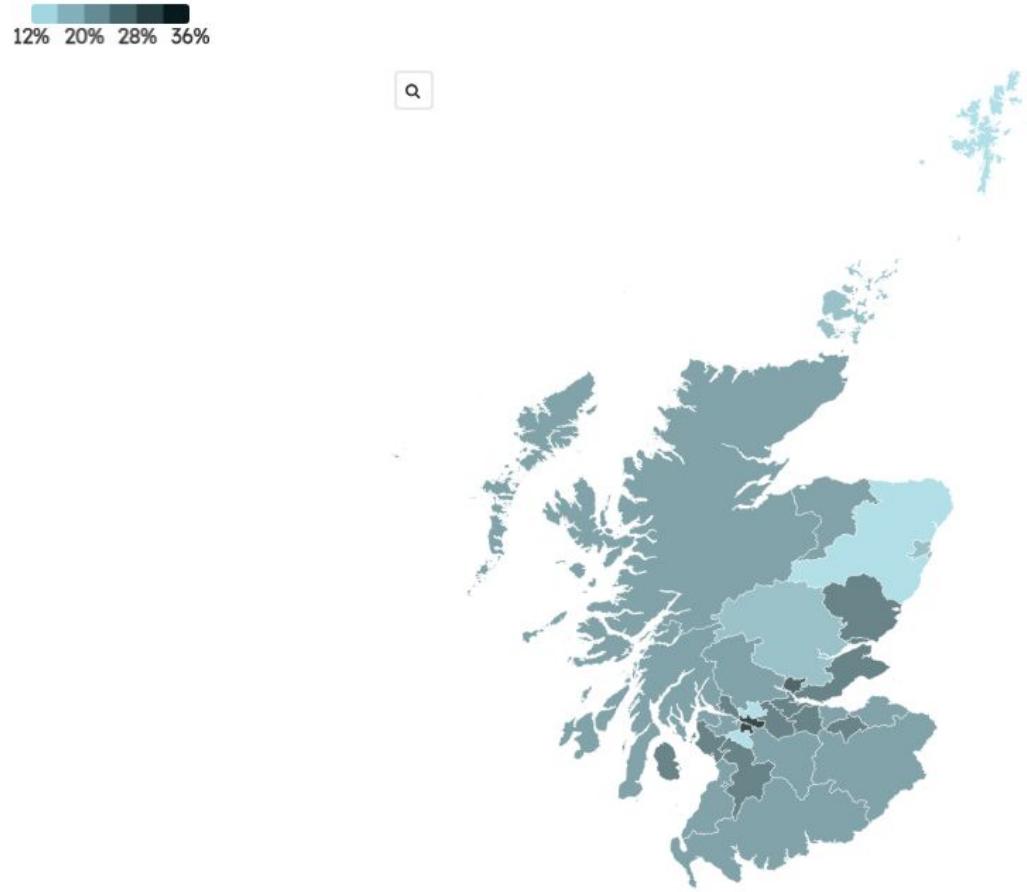
Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: The sample size for children with a young mum is too small to publish. The sample for a family with a baby is small in 2020/21. However, it shows a similar poverty rate to earlier years and there is just a small difference between the 5- and 3- year averages. *Our definition of minority ethnic does not include people from an 'other white' background.

Local child poverty rates

In nearly three-quarters of Scottish local authorities, at least 1 in 5 children were living in poverty in 2023/24. Local authorities with the highest child poverty rates include Glasgow City (36%), Clackmannanshire (28%) and Dundee City (26%). At the other end of the scale, East Renfrewshire (12%), Shetland Islands (14%), East Dumbartonshire (15%) and Aberdeenshire

(15%) had the lowest rates.

Figure 7: Map of Scottish local authority child poverty rates (2023/24)



Source: Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2023/24. Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University.

Figure 8: Trends in child poverty across local authorities from 2014/15 to 2023/24

Source: Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2023/24. Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University.

Note: The drop in child poverty in 2020/21 is likely a temporary effect of emergency pandemic support, including the £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit, which significantly boosted incomes for low-income families during that period (Loughborough University, 2022)

The SCP, introduced in February 2021, has helped reduce child poverty in Scotland (End Child Poverty, 2025). At a local level, SCP may be contributing to the reduction in child poverty, with 27 out of 32 local authorities having lower rates in 2023/24 compared to levels before its

introduction in 2019/20. However, progress has not been uniform. City of Edinburgh, Angus, Midlothian, Falkirk, Clackmannanshire and Glasgow City have all seen increases in child poverty over that same period.

Summary of key poverty reduction policy areas

This section summarises some of the links between key policy areas and poverty in Scotland. It is intended to give a high-level insight into the drivers of poverty, the barriers that contribute to it and the solutions. The rest of the report will consider these areas, but within the context of the priority families.

Work

Work, particularly full-time work, continues to be a protective factor against poverty. One in 10 people in a family where at least one person is working full-time is in poverty. This compares to 3 in 10 people in families where there is only part-time work and more than half (54%) of people in families where no one is working.

However, in-work poverty has increased in Scotland, with more than 6 in 10 people in poverty having one or more person in their household in work. This compares to 44% of people in poverty 25 years ago. Nearly half of working families in poverty have all adults in employment.

We see similar trends for families with children, with nearly three-quarters of children in poverty (73%) having one or more parents in work, and one-third of children in poverty having all their parents in work.

Work undertaken earlier this year showed that by supporting parents into work and more work could lift up to 70,000 children out of poverty by 2030/31 and make a significant contribution to reducing child poverty (Evans et al., 2025). While work can be a protective factor for people in Scotland, it must be of sufficient hours and pay to keep families afloat. Decision-makers must also recognise that work will not always be an option for everyone, meaning that social security must provide a sufficient safety net.

Social security

Last year's Poverty in Scotland focused on social security (Birt et al., 2024). It showed that the social security system was failing those who need it most. In 2021–24, 42% of people in a family in receipt of a low-income benefit such as UC were trapped in poverty. This is a rise from 31% in 2004–07. Meanwhile, people in families not in receipt of a low-income benefit have not seen their risk of poverty rise at the same rate, increasing by just 2 percentage points over the same period. Some of this will be due to changes in the benefits system, but nevertheless, the difference is striking.

Although income from benefits is critical for keeping low-income families from falling further into poverty, the system is not keeping families afloat.

The UK Government continues to plan to cut UC support for disabled people and those who are ill via the planned cuts to the health elements of UC. It also remains to be seen what their review of Personal Independence Payments will mean.

Of people in a family in receipt of disability benefits, 16% are in poverty when we include their non-means-tested disability benefits that are intended to cover the additional costs of being disabled. As this income is used by disabled people to cover these additional costs, we also calculate the poverty rate when we exclude these benefits. When they are excluded, the poverty rate for people in families where someone is in receipt of a disability benefit increases to 38%, highlighting the unfairness inherent in trying to cut more social security funding on the backs of those already at a higher risk of poverty, as well as broader discrimination.

Housing

As mentioned earlier, more affordable and social housing has helped Scotland to maintain a lower poverty rate (AHC) than the rest of the UK. However, increasing social rents and not keeping up with the building of social housing could mean that this advantage begins to wane.

Since 2010–13, poverty rates in the social rented sector have risen from 33% of people in the social rented sector to 42% in 2021–24. At the same time, poverty rates in the private rented sector have fallen from 35% to 32%. This means that in 2021–24, 43% of people in poverty live in the social rented sector and 22% in the private rented sector.

The poverty rate is lower for homeowners: 13% of people who own outright and 8% of people who own with a mortgage were in poverty in 2021–24.

Of those in rented accommodation (private or social rents), 1 in 10 are pulled into poverty due to their housing costs. High housing costs are also a reason that renters can find it harder to maintain a decent income. One in 4 people in private rented accommodation and 6 in 10 private renters in poverty are paying high housing costs, meaning that their housing takes up a third or more of their income. Among social renters, 16% had high housing costs and over 1 in 3 social renters were in poverty.

