

# POVERTY AND ETHNICITY IN WALES

This qualitative study of poverty and ethnicity in Wales focuses on the experiences of 47 people from five ethnic groups – Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Somali, Polish and white British/Welsh – living in a large city, the north Wales coast, the south Wales valleys or the countryside.

## Key points

- The study found marked differences in the levels and experiences of poverty amongst interviewees. These differences were not caused by ethnicity, but by the differences in where people lived and the interaction of their human capital, social capital, entitlements and attitudes, thinking and choices. Racism and discrimination, sometimes directly linked to people's ethnicity, but also for example, to their appearance or religion, was the main exception.
- Differences in these factors reflected other underlying causes, such as differences in people's migration experiences and gender. For example, amongst Polish interviewees who had recently migrated to Wales for work, skills and attitudes to work were helping to reduce poverty, while social networks helped the longer established Pakistani men in the study to cope.
- The importance of these multiple factors emphasises the importance of looking beyond outcomes, which may be associated with ethnicity (such as higher levels of poverty amongst some ethnic groups) to focus on the underlying causes. Schemes to reduce poverty within particular ethnic groups need to form part of population-wide anti-poverty strategies.
- Policies to strengthen social and human capital and extend access to entitlements are vital – for example, investing in early years provision and in public spaces.
- These policies need to be matched by interventions to support changes in people's attitudes, thinking and behaviour in relation to employment, and by greater analysis of the impact of general policies on specific ethnic groups.
- Some targeted work would be of particular help for specific groups, especially English for Speakers of Other Languages provision and cultural awareness training for frontline staff in some services.

## The research

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# BACKGROUND

This study addressed gaps in knowledge about the relationship between ethnicity, place and poverty in Wales. It focused on the experiences of 27 families from five ethnic groups: Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Polish, Somali and white British/Welsh (so termed because this group variously described themselves as Welsh, British, British and Welsh, or English). Respondents were characterised by relatively high levels of poverty. Four distinctive places were studied: Cardiff, a large metropolitan area; the south Wales valleys; Carmarthenshire, a rural area; and Rhyl, on the north Wales coast.

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As this was a qualitative study, the experiences of a particular group, such as Somalis, do not imply that all Somalis in Wales have the same experiences; this was just the experience of the Somalis in this study.

## Key factors affecting poverty

Five factors were particularly powerful in explaining levels and experiences of poverty:

- *Place*, which influenced how people felt during everyday life, their access to housing, employment opportunities and public services.
- *Human capital*, including health, knowledge and skills, which influenced people's capacity to identify and take up opportunities, to use public services, and their resilience in the face of challenges.
- *Social capital* – the productive relationships people had with others; for example, they helped people to cope by providing emotional help and support and access to knowledge.
- *Entitlements* to benefits and public services.
- *Attitudes, thinking and choices* about potential pathways out of poverty, such as employment and education and training.

Respondents saw employment as the main potential pathway out of poverty, but also identified barriers to finding and progressing in employment. Their ability to overcome these barriers depended on their social and emotional skills, advice and support, and their attitudes, thinking and choices, including willingness to move in search of work and to accept 'poor work'.

In contrast, attitudes towards education and training (another potential pathway) were often ambivalent. With the exception of English language courses, people were generally much clearer about the value and importance of education and training for their children, rather than for themselves.

Entitlements provided a safety net, helping to prevent destitution, despite being insufficient to raise people out of poverty. Nevertheless, entitlements were restricted for some, such as asylum seekers, not taken up in full, or unfulfilled for others (e.g. where public services that people were entitled to were judged inadequate); this influenced levels and experiences of poverty. Differences in these factors, such as people's entitlements or the strength of their human and social capital, were linked to other, underlying factors such as their migration pathway, age and gender.

## Influence of ethnicity on levels and experiences of poverty in Wales

Although members of all five ethnic groups were in poverty, there were important differences in their experiences and outcomes. These reflected differences in the places they lived, their human and social capital, entitlements and attitudes, thinking and behaviour. These differences meant that:

- The Polish families in the study were generally the most work focused and resilient. They were the most likely to be in work and appeared most able to cope with challenges. Nevertheless, they often felt isolated and were limited to 'poor work' with low pay and few progression prospects, making it difficult to escape poverty.

