

TALKING ABOUT POVERTY: HOW EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC UNDERSTAND UK POVERTY

The idea of poverty and the meaning of the term in the UK is contested, and those working to tackle poverty are finding it difficult to shift negative public attitudes and cultivate broad public support for policies to solve it. This research compares how experts and the public understand UK poverty. It analyses the overlaps and gaps between these ways of thinking to identify challenges in communicating about poverty and strategies for building support.

Key points

- Experts agree that: poverty in the UK is about a lack of resource to meet basic needs and participate in society; poverty can be addressed through state, market and individual-level solutions; and there are actions that can and should be taken to ensure sufficient social and economic support, and to prevent future poverty.
- A set of 'cultural models' – shared assumptions and patterns of thinking prevalent across the UK population – shapes how the public thinks about poverty in the UK.
- Some of these cultural models act as barriers to communicating expert perspectives on the causes and consequences of UK poverty and impede support for the actions needed to address this issue. However, there are also perspectives and values that provide a 'way in' for those seeking to tackle UK poverty by building public understanding and demand for action.
- There are overlaps between expert and public understandings of poverty, which can also be leveraged to build public support. However, there are also gaps, which need to be bridged through new approaches to communicating about UK poverty. The next phase of this project will focus on bridging these gaps.

The research

By Volmert, A, Pineau, M, and Kendall-Taylor, N,
the FrameWorks Institute. The National Children's Bureau
is a partner in the *Talking about poverty* project.

NOVEMBER 2016

Introduction

The *Talking about poverty* project, funded by JRF, will develop an evidence-based communications strategy to increase public understanding of UK poverty and support for measures to address it. The project builds on previous work on public opinion on UK poverty. This summary of the research, by the FrameWorks Institute, outlines expert and public understandings of poverty, analyses the gaps and overlaps between these, and makes initial recommendations for how to bridge these gaps and more productively engage the public in thinking about UK poverty.

What experts think about UK poverty

Experts on UK poverty, including those with experience of poverty, agree the following key points need to be more widely communicated:

- Poverty should be understood in terms of: a lack of resources to meet material needs and take part in society; the specific social and historical context in which an individual is living; and the effects of income and costs of living.
- While poverty can affect anyone, certain groups are more at risk than others.
- The causes and consequences of poverty are interconnected and vary geographically. In general, they include: low wages and insecure work; high cost of living; unemployment; low educational attainment; the way the benefits system works; discrimination and stigmatisation; social isolation and exclusion; stress and illness; family breakdown; and economic stagnation and low economic productivity.
- Poverty is complex, but can be addressed through state, market and individual-level solutions.
- Social and economic support should be broad, sufficient and responsive to individuals' needs over the life course, with a combination of universal and targeted support. Action should be taken to prevent poverty, have an impact now and in the future, and include a focus on place.
- Solutions must be driven by input from people living in poverty.

What the public thinks about UK poverty

This research identifies 'cultural models' – shared assumptions and patterns of thinking – which members of the British public broadly share and draw upon when thinking about poverty.

The 'non-negotiable needs' model: Poverty is understood as the lack of basic, absolute needs – food, shelter, clothing and warmth. All other things are understood as 'wants' or luxuries. This cultural model can help to garner support for a limited form of welfare support that meets basic needs, and action to address the costs of housing. However, it undermines support for a more robust welfare state and leads the public to focus on tightening up the benefits system.

The 'spectrum of self-determination' model: People reason that material resources are important because they both satisfy wants or needs and enable people to freely choose or determine their own path in life. This allows people to see a spectrum of poverty, where more resources means more self-determination. This expands public thinking about the support people need to live an autonomous life, but it can also undermine the sense that society should provide a basic level of welfare support to all.

The 'post-poverty' model: There is a strong tendency to identify poverty with other places – such as the third world – and the UK's past. Drawing upon this model, the public assumes UK society is prosperous and has progressed beyond poverty, undermining concern for the issue in the UK today.

The 'poverty romanticism' model: People romanticise poverty as a form of freedom from unnecessary consumer goods and modern materialistic society. This model directly impedes thinking about poverty as a serious social problem that must be addressed.

The 'game is rigged' model: People draw upon an assumption that economic outcomes, such as poverty, are controlled by elites who employ government policies to benefit themselves and keep others down. This model helps to highlight inequality, but makes change through government-led reform seem unrealistic.

The ‘economic naturalism’ model: People view the economy as shaped by mysterious market forces beyond individual or societal control. This leads people to assume that there are significant limits on society or government’s ability to reduce or eliminate poverty by affecting the economy.

