



Childhood vulnerability and assets

Diverse experiences of children with domestic violence in the household

Vulnerability Technical Report 3

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Executive Summary

Children classified as belonging to a vulnerable group are unlikely to experience the challenges in the same way. Instead, there is likely to be a wide variation in their lived experience, with some individuals faring better than others despite each being similarly labelled as 'vulnerable'.

One possible reason for why children with the same vulnerability may have differing outcomes is the presence or absence of assets. Assets are often described as 'building blocks' that improve developmental outcomes and reduce risk amongst children, including those in vulnerable groups. Common examples for young people include having positive parental relationships and family communications, engagement with school, as well as having high self-esteem and sense of purpose.

This report explores the assets, resources and competencies of vulnerable children, with a particular focus on children with experience of domestic violence. This analysis compares the distribution of assets between children with domestic violence in the household and those without, and examines its relationship with socioeconomic factors using data from the Millennium Cohort Study at age 11 (sweep 5) and age 14 (sweep 6).

This research into the association of assets with vulnerability supports the wider Children's Commissioner's programme into quantifying the scale of vulnerability faced by young people today. This report aims to highlight that vulnerability is neither an easily measured concept nor does it confer the same experiences for all labelled as vulnerable.

Key Findings

By age 11:

- > Children in households with domestic violence were as likely to have a range of assets as their peers, including feeling safe, engaging in youth programmes and having parental involvement in school.
- > Assets varied considerably by socioeconomic characteristics. Children from higher socioeconomic groups were more likely to possess a variety of assets including parental involvement in schooling and positive peer influence.
- > When comparing children with experience of domestic violence and those without, assets for children from the highest income groups were broadly comparable. However, assets varied when comparing children from the lowest income group. For instance, 69% of those with domestic violence and from the lowest income group reported having positive peer influence in contrast to 76% of their peers from the same income group who did not experience domestic violence. This suggests that the risk of a lower level of resources and assets is much greater in lower income households which experience domestic violence.

By age 14:

- > While the distribution of assets between children with domestic violence and their peers was broadly comparable at age 11, differences become more stark by age 14. Just over half (57%) of children with domestic violence report having parental involvement in schooling compared to

67% of their peers. Similarly, 33% of children with domestic violence said they have restraint (refraining from alcohol, cigarettes and illegal drugs) in contrast to 43% of their peers.

- > Children within higher socioeconomic families continued to be more likely to have a wider range of assets.
- > Among children with domestic violence in the household, those in families with higher socioeconomic backgrounds had a wider range/ more assets than those in families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This was especially pervasive for income inequality, where family-based assets varied considerably for vulnerable children, but less so for their non-vulnerable counterparts.
- > On average, children with domestic violence in the household are less likely to have assets than their peers from the same socioeconomic backgrounds. This is observed across family-related assets such as positive family communication and parental involvement in schooling. However, these trends did not extend to assets relating to children's constructive use of time such as engaging in youth programmes.

These findings demonstrate that children with experience of domestic violence within the household are a diverse group with distinct assets, resources, and experiences. The experience of vulnerability itself is not homogenous and is strongly patterned by the socioeconomic backgrounds of young people's families.

Vulnerability and assets

There is a broad and well established evidence-base demonstrating that vulnerable children are more likely to experience poorer outcomes in later life, though it is important to consider that the severity of these outcomes is not the same for all children. In some instances children with the same experiences of vulnerability have poorer, or better, outcomes than their counterparts. This report considers how the outcomes of a vulnerable group might vary, by examining the diversity of experiences, competencies, and resources of vulnerable children.

Understanding assets

Assets are individual competencies and resources within families, schools, and communities, which promote positive development and reduce risk amongst children and young people. They have been described as 'building blocks' that improve developmental outcomes¹.

Assets are often discussed alongside protective factors within the resiliency literature, and it is therefore, worth distinguishing the two concepts. Protective factors are constructs that promote positive adaptation in high risk situations². On the other hand, assets are 'good to have' for all children, in normal development and amongst vulnerable groups, regardless of the presence of risk. Assets can therefore act as protective factors when children are faced with adversity.

The asset-focused model is particularly useful for studying vulnerability for two key reasons. Firstly, unlike the previous deficit-focused models, the asset-focused model undertakes a more positive approach to understanding the diversity of experiences and outcomes of vulnerable children³. Additionally, since evidence has shown that developmental trajectories can be improved⁴, identifying assets within vulnerable groups is a stepping stone towards improving outcomes and preventing problems.

