

[Kitty Stewart](#)

Book review: monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2008

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Stewart, Kitty (2009) *Book review: monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2008*. [Journal of social policy](#), 38 (4). pp. 729-731.

DOI: [10.1017/S0047279409990171](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279409990171)

© 2009 [Cambridge University Press](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25851/>

Available in LSE Research Online: September 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

on many counts and it questions whether other countries should adopt a similar policy path.

The last two chapters examine pensions and pensions reform from unique critical social perspectives. The first, by Patricia Frericks and Robert Maier, examines the effects of norms and pension reform policies from a gender perspective. More specifically, they look into specific policies such as employment, tax incentives, care credits, parental leave, that eventually all relate to pension schemes and benefit levels. The analysis concludes that, while recent policies attempted to address gender inequalities, many current policies still do not adequately address gender pension gaps and, in some cases, they even increase it. The final chapter, by Martin Kohli, touches upon concepts and attitudes toward generational equity and how these concepts are reflected in public attitudes towards pensions and redistribution of income in old age.

Overall, the book tackles key issues of recent welfare reform with new perspectives and on the basis of new empirical evidence. The overall picture is complex: empirical evidence from difference welfare systems suggests that there is convergence with respect to the original regime classifications and divergence with respect to the new differentiations. In other words, pension systems are moving farther and farther away from the ideal types embodied in regime classifications, and the new reality that emerges is that of countries that have become 'hybrids'. Recent pension reforms are found to be less dependent on rigid past welfare structures and more on pragmatics and resources, incorporating features from competing basic designs. The findings that are presented in the book also emphasise the complexity of the outcome of any pension reform. Evidence shows that pension reforms have differential impacts on different social groups. Some reforms are likely to increase the future well being of specific groups but at the risk of decreasing that of others. It is important to systematically examine outcomes of pension reform from gender and cohort perspectives and to project the expected outcomes against the likely evolution of life course patterns of employment and family structures.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the book is its focus on fairness and justice and with public discourse regarding pension reform. As discussed in the book, there is no clear-cut generational divide in people's attitudes and support for the welfare state and for its pension system. Thus, the overall all message of the book, as argued by its editors, is of much importance: 'many of the received ideas need to be replaced by a richer and better grounded account of how institutions cluster, change, and influence outcomes.' (p. 18).

ISRAEL (ISSI) DORON
University of Haifa

Guy Palmer, Tom MacInnes and Peter Kenway (2008), *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2008*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. £16.95, pp. 116, pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0047279409990171

It is something of an understatement to say that 2009 is not turning out to be a good year for the Labour Government. With the economic downturn and the credit crisis pushed off the front pages only by daily revelations over MPs expense claims, Labour looks set for catastrophic general election defeat, the question no longer if but when. We seem a long way from the halcyon days of 1999, when Tony Blair launched *Opportunity for All*, an annual government report monitoring poverty and social exclusion, and pledged to eradicate child poverty in a generation – a breadth of vision and clarity of purpose which it is difficult to associate with today's government.

The Opportunity for All reports have been quietly discontinued – the last indicators update was published online in 2007 – but the New Policy Institute has continued to produce

its own, independent, annual monitoring volume. The latest report, *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2008*, by Guy Palmer, Tom MacInnes and Peter Kenway, is the tenth anniversary edition, and the authors are keen to mark the occasion by ensuring that the focus is as broad as it was at the start. In the intervening decade, they argue, the government's agenda has narrowed sharply, with an ambitious and wide-ranging set of goals reduced to a near-exclusive focus on the child poverty target: 'Ten years ago, the challenge was to get child poverty reduction added to the government's agenda. Ten years on, the challenge is to prevent it dominating the social policy agenda to the exclusion of virtually all else' (p. 18). The blame for this shift they place at the door of campaigners at least as much as politicians, and they do not exempt themselves, pointing to a growing share of space in the monitoring reports dedicated to indicators of low income among households with children.

This report contains data for 56 indicators covering children but also young adults, working age adults, older people and communities. What do the indicators tell us? First, they provide further confirmation of a picture which may now be familiar – the striking difference between achievements in Labour's first five years and its second five. Analysing progress in these two periods, the authors find that out of the 56 indicators, only five show a better trend in the second than the first period. In the first five years, 30 of the indicators improved and just seven worsened (the rest remaining steady). In the second five years, 14 improved while 15 worsened. The share of low-income households and (related) the value of social security benefits relative to average earnings for pensioners and children are among the indicators where positive early trends were not sustained. Indicators where progress not only stalled but went sharply into reverse after 2003 include unemployment among young adults, with the gains between 1999 and 2003 undone well before the onset of the current recession.

Second, there are measures which have seen no period of progress but have been steady or deteriorating over the period as a whole. There are only a handful of these, but the report highlights two in particular which raise serious questions about the government's central focus on work as the best route of poverty. One million more working adults lived below the 60 per cent poverty line in 2006/07 than in the mid-1990s; while the number of working households with children reliant on tax credits to lift them over the poverty line has also risen. Some half a million more children in working households had incomes below the threshold before tax credits in 2005/6 than in 2001/02, suggesting that some working families have moved from a position secure without tax credits to a position in which they are needed.

Amid this tale of gloom, there are snippets of good news – indicators which have continued to improve throughout the decade, or where progress has picked up over time. These include some of the measures of educational achievement (for example, the share of 16 year olds failing to get five or more GCSEs), the pay gap for low-paid women, the share of households with no bank account, the proportion of adults who have been victims of burglary or violent crime, the share of non-decent homes. As the report points out, these are all crucial indicators which have great significance for the quality of life of some of the most vulnerable, but which receive little or no press attention (or in the case of crime rates, attention but no credibility).

Two-thirds of the indicators in the 2008 report are the same as in the report for 1998, but there are also a number of new indicators, with three in particular appearing in the report for the first time – costs, prices and debt. Though a full time series is not available for these, their inclusion is clearly timely given the current economic situation. The focus on the differential impact of inflation for different income groups is particularly illuminating. The CPI indicator shows that inflation has been higher for the lowest quintile, with poorer pensioners particularly affected: the inflation rate for this group was 20 per cent between 2004 and 2008, compared to 14 per cent for non-pensioner households on average incomes.

Colourful and well laid out, the graphs bring the indicators to life: flicking through the pages provides an instant impression and some striking statistics. The report is also scrupulous in providing detailed notes about each indicator, including a very honest assessment of the indicator's reliability. Backed up by the supporting website, www.poverty.org.uk, this makes for a really valuable independent resource. But this is not just a series of pictures, and the authors bring out forcefully their main messages: that the government got it right early on with its broad, many-sided agenda, and that the narrowing of its vision has been fatal to its efforts; that child poverty cannot be eradicated through tax credits alone; and that 'work' must be not idealised but scrutinised as a response, with a view to understanding the problems it can cause as well as the solutions that it can provide. Let us hope that the New Policy Institute continue to provide an annual check on progress – or regression – in the lean years to come.

KITTY STEWART

The London School of Economics and Political Science