

The mythology of poverty

People in poverty are frequently blamed for their situation. But, in fact, a complex web of wider social, economic and political factors is responsible. Poverty is not an option anyone actively chooses any more than it has ever been. No one wants to be poor.

Blaming people in poverty for their situation is not a new attitude. They have always been blamed and stigmatised by some in society. In the past people in poverty were dismissed in the same way that some regard people in poverty now. But those who have experienced poverty themselves are less likely to 'blame' people on a low income. It is also true that people in other parts of Europe are less likely to criticise those on low incomes.

It is easier to look at poverty and its solutions in terms of individual behaviour than at wider features of society affecting people's life chances.

But poverty itself can be a barrier to self-improvement and 'getting on'. The daily pressures of living on a low income include limited access to services (such as transport and childcare) and opportunities (employment, education and training), as well as facing prejudice and discrimination.

So solutions need to involve both improving what individuals can do for themselves and how they are helped from outside. Government schemes and initiatives must be put in the context of the large-scale fundamental measures that are needed to tackle the deep-rooted economic causes of poverty.

Some frequently-quoted perceptions – myths – about poverty are described below.

Myth – Poverty only exists because people are too lazy to work

This assumes two incorrect things:

- firstly, that people who are not working are lazy, and
- secondly, that working means you are not in poverty.

People who are not working include pensioners, people with disabilities that prevent them working, lone parents with young children and people who are temporarily out of work. The latest government figures on in-work poverty show that around half (46 per cent, after housing costs have been deducted) of households in poverty have at least someone in paid employment.

Myth – People on benefit are well off

The basic level of benefit for a single adult works out at £9 a day to cover food, clothes, bills and everything else. This amount has not changed in real terms for 25 years although prosperity has generally increased considerably

over this period. Some people, such as asylum seekers and those aged under 25, get even less than this – £6 and £7 a day respectively.

Myth – Poverty will always be with us: if poverty is relative, then some people will always be considered poor

Poverty is not having a bit less than the average, it is being far below the normal standard of living. While it is obviously true that some people will always have an income below the average, it is possible to have arrangements that raise incomes to ensure that no one falls a given amount below the average income. The aim of government policy is to provide support for households to escape poverty – though it has yet to be achieved.

Myth – That family can't be poor, the kids always have new trainers/football shirts/electronic toys

Parents experiencing poverty sometimes provide their children with the same things that their friends have so they don't feel left out. To do so, they have to make savage cuts to other aspects of their spending to pay for them – such as not eating properly themselves. Debt is another problem facing people on low incomes, who often need to buy essential items on credit or take out loans – often the only place they can get these is from lenders who charge well above 'normal' commercial interest rates.

Myth – Immigrants/asylum seekers aren't in poverty because if they were still in Africa/Eastern Europe what they get here would be considered a fortune

Income has to be considered in the context of the society in which someone lives – and the cost of living in that area. What might be regarded as a reasonable income in an African country, for example, would be impossible to live on in the UK.