Community consultation on poverty and ethnicity in Scotland

This study examines the reasons for differences in low income and poverty among people from various ethnic backgrounds in the Scottish regions of Fife and Highland. Although comparable in population size, the two areas exemplify Scotland's very diverse geographies.

Key points

- All participants associated poverty with limited choice and opportunities in accessing food, warmth and accommodation.

- While recognising poverty's complex causes, all participants emphasised economic factors such as poor access to well-paid, secure employment, because of economic restructuring and labour market constraints.

- Factors like gender, disability, age, legal status, migration history and marital break-ups, combined with economic issues, increased vulnerability to poverty and made it difficult for some groups and individuals to find routes out of poverty.

- Ethnicity-specific factors:

    – loss of traditional livelihoods, pressures to lead settled lives, prejudice and low literacy levels increased Gypsy/Travellers' risk of being in poverty;
    – in both regions, diminishing opportunities in accessing well-paid skilled occupations affected white Scottish men;
    – language barriers, lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, prejudice, discrimination and legal status made it difficult for East Europeans and Chinese to access appropriate employment or training and development.

- The different geographies and economies of Fife and Highland were important in understanding the causes and impact of poverty among different groups within and across the regions. However, some issues were common regardless of geography, as minority ethnic participants in both areas experienced prejudice in getting employment.

- Church and faith organisations provided support for East European, Chinese and Gypsy/Travellers participants in Highland. However, there was little inter-ethnic interaction. Most people depended on family and friends and their own ethnic communities.

- The authors conclude that more research is needed on the relationships between poverty and ethnicity, taking into account intersecting factors and diverse geographies, economies and public policies.

The research
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Background

This study explored participants' experiences of poverty, their coping strategies and views on potential solutions. Interviews with 32 participants from four ethnic backgrounds (white Scottish, East European, Gypsy/Travellers and Chinese) were held in two Scottish regions: Fife and Highland. Stakeholders from the public and voluntary sectors were also consulted.

Perceptions of poverty

All participants perceived poverty as relative, and compared their situation with others in the UK, internationally and their countries of origin. They associated poverty with limited choice and opportunities in accessing basics such as food, warmth and accommodation. For some, poverty seemed a downward spiral with few, if any, routes out. However, younger participants (under 35), mainly East European or white Scottish, were less likely to regard poverty as permanent or inescapable.

Causes of poverty

Although participants identified a range of factors causing poverty, almost all emphasised economic issues. Housing and intra-regional labour market issues created additional pressures. Participants' experiences confirmed the complex relationship between poverty, ethnicity and location/place, contingent also on individual, community and institutional/policy factors, as well as intersecting factors such as age, gender, marital status and disability. Cross-cutting factors such as legal status, marital break-up and drug and alcohol dependency also increased vulnerability to poverty.

Economy, labour market and access to employment

Regardless of ethnicity, the majority of participants identified economic restructuring and local labour market constraints as key contributors to poverty. The rise in service-sector jobs and decline in skilled manual work (e.g. construction, mining, fishing) were felt to have led to limited well-paid, secure employment. Participants saw the recession as exacerbating a difficult labour market, with fewer apprenticeships, training opportunities and jobs.

> I've fought for my country. I've been in Iraq ... I was already in full-time employment as a chef ... came back, there was no jobs. And I was left wae nothing and had to start again ...There's nae support ... once you are oot, you're oot. (White Scottish man, Fife)

Most participants identified difficulties in accessing training and development programmes, because of inadequate provision and costs. They also saw the lack of enabling staff within local employment agencies (such as Jobcentre Plus) as making it more difficult to access work.

Participants also raised ethnic and/or gender-specific issues. For example, the loss of traditional livelihoods and being unable to access employment because of prejudice and racism presented barriers for Gypsy/Travellers.

