'It's not a choice'

Young People's Views on Poverty in Belfast

A pilot Study

Research by:
Belfast City Council Youth Forum

Why did we do this research?

Poverty is an issue that affects many young people in Belfast and yet, we are mostly ignored in the discussions and debates about poverty in our city.

We want to change this.

We think **young people**, especially those experiencing poverty, can provide important insights into the issue and are some of the best placed people to push for action and change.

Our voices should be heard on this issue and our opinions taken seriously by decision makers working to end poverty in Belfast. We want our research to help make this happen.

Our Aims:

We wanted our research to find out what young people living in Belfast think about poverty, in particular:

- What they think poverty in Belfast is;
- What they think it means to be living in poverty;
- How they think poverty impacts them, their families and communities; and
- What actions they think our government should take to end poverty

The Facts

Currently in NI, 1 in 4 children and young people live in poverty; this equates to over 100,000 children and young people [1]. The gap between rich and poor is growing and this number is expected to rise to 1 in 3 by 2020, an 8.3% rise since 2010 [2]. Proportionally, we have a higher poverty rate than the rest of Ireland or the UK [3], one reason for this is the relationship between poverty and the legacy of the conflict in NI [4]. Research suggests families who have had a 'high experience' of the conflict are significantly more deprived than those with no conflict experience and that a fifth of all children are living with an adult/s who have a 'high experience' [5].

Poverty affects many parts of a young person's life including their education. At every stage of schooling, NI's poorest children and young people are likely to do worse than their better off class mates [6]. Around 60% of boys and 50%

of girls receiving free school meals do not leave school with 5 good GCSE's compared with 30% and 20% of those not eligible [7]. The makeup of people who experience poverty has changed over the last few years; there are now more working-age adults, particularly young people, living in poverty than there was 5 years ago [8]. Employment rates for young people aged 12-24 are 12% lower than in Great Britain, a significant difference and the average weekly wage in NI is lower than it was 10 years ago [9]. Levels of 'in work poverty' have also increased; 36% of children experiencing severe poverty live in a household where at least one adult works [10].

Child Poverty: It's a Children's Rights Issue

In May 2016 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted its concern about the impact of government policy on child poverty, specifically in Northern Ireland. The UN recommended that government address this issue urgently:

> … the Committee urges the State party to allocate the maximum extent of available resources for the implementation of children's rights, with a special focus on eradicating child poverty and reducing inequalities within and across all jurisdictions. (UNCRC, Concluding Observations and Recommendations, 2016).

Addressing child poverty is, therefore, a children's rights issue which needs to be addressed at all levels of government: national, regional and local. Local councils, like Belfast City Council, therefore have a key role to play in effectively addressing this issue.

Youth-led Research

From the start, we knew that we wanted our research to be youth led. It had to be a piece of work done by young people for young people. We asked the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to help us with this because they are experts when it comes to young people conducting research.

NCB helped us to:

- Develop our research tools
- Get trained in research skills
- Analyse the findings
- Create our research report

Our approach meant our research was not just about exploring young people's opinions, but also about taking ***action.*** This helped us to make a more powerful piece of work.

How did we do our research?

- Our research was carried out from March through to May 2016;
- Young people who took part were aged 12-18;
- We used youth-led focus groups to gather our information;
- Young people were asked qualitative questions- we thought this would give us more in-depth answers;
- Youth groups and schools from across Belfast were invited to take part;
- 7 groups accepted the invitation which resulted in 68 young people participating in our research;
- These young people were from all 4 parts of Belfast- North, South, East and West;
- We created a research booklet, which helped get young people in the focus groups talking (a copy of this is contained in Appendix 1).

Our definition of poverty

As part of the development of the research booklet the Belfast Youth Forum (BYF) came up with our own definition of poverty:

> ***When a family lives in poverty this means they don't have enough money to enjoy the things that will give them a decent quality of life.***

A decent quality of life means having things like:

- nutritious food
- heating and electricity in your home
- clothes that keep you warm in winter
- family trips, like to the cinema or amusement parks
- school trips
- family holidays
- taking part in hobbies like football or dance classes

Findings

Young people's views on what poverty means

Young people said explaining poverty is not straightforward and that it has many different sides to it. They associated poverty with a range of interconnecting issues:

- Homelessness- sleeping rough on the street, sofa surfing *and* also those living in overcrowded homes.

- Poor housing conditions.