Restricted insights — the challenge of working with data in Scotland

The data used for poverty reporting in the UK is called Households Below Average Income (HBAI) and collects detailed information on households, their income and some of their costs. It is the only complete source of this information in Scotland and, while other datasets might hold some of this information, they do not have it all for the one household that we need to

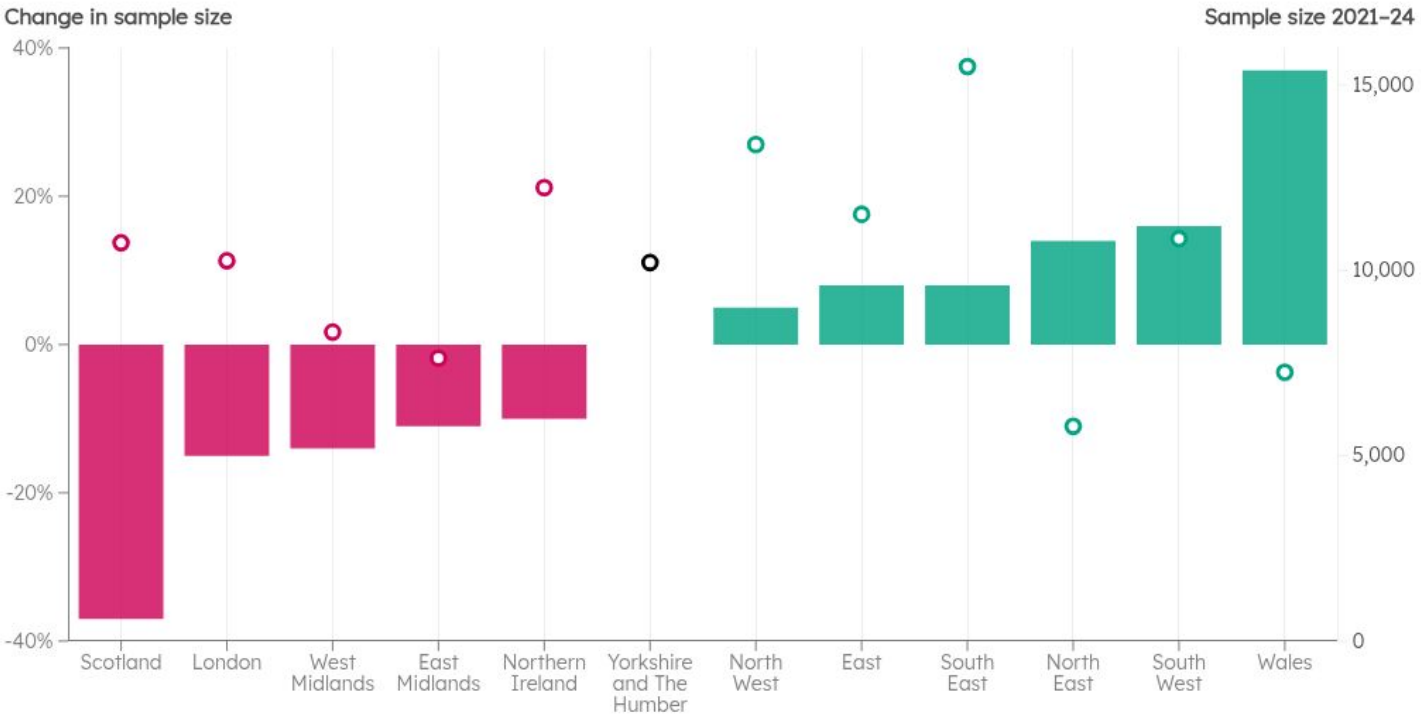
work out whether a person is in poverty or not.

In 2020/21, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, big social surveys, like HBAI, had to change what they were doing as they could no longer interview people in their homes. This meant that the HBAI data for 2020/21 was not robust and had extremely small sample sizes. For all of our analysis in Scotland, we exclude this year of data as suggested by DWP (2025).

After the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, DWP made significant steps to have suitable sample sizes and conduct the survey safely, although they cancelled a sample size boost after one year (2022/23 had a boosted UK sample). Overall, the sample in Scotland has not recovered since the pandemic, even with the Scottish Government paying for an increased sample across the whole period.

The sample size in Scotland for 2021–24, in terms of the number of people included in the survey, has fallen by 37% compared to the 3-year pooled sample for 2017–20, before the Covid-19 pandemic. This is the biggest fall across all regions and countries of the UK and has left us with a pooled sample of just 10,744 people. This seems like a big number, but we undertake analysis by year (so less than 3,500 people per year on average), and once we start to look more closely, we see that some groups get small very quickly. For example, across all 3 years, there are fewer than 2,000 children, and just 378 are in poverty. This makes it very hard to understand the drivers of poverty for children in Scotland and to understand change over time.

Figure 9: Sample size in 2021–24 and change in sample size before and after Covid-19
By region



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: There has been no change in sample size for Yorkshire and The Humber, this is why there is no visible bar for this region.

Ultimately, this low sample size has meant that our understanding of what is and is not working in Scotland is constrained. The challenge is to piece together information where we can, but this limits what we can say.

Far more importantly, this is restricting both the Scottish Government's ability to design policy and measure its impact, and the Scottish Parliament's ability to hold government to account

for doing so. While the sample sizes of surveys may not come out as the top of public priorities, presumably the Scottish Government would prefer to be able to show the impact of its policies more clearly, and the Scottish Parliament would want to be able to state when the Scottish Government's actions are falling short?

We believe that the Scottish Government and DWP need to urgently review the efficacy of this survey in Scotland and put together an action plan to raise the sample sizes to pre-Covid levels at the very least.

Where are we and what is next?

This is the last Poverty in Scotland of the Scottish Parliament's 2021–2026 session. It shows the overall poverty position in Scotland to be largely the same as it was at the start of the session. If this pattern is repeated across the next Parliamentary session, the Scottish Parliament will miss its child poverty reduction target by a large margin. This Parliament has seen the full roll-out of a significant anti-poverty measure in the SCP that is having an impact on low-income families, but the next Parliament must be one of ambition and scale. As we noted in our Meeting the Moment toolkit, it is acceptable to try but fail to meet the targets, but it is unacceptable not to try (Evans et al., 2025).

4. Who are the priority families?

The priority families were introduced by the Scottish Government in the first tackling child poverty delivery plan (Scottish Government, 2018). They are 6 family types that have a high risk of child poverty and/or make up a big proportion of children in poverty. These family types face some shared structural barriers that trap them in poverty, such as access to flexible work. Yet others experience specific barriers that are particular to their family type. For example, children in large families are discriminated against by our benefits system through the two-child limit.

In 2021–24, nearly 9 in 10 children in poverty are in one or more of the priority families. This means that it is impossible to meet the Scottish Child Poverty Reduction Targets without reducing poverty for children in these families.

Name	Description
Single-parent families	Households with children headed by a single parent.

Name	Description
Households where someone is disabled	Households where a parent and/or child is disabled under the Equality Act. This means that they have a physical and/or mental disability that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.
Large families	Households with 3 or more dependent children.
Families with a baby	Households with a baby under the age of one. When we look at this priority family, we also include any older siblings living in the same household.
Minority ethnic families	Households where the head of the household is from a minority ethnic background. This is not an ideal way to capture parent and children's ethnic identity as it assumes that those in the household share one ethnic background. We have used this method due to the information captured in the HBAI data.
Families with a young mum	Households with children where the mum is under the age of 25. This group is very small although experience acute barriers to work, housing and receipt of adequate social security. Due to the very small size of this group, we have not included it in the majority of the analysis undertaken in this report.

Note: All of these ‘families’ are measured at the household level and not the family level. For example, a single-parent family can live in a household with another family, meaning they are not necessarily a single-adult household. In this analysis, we only include households with one parent, even though we are calling them a single-parent family. This is not identical to the method undertaken by the Scottish Government (2025b), but it provides consistency across the priority groups by measuring them at the household level.

However, we also know that in real life, these family types are often interconnected, with families in poverty being in more than one group. In fact, the majority of children in poverty in Scotland are in 2 or more of these groups. For these families, this may mean that the barriers and solutions to poverty are compounded or different due to the overlapping nature of the priority groups they belong to.

Additionally, whether people are in one of the priority groups is not fixed. People’s situations can change, and this means that they can move in and out of these groups. For example, families with a baby will naturally grow out of this group as their baby becomes a toddler. For other groups, it may be more complex; for example, when parents separate, they may become part of a single-parent family, which then transitions back to a couple family in the future. Yet, while these groups are not static for individual families, many of the barriers faced by people in this group have seen little progress since the creation of the Scottish Child Poverty Reduction Targets.

How do parents feel about the concept of priority families?

We asked members of our End Poverty Scotland Group (EPSG) what they thought of the priority families. The group found them to be a helpful tool for thinking about the structural barriers that families might face. Yet they also felt like their individual experiences tended not to neatly fit into one 'bucket', with the majority of EPSG members being or having grown up in overlapping priority groups.

Members of the group spoke about the structural barriers that affect the priority families, as well as their experiences of facing these barriers themselves. The group identified where the priority families might share similar or differing experiences. For example, parents feel like there is not enough flexible and affordable childcare, and although the impact of this will be experienced differently for parents of a large family compared to a single-parent family, the solution may be similar. On the other hand, not having enough work to have an adequate income is a shared barrier for many of the priority families, yet the solution for single parents is very different to the solution for disabled people.

The group's feeling that they do not neatly fit into one priority family type is one reason why we have also focused on how the priority groups overlap. Sadly, we could not look more closely at specific overlaps (for example, single-parent large families) because of the very small sample sizes, but we could look at children in 2 or more priority families. We have also

highlighted which priority families are more likely to contain children in more priority groups.

Finally, parents also told us that the barriers that affect them change over time, making their belonging to a certain priority group more or less important to them. For example, Andrew in Dundee, whose family is in multiple priority groups told us how being the parent of a disabled child has become a bigger part of the barriers that affect him and his family as his child has aged:

"My priorities change from week to week. It's really... difficult to plan ahead because you know, things are changing, your kids are getting older, you know, there are so many moving parts."

This again highlights that the priority families are a useful policy tool to understand structural inequalities and barriers that affect parents and their children. However, for many people in poverty, their experiences of these groups are much less static and more complex.

Why are we focusing on the priority families?

In 2021, we focused on the priority families in Poverty in Scotland. Reflecting on the very high proportion of children in poverty in a priority family, one member of the EPSG said:

“If over 80% of children in poverty are in one of the priority groups, how big a priority are we really?”

