

UK poverty: what's the problem?

What's the problem when talking about poverty becomes talking about food banks?

Following Boris Johnson's resounding general election victory, *Guardian* columnist Frances Ryan suggested some practical ways in which people could help families experiencing poverty and enduring hardship.¹ Frances Ryan's five suggestions included donating items to food banks and hygiene banks, and making a donation to 'Free Cakes for Kids', a charity that steps in to meet need where families cannot afford a birthday cake for their children. Her plea was in step with the public mood, and food banks and charities reported a spike in donations following the election result, with the Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank provider, overwhelmed with the number of donations received.²

As Frances Ryan herself acknowledged, charity is no substitute for a competent and compassionate state which effectively protects its citizens from poverty. However, in the current context, with poverty and destitution rates continuing to rise, there is an inevitable focus and reliance on charitable responses to various symptoms of poverty, which are increasingly described as forms of poverty in their own right. Food poverty, period poverty, bed poverty, clothing poverty, appliance poverty, pet poverty (among others) are all examples of the poverty 'types' we have seen emerge in recent years. Football grounds and schools now offer free sanitary products in the toilets, and food collection points are available in the vast majority of supermarkets, in university foyers and workplaces. Schools open over the holidays to provide emergency food for those affected by 'holiday hunger', and local charities and community groups step in to meet urgent need when families are re-housed and are short of bedding, furniture and other essentials. Quite silently, and with relatively little resistance, the last decade has seen the normalisation of poverty and immediate need, and its increased visibility creeps into our everyday lives.

The tensions in how we, as individuals and as a society, respond to campaigns that call, for example, for beds for children, for emergency

A new collaborative project, available at whatstheproblem.org.uk, hopes to open up a new conversation about how poverty is currently talked about and understood in the UK. Ruth Patrick, Kayleigh Garthwaite and Stephen Crossley explain how the project came about.



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food packages for individuals and families, and for sanitary products for women and girls, while at the same time aiming to tackle and solve poverty, are considerable. Frances Ryan is quite right in pointing to the urgent need to support families lacking basic essentials at the present time, but she is also right to point to the equally pressing need to ensure that we campaign for change so that all families have all they need in order to get by and to meet their and their children's needs.

There is a risk that action to address the visible and damning symptoms of poverty obscures attention away from their wider structural determinants. Where services and goods replace income transfers, there is the inevitable linked danger that individuals experiencing poverty have reduced scope to choose how to spend their limited income. Responding to the 'problem' of period poverty or food poverty with free sanitary products or a food parcel represents a partial fix, which can assist people living in poverty temporarily, but ultimately could mean

that people continue to risk facing the chronic and multiple realities of poverty in the longer term because the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

Our intention is not to discredit the work that is being done to address these issues; after all, there is a real and growing need for the support being offered through charitable provision. However, there is a danger that a focus on the symptoms of poverty not only conceals wider issues of inequality and injustice, but can also contribute to and reinforce hierarchies of deservingness, and entrench the stigma and shame of poverty. It is well documented, for example, that visiting a food bank is a source of stigma and shame, while the conditions of entitlement attached to these (and other) forms of emergency support can create further layers of conditionality with which people must comply, and which then sit alongside state-imposed conditionality in the social security system.

Occurring at the same time as the fragmentation of poverty into various poverty types, recent governments have attempted to marginalise discussions of poverty, particularly child poverty. We have seen efforts to change how we measure poverty, the introduction of new poverty measures (for example, by the Social Metrics Commission), as well as debates between politicians and academics over the extent to which poverty has risen in recent years. During the election campaign, in an interview with Andrew Marr, Boris Johnson argued that there are actually now 400,000 fewer children in poverty than in 2010, a claim that was quickly disputed by charities and academics.³ While it is essential to develop accurate and precise measurements for both the level and depth of poverty, it is important that these debates do not distract from the pressing need to reduce and prevent poverty in all its forms.

The 'What's the Problem' project

Given all of this, we think it is important to closely examine how poverty is discussed and spoken about; something which we have all written about before. How poverty is presented is important in terms of thinking about how people experiencing these issues are portrayed, and also in thinking about potential responses. We have started to explore some of these issues in a working paper,⁴ which begins a process of thinking through how poverty is currently conceptualised, and some of the potential problems with the current splintering of income poverty into multiple poverty types. In

our working paper, we argue for a revived focus on poverty as a lack of resources, rather than focusing on a lack of specific items, such as food, clothes, a suitable bed or sanitary products. This is particularly relevant at a time when think-tanks and campaigners are urging us to 'rethink poverty' and arguing that it is time to 'tell a new story' about poverty in the UK.