- Poor physical and mental health.

- Lack of basic necessities, e.g. heat, light, food, clothing.

- Unemployment or low paid employment.

- Poor educational achievement.

- Lack of choice in some aspects of life, e.g. in relation to transport, no car or money for bus fares: forced to walk or cycle.

Young people also associated poverty with a ***vicious cycle*** of events or circumstances, for example:

- Poverty causes poor educational achievement, which can lead to poor employment opportunities and in turn can lead to lack of money which causes people to continue to live in poverty.

While our results show that many of the participants associated poverty with not having a decent quality of life, in almost half of the focus groups there were young people who did not know what the term 'poverty' or 'being poor' meant:

"What is poverty?"

"I don't know what poverty means"

When this happened, young people were told the BYF's definition of poverty and that helped them to participate in the rest of the discussion.

<u>Young people's views on poverty in Belfast</u>

Young people were asked to say how they can tell if someone in Belfast is living in poverty. Their responses tended to centre on the following areas:

Financial hardship

"People struggling with bills"

"Being in debt"

"Having your car taken away (i.e. repossessed)"

"Can't afford holidays"

Food and nutrition

"Using food banks"

"People who don't bring snacks to school"

"People who get free school meals"

Housing and homelessness

"Where you're living - [this] area is one of the most deprived areas in Europe"

"Not living in a healthy environment, like crime in the area, dirty streets"

"No heat, being cold"

"People who live in hostels"

"Sleeping on the street"

Appearance

"Poor hygiene and being unkempt"

"Second hand clothes/cheap clothes"

"They would look 'tired and sick'"

"[They would look] sad and heartbroken"

Behaviours

"Begging on the street"

"They make excuses not to go out with friends"

"They don't go to school"

Young people's views on what causes poverty

During the focus groups young people discussed what causes poverty. Generally, responses fell into the following categories:

• Unemployment and low paid work

• Inadequate Welfare/Benefit rates

• Lack of resources

Unemployment and low paid work

The young people who took part in the research felt that both unemployment and low paid work were a cause of poverty in Belfast.

Young people said it is now more difficult to get a job, sometimes due to lack of education, skills or lack of confidence, but also that there are simply not that many jobs on offer:

"There are not enough jobs, places are closing down"

"No skills, no education"

"Education is poor"

"If you aren't confident enough"

"Wages are too low"

Young people also identified that low paid work contributed to poverty as it did not provide enough money for families to live on, even if a person is working full time:

"If you work and earn the minimum wage you can only get your family the necessities...the minimum wage is not enough to stay out of poverty"

Barriers to employment were also identified, such as childcare costs and responsibilities, disabilities or having appropriate clothing to wear when looking for a job:

"Can't pay for childcare so can't work"

"Disabilities can stop people [from getting jobs]"

"No money to buy clothes for interviews"

Inadequate Welfare/Benefit rates

Many of the young people said that the amount of money paid to people through benefits was not enough and contributed to poverty, especially for large families.

Young people maintained that benefits should pay enough as to not keep people living in poverty:

"£180 is not enough"

"Children cost extra as they get older"

"Heating, electricity, food and clothes require more"

"It's not enough to live on"

Others pointed out that some people cannot get jobs and/or that many jobs are poorly paid, so therefore people really relied on benefits out of necessity. It was felt that if more people could get work that was better paid, they would not need benefits at all:

"There is not enough support to get people off the brew, wages are too low,"

"People want to work but they can't"

Among a few of the groups there were some young people who felt that the welfare system was abused by those who were not really in the greatest need. These young people believed this created a 'benefit culture' and prevented those who were in genuine need from getting the levels of monetary support they really needed:

"The needy can't get for the greedy".

"They may not need benefits, but still claim them"

"They [Benefits] are given out to too many people"

"[Benefits] are too generous for immigrants, they get benefits easier"

Often young people who shared these views during focus groups had cited TV shows like 'Benefits Street', social media, some politicians, and listening to adults around them talking about benefits as the basis of their perceptions of the welfare system and of people who claimed benefits.

Lack of resources

Participants believed that people not having resources (personal, financial or otherwise) to fall back on when unfortunate things happen in life was another cause of poverty in Belfast. For example, those who do not have access to credit may have to use 'loan sharks' if unexpected bills arise, e.g. the washing machine breaks down and a new one is needed.

"Maybe they got a loan and can't pay it back..."