Alex, Fife, 2021

This sentiment is still echoed 4 years on in the lead-up to the next parliamentary election, and it is one of the reasons why we have again focused on the priority families in Poverty in Scotland.

“The phrase 'priority families' feels empty when the poverty rate for many within them is still increasing.”

Alex, Fife, 2025

For parents in the priority families, the disconnect between the policy rhetoric of the ‘priority families’ and their experience of life becoming harder on a low income is hard to swallow, feeding greater distrust of those in power.

5. Poverty risk and depth over time for the priority families

Since our time series began in 1994–97, children in all of the priority families have consistently had a higher risk of poverty than all children in Scotland. While the gap between the risk for the priority families and all children has closed for some of the priority families, it has not yet reached the same risk as for all children and remains significantly above both the interim and final targets for all priority families. We have also seen a lack of improvement since the introduction of the child poverty reduction targets in 2017 (see the dashed line in Figure 10). It is worth noting that 2017 also coincides with the introduction of the two-child limit as well as broader freezes to the values of low-income benefits.

In 1994–97, children in single-parent families had the highest rates of poverty. 2 in 3 children in single-parent families were trapped in poverty. This is more than double the rate seen for all children. Children in families with a baby, large families and households where someone is disabled had similar poverty rates at around 2 in 5 in poverty.

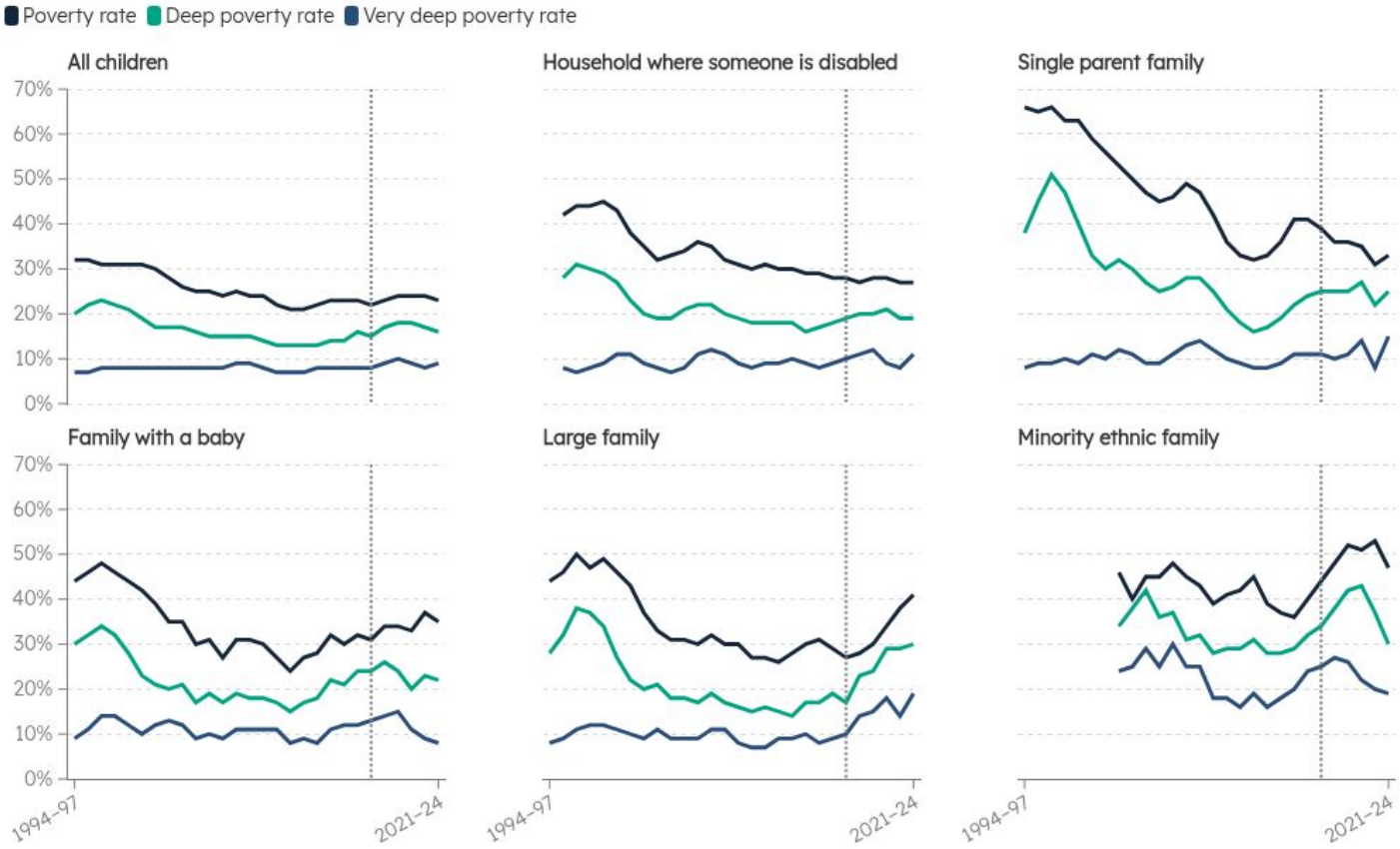
Due to small sample sizes, we can only calculate poverty rates for children in minority ethnic families from 2001–04. Here, they sat at 46%, almost double the rate seen for all children that

year.

As poverty fell for all children between 1994–97 and 2010–13, it also fell for the priority families and, generally, at a much faster pace. This is with the exception of minority ethnic families, where poverty rates fluctuated but never fell below 39%.

Since the introduction of the targets, we have seen no real progress on reducing poverty for all children in Scotland, and for 3 out of the 5 priority families for which we have analysis (families with a baby, large families and minority ethnic families), poverty rates have increased since 2016–19.

Figure 10: Poverty rate and depth by priority family
1994–97 to 2021–24



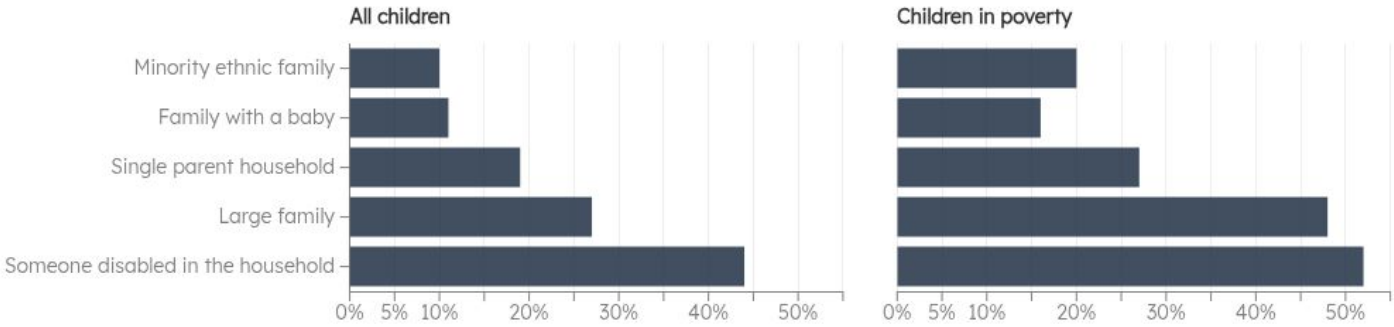
Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Incomes
Note: The dashed line marks the introduction of the Scottish Child Poverty Reduction Targets. The Scottish Government's minority ethnic priority family includes households from a 'White other' ethnic background, but we do not include them in our analysis.

All 5 of the priority families experience a much greater risk of being in deep poverty (an income less than 50% of the median income) than all children in Scotland. Deep child poverty has been rising for all children since 2012–15, and we see similar, if steeper, increases for many of the priority families. Of children in large and minority ethnic families, 3 in 10 are in deep poverty.

For the majority of priority families, very deep poverty (an income less than 40% of the median) sat at a similar rate to all children until 2014–17. Since then, the gap between very deep poverty for all children and children in large or minority ethnic families has widened. This has resulted in nearly 1 in 5 children in large and minority ethnic families being in very deep poverty.

This has resulted in the over-representation of the priority families among children in poverty. For example, 10% of children in Scotland are from a minority ethnic background, while 20% of children in poverty in Scotland are from a minority ethnic background.

Figure 11: Proportion of children in each priority family type
Comparing all children and children in poverty



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: Proportions do not sum to 100% as these groups overlap.

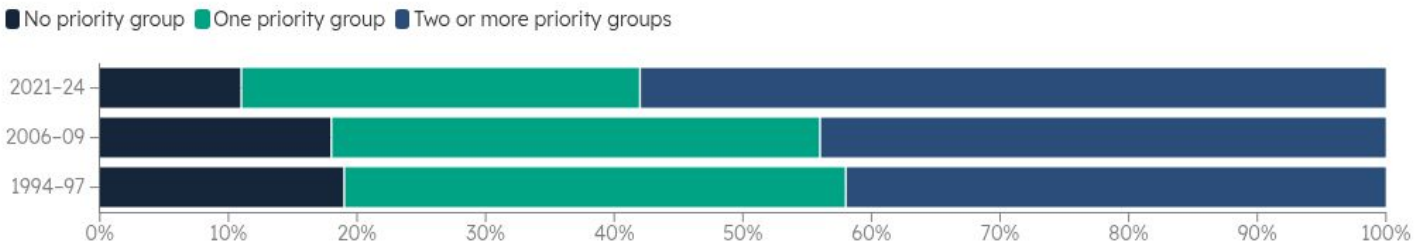
6. Overlap between priority groups

As raised by the EPSG, while the priority families concept is a helpful tool in understanding the drivers and barriers faced by these families, it does not always reflect the complexities of family life, including that families are often part of more than one priority group, meaning they have intersecting and often compounding needs and barriers.