The report is centred on the asset-focused model of vulnerability which will be applied to the experiences of children aged 11 and 14. By way of example, the assets of children classed as vulnerable due to the presence of domestic violence in the household will be explored. The overall aim of this study is to examine whether it is possible to measure the diversity of assets, competencies and resources that may be associated with vulnerability, and to highlight the heterogeneity of experiences of vulnerability.

¹ Leffert et al., 1998

² Wright et al., 2013

³ Ibid.

⁴ Leffert et al., 1998

Domestic violence

This report will exemplify the asset-focused model by focusing on a particular group of vulnerable children: children with domestic violence in the household. This group was defined by whether either of the parents / carers had ever used force against their partner. It should be noted that this is a proxy measure for domestic violence and it does not provide an indication of the level of severity of any force or of its regularity in the household.

Although there is limited literature on assets and domestic violence, several factors have been found to mitigate the impact of experiencing domestic violence within the household. This includes children having a close relationship with a caring adult⁵, parenting effectiveness, and self-esteem⁶. This means that the assets, resources, and competencies available to vulnerable children influence their outcomes.

Given that children with more assets are associated with better outcomes and fewer risk behaviours⁷, this report will investigate the assets associated with children with domestic violence in the household by comparing them with their peers and taking into account socioeconomic factors such as household income, parental education, and socioeconomic group (NS-SEC).

Analysis

Scales' 40 key developmental assets (Scales, 1999) formed the framework for understanding assets in this study as several components of this framework could be operationalised within existing data. This is in contrast to other several alternative frameworks on assets such as that developed by Masten and colleagues⁸, which tends to be more conceptual and offers a theoretical basis for understanding resilience. Similarly, Sen's Capability Approach⁹ focuses on the quality of life an individual is able to achieve based on effective access to various activities and states of being. This approach is also challenging to operationalise with secondary data as conceptually the activities or states can be regarded as positive assets in one context but a negative influence in another.

Scales' framework was therefore selected as a way to exemplify a way of understanding assets given that operational definitions for the assets were available, making the framework more measurable than others. Scales identified 20 external and 20 internal assets amongst young people. External assets refers to resources within a child or young person's family, school, or community such as having family support and feeling safe within their neighbourhood. Conversely, internal assets consist of children's positive attributes and characteristics such as self-esteem and achievement motivation. The list of assets used for this analysis and their corresponding operational definitions is included in the appendix.

These assets were operationalised within a secondary data source: the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) age 11 and 14 (sweeps 5 and 6 respectively). At age 11, 10 assets were mapped onto the young person's

5 Holt, S., Buckley, H., & Whelan, S., 2008

6 Graham-Bermann et al., 2009

7 Scales, 1999

8 Masten & Coatsworth, 1998

9 Nussbaum and Sen, 1993

questionnaire whereas 15 were mapped at age 14 (Table 1). The data is based on children and young people in England and has been weighted on a national level.

It should be noted that Scales' assets have not been readily operationalised by researchers to date, instead remaining as a conceptual and theoretical framework around which research priorities and practice have been based. This analysis is therefore noteworthy in its attempt to use secondary data sources to model the range of assets. Due to the secondary data source the majority of the assets are not measured specifically as Scales would prescribe, so this analysis is dependent upon a range of proxy variables for individual assets. As a result, some proxy variables may be more robust measures of assets than others, and it is possible that some measures might vary in their meaning at different ages used in this study. Nevertheless, the selected proxy assets can still reveal patterns and the diversity of experiences and resources within vulnerable group when compared to non-vulnerable counterparts.

The list of proxy variables used from the Millennium Cohort study is found in the Appendix.

