



POVERTY FACT SHEET

WHAT IS POVERTY?

Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent or buy the essentials for your children. It means waking up every day facing insecurity, uncertainty and impossible decisions about money. It means facing marginalisation – and even discrimination – because of your financial circumstances. The constant stress it causes can lead to problems that deprive people of the chance to play a full part in society.¹

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

This definition moves beyond thinking about poverty solely in terms of income. It introduces the idea that poverty should be thought of more broadly, to include factors such as the feeling of being in control of your life and the ability to build and maintain healthy relationships. This social lens of poverty is crucial in understanding the daily realities of people living at the cold face of inequality.

Poverty is intricately linked to people’s access to resources and services. For example, research shows clear links between a cold house and lower educational attainment.² Data from the Marmot Review team has shown that the children in homes with no or poor heating are more likely to be admitted to hospital. With higher numbers of absences, children living in poverty are less likely to achieve their academic potential and become isolated from peers due to lower participation in school life. Poverty acts as a barrier to fully accessing services that the more affluent can access with ease.

IN WORK POVERTY

A worrying trend is the increase in workers living in poverty with almost 13% of workers in the UK now living in poverty. This is an increase of 500,000 people and represents 4 million workers.³ The old mantra of ‘work your way out of poverty’ is clearly untrue today. The rise in uncertain and temporary work has left many trapped in a cycle of insecure employment. Zero hour contracts, the gig economy and a rising cost of living all contribute to a situation of the ‘working poor’.

POVERTY AND DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination harms health. Research shows that discrimination experienced at an individual level leads to increased stress which directly harms a person’s health. Structural discrimination that exists in a society’s narrative denies people the services and resources that are also determinantal to health.⁴

People living in poverty often experience this marginalisation. The ‘skivers vs strivers’ narrative poses people needing income support as ‘lazy’ and ‘uneducated’. This discrimination is real and can lead to embarrassment, shame and stress. The reality is that people living in poverty often do not have the same access to the levers of power or control afforded to others. When each day is filled with the anxiety of where the next meal will come from or how to keep your children warm, planning and budgeting is a luxury.

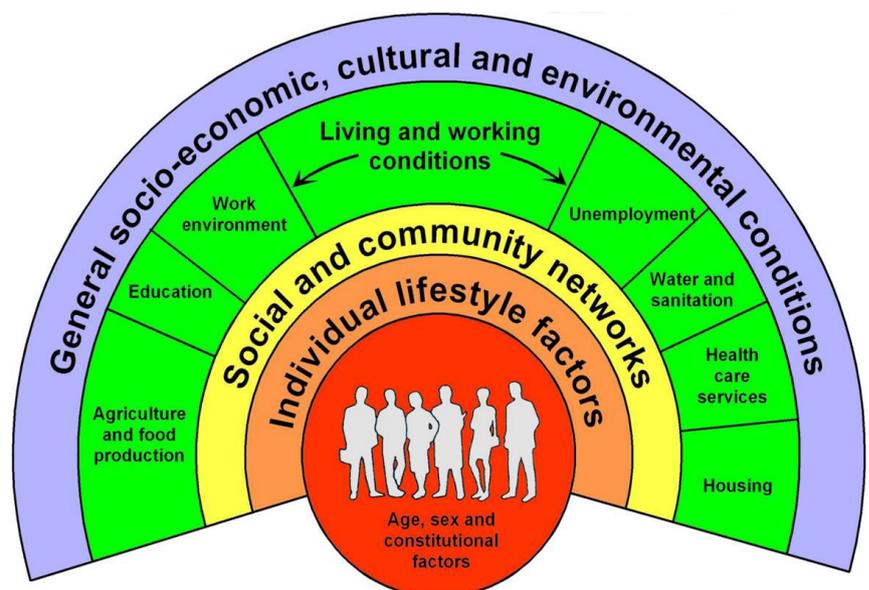
POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

When thinking about poverty, a good starting point is to think about how wealth is created and distributed. We all benefit from the poor in that our food, clothes and technology are all subsidised by the cheaper labour of poorer countries. At the heart of poverty is an unfairness that is avoidable. As we discuss in our Fact Sheet on Health Inequalities, the choices of governments and individuals permit gross inequalities we see within and between nations. Tackling poverty should be led by the principles of social justice and equality.