- The Pakistani families in the study were largely coping. They had the strongest support networks and tended to live in places felt to be safe, inclusive and meeting their everyday needs. However, few were working; there was a sense of prioritising security and stability over strategies to escape poverty, such as searching for work.
- Many Bangladeshi families studied were struggling; few saw how they could escape poverty. Although the men interviewed were often working, they were restricted to 'poor' and part-time work. Women interviewees wanted to work, but felt unable to, primarily because of limited English language skills. Despite living in places felt to be safe, inclusive and meeting their everyday needs, many were very dissatisfied with their housing. Family-based support networks typically centred on the husband's family, limiting their value to women.
- Somali families' experiences in the study showed stark divides, and men and women's experiences were very different. Some men were angry at the racism they felt held them back and stopped them finding work or 'good work', despite living close to centres of power and wealth. In contrast, women interviewees were more focused on raising children, so felt the difficulties of finding employment less keenly. The experiences and poverty levels of those who had come to the UK as asylum seekers were very different to those who had migrated under less traumatic circumstances, or were born in the UK. For many of those who arrived as asylum seekers, their initial experiences were often very difficult, although this improved when they secured legal status and their entitlements were extended.
- The white British/Welsh families in the study were generally struggling; they often felt very vulnerable and sometimes defeated. Those in work felt limited to 'poor work'. Poor physical and mental health severely limited the employment prospects of many who were out of work, leaving them heavily dependent on their entitlements. Their social networks were also often fractured. The consequent social exclusion, isolation and vulnerability contributed to feelings of depression and powerlessness.

So while ethnicity was associated with different experiences and levels of poverty, there was little evidence that it was the cause. For example, while many Pakistani, Polish and Somali interviewees found their work opportunities and entitlements limited, particularly by their English language skills, this was not because of their ethnicity but because they had come to the UK as migrants. Experiences and perceptions of racism directly linked to ethnicity were the main exception to this.

## Impact of place on poverty in Wales

Respondents strongly believed that place affected their lives. As a result, many had moved, or planned to move, to new places. Many factors influencing people's everyday experiences were linked to the ethnic composition of places.

However, place generally had much less impact on levels of poverty. Although access to employment opportunities (often tied to particular places and their transport links) might be a necessary condition for reducing levels of poverty, it was not sufficient in itself. Other factors, such as lack of knowledge and skills, prevented interviewees from exploiting local employment opportunities.

## Conclusion

The study found a strong association between poverty and ethnicity, but little evidence that ethnicity caused poverty. Five factors – place, human capital, social capital, entitlements, and attitudes, thinking and choices – were particularly powerful in explaining differences in poverty levels and experiences across the five ethnic groups, and to a lesser degree, between different members of each ethnic group, such as men and women.

People's choices regarding employment – the main pathway out of poverty – and to a lesser degree education and where they lived were likely to have a major influence on levels of poverty. However, their choices were often limited and influenced by other factors, including: key aspects of their human capital, such as health and skills; their access to support and advice, which could link them to knowledge and resources that could help them escape from poverty; and social norms, including gender roles.

## Policy recommendations

### Improving places

- Reviewing the forthcoming Welsh housing bill's effectiveness and its impact on different ethnic groups.
- Reviewing the effectiveness of community policing policies in promoting good community relations, particularly in multi-ethnic areas.

### Developing human capital

- Sustaining increased investment in early years provision.
- Ensuring a stronger focus on evaluating the progress made by different ethnic groups in school.
- Reviewing English for Speakers of Other Languages provision to consider how to improve it.

### Strengthening social capital

- Ensuring that investment in public spaces and cultural activities strengthens social capital.
- Supporting schools' community focus.

### Improving access to and take-up of entitlements

- Ensuring that workforce development strategies assess the need for social and cultural training for frontline staff, and planning for its provision.

### Extending entitlements to vulnerable groups

- Acting on the recommendations of the *Report of the parliamentary inquiry into asylum support for children and young people* (The Children's Society, 2013).

### Changing attitudes, thinking and behaviour

- Evaluations of the Work Programme should assess how far it meets different ethnic groups' needs.
- The scope to develop local support to help change people's attitudes, thinking and behaviour about employment requires consideration.
- Government could consider appointing a women's enterprise champion.
- Ways of supporting flexible and part-time working need attention.

### Overarching recommendation

- Schemes to reduce poverty within particular ethnic groups need to be part of population-wide anti-poverty strategies.

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## About the project

The research was carried out for six voluntary sector organisations. Within the four geographical areas studied, in-depth interviews with families from two or three different ethnic groups were undertaken. This focus on families rather than individuals enabled exploration of key questions for the study, such as the impact of gender and age. The interviews were complemented by six focus groups with stakeholders from each ethnic group, and two round-table discussions with representatives from statutory and voluntary sector organisations.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, **Poverty and ethnicity in Wales** by Duncan Holtom, Ian Bottrill and Jack Watkins, is available as a free download at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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