There has been a growing proportion of children in poverty in one or more priority families. In 1994–97, around 2 in 10 children in poverty were in none of the priority groups. This has fallen to just 1 in 10 children in poverty (11%) in 2021–24.

In the latest data, the majority of children in poverty (58%) were in 2 or more priority groups. This is a big increase in the proportions of children in poverty that are in multiple priority families: 16 percentage points, compared to 1994–97.

Figure 12: Proportion of children in poverty by number of priority groups



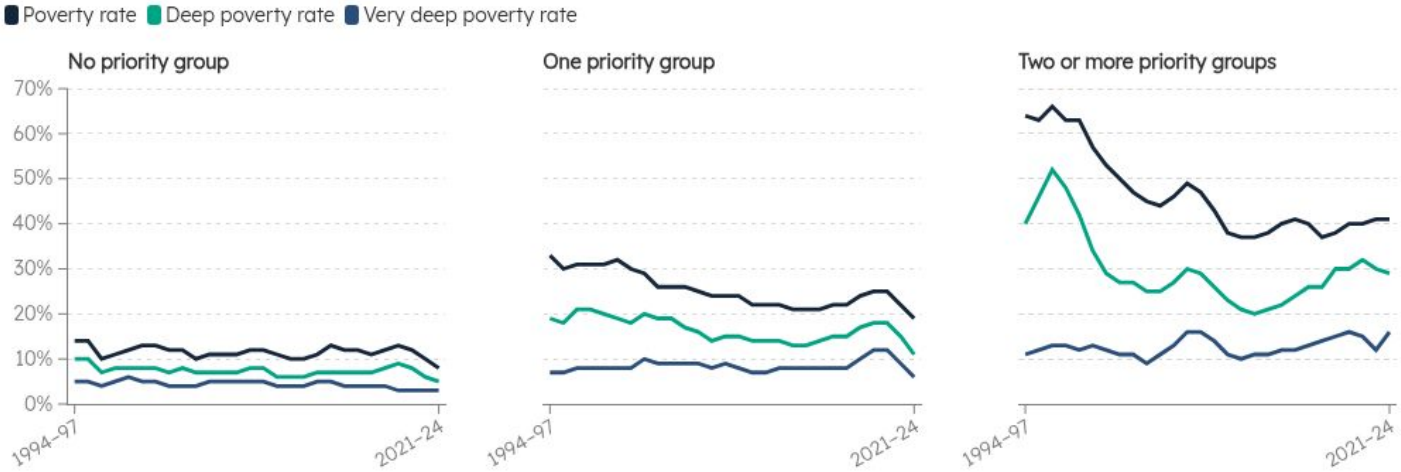
Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: This analysis includes children with a young mother.

As child poverty has decreased in Scotland (see Figure 3), the risk of poverty for children in no priority family group has remained lower and more stable than is seen for all children, at around 12%.

Over the same time period, poverty rates have fallen both for children in one priority family and for those in 2 or more priority family types. In 2021–24, the risk for children in one priority group sits at 19%, just above the interim target of 18%. It has fallen most steeply for children in 2 or more priority groups from 64% in 1994–97 to 41% in 2021–24.

Unlike the children in none or in one priority group, the poverty rate for children in 2 or more priority groups has been creeping upwards since 2016–19. This group has also seen increasing deep and very deep poverty since 2010–13. Nearly 3 in 10 children in 2 or more priority groups were in deep poverty in 2021–24.

Figure 13: Poverty rate and depth by number of priority groups
1994–97 to 2021–24



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: This analysis includes children with a young mother.

7. The barriers and drivers for the priority families

The following sections will delve further into the experiences of each of the priority families, focusing on where there are shared and differing experiences and barriers to escaping poverty. As mentioned previously, the sample size and quality of the data used to measure poverty in Scotland have been poor since the Covid-19 pandemic. Because the priority families are smaller groups of children than 'all children', this means that the following sections will be different to the previous sections:

1. These sections will use a 7-year average instead of a 3-year average, unless otherwise stated. This means the latest data is for the period 2017–24. We will not focus on change over time, as this is capturing the data since the Scottish Child Poverty Reduction targets were set.
2. These sections will not be able to cover all the same statistics for every family type. Instead, we will provide as much information as possible for every section.
3. These sections will not be able to focus on children in poverty in the priority groups for every family type. For some family types, we can look at children in poverty in that priority family, while for others, we will only be able to look at all children in that priority

group.

JRF have repeatedly flagged data quality to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. Alongside the inability to understand the impacts of the SCP (Birt et al., 2024), being unable to reliably look at the drivers of poverty for the priority families makes policy-making more challenging in the Scottish context.

Households where someone is disabled

Children in households where someone is disabled is the biggest priority group, both for all children and children in poverty. Over half of children in poverty in Scotland (2021–24) have someone who is disabled in their household; this could be the child, a parent and/or a sibling. The individual experiences of families are likely to differ greatly depending on who is disabled (parent/child) and their disability. However, we know that while individual experiences differ, families share similar structural barriers in access and support, even if the solution for each family may be different. Additionally, the current anti-disability rhetoric highlights further the prejudices experienced by many disabled people in accessing the services and support they need and are entitled to.

Poverty rates for children in households where someone is disabled have seen a steady decline since 2005–08, falling from 36% to 27% in 2021–24. Out of the priority groups, they have the

closest poverty rate to all children in Scotland but remain 9 percentage points above the interim target.

In 2021–24, compared to other priority groups, children in a household where someone is disabled are more likely to be just in this one priority family. Of children in a household where someone is disabled:

- 44% are only in this priority group
- 39% are in one other priority group
- 17% are in 2 or more other priority groups.

For children in poverty in a household where someone is disabled, the proportion in multiple priority groups increases, with 32% in 2 or more other priority groups.

Access to and the inadequacy of social security are key drivers of poverty for households with children. This is further complicated for disabled households in poverty due to families being in receipt of both low-income benefits (like UC) and/or disability benefits (such as Adult Disability Payment).

Disability benefits are intended to cover the additional costs of being disabled. Last year's Poverty in Scotland report (Birt et al., 2024) spotlighted the strong evidence for the additional costs experienced by disabled people and how, for many, they outstrip the support received

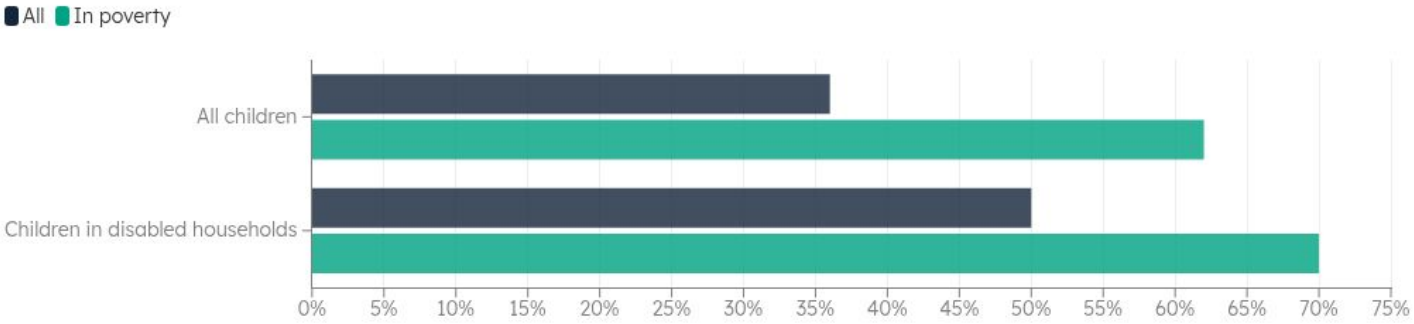
through disability benefits. Poverty rates are calculated using a household's total income from all sources, including from work and benefits, and including disability benefits. As disability benefits are intended to cover the additional costs of being disabled, they do not contribute to a household's disposable income; that is, the funds are not available to spend on day-to-day costs.

This means that using the total household income, including disability benefits, overestimates the incomes of households in which someone receives disability benefits, masking the risk of poverty for those households. When we remove disability benefits and recalculate the poverty rate for children in a household where someone is disabled for 2021–24, the poverty rate remains at 27% but the poverty rate for all children falls to 18%, widening the gap between groups.

Access to disability benefits can also be challenging. While Social Security Scotland has made progress in making the application process kinder and more able to treat applicants with dignity, it still requires significant paperwork and patience to complete. We find that children in disabled households in poverty are less likely than children in disabled families not in poverty to be in receipt of a disability benefit, at a rate of 23% compared to 17%. Considering that disability benefits are intended to cover additional costs of a disability, it is likely that many disabled households not in receipt of disability benefits are covering these from their already inadequate income.