Table 1: Key developmental assets (from Scales, 1999)

Scales's Asset	Scales's Description	Proxy variables available in MCS 5	Proxy variables available in MCS 6
Family support	Family life provides high levels of love and support		✓
Positive family communication	Young person and his/her parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s)		✓
Parent involvement in schooling	Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school	✓	✓
Safety	Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighbourhood	✓	✓
Family boundaries	Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts		✓
Positive peer influence	Best friends model responsible behaviour	✓	✓
Creative activities	Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music		✓
Youth programs	Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organisations at school and/or in the community	✓	✓
Religious community	Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution		✓
Time at home	Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week	✓	✓
Achievement motivation	Young person is motivated to do well in school	✓	✓
Homework	Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day		✓
Reading for pleasure	Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week	✓	✓
Restraint	Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs	✓	✓

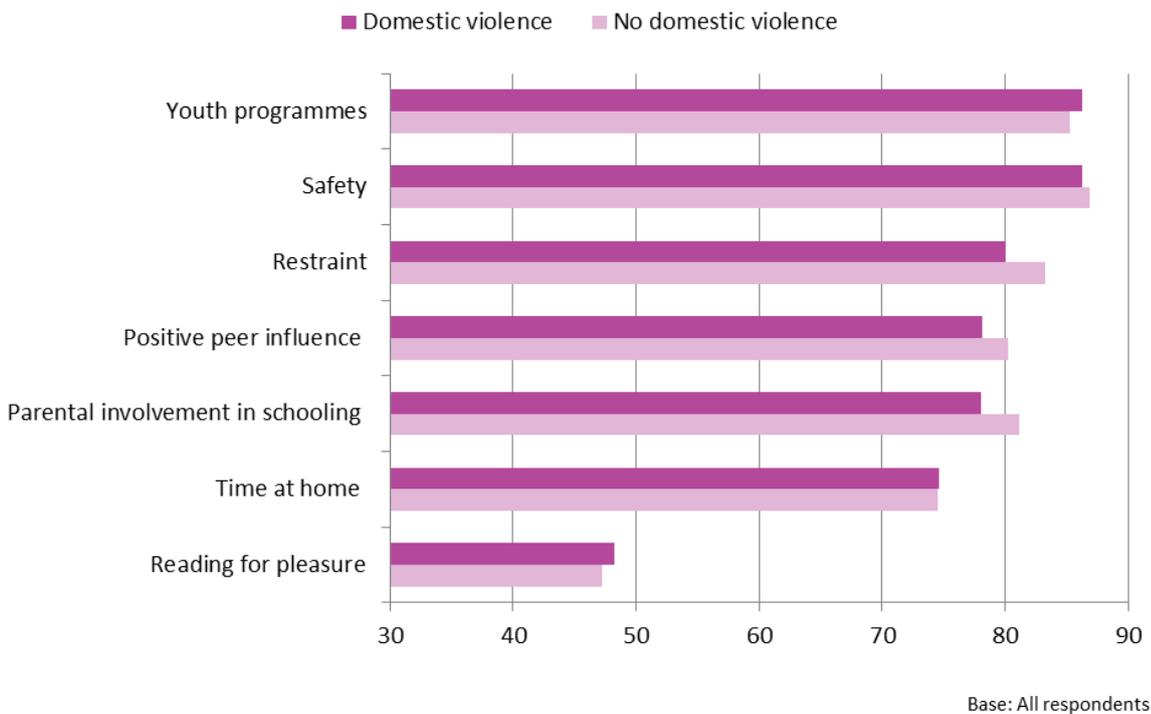
Interpersonal competence	Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills	✓	
Self-esteem	Young person reports having a high self-esteem	✓	✓

Comparing assets at age 11

Assets by domestic violence

In this section, the proportion of children possessing each asset will be examined based on whether they have experienced domestic violence in the household. Figure 1 demonstrates that proportion of assets between children with domestic violence and their peers at age 11 is broadly comparable.

Figure 1: Assets by group of children (%)



Although the literature consistently suggests poorer developmental outcomes of children experiencing domestic violence in the household (Kitzmann et al., 2003), these findings from the Millennium Cohort demonstrate that vulnerability is equally associated with having assets and resources. For example, 11 year old children in England with domestic violence in the household are as likely as their peers to take part in youth programmes (86% vs 85% respectively), spend time at home (75% vs 74% respectively) and to feel safe in their neighbourhoods (86% vs 87% respectively). Similarly, self-esteem, interpersonal competence, and achievement motivation also did not differ significantly across the two groups.