> Everyone is struggling. But I feel that some of the employers are a bit racist, and they're only putting themselves first and other people who live in the village. And they are not even considering our children ... who are trying to survive, trying to better themselves, so they can be better people when they're older. (Gypsy/Traveller woman, Fife)

This problem was compounded by low literacy levels and pressures to lead a settled life, which they felt led to extra expenses (e.g. expenditure on heating a house).

In both regions, white Scottish men expressed concerns about diminishing opportunities in well-paid skilled manual occupations. They were reluctant to take on what they perceived as 'women's work' (e.g. service-sector jobs).

Chinese and East European participants identified prejudice and discrimination in accessing appropriate employment. A combination of factors exacerbated their situation. Lack of recognition of overseas qualifications led to employment not commensurate with their qualifications. Language barriers and lack of fluent English made it difficult to access well-paid employment or training/development programmes. Eligibility rules and legal status created additional barriers; for example, access to training funded through the European Social Fund was denied to those who had the use of public funds, impacting adversely on some East Europeans. The legal status of some Chinese women (asylum seekers/recently granted refugee status) impacted on their ability to access employment and other state support, making them dependent on other members of their community. Inter-ethnic differences and resentments could arise, based on possible misperceptions.

> I have tried to apply for social housing ... it would take me 10–15 years to get on the list ... that is me – a normal citizen – I am a normal citizen, but less fortunate than asylum seekers. I have to pay my tax, rent and I start a business to pay VAT, tax rates, it is all so difficult to continue with a business in this situation. (Chinese woman, Highland)

Participants considered language provision in Highland to be insufficient and inflexible. While lack of affordable childcare was an issue for all single parent mothers with school-age children, it was most acute for Chinese women with little English and lacking family or social support structures locally.

Housing
Participants of all ethnicities in both regions spent a large proportion of their income on rent for poor quality public and private housing and items such as heating costs, which were particularly high in Highland. In remote rural areas in Highland, the housing issue was compounded by second home-owners buying much of the affordable housing for holiday accommodation.

Regional and intra-regional factors
The two regions' different geographies and economies, intra-regional differences and how these have shaped labour market opportunities and access to goods and services were important in understanding poverty among different groups. In Highland, limited labour market opportunities and the prevalence of low-paid seasonal work restricted access to well-paid employment and led to individuals taking up multiple jobs. In Fife, the loss of manufacturing jobs affected white Scottish men in particular. In remote rural communities in Highland, lack of public transport, the high cost of fuel for transport and domestic use, the withdrawal or outsourcing of public sector jobs since the recession and public sector cuts appeared to be leading to reduced employment opportunities and lower wages.

Impact of poverty
Poverty impacted on participants' ability to afford the basics, such as healthy food, good quality, affordable accommodation and meeting their children's needs. They did without and reduced their spending.

> We had, we tried to avoid, like I say, using the electricity and such. We started buying cheaper food and being more economic with what food we did buy … I picked up a lot of skills, fixing washing machines and plumbing and [laughs] resealing things. (White Scottish man, Highland)

The stress of poverty strained family relationships, affected people's ability to meet family responsibilities and led to family breakdown and division.

> I think it does [being on low income] have a huge, I think it does have an impact. I think it has an impact on sort of family life and can be quite, quite stressful and I suppose people, people can suffer from depression and things like that because they are not, you know, they are not just managing to maintain that, you know. It's very much up and down because there isn't any permanent work … (White Scottish woman, Highland)

Participants found access to training and educational opportunities limited because of lack of funding, or restricted because they were in receipt of benefits. For all participants, poverty led to low self-esteem, increased isolation and loss of work/community links. For some, ill-health and mental health breakdown followed.

> I'm just depressed. I'm negative all the time now. When you're on long-term unemployment you get negative about everything. It's gonnae get worse. (White Scottish man, Fife)

Coping strategies and solutions
There were no common coping strategies or solutions; individuals harnessed whatever was available to them. Most coped by very careful budgeting, 'doing without', frugality and self-sacrifice.