Children in households where someone is disabled are also much more likely to be in receipt of a low-income benefit such as UC or an equivalent legacy benefit than all children. This again highlights the inadequacy of low-income benefits in the UK, when 70% of children in poverty in a household where someone is disabled are in receipt of a low-income benefit and remain below the poverty line.

Figure 14: Proportion of children in households where someone is disabled in a household in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent low-income benefit



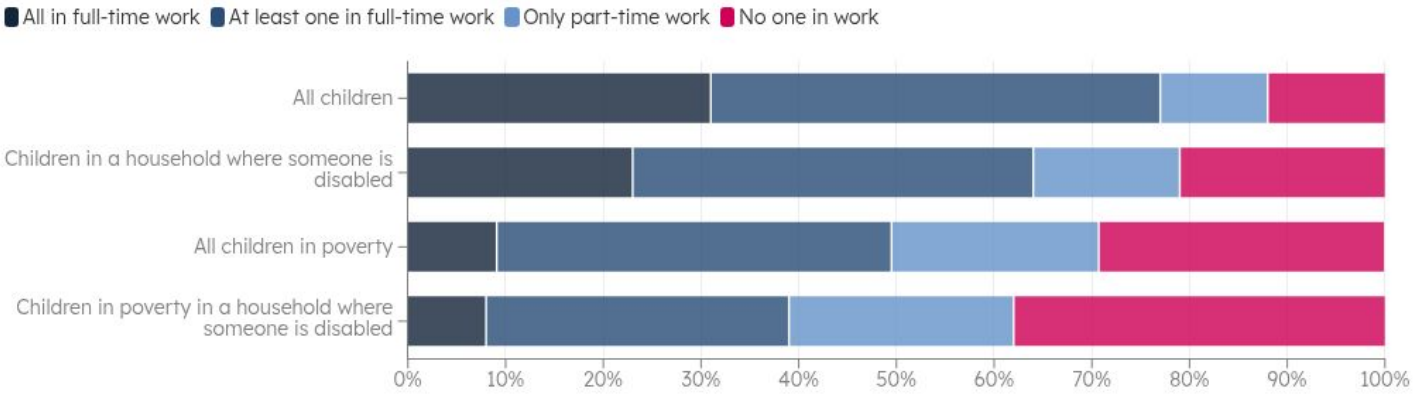
Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: This analysis uses a 7-year average, 2017–24

Children in families where someone is disabled also have notably different family work status than all children in Scotland, both when we compare all children and children in poverty. They are much less likely to have a parent in work, with less than 2 in 3 children in households in poverty where someone is disabled having a parent in work (62%).

Within the households in work, the work patterns also differ. Fewer children in households where someone is disabled have all parents in full-time work compared to all children (23% compared to 31%). Just 8% of children in poverty in a household where someone is disabled have all parents in full-time work.

Figure 15: Composition of children by household work status

By poverty and household disability status



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: this analysis uses a 7-year average, 2017–24

This analysis tells us that children in households where someone is disabled are less likely to have all parents in full-time work and less likely to be in work, full stop. Parents tell us that this is due to the challenges and barriers they face in accessing work and care.

Parents in households where someone is disabled have to make difficult decisions about work. For parents with a disabled child, the decision to work is often not a real 'choice' between working and caring. Andrew, a full-time carer for his disabled child from Dundee, told us:

"Looking at my situation, you have a choice to make, you either care for your [child] or you go to work and put [them] in the hands of whoever that may be. I wouldn't feel comfortable with that because the care system is very, very broken, so I wouldn't feel comfortable, especially with [them] being non-verbal. [They] can't come home and tell me this, that or the next thing happened. So, as carer, I have got zero choice now to go back into work."

The system describes the choice to be a full-time carer as if there are real options for parents, but as pointed out by Andrew, these options are not always available or suitable. This can be because services that are available for non-disabled children do not meet the needs of their child, leaving them without care, or because the child needs full-time care from a parent due to their disability. When talking about the barriers faced by parents in households where someone is disabled, Zain pointed out how it feels like the system takes advantage of families' instinct to care, pushing them into more precarious financial situations:

"It's against human nature to go against caring for somebody, and so the system kind of takes advantage of that."

For these families, the social security system must step in to support full-time carers, where work is not a choice and the imperative to provide care is both deep and inherently human.

The EPSG also flagged the fear created by the social security system that prevents disabled parents from moving into work. With a lack of accessible and flexible work, many of the challenges already experienced by parents are laser-focused for disabled parents. A concern arises in the case that they move into work only to discover that the work/workplace is not suitable, leaving disabled parents at risk when the social security system has limited flexibility or reactivity. Disabled people also fear the removal of disability benefits if they move into work and are concerned that the system sees them as 'not disabled enough' to continue to receive support. Andrew added:

"The fear of leaving [the social security] system and going into work because it could punish you if that doesn't work out… it punishes so many people for the slightest things, so people are fearful for making big changes because of the consequences that could lead to."

Disabled parents face the same challenges of balancing work and childcare as all parents, yet they also face additional barriers to accessing work that is flexible and accessible enough to meet their needs, both as disabled people and parents. The disability employment gap in Scotland remains large, at 31.5% in 2024 (Scottish Government, 2025c). Disabled people should have equal access to the labour market, and their work should be valued equally. Yet this wide

disability employment gap remains and contributes to the levels of poverty experienced by disabled households.

To ensure that work is a route out of poverty for disabled parents, significant progress is needed in 3 broad areas. We focused on these extensively in Poverty in Scotland 2023 (Birt et al., 2023). These areas can be applied universally to all priority groups, but there are, of course, very specific differences for disabled parents.

First, the barriers that enable people to participate in the labour market must be taken seriously. These can range from adequate and affordable childcare (a challenge for many parents) to suitable adaptations to make work more accessible. Disabled people's opportunity to access work is often harshly limited by an inaccessible world.

Second, people must have an effective service of support into work. This must tailor support to individual needs and be focused on supporting people into good work. There is a great deal of evidence and good practice around what works. The Scottish Parliament's Economy and Fair Work Committee inquiry (2024) into the disability employment gap offers a good insight into the breadth of work being done and the organisations doing it. There is a degree of goodwill behind the No One Left Behind approach to employability, despite clear concerns about a lack of success and variation in local approaches.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a massive step up in effort is required to change the work that is available in the labour market so that it becomes better and fairer. Employers have a huge role and responsibility here. It is vital that this is understood and that the Scottish Government makes every effort to support them in fulfilling their potential to create a future labour market that values the contribution of disabled workers. In reality, this will look like many more employers going beyond the legal minimum and engaging directly with disabled people to co-create workplace policy which works for everyone.

With 120,000 children in Scotland living in poverty and a household where someone is disabled, the Government must make changes to the systems that hold parents and their children back from being able to fully participate. By supporting parents of disabled children to access suitable support and improving the adequacy of benefits for carers, families with disabled children could have vastly different opportunities. For disabled parents, improving the quality of accessible work is critical, as is the creation of a better safety net for disabled parents when they are not able to work.

Single-parent families

Over the last 25 years, children in single-parent families have seen some of the biggest reductions in child poverty among the priority families. The poverty rate in 2021–24 is half the rate in 1994–97. Yet 1 in 3 children in single-parent families remain trapped in poverty in

2021–24. At the same time, children in single-parent families make up over one-quarter of children in poverty (27%).

In 2021–24, just 1 in 3 children in single-parent families are only in this priority group (31%); the majority are in at least one other priority group. Among children in single-parent families, 2 in 5 are in one other priority group and a further 29% are in 2 or more other priority groups.

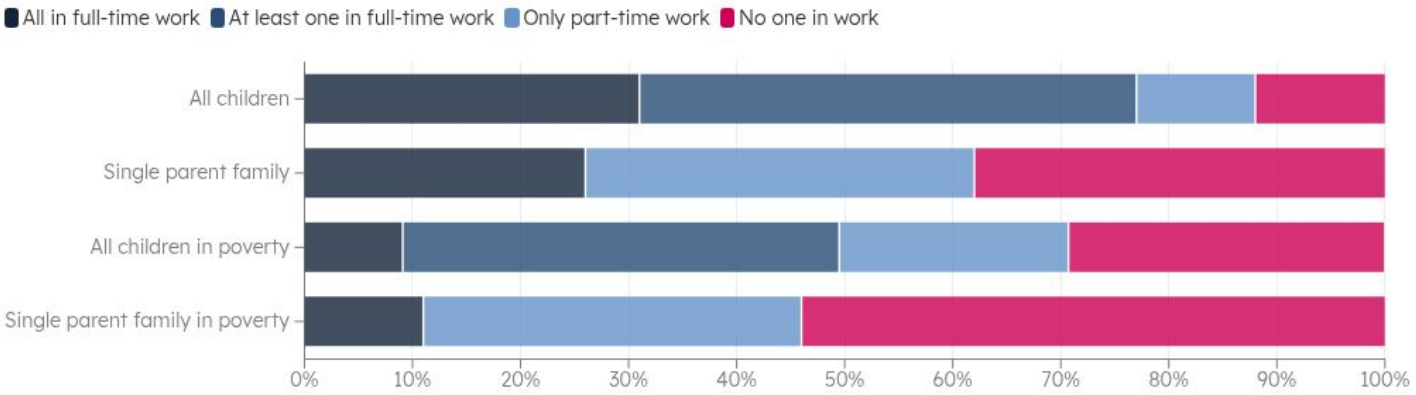
Single parents face an uphill battle in maintaining a sufficient income. In part, this is because our economy is designed for couple parents, yet many essential costs remain the same, whether there is one parent or 2. While JRF (and others) try to account for this in how we measure poverty, by giving the first adult a bigger financial need than the second, this does not resolve the challenge for single parents in meeting their families' financial needs through work and/or social security.