"It's a matter of circumstance"

"It's not a choice, who would choose to live that way?"

"You could lose all your stuff in a fire"

Also linked to lack of resources, young people said that investment in Belfast is too concentrated in the city centre and that their communities have been 'left behind' when it comes to the sharing of economic growth in the city.

"There has been no investment in this area, the shops are closing and the place looks poor and rundown"

There was a belief amongst many of the young people that help has been targeted at individuals too much, and there has not been enough emphasis on transforming entire communities. Several young people said proper sharing of economic growth amongst poorer communities could help with this transformation.

"Share all of the money in Belfast"

Young people's views on the impacts of poverty

As well as the signs and causes of poverty, the research participants also explored the impacts of poverty on their peers and communities. Their responses to this section are grouped under the following headings:

•   'Traps' people in unemployment and low paid work

•   Health, education and social life

•   Impacts entire communities

'Traps' people in unemployment and low paid work

Young people said poverty 'traps' people in unemployment and low paid work. Most of the young people felt that it was possible to be both employed and to be poor. They provided several reasons to back up their argument:

"…the minimum wage is not enough to stay out of poverty"

"[Some parents] might have lots of kids so their wages aren't enough"

"Income may not cover debt from overspend"

"Living wage should be available to under 18s as well [as adults]"

"You have to pay the gas bill etc."

"Young people are seen as cheap labour"

"You could work more than one job and still not have enough money"

A minority of young people felt that those who had some kind of a job, even if it was not well paid, were better off than those who were unemployed. These respondents tended to compare absolute poverty with relative poverty:

"Poor people have no money at all but if you've a job you have a wee bit"

"All jobs give people the money to afford your necessities"

Health, education and social life

Young people said poverty impacts negatively on their health, education and social life. The majority felt that poorer children and young people did not have the same opportunities in school. Young people spoke about the extra costs associated with going to school or FE College, for example, some subjects such as PE, Home Economics, Music or Art may incur extra spending on sports kits, ingredients, equipment or tuition. The cost of school trips and uniforms were also cited by participants as factors that may prevent poorer young people from having the same opportunities as their more affluent peers:

"You have to pay for sports gear or instruments and lessons (i.e. music lessons)"

"Home economics, Art and PE are all costly"

"Some people won't go on school trips because they cost money"

"Uniforms are dear"

"People would judge you on non-uniform days"

Young people also spoke about a 'two-tier' education system and how this negatively impacts on children and young people from poorer backgrounds:

"There is a difference between grammar and other schools: people who go to grammar schools have more education and more opportunities"

More affluent families being able to afford tutors was an example cited several times by young people in our focus groups. Young people felt those who could afford tutors got better transfer results, which in turn saw them get places in 'better' schools which in turn affected their future life opportunities.

"We can't afford tutors the way rich people can"

Young people said poor quality housing, living in "run down" communities and not having money to buy things like healthy food or electric all compound to negatively affect poorer young people's health. Not having money to take part in social activities with friends both in and outside of school was also highlighted constantly throughout the focus groups.

"Not living in a healthy environment, like crime in the area, dirty streets"

"Using food banks"

"Can't go out and do stuff with friends because you've no money"

"They make excuses not to go out with friends"

Impacts entire communities

Young people discussed how poverty affects entire communities, not just individuals. Several mentioned that their areas had to some extent been 'left behind' by those who make decisions about economic, social and environmental investment.

One group in particular, in which a number of the young people had experience of claiming job seeker's allowance, felt frustrated at the lack of investment in their community in terms of jobs, education and skills development. They also knew it was important not just to help young people with these, but also their parents and communities in order to give people a chance of 'doing well'.

"There has been no investment in this area, the shops are closing and the place looks poor and rundown"

"The parks aren't maintained"

"There are not enough jobs or opportunities or places that have open door policy to support people into employment"

They pointed out that they want to live in **'active communities'** where people had a stake in their community, where they belonged, where they could contribute to and benefit from an active community.

Some respondents mentioned ways in which low cost or no cost activities and/or amenities helped to create such a community. These included sports clubs such as football and GAA clubs, youth clubs, parks, feeding ducks, exercising:

"Certain schemes don't cost anything"

What solutions to poverty do young people recommend to our government?

Young people who took part in our poverty research were asked to discuss solutions to the issue and suggest what actions our government could take to end poverty and its consequences.