The ‘self-makingness’ model: People frequently attribute an individual’s circumstances to their personal choices and level of motivation. They understand poverty to be the result of inadequate effort and poor choices, undermining the public’s ability to appreciate the environmental and systemic contexts that enable or constrain individuals to shape their lives.

The ‘culture of poverty’ model: This model perceives certain communities to have a set of shared norms and values – particularly worklessness – which result in an unbreakable intergenerational cycle of poverty. This model shifts blame from the individual to the community, and undermines support for any solution other than fundamentally changing cultural norms among certain groups of society. It can lead members of the public to support a tightening of the benefits system to prevent exploitation.

The ‘opportunity structures’ model: People understand poverty to be caused by a lack of adequate opportunities, such as good education and strong social networks. This model enables people to appreciate the impact of social structures on the chances of an individual experiencing poverty. It can move people beyond a ‘basic needs’ view of poverty, and make them more receptive to education and skills development policies.

Expert and public understanding: overlaps and gaps

There are overlaps between expert and public understandings that can be used to build public support for evidence-based poverty solutions. For example, both experts and the public see that society has a fundamental obligation to provide for people’s basic needs, recognise the differential availability of opportunities as a cause of poverty, and identify improvements in education, job training and housing provision as key measures for addressing UK poverty.

The analysis also reveals gaps in how experts and members of the public think about UK poverty:

- Experts define poverty, and minimum standards of living, in terms of the wider social context. The public focuses on a lack of basic subsistence needs.
- Experts view poverty as a contemporary UK problem. The public associates ‘real poverty’ with the third world or the UK’s past.
- Experts root the causes of poverty in the failure of social systems and economic structures. The public tends to focus on flaws in individuals or groups.
- Experts focus on how certain social groups are at greater risk of experiencing poverty. The public pays less attention to these vulnerabilities.
- Experts put social isolation and exclusion at the heart of their definition of poverty. The public is unaware of or unconcerned about people being unable to participate fully in society due to a lack of resources.
- Experts emphasise the significant effects of poverty on wider society, such as loss of productivity. Public understanding centres on the effects of poverty on individuals.
- Experts understand the economy as a complex system affected by a range of factors. Public understanding attributes economic outcomes to the actions of elites or undefined ‘market forces’.
- Experts identify a range of policy measures that could reduce and prevent poverty. The public focuses on an unlikely ‘change of heart’ by powerful elites or a futile battle against economic forces that are beyond human control.
- Both experts and the public endorse government provision of social benefits to tackle poverty. However, experts see the current benefits system as insufficient and inaccessible, while the public is concerned about abuse of that system.

To gain public support for policies to tackle UK poverty, communications strategies must focus on the overlaps and bridge the gaps to avoid triggering unproductive ways of thinking among their audience.

Initial recommendations for more effectively communicating about UK poverty

- Avoid talking about 'needs' – the public equates this only with basic subsistence needs, not in terms of wider resources and living standards.
- Emphasise the link between material resources and self-determination to move away from the idea that any resources beyond subsistence needs are luxuries.
- Use examples to explain what UK poverty looks like today and how it works, focusing on the role of systems and policies in creating and perpetuating poverty.
- Tell stories that explain poverty as a systemic and structural issue, and make systems and structures a character in the story, along with people.
- Be explicit about how poverty constrains people's opportunities, enabling the public to think more about social context, structures and systems.
- Try to explain how economic forces are shaped by policies and institutions, and how they could be shaped differently to address poverty, to tackle fatalistic thinking about elite control or uncontrollable market forces.
- Do not invoke individual politicians' potentially negative motives when criticising government, as this is highly likely to reinforce the sense that reform through government policy is impossible.
- Avoid describing the need for material resources in terms of consumption, as this may trigger anti-consumerist thinking that can be connected to romanticised views of poverty.
- Contextualise and explain statistics on UK poverty; otherwise, the public will interpret them through their default cultural models.
- Avoid explicitly addressing the public's unproductive thinking about individuals in poverty needing to work harder or be more responsible – rather than defusing such ways of thinking, this will more likely reinforce the message.

About the project

The expert understanding of poverty was based on interviews with researchers, policy stakeholders, practitioners and those with experience of poverty. Findings on the public understanding of poverty were based on 40 in-depth interviews with members of the public across the UK, complemented by on-the-street interviews.

The second phase of the project, beginning in early 2017, will build on the initial recommendations to design and test new approaches to communicating about UK poverty.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, **Talking about poverty: How experts and the public understand UK poverty**, is published by the FrameWorks Institute and is available at: www.frameworksinstitute.org/uk To find out more about the project, please contact Abigail Scott Paul, email: Abigail.ScottPaul@jrf.org.uk

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ISBN: 978-1-910783-88-7

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905

<mailto:publications@jrf.org.uk>
www.jrf.org.uk
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