

Recession, poverty and sustainable livelihoods in Bradford

Findings
Informing change

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There is widespread concern that the recession and subsequent spending cuts could have a particularly damaging effect on deprived areas. This study explored the extent to which such damage is already evident in Bradford. Researchers considered the daily lives of people living in poverty, their experiences of the economic downturn and the barriers they faced in attempting to improve their situation.

Key points

- Research participants blamed the recession for:
 - rising fuel and food prices;
 - job losses and reduced working hours; and
 - the lower availability of jobs (particularly full-time and secure employment) and increased competition for the work opportunities that still existed.
- Ill health (particularly mental health), the experience of trauma (often as a victim of crime), inadequate incomes, widespread crime and anti-social behaviour were identified as the main barriers preventing people from improving their lives and moving out of poverty.
- The vast majority of interviewees said they did not have enough to live on. Most felt that benefits were inadequate because they had not risen in line with the cost of living.
- Most people said they wanted to work because they felt that work was the best way of improving their situation. However, people were clear that they wanted reasonably paid and secure employment, as opposed to any job available.
- Most did not fully access the resources and services available within their neighbourhoods. Reasons included not knowing what was available, not feeling that services were aimed at them and negative experiences of some public services.
- Most people did not feel that they had opportunities to improve their situation; they just had to 'get on with things' and 'get by'. Financial and emotional support from family and friends was seen as crucial in enabling them to cope.

The research

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Background

There is considerable evidence to show that Bradford's local economy – like that of many post-industrial areas with a recent history of high unemployment, a low skills-base and significant concentrations of deprivation – has been particularly badly affected by the recession. The city remains vulnerable as a result of the imminent cuts to key public services.

This eight-month research project was carried out to document the impact of the recession on people living in poverty in the Bradford District, and to identify policy changes that would enable communities to become more resilient in future.

The impact of the recession

It was difficult to separate the effect of the recession on people's livelihoods from other factors that contributed to poverty. In particular, it was hard to disentangle the impact of the recession from changes in the economy that predated the recession (for example, increases in food and fuel prices) or from the effects of changes in policy such as increasing conditionality in the benefits system. Each of these factors compounded the experience of poverty among the people who participated in the research.

Most interviewees did not identify 'the recession' as a major factor affecting them in the past three years. When they did speak of the recession and its impact they mentioned rising fuel costs and food prices, which often pushed them into debt, job losses and reduced working hours, a reduction in the availability of jobs (particularly full-time and secure employment) and increased competition for the employment opportunities that remained. Many interviewees said that they did not have enough to live on before the recession, and now they had even less.

Poverty is becoming more acute. It used to be a myth about having to make a choice between having your house warm or having a hot meal. It's becoming a fact. (Community Centre Manager)

To date, the recession does not appear to have caused new problems, instead existing problems have become more acute. There was also a clear feeling among research participants – particularly those involved in the later stages of the research – that it was too early to assess the real effects of the recession, and that things were only going to get worse for those living on low incomes.

Living on a low income

When interviewees described what it was like to live on a low income, they frequently spoke of not having anything left after paying for housing, fuel and food. Dealing with unexpected costs, such as household emergencies and repairs, pushed household budgeting to breaking point.

A large proportion of the interviewees felt that the worst aspect of living on a below-average income was the extent to which it reduced their ability to give their children the opportunity to participate in everyday life, such as going on school trips, but also to meet their children's expectations in terms of 'treats'. Participants described the impact of a life of a constant struggle with few resources as demoralising.

Well there's the park and that ... but if you wanted to go to the cinema and stuff, you can't go can you? Or if you wanted to take your kids somewhere [you can't afford to]. (White woman, North Wing and Pollard Park)

Debt was widespread. People owed money to landlords, utility companies, family (within and outside the household), friends, credit card companies and banks. Doorstep lenders were ever-present and persistent, offering a seemingly easy solution to an immediate cash-flow problem when people were at their most vulnerable – at exorbitant overall cost.

People knocking at your door for money ... that doesn't help the stress, does it? And that's probably one of the most worrying things I've got in my life now. (White woman in Lawkholme)

A significant number of research participants revealed that they had been victims of serious violent crimes or had suffered other personal tragedies. These traumas were a disabling force which undermined people's attempts to

change or improve their situations. Those who disclosed such experiences were usually trying to cope with the aftermath without professional support.

Research participants struggled in a number of other ways, including coping with poor health – and in particular, mental health such as depression and anxiety – dealing with bureaucracy and living in poor quality accommodation. However, the two issues that were said to have the greatest impact on people's daily lives were the lack of money (as described above) and anti-social behaviour. It was felt that anti-social behaviour such as joyriding, consumption of alcohol and drugs in public places and vandalism had increased. This added to residents' anxiety and feelings of being unsafe. Most people attributed anti-social behaviour to a lack of employment opportunities and leisure activities for young men.