Some of their responses focused on children, young people and families whilst others were more general. These are grouped around a number of key themes as follows:

- **Ensuring that people had more money**

Young people felt one solution was to ensure benefits paid enough while also driving wages up so that working would be worthwhile and make economic sense for people. In their opinion, decreasing benefits would only drive people further into poverty and needed to be avoided. They suggested the following:

"Better wages, including a living wage for young people"

"Help with money"

"Higher benefits"

"Increase Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)"

"Less taxes for middle and low income households"

"Help with the cost of going to school"

- **Helping people find good quality employment**

Young people asked for investment in jobs and education so that people could find '*well paid, good quality*' employment. The young people knew the difference between low paid work (which was associated with keeping people in poverty) and well paid work which they saw as a way out of poverty. They suggested the following:

"More jobs and training for us and our family"

"Well paid and flexible, long term employment"

"Helping people prepare for jobs, interviews, employability workshops"

"More help with children's education (i.e. parents being able to help with homework"

- **Better access to information about what is on offer and knowing what your rights are:**

"Advice clinics"

- **More education about managing money and budgeting**

"Raise awareness about poverty/how to keep out of poverty"

- **More and better public services**

"Free transport for young people"

"More housing"

"More help for the homeless"

- **More help for those in poverty who struggle with addiction and/or family issues**

"Family support"

"More help for those with addiction problems"

- **Addressing the needs of whole communities, not just individuals**

"More community investment"

"Invest more money in leisure centres"

"Meeting young people to get an inside point of view on what's going on"

- **Addressing the mental and emotional impact of poverty and its consequences**

"More kindness, happiness, honesty, attitude, hope"

Our Actions for Local Government

Young people said low paid work is one cause of poverty.

We want Council to:

- **Create a Living Wage recognition scheme**

    This would recognise/reward employers in the city who pay, as a minimum, the living wage to their staff. It could work similarly to the 'Scores on the Doors' scheme that Council operates. This should be the 'True Living Wage' as set by the Living Wage Foundation.

- **Drive a Living Wage culture: Utilise contracting powers**

    Council should use its power as a major contractor of services in Belfast to only award outside contracts to employers who pay their staff the Living Wage as a minimum.

- **Endorse equal wages for young people**

    Council should endorse young people from the age of 16 onwards receiving equal pay for doing equal work to adults.

Young people said their communities have been 'left behind' when it comes to economic growth and investment. They want to live in 'active' communities.

We want Council to:

- **Create a plan to end poverty and share wealth**

    This plan should tackle the root causes, create solutions and be funded to make it work. It should also make sure that as our economy grows, our most disadvantaged communities get an equal share of the wealth and investment.

- **Commit to meaningful participation**

    Have real conversations with people of all ages living in poorer communities before creating policies and making decisions about their lives. They know what they need, so ask them.

Young people want 'decent' jobs for them and their families and help to get these jobs.

We want Council to:

- **Create more 'decent' jobs**

  Young people think decent jobs are ones that pay well, develop their skills and talents and are long term and stable. Young people don't just want these jobs for themselves; they want them for their families and people in their communities too.

- **Make sure people facing poverty get these jobs: target training & opportunities**

  Council should create a work placement programme and career pathways especially for young people at risk of poverty (young carers, young people with disabilities and young people with low educational attainment for example). Work programmes should be built to meet *their needs* and should target them at key transition stages of their lives (like young people leaving school or young people leaving care).

Young people said poverty impacts negatively on their health, education and social life.

We want Council to:

- **Make it free**

  Council owned leisure centres should include 16, 17 & 18 year olds in their junior admission prices and offer free swims and gym memberships to young people on certain days of the week. Council should organise more free social events and spaces for young people in Belfast like music festivals, fun days and hang out spaces in the city centre.

Young people said poverty is not a lifestyle choice.

We want Council to:

- **Raise Awareness**

  Council should use its position as a city leader to raise awareness about poverty in Belfast and to challenge the myths and stereotypes about people and communities experiencing poverty and deprivation.

Appendix 2

References

[1] Save the Children (2011), *No child born without a chance.* Belfast

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[7] P. Tinson and T. MacInnes (2016), *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland.* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

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[10] Save the Children (2011), *No child born without a chance.* Belfast

Thank You (to go at start of report)

We want to say a big thank you to all the young people who took part in our research, without your help none of this would have been possible.

Appendix 2

Appendix