

POVERTY AND ETHNICITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

A period of increasing ethnic diversity in Northern Ireland has focused attention on how people from minority groups experience poverty, and their ability to access key services. This literature review was supported by a series of focus groups and establishes, for the first time, an evidence base on the relationship between poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland.

Key points

- New migrants have joined longstanding communities of people from minority ethnic groups during the last decade and have contributed positively to the local economy.
- People from minority ethnic groups are employed at all levels in the economy, but low-grade, low-paid employment appears commonplace, despite many having high qualifications and skills.
- Others from minority ethnic groups are disadvantaged by limited skills or education, and the present recession may have disproportionately affected them.
- In-work and child poverty appear to be problematic, but to what extent people from minority ethnic groups receive benefits when eligible to claim is unclear.
- There has been a focus on access to services, but little is known about education and health outcomes. Housing conditions may vary, but poor management by landlords, high costs and overcrowding are evident.
- Despite positive policy changes, people from minority ethnic groups have experienced racism as service users, employees and pupils, with mixed responses from organisations, employers and schools.
- The relationship between tackling race equality and combating the legacy of sectarianism is complex, and provides a unique but little understood context to poverty among minority ethnic groups locally.
- Other concerns include the weakness of ethnic monitoring, a perceived 'policy vacuum' in senior government, and *ad hoc* initiatives with little shared learning on effective responses.

The research

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BACKGROUND

Northern Ireland saw increasing ethnic diversity during the last decade. This was a period of rapid economic expansion to which people from minority ethnic communities contributed positively. This period also saw increasing political stability following decades of sectarian conflict, and progress in racial equalities legislation and policies. However, not all people in the region benefited equally from the economic success, or have had the same experiences of the market downturn following the 2007–2008 financial crisis.

The review project had two parts: a comprehensive literature review of empirical research since 1998 and five focus groups to discuss the emerging findings with people from minority ethnic groups and community organisations. The review brings together, for the first time, evidence on whether and how people from minority ethnic communities experience poverty, and their ability to access key services.

Minority ethnic people in Northern Ireland

The timing and composition of migration to Northern Ireland differ from that in Great Britain. A combination of rapid change and small numbers make determining the size of Northern Ireland's minority ethnic population difficult, although new 2011 Census data will support this task. It is clear, however, that net inward migration during the last decade has supplemented existing minority ethnic communities and changed the ethnic mix of many places, both urban and rural. It is likely that the largest minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland are from Eastern Europe – particularly Poland and Lithuania – followed by Chinese, Irish Travellers and migrants from Portugal, the Philippines, and Somalia and other African countries.

Policy and legislation on racial equality in Northern Ireland have lagged behind that in the rest of the UK. The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order became law in 1997, 21 years after similar legislation in Great Britain. However, the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998 requires public agencies to promote equality for 'protected' groups, 'good relations' – a term for cohesion encompassing religious and minority ethnic communities – and to monitor the effectiveness of organisations' strategies. The first Racial Equality Strategy was published in 2005.

These steps have raised awareness of the issues, but monitoring of their effectiveness is considered weak. There are concerns that policy implementation and practice have not kept pace with the needs of new and existing minority ethnic communities. Furthermore, fresh policies on good relations and cohesion have stalled. Whatever the reasons for previous inaction, the implementation of race equality legislation and policies remains relatively new.

Poverty, low incomes and benefit receipt

The precise household circumstances and relative extent of poverty among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland are unknown. Anti-poverty strategies *Lifetime opportunities: Government's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy for Northern Ireland* (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006) and *Improving children's life chances: the child poverty strategy* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2011) note the lack of data. Despite acknowledging that people from minority ethnic groups may be at risk of disadvantage, these strategies offer no targeted initiatives.

People from minority ethnic groups are represented across the workforce, including in skilled and professional employment, but appear to be over-represented in low-grade, low-pay jobs. There was some evidence that recent migrants earn below the average local wage, even below that of other lower grade employees. Minorities consistently report that underemployment is problematic. A large proportion of recent arrivals are highly educated and skilled, but have found it difficult to gain recognition for their qualifications and experience.

Others from minority ethnic groups have fewer skills and face greater challenges in overcoming insecure and/or low-grade employment. Moreover, career progression opportunities in some sectors are limited, because of language difficulties, racism or lack of training. Immigration rules further inhibit some people's choices in the labour market and their access to social security benefits, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Evidence also highlighted a possible disproportionate impact of the recession and greater incidence of unemployment among some recent migrants.

