

Voices of people experiencing poverty in Scotland

While there are lots of statistics available on poverty in Scotland, the voices of people living in poverty are largely missing from policy debates. This research, by Mhoraig Green on behalf of a group of Scottish charities, aims to ensure that the voices of people living in poverty are heard as policies to tackle poverty and disadvantage in Scotland are developed.

- Participants talked frequently about having to make tough choices between items and services that most people would consider essential. This led to frustration about not being able to provide greater financial security for themselves and their family, and anxiety about getting into debt.
- Low income was central to people's experiences, whether they were working or living on benefits. In fact, the problems faced by people on benefits and those in low paid work were very similar.
- Despite the fact that statistics indicate that poverty has fallen for some groups in Scotland, participants found it difficult to identify many changes in their own situation. People did talk about improved public transport and leisure facilities in some areas. Some participants also talked about the benefits brought by touring arts companies and online shopping.
- Participants described continuing to face barriers to work. Though some had taken on work despite little or no financial gain, others pointed to extra costs such as childcare, travel and buying work clothes and the fear of a gap between benefit withdrawal and the first pay cheque as making the transition to work unattractive.
- Many participants described problems accessing various services and the quality of available services. This was particularly an issue relating to advice about housing and benefits entitlements and around mental health services.
- Although people highlighted problems in their local areas, such as anti-social behaviour and poor environments, many also described having strong social networks and said they wanted more say in how their communities are run.



Background

There is little recent qualitative evidence about the experiences of people living in poverty in Scotland. There are lots of statistics available which give us a consistent picture of how poverty changes over time, but what such data cannot provide is a fuller picture of what day-to-day life is like for people experiencing poverty. This research engaged with people experiencing poverty, giving them the opportunity to identify the issues that affected them and how their situation had changed since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999.

Living on a low income

People involved in this research described living on a low income and having to struggle to make ends meet. Getting by often involved making tough choices between things other people take for granted, including food and heating. Rising fuel prices led to difficult decisions for many participants:

“I now buy food and bring it home – cooked chicken and things like that, because I’m scared to use the oven because I know it costs too much money. I only use the washing machine twice a week because I’m scared of what it costs.”

Low income had an immediate impact on people’s lives, but participants also described the psychological and long-term impact of having to go without. Participants described the isolation that arose from not being able to afford to socialise or participate in leisure activities. They also spoke about their frustration at not being able to save money, thus providing greater financial security for themselves and their families:

“After bringing up kids and not working, then going back to work and being too old to take out a pension, there’s no hope for me. I retire in a year and I’ve got nothing to look forward to. I’m going to be a poor pensioner and that’s my future.”

Credit was described as a means of alleviating these problems, but for some participants this had led to problems with debt and in some cases aggressive creditors.

“I’m scared to open the front door. If there’s a knock, I’m on the nebuliser wondering how much he’ll be looking for now.”

Almost all of the participants received benefits or had received them in the past. Many spoke about their efforts to find work and had experience of both employment and unemployment at different points in

their lives. It was striking that the problems described by participants who were working in poorly paid jobs were similar to those described by participants living on benefits.

Barriers to work

Many of the participants spoke about the importance of paid work, but most had experienced difficulty in finding and keeping a well-paid job. Asylum seekers described being particularly troubled because they are not allowed to work. Some of the participants described taking on paid work despite little or no financial gain:

“My husband works all night and then I’m out at college all day. All his money goes on council tax, rent and bills. We don’t have a penny extra and I never see him. We’d be better off if he didn’t work but he feels like he has to.”

People also described how extra costs, such as childcare, travel and work clothes, make it even more difficult for work to pay. These extra costs were particularly off-putting to people coming off benefits since they would have difficulty meeting their extra costs between benefit withdrawal and their first pay cheque.

Some of the groups also described having difficulty finding or keeping employment because of the discrimination they faced from employers. This was particularly the case for refugees, lone parents and disabled people who participated in the research. Disabled participants described employers interviewing them so they could be seen to be inclusive:

“I gave up going to job interviews because employers were just playing the system. They interviewed you to tick a box. They knew they’d never employ you and they were just doing it for the stats.”

Identifying change

Participants in the research were asked how their situations had changed for the better or worse since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999. Despite evidence that poverty is decreasing amongst some groups in Scotland, almost all the participants in this research found it difficult to identify a general sense of improvement in their communities or in their own circumstances. Some participants were able to identify improvements in specific services or aspects of their lives, but a general sense of improved well-being was not reported.

The most widely reported improvement was in cultural and leisure services. These services were highly valued and were not seen as a luxury but as an important means of educating young people about the opportunities available to them and broadening their horizons. Scottish Executive-funded touring productions by major arts companies were especially welcomed by people in rural areas, where participants also reported isolation and lack of opportunities for young people.

