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A picture of poverty Project can help shape policy for children

THE Growing Up in Scotland (Gus) research project, which began in 2005 and follows the lives of more than 8000 babies and toddlers through childhood to their teenage years, is, itself, in its infancy. But detail is already emerging from the first Gus report, published yesterday, to show how the circumstances into which the sample group was born can affect its members' future prospects. This would not be a worry if children were born into stable families that wanted for nothing. In present-day Scotland, this is often not the case, as the Gus report confirms.

More than one baby and toddler in five lives in a single-parent household, but the figure is much higher for children from poorer backgrounds and whose mothers were aged 20 or younger at the time of birth. Individual circumstances do not automatically make a parent good or bad. But socio-economic background, expressed through lifestyle and attitudes, does matter to a child's outcomes. The results of the first Gus fieldwork show, for instance, that while some two-thirds of mothers said they intended to breastfeed their babies, the proportion who actually did was 77% in more affluent areas, falling to 44% in those of greatest deprivation. This has a bearing on children's health and capacity for learning.

Better-educated, better-off mothers were most informed about schemes to support parents and families. Conversely, mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds found it difficult to know

where to ask for help with parenting, or did not ask for assistance. Poorer children had fewer books in the home than better-off ones whose parents had higher educational qualifications. But they were more likely to watch television, as were those in single-parent households (lone parenthood and disadvantage often go together).

It will be of great interest and, it is to be hoped, instructive, given that the study is mainly aimed at providing an evidence base for policy-making, to find out exactly how background and attitude impacts on the children's life chances. There is already evidence from this study to support the case for intervention from birth to nullify the baleful effects of poverty. That this should be a higher priority is confirmed by research carried out for Save The Children, the results of which were published earlier this week. Identifying welfare and other benefits as the only source of income for families, these show that, in some council wards in Scotland, more than half the children live in poverty.

Glasgow had the lion's share of the poorest wards, Parkhead being the worst with nearly two-thirds of children living in poverty. The figures, while shocking, are a timely reminder to policy-makers in a Scottish parliamentary election year that, while progress has been made, endemic poverty remains a blight on the children it traps and a stain on this country and its political classes for failing to eradicate it.