Small-scale surveys suggested that around half of recent migrants are married with families; their regular reporting of low pay strongly indicated that in-work and child poverty are likely to be a concern. Respondents considered family benefits important, but receipt of housing benefit was uncertain despite indications of high housing costs. Community groups are critical in helping people to navigate the social security system, but reported that administrative delays to applications have contributed to periods of destitution. More evidence is needed on how benefit agencies meet the social security and labour market requirements of people from minority ethnic groups.

Obtaining key services

Reporting of satisfaction with education and health services was generally high across ethnic groups, although there was evidence of racism among a minority of health and local council staff. An example of this was people being deterred from registering with a GP. Aside from Travellers, who experience severe disadvantage, little is known about the educational achievements or health status of people from different minority ethnic backgrounds. Schools offer language support for new pupils, but there were concerns that schools could do better in understanding diversity and handling incidents of racist bullying.

Reports suggest that most people from minority ethnic groups lived in the private rented sector. They reported overcrowding, unaffordable rents and poor management by landlords. These experiences are similar to those of other low-income households, but problematic access to benefits, uncertainty about rights, isolation and language difficulties could exacerbate disadvantage.

Belonging in Northern Ireland

People from minority groups reported experiences of racism and discrimination at work and in their neighbourhood, affecting their well-being and ability to get on. Whether Northern Irish society is more racist than elsewhere is debatable; people from minority ethnic groups report negative experiences in other countries too. Despite publicised race attacks in the region, there have also been many reports of positive neighbourliness and acceptance. However, incidents of racism in Northern Ireland are complicated by the interplay between racism and sectarianism. Responses to race equality by community organisations and statutory agencies are shaped by the region's legacy of conflict.

The high degree of residential segregation in many areas of Northern Ireland seems to have affected some migrants' housing choices. How people from minority ethnic groups find their own space within the complexities of neighbourhoods that are often highly territorialised is not understood. The implications of their housing choices – not least for accessing employment and other services – are also unclear.

Conclusion

The literature on the experiences of minority ethnic communities has grown during the last decade, but specific understanding of poverty is limited. Nonetheless, this review found evidence to suggest that the lack of recognition of overseas skills and qualifications, immigration status, language difficulties and problems in negotiating support services all serve as obstacles to improving some people's employment position and financial circumstances. However, the extent of financial hardship, health, housing and educational attainment and how these differ among people from minority ethnic groups and households has been insufficiently studied. How the circumstances of minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland compare with Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland is also uncertain. Much is known about Travellers who, although seeming to fare better in Northern Ireland than in the Republic, experience severe disadvantage across many areas. A similar focus on the circumstances and needs of other minority ethnic groups is required.

Recommendations

Changes in policy and practice are needed to better address poverty in Northern Ireland across different ethnic groups. These recommendations relate particularly to enhancing opportunities in the labour market, despite the difficult economic climate, and ensuring that safety nets are available and used. Actions should include the following:

- tackling underemployment to ensure that career progression is possible;
- pursuing opportunities to engage people with employment through vocational training, language courses or self-employment;
- ensuring that people from minority ethnic groups are not disproportionately affected by benefit delays;
- examining how staff in Jobcentre Plus and benefits offices support unemployed people from minority ethnic communities back into work.

In addition, primary race equality legislation could be strengthened and made more effective.

Lastly, there are major knowledge gaps in understanding the lives of people from minority ethnic groups, particularly in respect of how they compare with others in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Robust statistical data resources and quantitative analysis would be a solution. To ensure effectiveness in tackling poverty among minority groups, there is a need to examine the availability and usage of all data resources.

About the project

This literature review represents a comprehensive but not exhaustive synthesis of the empirical research available on ethnicity and poverty in Northern Ireland since 1998. The relevance of the research evidence to the current experiences of people from minority ethnic groups was established by conducting five focus groups. Four focus groups were undertaken with people from the Roma, Somali, Polish and Chinese communities and the fifth focus group comprised representatives from a range of statutory and community organisations with an interest in migrant and minority ethnic groups. The review was carried out by Alison Wallace (University of York), Ruth McAreavey (Queen's University, Belfast) and Karl Atkin (University of York).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF.

The full report, **Poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland: an evidence review** by Alison Wallace, Ruth McAreavey and Karl Atkin, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk.

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