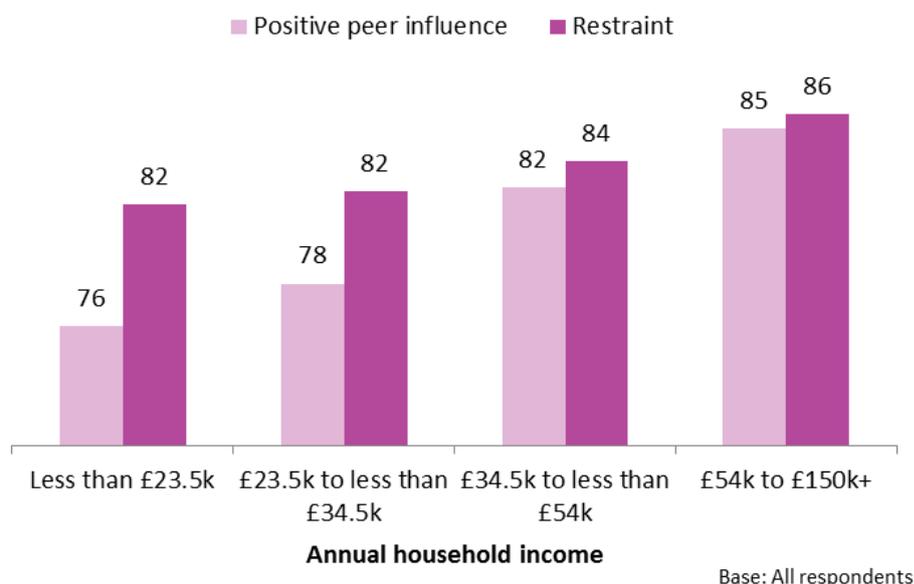
Assets in relation to socioeconomic groups

Given that assets were distributed evenly between children experiencing and not experiencing domestic violence, other factors may explain why those exposed to domestic violence have worse outcomes. Assets were also explored by socioeconomic characteristics such as household income, parent's highest education qualification, and socioeconomic group as these are the major determinants of life chances (Marmot and Bell, 2012)

There was a strong socioeconomic patterning to the presence of family-based assets among all 11 year olds. Children in households with highest levels of income and parental education were significantly more likely to spend time at home constructively and have parents involved in their schooling. There was a similar socioeconomic effect involving some assets concerned with positive peer influences, such as having friends who never drank alcohol or smoked, with positive peer influences more likely in the higher social classes. And children with parents with the highest levels of education, social classes and income were also more likely to report feeling safer at home, school and in the neighbourhood than their more disadvantaged counterparts.

However, there was some evidence of diversity of assets according to social background. Figure 2 shows a strong linear relationship between positive peer influence (when friends smoke or drink) and household income. On the other hand, the association between restraint (defined as children having drunk more than a few sips of alcohol) and household income is far weaker than positive peer influence.

Figure 2: Proportion of assets related to risk behaviour (%)



These findings suggest that a young person's internal restraint is more resilient to the effects of living in an economically vulnerable household, than is the likelihood of having positive peer influences. This raises the issue of how diverse socioeconomic backgrounds may independently predict the presence of

assets. A new level of complexity must be considered once these socioeconomic effects are factored in alongside the presence of vulnerability.

Assets in relation to domestic violence and socioeconomic factors

Is the social patterning of assets different for children with domestic violence in the household at age 11?

On average, differences in assets across household income groups were more pronounced for children with experience of domestic violence than those without. Differences between the two groups were greatest in the lowest income groups. For instance, 75% of children with domestic violence in the household had parental involvement in schooling compared to 80% for their low income counterparts. Additionally, 69% of those with domestic violence in the household and from the lowest income group reported having positive peer influence in contrast to 76% of their peers from the same income group. This suggests that the combined effect of domestic violence in the household and low income may influence the likelihood of children having particular assets.