Our intention in publishing this working paper – and making it freely available online – is to try and open up a conversation about the current ways in which poverty is talked about and understood in the UK. Beyond that, we also hope to encourage reflections about how poverty is portrayed in political discourse, in the media, and in everyday conversations. To enable this, we are inviting blog posts which we are publishing on our project website, encouraging individuals and organisations to reflect on the portrayal of poverty from their own perspectives. To facilitate this conversation, we pose a number of questions which have been preoccupying us over recent years. We ask whether it is possible, or even appropriate, to say there is a 'right' or a 'wrong' way to talk about poverty, and explore the nature of the link between the unravelling of the consensus on the need to address poverty, and the increasingly fragmented way poverty is today described. We also question whether fuel poverty represents a different case because of the ways in which it can characterise both a lack of financial income and residence in a house that is especially expensive to heat or is poorly insulated. Finally, we are conscious that the emergence of new and multiple poverty types might serve as a 'gateway' to discussions about poverty. In so doing, could talk of food and period poverty for example, help to raise awareness of the extent of deprivation faced by so many in the UK today, strengthening campaign efforts and increasing pressures on politicians to act on poverty? Does this mean that the fragmentation of poverty is an effective campaigning tool to be welcomed by those of us seeking effective poverty reduction and prevention strategies?

Even among the three of us, there is often disagreement in answering these questions, and we want to encourage disagreement and discord, and to create a space where that is welcome. We are not seeking to set out the answer(s), but rather to enable exploration and critical discussion. To date, we have received a series of blogs (which can all be found on whatstheproblem.org.uk) from people with direct experiences of poverty, from those working in third-sector organisations, from academics and

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from activists campaigning on issues around fuel poverty, food poverty and funeral poverty.

Some of the responses argue that as poverty is a fragmenting experience, it cannot be addressed by a singular response. Writing about funeral poverty, anti-poverty campaigner Ewan Gurr suggests that:

Without categorising the multi-faceted nature of poverty I fear support... would not be as co-ordinated as it is, nor would efforts to support people in the multiple different ways poverty manifests itself throughout the rest of the UK.

Similarly, academics Lucie Middleton and Neil Simcock argue that conceptualising energy poverty as at least partially distinct can be useful, given that it can reveal:

... structural and systemic factors producing inadequate domestic energy services that go beyond low-incomes.

Other responses warn that a retreat from explicitly talking about the different poverty types could lead to the withdrawal of public support for the underlying issues. Clara Widdison leads Kitchen Social, a London-wide response to 'holiday hunger'. In her blog, Clara makes the case for talking about – and acting on – food poverty as a siloed issue. She argues that:

... to stop talking about food poverty could risk reducing much-needed public support. Rediverting resources, intentionally or not, would reduce access to food for those who most need it.

In our own working paper, we argue that 'as the notion of poverty becomes increasingly fragmented, wider determinants of the distribution of resources remain unproblematised and the scope to challenge them is diminished.' So – for our part – we fear that if we focus too squarely on just one symptom of poverty – for instance, a lack of food – the solution posited will address only one dimension of poverty, and so will fail to get to the root of the problem.

This was reiterated by Robin Burgess, who heads up Hope and Hope Enterprises, a Northampton-based charity supporting and campaigning for homeless people and those with other needs, such as isolation and loneliness, which often link back to poverty. Robin Burgess warns that in continuing to compartmentalise different poverty types 'opportunities

for charitable relief, often structured around events and community activity, rather than a more structural response' are prioritised. He also points to the growing corporate involvement in charitable responses, a development that mirrors the growth of charitable food provision in North America. The concern he flags around corporate involvement in charitable food provision is something we highlight in our own paper:

Corporate partnerships are an opportunity for big business to be seen to 'do good', acquire 'social honour', and are part of broader strategies and programmes of corporate social responsibility and reputation management.