> I have learned to find, find out where I can get something cheap, where I can get something for nothing, do without, without something. Not buying something just because I wanted it and I didn't need it which is not a, not very much fun but it's necessary. But you learn. And maybe it was easier for me because my childhood was poverty. (White Scottish woman, Highland)

Church and faith organisations provided tangible support for most of the East European, Chinese and Gypsy/Travellers participants in Highland. However, there was little inter-ethnic interaction and most coped by depending on family, friends and their own ethnic communities. In general, participants highlighted non-statutory local authority and voluntary sector agencies, including minority ethnic associations, as more accessible and helpful than central government agencies in assisting with coping with poverty, and in finding routes out of poverty through assistance with job-finding and providing information.

'Magic wand' solutions
When asked what they would like to see changed in five years' time if they had a 'magic wand', participants unanimously wished for good jobs with improved wages and affordable, good quality accommodation.

Conclusion

More research is needed on the relationships between poverty, ethnicity and place, inclusive of all ethnic groups. Understanding the complex, dynamic relationships between poverty and ethnicity, alongside other identities and location, requires more than short interviews. Ethnographic and mobile methods (such as walking interviews and case studies) may be more appropriate, while ensuring sensitivity to issues of gender, ethnicity and linguistic appropriateness in selecting researchers.

Implications for future research

More research is needed on poverty, ethnicity and intersecting factors, taking into account the diversity of geographical locations, their economies and public policies. Mapping the operation of regional and localised labour markets and their impacts on different ethnic groups is another important gap to be addressed. Understanding the influence of global, national and regional economic policy and institutional factors on in-work poverty and employment/unemployment in particular localities and across ethnic groups is a further area for research.

Finally, to understand the relationship between poverty and ethnicity, it is essential to develop greater understanding of similarities and differences across and within ethnic groups regarding the impact of poverty, along with coping strategies and routes out of poverty. The role of other identity markers, as well as legal status and migration histories, also needs taking into account.

Implications for policy and service delivery

Several issues raised during the study have implications for policy-makers and service deliverers. For example, statutory and non-statutory agencies need to understand how racism (personal, cultural and institutional) increases the risk of poverty among different ethnic groups, and ensure that policies, practices and poverty-alleviating measures challenge and address racism.

Agencies need to ensure that they have strategies to connect with individuals/households in poverty from across all ethnic groups. In particular, they need to be aware of and address the circumstances of individuals, such as Chinese (former) asylum seekers, who are living in conditions of extreme poverty and vulnerable to intra-ethnic exploitation. It is also necessary to address poor communication and inadequate staff briefing and training to ensure that non-UK individuals and Gypsy/Travellers have access to information about their entitlements. Childcare support and services (public, private and voluntary sector) need to ensure that they are culturally sensitive and proactive in ensuring racial, religious and linguistic inclusion.

In addition, participants in remote rural areas in Highland felt that the Scottish and central Government need targeted policies to address the specific challenges – limited employment, low wages and high food and fuel prices – that increase their risk of poverty.

About the project

This study will inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's programme on ethnicity and poverty. It was carried out by Philomena de Lima and Tim Braunholtz-Speight, Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, and Rowena Arshad and Alan Bell, Centre for Education in Racial Education, University of Edinburgh.

The small-scale qualitative study involved 32 participants from four different ethnic groups in exploring the relationship between poverty and ethnicity. Individuals or households on an annual income of £16,000 and below were defined as low income. 'Purposive sampling' was used to include people on low incomes in a variety of circumstances in Fife and Highland. Semi-structured interviews focused on participants' perspectives on five issues: understanding and meaning of poverty; causes of poverty; impact of low income and poverty; coping strategies and routes out of low income/poverty; and 'magic wand' solutions. Two stakeholder groups from public and voluntary sector agencies in each region were also consulted.

For further information

The full report, **Community consultation on poverty and ethnicity in Scotland** by Philomena de Lima, Rowena Arshad, Alan Bell and Tim Braunholtz-Speight, will be available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk from April.

Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk

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