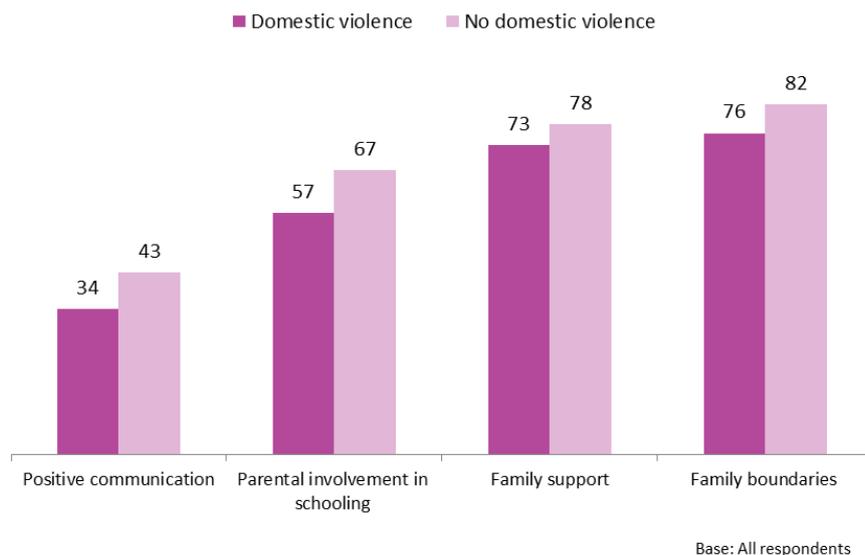
Comparing assets at age 14

Assets in relation to domestic violence in the household

The distribution of assets in 14 year olds was compared between those who have and have not experienced domestic violence in the household. At age 11, assets of the two groups were broadly comparable (Figure 1). However, Figure 2 shows that by age 14, the differences in the likelihood of having particular assets are more pronounced, with the biggest differences observed for family related assets,

Approximately three quarters of children with domestic violence in the household experience family support (73%) and have family boundaries such as rules about staying out (76%). Importantly, on average, this group is less likely to have family related assets than their peers who are not classed as vulnerable.

Figure 3: Family related assets at age 14 (%)



In addition to family differences, children with experience of domestic violence were less likely to report positive peer influence (33%) and restraint from alcohol, smoking and drugs (73%) than children with no domestic violence in the household (positive peer influence- 43%, restraint- 78%).

In spite of these emerging differences around family and peer-related assets, children with domestic violence in the household were as likely as their peers to have assets relating to a 'constructive use of time' such as engaging in youth programmes, creative activities (e.g. band, choir) and reading for pleasure. Additionally, there were no group differences on measures of feeling safe in one's neighbourhood, spending time at home, and taking time for homework at age 14.

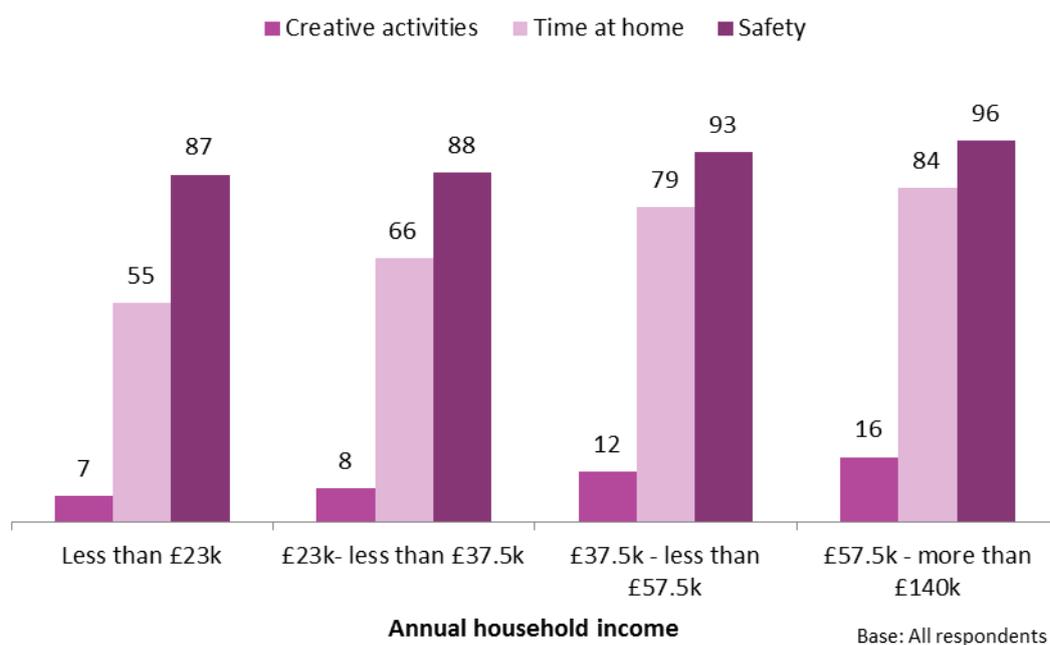
These findings imply that there is an important age-related effect whereby the distribution of some assets becomes less equal as vulnerable children grow older, though the picture is complex as the re-distribution of assets with age is not uniform, with some groups of assets being more stable than others. The overall impact of these age-related changes is to increase the diversity of assets and resources, which will likely lead to much greater variation in the outcomes experienced by vulnerable children.