One way that we see this challenge play out is through work. The risk of poverty for children in working single-parent families is higher than for all children in Scotland: 26% compared to 23%. Single parents are also much less likely to be in work than other priority family types.

Nearly 2 in 5 children (38%) in single-parent families have no parent in work, while more than half (54%) of children in poverty in single-parent families have a parent not in work. This is the highest prevalence of parents not being in work out of all of the priority family types.

Single parents are also much more likely to be only working part-time hours compared to couple parents. More than 3 times the proportion of children in single-parent families compared to all children have parents with only part-time work (11% versus 36%).

Figure 16: Composition of children by household work status
By poverty and whether a single parent family



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: this analysis uses a 7-year average, 2017–24

While we have already highlighted the challenge single parents face in reaching an adequate income in an economy designed for couple parents, we also see single parents stretched in other ways. Again and again, we hear how difficult it is for parents to access enough affordable childcare (Evans and Cebula, 2024). For couple parents, where both are in work, this may involve using flexible working options to fit work around childcare or one parent working part-time. For single parents, the options are more limited: they can either work part-time or

pay for childcare, something that is not always available. Alex from Fife told us how being a single parent of a large family affects her ability to find suitable and affordable childcare, highlighting the intersectional experience across these 2 priority families:

"[There is a] lack of space for breakfast clubs and afterschool clubs, so if you are working a 9am–5pm job but your child is in school 9am–3pm, then you need to have access to childcare, and affordable childcare, that will take your child to school or is already at the school."

Juggling childcare is hard enough for couple parents, but it can be an impossible task for single parents trying to work full-time. It is therefore unsurprising that so many single parents are not in work or are only able to work part-time. Providing affordable wrap-around childcare for parents is critical to closing the employment gap for single parents.

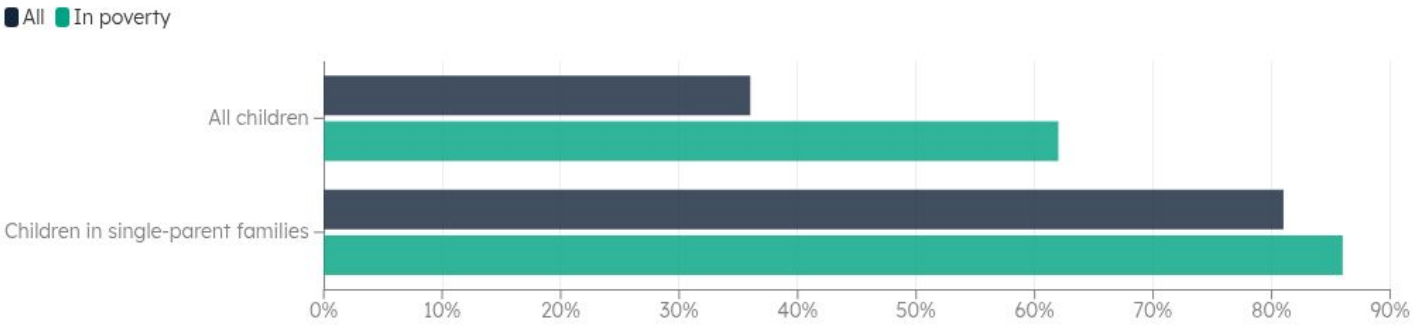
Like other essential costs, housing costs continue to be high for single parents as they use one person's income, yet require an equivalent number of bedrooms. While housing is not a primary driver pulling children in single-parent families into poverty — because they have a similar AHC-only poverty risk as all children — housing costs do take up more of their household income. Of all children, 7% live in high-cost housing, meaning their parent/s spend a third or more of their total household income on their housing. This is more than double for children in single-parent families, with 15% in high-cost housing.

Children in single-parent families are much more likely than all children to be in a family in receipt of a low-income benefit. Of children in single-parent families, 8 in 10 are in a household in receipt of UC or an equivalent benefit. This is more than twice the proportion for all children (36%).

We see a small gap in the proportion of children in single-parent families in receipt of low-income benefits between all children and children in poverty in this priority family (81% versus 86%). This gap is much wider when we look at the same values for all children and the other priority families. This highlights 2 points:

- single parents are much more reliant on the social security system than other priority families and this means that they are more vulnerable to changes to the system
- on the other hand, a significant proportion of children in single-parent families that are not in poverty (79%) are in receipt of a low-income benefit, showing its potential in lifting and keeping families out of poverty.

Figure 17: Proportion of children in single-parent families in a household in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent low-income benefit



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: This analysis uses a 7-year average, 2017–24

The above highlights how the economy and our services remain designed for couple-parent families, even when single parents make up nearly 1 in 5 children in Scotland. The economy needs to change so that single parents can access flexible, well-paid work and flexible, affordable childcare. At the same time, our social security system needs to understand the costs experienced by single parents within this context. Like many policy areas, by designing a system that can meet the needs of single parents, other families can benefit from these adaptations. For example, flexible working, accessible childcare and a social security system that meets our fundamental needs would make a difference for all families.

Family with a baby

Families with a baby is a fairly unique priority group, with families inevitably moving out of this group when their youngest child turns one. Yet all families will pass through this priority family type in the first year of their child's life.

Poverty rates fell dramatically for families with a baby between 1996–99 and 2010–13, from nearly half of children in a family with a baby (48%) to around 1 in 4 (24%); this is the lowest it has been over the 25-year period. It has since risen to 35% in 2021–24, raising concerns as to why it is going against a national trend of rates remaining largely unchanged. On the other hand, the very deep poverty rate has fallen since 2018–21, against the trend of an overall increase in poverty for families with a baby and rising very deep poverty.

While time in this group may be transitory, many children in families with a baby are also in other priority families. In 2021–24, around one-third are just in this priority family, a further third are in one other priority group and the final third are in 2 or more other priority families.

As one of the smaller priority families, who make up just 1 in 10 children in Scotland in 2021–24, there is limited data available to understand the drivers of poverty for this group. Unpicking the drivers is also more difficult for this group due to how systems work at this point in a parent and baby's life.

Understanding family work status for families with a baby is complicated by the way that maternity leave is recorded. Work status for parents whose baby is less than 40 weeks old will generally look like they are in employment when they are in fact in receipt of maternity pay and, in some cases, Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). This leads to a slightly higher proportion of children in a family with a baby appearing to be in full-time work than is seen for all children (34% versus 31%). This is counterintuitive when the risk of child poverty for a family with a baby when a parent is in work rises to 27% compared to 19% for all children, highlighting the inadequacy of maternity pay for so many families.

There is also a slightly higher proportion of families with a baby that have no one in work (20%) compared to all children (12%). This group is likely to be families with older babies, where mothers are no longer eligible for SMP, and parents who were already not in work prior to the birth of their child.

Many families with a baby experience a large drop in their income when their baby is born or within the first year of their life. At least one parent, predominantly the mother, will inevitably be providing constant care, yet maternity pay (and other forms of parental pay) is inadequate to maintain a decent income.

A similar proportion of children in families with a baby compared to all children are in a family in receipt of low-income benefits. As poverty rates are higher for families with a baby, we

would normally expect families to have a higher receipt of low-income benefits. Again, this highlights how systems in their current form are not meeting the needs of many families with a baby. Income maximisation for families with a baby could be crucial in supporting families to get the support they are entitled to while helping them to navigate complex and difficult systems.

One key challenge raised by parents is that SMP only lasts until a baby is 40 weeks old, leaving parents 12 weeks in which they lose financial support or must move back into work. Alex said:

"Maternity ends at 40 weeks, but there is still that gap between the 40 weeks and the baby turning one, and the price of childcare under one is extortionate."

Earlier this year, we calculated that it would cost £60 million if the Scottish Government were to provide additional payments to families on low-income benefits that would be equivalent to extending SMP to 52 weeks for this group. This is just one example of how the Scottish Government could try to fill the gap left between maternity leave and work. Save the Children (2025) have also proposed action in this area as part of their 'Better for Babies Guarantee'. This is a call for an increase in Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods at a combined cost of £100 million a year, which would reduce poverty rates for this group by 6 percentage points.

Although families with a baby are a relatively small proportion of children in Scotland, all children will begin their lives in this priority group. This is why it is critical that the Scottish

Government invest in families with a baby so that all children can have a decent start in life.

Large families

Poverty rates were falling for children in large families until 2011–14, from 50% in 1996–99 to 26%. There has been a steep rise in poverty rates for children in this group since the introduction of the two-child limit in 2017, and it now sits at 41% in 2021–24. Alongside minority ethnic families, children in large families have the highest deep (30%) and very deep poverty (19%) rates out of the priority families.

