



Introduction

Studies into the impact of childhood bereavement on mental health, social and educational outcomes often show complex and contradictory findings. This is partly because little attention has been paid to the circumstances that might make a difference to how a death affects a child, such as their material circumstances and the mental health of their surviving parent.

These circumstances often interrelate closely. Jane Ribbens McCarthy discusses how studies showed that parenting difficulties increase children's risk, 'but this in turn tended to be associated with a variety of other difficulties, including: many family changes following on from the death; health problems in the family; financial problems; larger family size; younger age of the surviving parent; and, finally, deaths that were unexpected' (p134)

An important example of these interrelating circumstances is poverty. While children who are living in poverty are more likely to be bereaved - and to be adversely affected by their bereavement - a death in the family can also precipitate a family into poverty¹. This paper summarises some of the research into bereavement and poverty.

Increased likelihood of bereavement

- As mortality rates of adults vary significantly by social class and geography², children and young people living in deprived areas are more likely to experience the death of a parent³
- Young people reporting the death of a parent are more likely to report they have had another bereavement in their close family⁴

Increased difficulties of bereavement

- Young people who had experienced multiple bereavements are at greater risk of depression than those who have never had such a loss⁵
- Parentally bereaved children in affluent families were less likely to be at risk of emotional or behavioural difficulties at any point over a two year study⁶
- Changes in children and young people's lives following a parent's death increase their risk of depression⁷, family arguments and poorer relationships with their surviving parent⁸

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6681421.stm> (Accessed 14/8/2008)

² Eg among people aged 35-64, premature death rates were much higher for those from manual social backgrounds than for those from non-manual backgrounds, by 50% for heart disease and by 150% from lung cancer. The Poverty Site <http://www.poverty.org.uk/35/index.shtml?2> (accessed 13/08/2008)

³ Ribbens McCarthy, J (2006) *Young People's Experiences of Loss and Bereavement: towards an interdisciplinary approach* Maidenhead: OUP

⁴ Harrison, L and Harrington R (2001) 'Adolescents' bereavement experiences: prevalence, association with depressive symptoms and use of services' *Journal of Adolescence* 24 (2) 159-69

⁵ Harrison, L and Harrington R (2001) *ibid*

⁶ Worden, J (1996) *Children and grief: when a parent dies* New York: Guilford Press

⁷ Harrison, L and Harrington R (2001) *ibid*

⁸ Worden, J (1996) *ibid*

- A study found that parentally bereaved children whose surviving parent wasn't working underachieved at GCSE by an average of 1.8 grades more than those whose surviving parent was employed⁹.

Increased risks of poverty

- Analysis of cohort data showed that family income following a death remained stable for children in non-manual families, deteriorated for skilled manual children and deteriorated the most in unskilled manual families¹⁰
- If a parent dies, the other becomes a lone parent. 5% lone parents have been widowed: (12% lone fathers, 4% lone mothers).¹¹ Half of all children living with a lone parent are in poverty¹².
- In the last year, the average cost of a modest funeral increased by 10% to £2,390. Other expenses associated with a death bring the total cost to an average of £5,923¹³.
- Those on a low income can claim a funeral payment from the Social Fund but gross expenditure has fallen from nearly £63million in 1994-5 to £46 million in 2007-8. James Plaskitt, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Department for Work and Pensions is *'of course aware... of concerns that the amount allowed for funeral directors' fees does not meet the full cost.'*¹⁴

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⁹ Abdelnoor, A and Hollins, S (2004) 'The effect of childhood bereavement on secondary school performance' *Educational Psychology in Practice, Vol. 20, No. 1*

¹⁰ Summarized in Ribbens McCarthy, J (2006) *ibid*

¹¹ Statistics kindly supplied by One Parent Families | Gingerbread from Labour Force Survey, 2006

¹² The Poverty Site <http://www.poverty.org.uk/08/index.shtml?2> (accessed 12 August 2008)

¹³ Axa Sun Life Direct http://www.axa.co.uk/media/pressreleases/2007/pr20071031_0001.html Total cost includes funeral flowers £229, death notice in newspapers £98, funeral notice in newspapers £146, catering at wake for 50 people £341, memorial (eg headstone) £612, probate £2,107.

¹⁴ House of Commons Hansard Debates for 09 July 2008 (pt0019) <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080709/debtext/80709-0019.htm> (accessed 13 August 2008)