Assets in relation to socioeconomic factors

The socioeconomic trends at age 14 mirrored those at age 11 - there was a positive relationship between socioeconomic factors and family-related assets. Children whose parents in the highest social class (83%), with the highest level of education and income (respectively 84%) were significantly more likely to have family support than those with lower levels. Similarly, socioeconomically advantaged children were most likely to have family boundaries than their less advantaged peers.

Participation in extra-curricular activities was particularly well characterised by income differences at age 14. Children in the highest household income group were significantly more engaged in youth programmes and creative activities as well as be more likely to spend time at home and devote time to doing homework

Figure 4: Assets distribution by household income (%)



While positive relationships have been observed, some assets are more evenly distributed across socioeconomic groups. For instance, there were no significant social class differences in feeling safe in one’s neighbourhood (91-94%), in having restraint (from alcohol, drugs, and smoking (77-89%)), or in having a religious community (9-12%).

Assets in relation to domestic violence socioeconomic factors This section examines the relationship between assets, domestic violence within the household and socioeconomic factors. This will also determine any heterogeneity of assets and experiences of children with experience of domestic violence across socioeconomic groups.

Is the social patterning of assets different for children with domestic violence in the household at age 14?

There was significantly greater inequality for children with domestic violence on several family-related assets compared to their peers with no experience of domestic violence. The proportion of children who had parental involvement in their schooling ranged from 44-64% depending on their household income. Conversely, for those not exposed to domestic violence, there was a mere 2% difference in parental involvement in schooling across incomes (66-68%). Similarly, income differences in family support ranged between 62-82% amongst children from the domestic violence group depending on their income, but by only 12% (72-84%) for those without domestic violence in the household.

However, the socioeconomic patterning of assets was more weakly related to the presence of domestic violence in the household. For instance, children were equally likely to have assets relating to a ‘constructive use of time’ such as engaging in creative activities and youth programmes, regardless of the presence of domestic violence and their household income (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Constructive use of time assets for children with domestic violence (%)

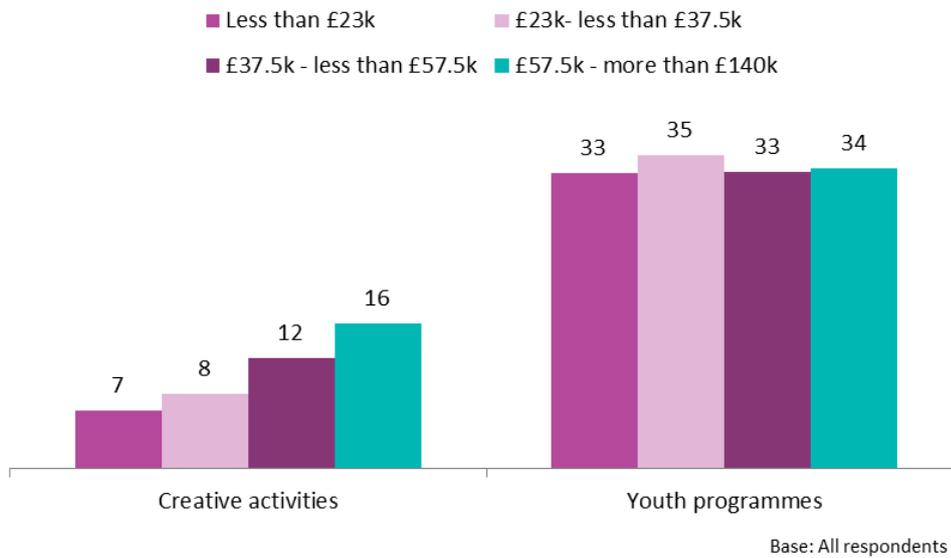
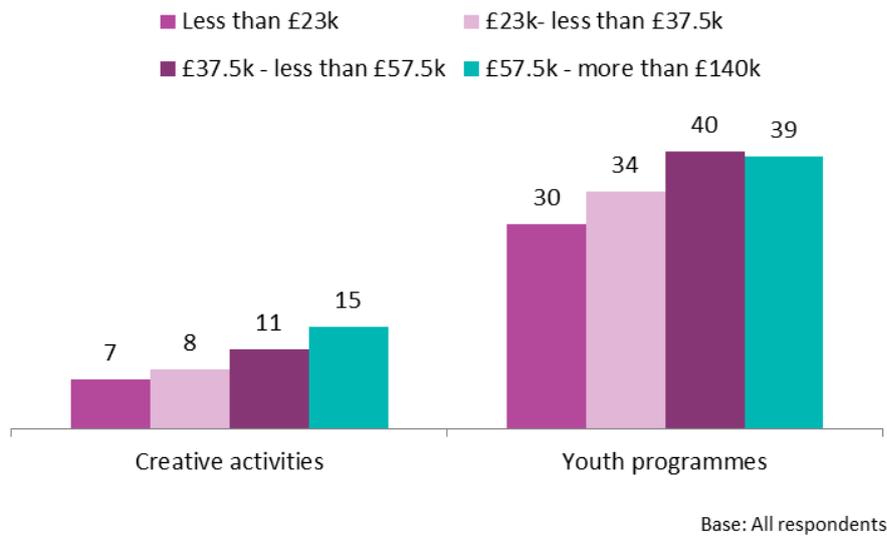