A clear example of this is the '#ShopForOthers' Christmas 2019 campaign by Sainsbury's, an initiative encouraging shoppers to donate non-perishable food items and toys in supermarkets across the UK, creating 'a magical festive pop-up shop'. Supermarkets therefore increase their profit, while, at the same time, maintaining a positive image, despite the fact some of their staff may be using food banks themselves because of endemic structural problems of low pay and temporary, insecure working contracts.

The role of big business in encouraging and enabling charitable giving is also part of the normalisation of charitable responses to rising poverty and destitution. The extent to which it is today commonplace to be asked to donate to a food, hygiene, beauty, uniform, or baby bank inevitably affects how individuals think about the relative role of the state, third sector and individual charitable donations in meeting unmet need. This is highlighted by academic Dave Beck, whose blog notes the real risk that the public are developing an indifference to the increase of food bank use in the UK, due to the increased visibility and commonplace nature of charitable responses to poverty.

Alongside questions about what we talk about when we talk about poverty, there are also urgent questions to be asked about who does the talking and who is included in these discussions and debates. Amanda Button, an expert by experience of poverty, used her own blog to explore the importance of participatory research on poverty, emphasising that ultimately people who are directly experiencing these issues 'want to be included in the final say'. She makes a compelling case for the value of research that properly utilises and works with the expertise that is ground in experiences of poverty, and highlights the potential of developing

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collaborations which make use of different forms of expertise (as evidenced in ATD Fourth World's recent 'Poverty in All its Forms' project, on which she was a co-researcher).

We also need to look beyond talk to the images that are used to represent poverty, and the ways in which these can reproduce very narrow (and often) stigmatising understandings of poverty. This will be an area of future work for the project, and we have already collated some of the images that are routinely rolled out as shorthand for poverty, especially in media coverage. Who, for example, is not now familiar with the girl in the red coat running down a back alley of back-to-back terraced houses? Siobhan Warrington has already started this conversation in her reflections on research she conducted for Save the Children, which looked at the viewpoints of those who feature in images the charity uses in their fundraising and campaigning work. Siobhan argues for more responsible and inclusive processes of image making by the charitable sector, a call that could be extended to all who are involved in representing poverty (in the media, in education and in public and political debates). She further argues for the involvement of people who feature in images of poverty and who live in the communities which are so frequently photographed in these discussions. It is essential that any response to poverty – fragmentary or otherwise – fully takes into account and listens to people who are actually experiencing it.

What next?

The ways in which we problematise and address poverty in the UK has undergone rapid – and in some ways unprecedented – change in the UK context and the consequences of this need to be more fully understood. We would argue for a pressing recognition that poverty is – at its root – about a lack of income, and that action to alter this absence of money is where change is most needed. This echoes something which Barbara Wootton argued, reflecting upon the case loads of social workers 60 year ago, in ways that remain sadly prescient:

Until we have abolished mental and physical illness, poverty and overcrowding, as well as such human frailties as jealousy and self-assertiveness, many of the problems presented [to social workers] are frankly insoluble. But they can often be alleviated, and most of them, it is worth noting, would be a lot more tolerable if those afflicted with them had a lot more money.⁵

Through our 'What's the Problem' project, we would like to encourage more critical discussion about the implications of the increased fragmentation of poverty, as part of a wider exploration of how academics, anti-poverty campaigners, people with lived experience, policy makers and stakeholders, talk about poverty. Can increased conversations about these poverty types help raise awareness of the structural factors driving poverty? Is there a 'right' way to do this? Should we all be singing from the same hymn sheet, or is critical reflection what is needed? We cannot address these questions alone, and so would be really pleased if anyone reading this would like to contribute to the project and become part of this ongoing conversation and debate. ■

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- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/shortcuts/2019/dec/13/dont-despair-a-practical-guide-to-making-a-difference-from-food-banks-to-fighting-fake-news>
- 2 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/charities-food-banks-donations-homelessness-tories-boris-johnson-election-results-a9247641.html>
- 3 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/01/how-accurate-were-boris-johnsons-assertions-on-andrew-marr>
- 4 S Crossley, K Garthwaite and R Patrick, *The Fragmentation of Poverty in the UK: what's the problem? A working paper*, 2019, available at whatstheproblem.org.uk/a-working-paper
- 5 B Wootton, *Daddy Knows Best*, *The Twentieth Century*, October 1959, pp248–261