

## Problems in reporting poverty

**By Neil Mackay, investigative journalist, film-maker and author**

There are a variety of problems for any journalist trying to report on poverty. Firstly, you have to try and find some way to circumvent existing prejudices amongst both colleagues and readers. It's common to hear the phrase "why should we care?" That's predicated on the belief that these days if you are in poverty, it's your own fault – either because of drug and alcohol misuse or because you are feckless and lazy.

I tend, therefore, when reporting on poverty, to write about children or families with children. It's difficult for even the hardest and most cynical heart to say that a child is to blame for its own circumstances. 'Using' the child as a kind of shield, I can then explore wider issues that simply reporting on adults would prevent me from doing. It gives me access to the reader without a wall of preconceptions standing in the way. Then we come to the gate-keepers: those in the so-called 'poverty industry'.

While many have been incredibly helpful to me over the years, some stand in the way of a reporter, even when the journalist's writing will further their own agenda. An example of this would be a charity dealing with families in poverty refusing point blank to even consider putting a writer in touch with a family to interview.

When this occurs, I tend to wonder why the charity exists, as they are not using the media to get across the political points they wish to make and therefore failing the people they purport to care for. Of course, it's understandable that the charity would wish to protect families from exploitation, but when the structure of the journalist's work has been guaranteed and promises given that any interviewee will be in control of what they say, what they do and how the writer can behave with them, then the fear of exploitation should not be an issue.

Another point: why not send a member of the charity's staff along with the journalist to any interviews to ensure that the family is protected?

Lastly, we come to the interviewees themselves. I have written many pieces focusing on families in poverty and while nearly all have been happy to be associated with the final piece – believing that it gave them a voice and highlighted the problems of their lives in a truthful and honest way – some have been very angry and disappointed. Despite agreeing that there were no factual inaccuracies, omissions or exaggerations in the final copy, some interviewees simply do not like seeing the realities of their lives displayed in print or on film. It embarrasses or shames them.

That leaves a very bad taste in a writer's mouth. You know you haven't done wrong, but the interviewee feels aggrieved and therefore the journalist must have a sense of guilt and responsibility. Perhaps you feel you didn't explain the consequences enough. Whatever the case, it's better to report the truth, even if some people don't like it, than to leave some of society's worst problems festering in the dark.