Barriers to work

What could be unequivocally attributed to the impact of the recession was the fierce competition for the few jobs that were still available. For example, there was increased competition from graduates who were now applying for lower-level employment than they would previously have considered. A number of research participants reported that they, or someone in their household, had lost a job during the economic downturn.

Every job [interview] I've been to from the Job Centre ... for three positions there'll be about 200 people applying ... some jobs you're over-qualified for, some jobs you know somebody else has taken ... the easiest job to get now is at a restaurant. (Bangladeshi man)

When asked what would make the biggest contribution to improving people lives, most felt that a full-time job with a reasonable wage was the one change that would move them out of poverty. People wanted to work, and were keen to take steps to improve their employability. However, many were pessimistic about the prospects of finding secure employment of adequate quality in the present economic climate. To make the transition from benefits to work, people felt that they needed the security of guaranteed work that provided an income over and above what they would receive on benefits.

The main disadvantages participants identified in obtaining employment were a lack of experience and a lack of qualifications. Some of the Asian participants also highlighted poor English language skills as an additional barrier.

If you've got poor language skills then the options available to you are extremely limited, especially with the current climate. Whereas, before, maybe you could have found something within factories. (Bangladeshi woman)

The increase in part-time working during the economic downturn has been noted by many commentators; some have seen it as providing opportunities to fit work around caring responsibilities. However, the participants in this research found part-time working frustrated their efforts to climb out of poverty. Some mentioned having had their hours reduced to such an extent that it was no longer economically viable for them to work.

I'm struggling because I've had to give up work ... the hours they gave me wasn't enough so it's got me into debt ... they said I'd have 15 hours a week and they knocked it down to six, which was no good at all. (White woman, Canterbury estate)

People were positive about occupational training, which they saw as holding the promise of access to secure employment. However, they were negative about the job-readiness training, which is compulsory for those in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance. They felt that it did not engage them in a meaningful way or help them to develop new skills or acquire new information.

Poor use of public services

The study explored what public resources were available to people living on a low income and whether these made a significant contribution to their lives. However, when asked about their experience of local public services, interviewees were not very forthcoming. Although some acknowledged that they did use local services, most reports of their usefulness were grudging and it was clear that people did not see these services as being key resources.

Further exploration as to why people did not use public services more found that there was a lack of knowledge of services and insufficient encouragement to use them. People did not feel able to influence the way in which public services were delivered. They felt detached from these services, and did not have a sense of ownership or see them as resources available for their use.

Failure to thrive

The research participants did not have realistic plans that allowed them to thrive in any sense, they were just 'getting by' from day to day. In almost every case they were unable to save any money to manage unforeseen costs or to deal with sudden crises. When people did speak of support structures, they largely referred to family members or, in the case of those with no family, close neighbours on whom they were dependent for both financial and emotional support.

Conclusion

It is difficult to differentiate between the impact of the recession and recent changes to social policy, such as increased conditionality within the benefits system. It is arguably too early to make a full assessment because future impacts of the recession and the cuts in public spending are so uncertain. However, the recession has affected not only the day-to-day struggle of people living in poverty, but also their prospects of moving out of poverty. People were worse off, but more significant was the fact that they now had far fewer opportunities to lift themselves out of poverty. This affected mental well-being – reducing people's hope that their situation could improve and increasing their levels of anxiety and depression. It also had a knock-on effect on the wider community evidenced by a decline in community spirit and the increasing incidence of anti-social behaviour.

These findings underline the importance of an integrated and holistic approach to social policy that takes into account the many inter-connected challenges that people in poverty face. The study highlights a danger that reforms proposed by the current government could lead to welfare effectively providing a subsidy for poor-quality, low-paid work, thus trapping people in situations of 'in-work poverty'. Measures to avoid this would include increasing the national minimum wage and strengthening the enforcement of employment legislation.

The study identified a need to prioritise the creation of opportunities that directly benefit people in poverty. One possibility would be to invest in neighbourhood regeneration schemes that would provide new employment opportunities in low-income communities. Community researchers reported that there was potential for environmental improvements in all the areas that were researched. Job-creation schemes could provide suitable jobs and support community development in these neighbourhoods while also injecting money into the local economy. The study also recommended transferring resources away from the current employment preparation programmes towards occupational training in the skills needed by the local economy.

About the project

The study was done in collaboration between Oxfam, Bradford Resource Centre and Community Statistics Project (BRC) and the International Centre for Participation Studies (IPCS) at Bradford University. The research team worked in partnership with community researchers, recruited because of their local contacts and direct experience of poverty. The community researchers conducted interviews with 39 people living on a low income in four disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Interviewees were selected to reflect the diversity of the different neighbourhoods in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and household composition. The research team also interviewed 14 policy-makers and service providers from local statutory and voluntary agencies. Participatory research was then conducted in each neighbourhood to verify initial findings and identify specific changes that would improve the livelihood strategies of people living in poverty in Bradford. The research took place between May and December 2010.

For further information

The full report, **Recession, poverty and sustainable livelihoods in Bradford**, by Bal Athwal, Lucy Brill, Graeme Chesters and Mike Quiggin, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

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