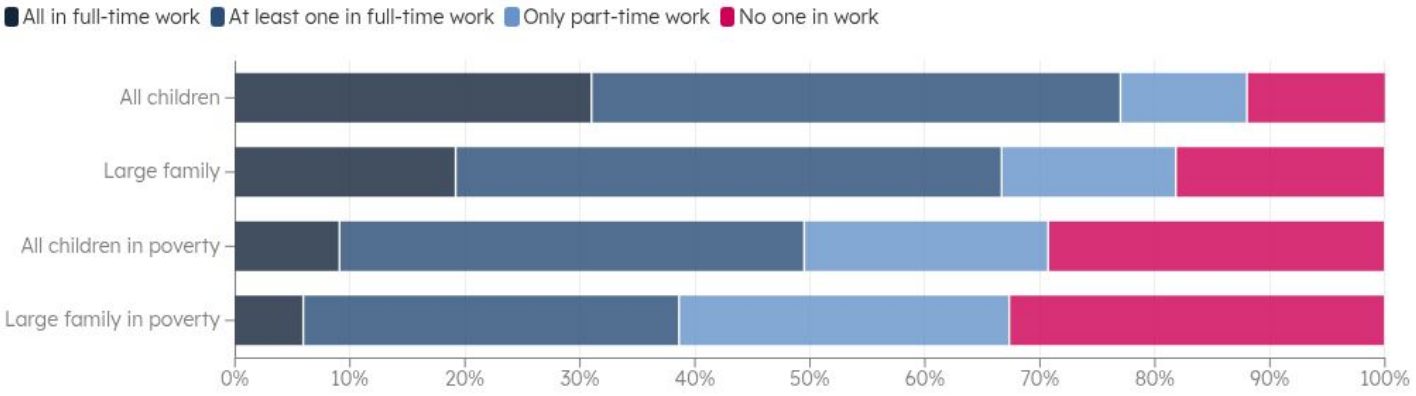
In 2021–24, children in large families make up just over 1 in 4 children in Scotland (27%) but nearly half of children in poverty (48%). The majority of children in large families are also in another priority group, with just 26% only in this priority group. Children in large families in poverty are more likely than children in other priority families to be in more than one priority group:

- just 15% are only in that priority group
- nearly half (48%) are in one other priority group
- 38% are in 2 or more other priority groups.

Like the other priority families, large families also experience a difficult intersection between work and the social security system. Last year, we showed that even when claiming the social

security they are entitled to, a large family with couple parents and 3 young children would need both parents to be in work (one full-time and one part-time) at the National Living Wage to have an income over the poverty line (AHC) (Birt et al., 2024). We see that children in large working families have a higher risk of poverty than all children in Scotland. Nearly 3 in 10 children in working large families (29%) are in poverty; this is 10 percentage points higher than for all children in working families and higher than the poverty risk for all children (with both working and non-working parents) in Scotland.

Figure 18: Composition of children by household work status
By poverty and whether a large family



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: this analysis uses a 7-year average, 2017–24

Children in large families are less likely to have all parents in full-time work than all children, including children in poverty. Considering the challenges of accessing suitable childcare, this is

understandable, particularly when families have younger children. Just 1 in 20 children in large families in poverty have all parents in full-time work. A similar proportion of children in large families have one parent in full-time work and have parent/s in only part-time work as all children. Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) children in large families and 1 in 3 in poverty in this priority group have no parent in work.

Alex is a parent with 3 children in Fife. She told us about the additional challenges faced by parents of large families. If all parents work more hours than the school day, finding wrap-around childcare for more children is increasingly difficult, particularly due to cuts to local childcare services such as those attached to schools:

“The spaces are really restricted due to cuts and it’s causing a massive issue… you are more likely to find a space for one child with a childminder, than to be like ‘please take three of my children’.”

It is crucial that all parents are supported into work that allows them to balance their caring needs with employment. Providing more affordable wrap-around childcare is one solution, while for others, access to better-paid, flexible, part-time work will allow families to earn more while caring for their children.

Although work can help some families to increase their incomes, the social security system must also step up to support low-income large families. Half of children in a large family are in

a household in receipt of UC or equivalent low-income benefit. This rises to 72% for children in poverty in a large family. While this shows that access to benefits is not the key driver of poverty for large families, with such high proportions in receipt, it does lead to the conclusion that the amount of income from these benefits is inadequate. In part, this is because UC purposefully provides less for families with 3 or more children. Last year, we calculated that a couple with 3 young children would be 20% below the poverty line (BHC) if in receipt of UC and not in work (Birt et al., 2024).

The two-child limit is a cruel and unjust rule that punishes children in large families, and we support the Scottish Government's intention to mitigate it. Earlier this year, we calculated that this could lift as many as 10,000 children in Scotland out of poverty (Evans et al., 2025), reducing child poverty by around 1 percentage point.

Reducing poverty for large families will require a combination of approaches. Eliminating the unfair treatment of large families by the UK social security system is critical in reducing poverty for this priority group. Supporting parents, particularly second parents in couple families, into work will help large families to increase their incomes through work. However, employability support must be aware of the intersections between the priority groups, which are more common for large families, and how this could affect the work and amount of work a parent can do.

Minority ethnic families

Minority ethnic families are the second smallest priority family group, after only children in families with a young mother. They make up just 1 in 10 children in Scotland in 2021–24. However, they have the highest risk of child poverty of all of the priority groups, with nearly half (47%) trapped in poverty in 2021–24. This means that they make up 1 in 5 children in poverty.

The deep and very deep poverty rates have been falling for children in minority ethnic families since the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a positive improvement and means they now have a similar rate of deep and very deep poverty to children in large families.

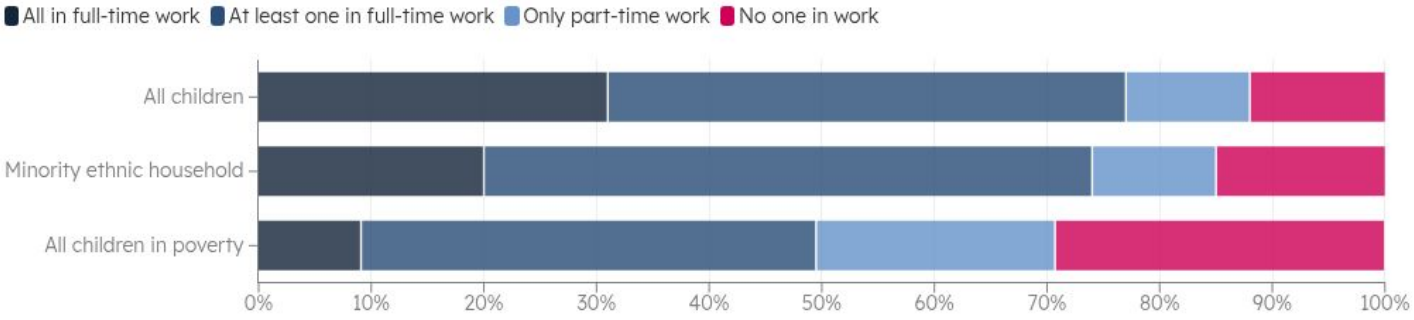
As this priority family is one of the smallest groups, there is limited data to understand the drivers of poverty. Therefore, this section will only be able to report values for all children in minority ethnic families.

Children in minority ethnic families are much more likely than the other priority families to have one or more parents in work (85%), and at a similar proportion to all children. Of children in working minority ethnic families, 2 in 5 are trapped in poverty, more than twice the risk of poverty experienced by all children in working families.

At the same time, children in minority ethnic families are less likely to have all parents in full-time work than all children (20% versus 31%) and more likely to have just one parent in full-time work (54% versus 64%).

Figure 19: Composition of children by household work status

By poverty and whether in a minority ethnic household



Source: JRF analysis of Households Below Average Income
Note: this analysis uses a 7-year average, 2017–24. The sample size of children in poverty in minority ethnic households is too small to undertake this analysis.

Supporting second parents into work and moving into better-paid work is key to lifting incomes for minority ethnic families and reducing poverty rates. Like parents in the other priority families, access to suitable and affordable childcare is needed so that parents can go to work. Tailored employability support that meets the needs of minority ethnic parents is also critical. We know that current support lacks understanding of the barriers faced by minority ethnic workers (Yaqoob and Shahnaz, 2023).

At the same time, minority ethnic parents in the workforce continue to experience both systemic and direct forms of racism. Employers must go further in making the workplace not just 'not racist' but actively anti-racist. At the same time, employability services are not up to scratch and must be designed with minority ethnic service users to meet their needs. Far too often, we hear about the skills and qualifications of minority ethnic people being dismissed rather than built upon.

Just 1 in 3 children in minority ethic families (34%) are in a household where someone is in receipt of UC or equivalent low-income benefit. This is a similar proportion to all children in Scotland. Considering nearly half of minority ethnic children are in poverty, we would assume that a greater proportion of children in minority ethnic families would be eligible and therefore in receipt of a low-income benefit.

Children in families with no recourse to public funds are not entitled to support through the social security system. A significant proportion of these families are from a minority ethnic background, and this policy is likely to disproportionately affect this priority family group. As we have set out in detail (Watts-Cobbe et al., 2023), it is unacceptable that destitution is being used as a policy tool, and the UK Government needs to end this punitive policy. Short of that, however, both they and the Scottish Government should cooperate to spare people from the harsh destitution that is rife among people subject to these conditions.

Increasing minority ethnic families' access to what they are entitled to through our social security system would help increase incomes for this priority group. However, members of EPSG also told us that the social security system and broader experiences of racism, religious discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiments within UK institutions and society created a sense of fear in engaging with institutions.