Figure 6: Constructive use of time assets for children with no experience of domestic violence (%)



These findings support the observations made at age 11, that the accumulation of resources and developmental assets is broadly socially underpinned and a consequence of socioeconomic inequalities. However, by age 14 there is a strong interaction between income and vulnerability which was not apparent at age 11, with income inequality giving rise to considerably greater variation in the presence of assets for those classed as vulnerable.

Conclusion

This report's aim was to measure the diversity of assets and resources held by vulnerable children, to contribute to the debate around why children with the same vulnerability may have different outcomes in early adulthood and later life.

Our findings demonstrate that vulnerable children can hold the same range of assets and resources as those who are not classed as vulnerable. For example, there were few differences between groups in the distribution of assets at age 11. This suggests that the negative experiences of vulnerability sit alongside the more positive endowment of assets. In other words, assets are not the opposite of vulnerability – rather, they co-exist and are likely to interact and moderate the risk of poorer outcomes depending on the diverse range and depth of assets held by a vulnerable child.

However, the story becomes more complex as vulnerable children grow older. By age 14 there are more marked differences in the presence of assets between the vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups, especially so for family-based assets. This clearly signposts age as an important factor when considering the impact of vulnerability of a young person's life chances. It also highlights that age is critical to issues on measuring vulnerability as what may be a negative experience at one point in time may well be of less importance at another. The complexity is increased further when the specific vulnerability is accounted for. Using domestic violence in the household as an example, the strongest age effect is the erosion of family-based assets, and like most age effects, this erosion may be in response to the accumulation of negative exposures and risks faced in households of this type. The relationship between assets and vulnerability is further nuanced by the influence of socioeconomic circumstances, with income inequality being particularly strong predictor of whether a child with domestic violence in the household holds a range of family-based assets.

This report does not intend to bring together all these findings to present a rigid framework for detailing pathways between vulnerability and assets. What it does do is use domestic violence as an example of vulnerability to demonstrate that there is a great diversity in the range of positive assets which are held by young people who each experience the same vulnerability, and which might ultimately determine why there is such variation in life chances within children in these groups. The multi-layered explanation for the association between vulnerability, the diversity of assets and final outcomes is complex and requires further investigation, but the challenge is in finding the information and the data to do so.

The analysis has attempted to operationalise academic theory using secondary data sources to answer research questions which the data was not designed to answer. This has required the use of proxy measures, in this case to measure 40 different indicators of development and nurturing assets. The data available was only able to generate 16 in total, and some of these are loosely related to the intended asset implying that assets are poorly measured within current studies. Given the age effect observed in the distribution of assets, this calls into question whether this difference is a result of developmental maturation of the children over time, or, is a measurement artefact whereby measures of assets at age 14 are more robust, interpreted differently or carry a different meaning than those used at age 11. So while the main aim of this work was to measure the diversity of assets and resources held by vulnerable children, the findings must be interpreted with some caution as there is considerable uncertainty around the quality of the measurement of development assets.