POVERTY AND HEALTH

Since the Black Report in 1980 made the link between socio-economic status and health, there has been a growing body of evidence that disadvantage which accumulates throughout a person’s life has a negative impact on their health.⁵ Even with such an evidence base, the emphasis of public health messages is on behaviour change at an individual level. This narrow perspective on health has contributed to misunderstanding that everyone can take control of their own life and health.

The diagram below maps the relationship between the individual, their environment and health. The various layers relate to lifestyle factors, community influences, living and working conditions along with more general social conditions. What this model shows is that a person often has very little control over the conditions that impact on their health. Poverty constrains choice.



Source: Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991



Money and resources

1 IN 5 of the UK population live in poverty. Over half of these people live in working households. Poverty damages health and poor health increases the risk of poverty.

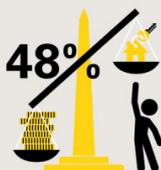
An inadequate income can cause poor health because it is more difficult to:

Avoid stress and feel in control



Living with the day-to-day stresses of poverty in early childhood can have damaging consequences for long-term health

Access experiences and material resources



Money can allow people to access the basics they need to fully participate in society. Yet, 48% of 21-24 year-olds earn less than the living wage

Adopt and maintain healthy behaviours



Healthy behaviours can feel unattainable. It is 3 times more expensive to get the energy we need from healthy foods than unhealthy foods

Feel supported by a financial safety net



A safety net enables people to invest in their future. In a recent study, 40% of people with unmanageable debt said they were less likely to study or retrain

To focus on the limited choices of people living in poverty seems to be an inefficient and ineffective use of resources. Research from the Health Foundation shows that adopting and maintaining healthy behaviours is much more difficult for people living in the daily reality of poverty. The consequence is that public health messages are often irrelevant to low income households. If the focus was to shift from behaviour change to the social circumstances in which people live, the evidence shows that health outcomes would improve.

“Poverty restricts the options and opportunities available to people and limits their access to things that are mostly taken for granted by society”
Ferragina et al⁸



References available at www.health.org.uk/healthy-lives-infographics
© 2018 The Health Foundation.

POVERTY AND COVID-19

Poverty in Northern Ireland has remained constant at around 19% for the past decade. Despite rising employment and a growing economy, the number of people unable to make ends meet has not dropped significantly. We know from previous recessions that people on lower incomes tend to be hardest hit. COVID-19 and the three-month lockdown has seen a dramatic rise in unemployment.



The government has taken steps to try to reduce the financial impact of COVID-19 on households. The furlough scheme which guarantees 80% of an employee's wages is one such example. Whilst such initiatives are welcome, research shows that lower paid people working in more at risk jobs are most likely to be furloughed with a further 20% drop in income. For many, this will be the difference in just about managing and being plunged into debt and insecurity.

If we have learned one thing over the course of the pandemic, it is that poverty is avoidable. Society does not have to be structured in a way that permits vast inequalities. The government can intervene to put money directly into the pockets of people that need it. Ultimately, poverty is about our values and choices. As we navigate our way beyond COVID-19, we need to be led by the values of social justice, equality and collective empowerment.



“Poverty is the drip, drip erosion of our soul”
NIAPN & JRF; 2006⁹

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The uncertain times during COVID-19 have shown community action at its best. Community development, with an inherent value of redressing power imbalances, has a significant role to play in addressing the cause and effects of poverty. Giving communities more say over decisions that affect their lives leads to stronger more powerful communities. For more information, see the Fact Sheet on Community Development.

1. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020), This is Poverty. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/our-work/what-is-poverty#:~:text=Poverty%20means%20not%20being%20able, because%20of%20 your%20financial%20circumstances.>
2. The Marmot Review Team (2011) The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty.
3. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/workers-poverty>
4. Health Affairs (2020). Discrimination: A Social Determinant Of Health Inequities. Available at: <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200220.518458/full/>
5. The Marmot Review (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/workers-poverty>
6. Health Foundation; 2018; Poverty and Health
7. Dalghren and Whitehead (1991). Dalghren G. and Whitehead M. Policies and strategies to promote social equity in health
8. NIAPN & JRF (2006) Consultation on Family & Child Health. The Real Story
9. Health Foundation (2018). Poverty and health