"... that's my own experience for minority ethnic families... it's a big deal, the way you are whipped if you make a mistake... I did extra hours and was treated like a criminal, I was so scared, I don't want to have any problem with DWP."

Sylvia, Glasgow

Here, Sylvia told us about her own experience trying to navigate the social security system after picking up extra hours of work. Working more led to her losing her support for housing costs and Council Tax Reduction, leaving her worse off than when she was working fewer hours. Losing income while increasing work is counterintuitive. People are faced with complex systems that can punish them for doing what they think is the right thing. Sylvia's experience also resulted in her having to engage with systems to resolve these changes, while falling into debt and having to return to her original hours. These systems were quick to remove support but much slower to return support when she went back to her original hours to fit around full-time education.

Zain also told us about the fear people have of engaging with systems, even when engaging with them could result in more support. Building trust between minoritised communities and support services is critical in maximising the support that minority ethnic families are accessing and entitled to.

"...[people] are scared to ask [for help] in case what they've got is taken away from them."

Zain, Glasgow

Children in minority ethnic families in Scotland are more likely to be living in rented accommodation, particularly the private rented sector, than white children. They are also more likely to be living in high-cost housing. Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) children in minority ethnic families are in housing that costs one-third or more of their total household income.

Minority ethnic children continue to have the highest risk of poverty out of all of the priority groups. While we cannot look at the difference between all minority ethnic children and minority ethnic children in poverty, there are a few key drivers of poverty for this group. In-work poverty is far too high, and both improving pay and conditions for minority ethnic workers and supporting second parents into work would make a significant difference to minority ethnic families. Increasing access to social security is also key, with surprisingly low proportions of low-income minority ethnic families being in receipt of low-income benefits. To achieve this, systems must be clearer and more approachable for people from diverse

backgrounds, rebuilding trust with minority ethnic communities.

8. Recommendations

As we set out in our Meeting the Moment toolkit, there are a variety of ways in which the child poverty reduction targets can be met. This report highlights the centrality of the priority families and the need to adapt responses to the different households most likely to be in poverty.

It is worth repeating that the Child Poverty Reduction Targets will not be met without additional investment in poverty reduction. And party manifestos that purport to commit to meeting the targets without a commensurate commitment to invest in change will lack credibility.

Scotland's political parties

Political parties standing in next year's Scottish Parliament election should:

- commit to meeting the Child Poverty Reduction Targets
- to do so, commit to additional social security spending, likely through a balance of increases to the SCP and through targeted support for the priority families
- radically overhaul how families are supported into, or already within, the jobs market. A key part of this will be the extension of funded childcare places.

Scottish Government

The Scottish Government's forthcoming Tackling Child Poverty Delivery plan must also seize the challenge of meeting the targets and, like manifestos, will lack credibility if it fails to invest in the change needed. While Meeting the Moment set out the scale of change necessary, our detailed recommendations for the types of change needed are in both Poverty in Scotland 2023 and 2024, in particular those focused on work and social security.

The Scottish Government should bring forward a Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan that will put us on a path to meeting the Child Poverty Reduction targets. As part of that, it should:

- raise its ambitions of current actions to meet the child poverty reduction targets, for example the premise of 'Pathfinders' or 'Fairer Future Partnerships' or 'Whole Family Support' to provide easier-to-access services in local areas is welcome, but to only do so in a limited number of local authority areas lacks the urgency and scale required
- operationalise Fair Work via investment in dedicated teams of people, independent of government, focused on working with employers to make changes on specific fair work components while, at the same time, feeding back concerns from on the ground — as set out in this report, this must mean different support being available to different household types

- expand the offer of funded childcare available for low-income families — we think it is legitimate for additional funding to be targeted at those families who need it the most, and so we would support contributory-based financing of any expansion
- create an independent agency that exists to deal with instances of racism in the workplace
- increase the SCP and consider arrangements for being able to taper the payment
- respond to the recommendations of the Minimum Income Guarantee Export Report and set out the next steps
- commit to the delivery of the Housing Emergency plan recently announced, including working closely with the sector to provide clarity and stability while rebuilding capacity in the sector to deliver on those commitments.

UK Government

Obviously, the UK Government still holds significant powers over key areas, not least in employment regulation and social security. It should:

- bring forward a credible Child Poverty Reduction Strategy, including the removal of the two-child limit
- detoxify the approach of DWP to UC recipients, creating a more supportive environment for claimants, where ‘work first’ and sanctions are replaced by a mutual commitment for

claimant and state to secure good outcomes for people.

The UK Government and the Scottish Government together

Much more progress needs to be made in making Scottish Government and UK Government systems work together to benefit people in Scotland.

- The two Governments should commit to joint working on poverty reduction and, in particular, how the devolved and reserved social security systems interact.
- As part of that, any review of how Job Centre Plus operates must consider how it can effectively cooperate with devolved employability services (just as it will have to cooperate with local services across England and Wales).
- The two Governments should work together to increase take-up of benefits.
- The two Governments should explore why minority ethnic households in Scotland are far less likely to receive social security and act appropriately to rectify that gap.
- The two Governments should cooperate in their respective child poverty reduction strategies to maximise the efficacy of their efforts within their respective powers.
- The two Governments should improve the quality of the data upon which we all rely to assess progress.

9. Conclusions

The next Scottish Parliament will be a crucial proving ground for Holyrood. With so many people in Scotland feeling left behind by our political debate, can it deliver on the things people care about, like reducing child poverty?

The actions to do so are clear and well understood. Scotland demands better, and our children deserve better. If the Child Poverty Reduction Targets are met, their lives will be better. That's how faith can be rebuilt in our political institutions: by delivering a better future for us all and investing in our children.

Notes

1. We have not included analysis focused only on children with a young mother as the sample size continues to be too small.
2. There have been higher levels of attrition to the Understanding Society data that is used to measure persistent poverty. This has led to a decreasing sample size for measuring persistent poverty in Scotland. This means we need to treat the large increase in persistent child poverty with a degree of caution for now.

References

Birt, C. Cebula, C. Evans, J. Hay, D. McKenzie, A. (2023) Poverty in Scotland 2023 (https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2023)

Birt, C. Cebula, C. Evans, J. Hay, D. McKenzie, A. (2024) Poverty in Scotland 2024 (https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2024)

Congreve, E. (2019) Poverty in Scotland 2019 (https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2019)

Department for Work and Pensions (2025) Households below average income: For financial years ending 1995 to 2024 (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2024)

Department for Work and Pensions (2025b) Households below average income, 1994/95–2023/24 (https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=5828)

Economy and Fair Work Committee (2024) Closing the disability employment gap in Scotland report (https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/committees/current-and-previous-committees/session-6-economy-and-fair-work-committee/business-items/closing-the-disability-employment-gap-in-scotland)

End Child Poverty (2025) Local Child Poverty Statistics 2025 (https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-2025/)

Evans, J. Cebula, C. (2024) Poverty proofing the future of early years childcare (https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/poverty-proofing-the-future-of-early-years-childcare)

Evans, J. Birt, C. Cebula, C. (2025) Meeting the moment: Scottish Election 2026 (https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/meeting-the-moment-scottish-election-2026)

Milne, B. Matejic, P. Stirling, A. (2025) Economic and employment growth alone will not be enough to reduce poverty levels (https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/economic-and-employment-growth-alone-will-not-be-enough-to-reduce-poverty-levels)

Save the Children (2025) A Better for Babies Guarantee: Boosting the impact of Best Start payments in the first 12 months (https://i.stci.uk/dam/a-better-for-babies-guarantee-boosting-the-impact-of-best-start-payments-in-the-first-12-months-ch11440295.pdf/2oq46aledkjs2pemwjvg1x2rlr80uxpl.pdf)

Scotland Demands Better (2025) Scotland Demands Better (https://www.scotland-demands-better.com/)

Scottish Government (2018) Every child, every chance: Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018–22 (https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/)plan-2018-22/)

Scottish Government (2025a) Tackling child poverty priority families overview (https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-priority-families-overview/pages/introduction/)

Scottish Government (2025b) Child poverty analysis (https://www.gov.scot/collections/child-poverty-statistics/)

Scottish Government (2025c) Helping disabled people access work (https://www.mygov.scot/helping-disabled-people-access-work)

Watts-Cobbe, B. McMordie, L. Bramley, G. Sims, R. Young, G. Rayment, M. (2024) Destitution by design: Righting the wrongs of UK immigration policy in Scotland (https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution/destitution-by-design-righting-wrongs-of-uk-immigration-policy-in-scotland)

Yaqoob, T. Shahnaz, I. (2023) Glasgow communities of colour failed by employability services and workplace racism (https://www.jrf.org.uk/race-and-ethnicity/glasgow-communities-of-colour-failed-by-employability-services-and-workplace)

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the EPSG for their time and involvement in this year's report.

The JRF Scotland team have been assisted by and are extremely grateful for the help of colleagues from across JRF, in particular Francisca Ladouch and Joseph Elliott for quality assurance of the report, and Scot Hunter for his work on local authority child poverty rates.

How to cite this report

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:

Birt, C., Cebula, C., Evans, J., Hay, D. and McKenzie, A. (2025) Poverty in Scotland 2025. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.