Furthermore, the identification of a vulnerable group on which to model differences in asset distribution was problematic due to a lack of sufficient sample sizes within the limited range of vulnerable groups present. A particular limitation of the use of domestic violence was the definition being: “has your partner ever used force in your relationship?” which does not account for regularity, severity or whether the child has witnessed the force. Despite assets being poorly measured generally within the data, and the vulnerability being imperfectly defined, the comparison between the proxy-vulnerable group and the non-vulnerable group (who may also be experiencing unaccounted for vulnerabilities) has generated meaningful differences in the asset distribution. This suggests that our findings have internal validity and are adequate for documenting, and confirming, the diversity of assets in two groups. However, it also highlights the need for future work that operationalises frameworks of assets and provides data that can more accurately measure vulnerability and assets across time.

Overall, this report identifies the diverse range of assets held by children experiencing a specific vulnerability, but it also calls for an acknowledgement of the complexity of the lived experience of belonging to a vulnerable group on a day to day basis. Possession of assets seems to vary over time, which is a clear signal that longitudinal data capable of measuring assets accurately will be needed in future if researchers are to equip evidence-based policymakers with the nuanced and detailed information necessary to mitigate the effects of vulnerability.

Appendix

Asset	Proxy variable(s) in MCS 5	Proxy variable(s) in MCS 6
Family support	-	Overall, how close would you say you are to your mother?
Positive family communication	-	Most young people have occasional arguments with their parents. How often do you argue with your mother?
Parent involvement in schooling	How often do your parents take an interest in your school work?	How often does anyone at home make sure you do your homework?
Safety	How safe is it to walk, play or hang out in this area during the day?	How safe is it to walk, play or hang out in this area during the day? By this area we mean within about a mile or 20 min walk from your home
Family boundaries	-	When you go out, how often do your parents know where you are going? When you go out, how often do your parents know who you are going out with? When you go out, how often do your parents know what you are doing? In the past month, how many times have you stayed out after 9pm without your parents knowing where you were?
Positive peer influence	How many of your friends smoke cigarettes? How many of your friends drink alcohol?	How many of your close friends get into a lot of trouble at school? Do any of your friends take cannabis or any other illegal drug? How many of your friends drink alcohol? How many of your friends smoke cigarettes?
Creative activities	-	How often do you do the following activities when you are not in school? Sing in a choir or play in a band or orchestra?
Youth programs	How often do you play sports or active games inside or outside, not at school?	How often do you do the following activities when you are not in school: go to youth clubs, scouts, girl guides or other organised activities?
Religious community	-	How often do you do the following activities when you are not in school: attend a religious service?
Time at home	In the afternoon after school, how often do you spend time with your friends, but without adults or older children, doing things like playing in the park, going to the shops or 'just hanging out'?	In the afternoon after school, how often do you spend time with your friends, but without adults or older children, doing things like playing in the park, going to the shops or 'just hanging out'?

Achievement motivation	School motivation/engagement scale in MCS: How often do you try your best at school? How often do you find school interesting? How often do you feel unhappy at school? How often do you get tired at school? How often do you feel school is a waste of time?	School motivation/engagement scale in MCS: How often do you try your best at school? How often do you find school interesting? How often do you feel unhappy at school? How often do you get tired at school? How often do you feel school is a waste of time? How often do you find it difficult to keep your mind on your work at school?
Homework	-	In a typical week in term-time, including weekends, how many hours do you spend doing homework?
Reading for pleasure	How often do you read for enjoyment, not for school?	How often do you do the following activities when you are not in school: read for enjoyment, not in school?
Restraint	Have you ever had an alcoholic drink? (More than a few sips)	Have you ever had an alcoholic drink? (More than a few sips) Have you ever tried any of the following things? Cannabis or any other illegal drug
Interpersonal competence	I care about how well I do at school I feel bad or guilty when I have done something wrong I do not show my emotions to others I am concerned about the feelings of others	-
Self-esteem	Rosenberg grid: On the whole, I am satisfied with myself I feel I have a number of good qualities I am able to do things as well as most other people I am a person of value I feel good about myself	Rosenberg grid: On the whole, I am satisfied with myself I feel I have a number of good qualities I am able to do things as well as most other people I am a person of value I feel good about myself



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