“That has made a huge difference. The idea that’s going to stop again is a big threat to us because it helps our sense of community, it gives us the idea that we can go elsewhere, it gives us ideas about what we can do and that’s particularly important for young people.”

Participants in some areas said there had been improvements in public transport, and described the positive impact increased services had on their ability to visit friends, socialise and access services. However, disabled people were concerned that while accessibility had generally improved across Scotland, some areas were better served than others and coverage was limited. Despite the improvements in some areas, in other areas participants complained that services had been cut, leaving them feeling isolated.

Improvements in people’s lives were not always caused by public sector work. Improvements can come from the private sector and one disabled participant described how online shopping had allowed her to maintain her independence. The service prevented her becoming dependent on other people, and the delivery charge was less than the cost of taxis to and from local shops.

Quality of services

Participants across all the groups described problems accessing various services but had experienced particular problems with mental health services and advice about housing and benefits entitlements. Many participants in the research reported being isolated because of their low income and a lack of services. Mental health services are a key support mechanism for people suffering the effects of isolation, but participants in this research complained about the quality and availability of these services:

“GPs say: ‘Go away, the only thing that’s wrong with you is that you don’t know how to cope. Now go away, I don’t want to see you again.’ ”

While some participants said their GP did not know how to effectively deal with mental health problems, others

were positive about the practice of referring people to leisure services to help relieve problems. Participants felt there was too much reliance on people turning to friends and family for support with mental health issues.

A key problem that many of the participants in the research faced was not being able to access services because they did not know they were available, because they did not know what they were entitled to, or were unable to access information about their entitlements:

“The onus is on the claimant to know what to ask for.”

Participants complained about the services provided by housing and benefits advice workers, particularly those employed by local authorities. Participants sometimes had difficulty accessing services that were available because they found the experience of dealing with service providers unpleasant or demeaning.

Communities and local areas

Participants described living in poor quality housing and in areas with a poor environment and talked about the impact this could have on their lives. People also talked about the issue of anti-social behaviour, and many said this made them unsafe in their local area.

Despite the problems people reported in their areas, there was a sense across most of the groups that people wanted to help improve their local area. Some groups talked about the benefits of community life:

“We’re a small community and we work together. That’s been a definite improvement.”

However, other participants had been frustrated by consultation processes where they felt their views had been disregarded:

“Sometimes they have consultations and you go ‘What is the point? Because you are going to do it anyway, you are going to shut the school down and build those flats’.”

Having a say over how their communities was run was important to most of the participants in the project. Children reported feeling particularly disengaged from decision-making processes and said the services available to them were often not suitable as a result. Participants suggested that if people were able to participate in decision-making they would develop a stronger sense of ownership over their communities and anti-social behaviour would decrease.

Conclusion

Low income is central to people's experience of living in poverty in Scotland, but people also face a broad spectrum of other problems ranging from a poor environment, to being disengaged from decision-making, to facing a lack of services. This study highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to tackling poverty and points to a range of policy priorities including:

- Raising people's incomes has to be the key starting point for tackling poverty and addressing many of the difficulties that people who participated in this research reported. This will require effective co-ordination across the UK and Scottish levels of government.
- The issue of low-paid work in Scotland has to be recognised as a major one. Work may not be an effective route out of poverty until this problem is resolved. Other barriers to accessing work, including extra costs and inflexibility of employers must also be tackled.
- It is important that there is a continued policy drive to improve existing services and to develop new services across Scotland. There needs to be more investment in mental health provision and ensuring public transport is accessible to all.
- Good quality advice services are crucial to helping people access available services and their other rights and entitlements, and provision should be supported and extended. Discriminatory attitudes towards people on a low income amongst service providers must be tackled.

- People must be able to participate in decision-making processes. Developing a framework that demonstrates how the results of public consultations have been taken into account would support this.

About the project

The research was a focus group study designed with two stages. It covers the experiences of 112 adults and children who participated in first stage focus groups held across Scotland with people who had experience of poverty. Attempts were made to ensure that a wide variety of backgrounds were represented. The general aim was to hold open discussions that allowed people to identify the problems that affected them and to discuss how their situation had changed since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999. The second stage involved one further focus group, which was held with a sample of the participants from the first stage groups. This group was designed to enable participants to check, comment on and contribute to the analysis. A separate event was also held with twenty-five academics and policy practitioners to discuss the policy implications of the focus group findings.

For further information

The full report, **Everyone matters? Voices of people experiencing poverty in Scotland** by Mhoraig Green, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 978 1 85935 566 4, price £14.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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