

the blame game must stop

challenging the stigmatisation of
people experiencing poverty

scapegoating (tr. v.)

the act of assigning blame to
another, to deflect attention
away from oneself

Acknowledgements

This research was undertaken by Church Action on Poverty, drawing on reports and research prepared by numerous other organisations. All of these sources are listed in the ‘Further Reading’ section.

Case studies and testimonies are drawn from Church Action on Poverty’s regular communications with supporters, the 1999 National Poverty Hearing, and the 2012 Greater Manchester Poverty Commission. Thanks to Amanda Bickerton and Daniel Nkrumah of Church Action on Poverty for collating the materials.

The experiences and perspectives of those living in poverty are fundamental to this report. Our biggest thanks go to the participants, and their families, for giving their time to these projects and for sharing their lives with us. We hope this report does justice to their honesty and openness.

Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally. Further information can be found at www.church-poverty.org.uk.

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Forewords



Sarah Teather is the Liberal Democrat MP for Brent Central

Times are tough for many families at the moment. The economy is struggling, jobs are uncertain, costs are rising. In that context, it is hardly surprising that many of us fight hard to hang on to what we have.

When times are tough, it is also very human to look for someone else to blame for our woes. It isn't a very attractive tendency, but it is easy to do. The problem is that the group who are being blamed are already having the hardest time of all.

Stigmatising people on benefits is politically popular, but it isn't fair, it isn't right, and it will have long-term impacts on society that I think we will come to regret deeply. Over a period of time it will make Britain less generous, less sympathetic and less willing to cooperate. It will reduce the ability of the most vulnerable members of society to participate in that society, and make it more difficult for them to help themselves. Furthermore, it will make it more difficult for campaigners coming after us to argue for an option for those in poverty, because public opinion will simply not tolerate it.

Church Action on Poverty should be strongly congratulated for highlighting this issue head on. Christians have a duty to defend and argue for those in poverty, and should strongly reject any language that attempts to dehumanise people or make them out to have lesser worth. This report will be a helpful aid to Christians of all denominations looking to play their part in making Britain a fairer place, and I recommend that churches circulate it widely to their congregations and encourage action on the back of it.

The most vulnerable people in our society are increasingly being used as scapegoats, and blamed for economic problems which are not of their making. I welcome this report from Church Action on Poverty, which looks at the facts and tells the real stories of people struggling to get by, shattering the myths and distortions which are becoming too common in public debates.

It is particularly important to challenge these attitudes in the current economic climate when many more people are struggling with unemployment and low income through no fault of their own.



Right Revd John Packer is the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds

Introduction

Every day, people who are struggling to make ends meet are demonised and blamed for their poverty. Politicians and the media use abusive language and images. Scroungers. Skivers. Chavs. Underclass.

This language is used to fuel mistrust by contrasting supposed 'strivers' with 'skivers'. It is used to justify cuts to our safety net, which will drive hundreds of thousands of people further into poverty. It dehumanises and degrades people who are already struggling to survive. It blames them for an economic crisis which is not of their making. It is deeply unjust.

If you oppress the poor, you offend the one who made them.
(Proverbs 14:31)

Christians believe that every person is made in the image of God, and has value. Christians are called to speak out when people are marginalised, excluded and stigmatised.

Christians today, as through the generations, have responded to the need to comfort the marginalised and vulnerable. Many shelters, foodbanks and community projects have been started by churches or people inspired by their faith. Perhaps, however, we are not so good at 'afflicting the comfortable', at telling the truth about injustice, or at recognising when we are complicit in perpetuating convenient myths for our own comfort.

(Lying to ourselves: ending our comfortable myths about poverty, Joint Public Issues Team, to be published February 2013)

Church Action on Poverty has produced this report to challenge some of the myths and distortions which are used to cast blame on vulnerable people – and to call on more people to speak out against this harmful blame game.

This is how it feels

The experience of people in poverty

Church Action on Poverty works every day alongside people on benefits and low incomes – helping them to make their voices heard, and empowering them to become leaders in their communities. We know from this work that people increasingly feel ashamed, and judged by others, if they are in poverty – particularly if they are receiving benefits.

These two pages feature stories from some of the people we have worked with recently. They illustrate the shame and stigmatisation which people feel.

Several pieces of in-depth research by other organisations have recently found further evidence of the problem:

- 50% of people surveyed by advice agency Turn2us said that there was a **social stigma** attached to claiming benefits – that they feel judged by other people for doing so. Similarly, the Child Poverty Action Group reported in 2012 that people “despised poverty, and felt **despised by others and by themselves** for being poor” – and this stigma creates “**a sense of powerlessness and lack of energy**”.
- 85% of respondents to Turn2us said there was an **institutional stigma** involved in claiming benefits – linked to the idea that the system is designed to make claiming difficult. Claimants feel looked down on by staff in jobcentres and benefit offices; some staff were reported as being openly rude; and people talked about the lack of privacy in these places. The Child Poverty Action Group have found that people are “**required to admit to their poverty and personal failure** in order to receive their entitlement”.
- People claiming disability benefits are **humiliated by having to demonstrate their disability** in jobcentres and benefit offices. Turn2us found that people are generally only seen as ‘deserving’ of disability benefits when their disability is obvious to others – but less than one in five recipients of Disability Living Allowance have a disability which is visibly obvious.

Case study 1: Neil Whitcher

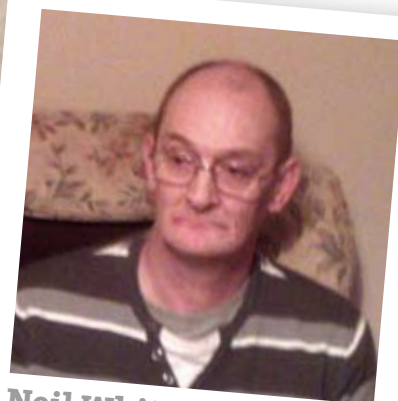
Neil used to be a long-distance lorry driver, travelling all over Europe. Ill health has meant that he has had to give up work. He receives disability benefits and has a car, without which he would be housebound.

Neil lives in a two-bedroomed property and is in danger of losing his home because of benefit reforms. He is active in his local community association, but if he has to leave his house, he will have to move out of the area. He feels desperate, fearful and uncertain of the future. He is also very clear about the extent to which he feels demeaned and stigmatised by his situation:

“I can no longer work. I was a proud man, I always worked, but I can no longer afford that luxury. Benefit changes reduce my ability to eat properly. I can’t afford to keep the fridge on all the time, and I can’t afford to heat my home all the time. I can’t pay my way if I go out with my family or friends: I feel like my children and my friends no longer look up to me because I have nothing. I feel like a failure. I don’t feel like a person any more.”

I feel like a failure

I don’t feel like a person any more



Neil Whitcher took part in the 2012 Greater Manchester Poverty Commission

Case study 2: 'Sarah'

Sarah (not her real name) moved to Oldham as a child in the 1970s, where she lived with her family on the Shaw Road Estate. The estate was seen to be an optimistic place: it was a new, concrete, multi-rise housing development. Her father worked for the local authority. Her mother had not had a good education and wanted her daughter to do well: she sent Sarah to a Catholic preparatory school and ballet classes. Sarah then went to a Catholic grammar school in South Manchester.

When she was 11, Sarah's father developed early-onset Alzheimer's Disease and could no longer work, so the household income dropped. Her father deteriorated quite rapidly, and was often incoherent and aggressive, so the family could not go out, and neighbours stayed away.

Unemployment rose and hit the whole area. People lost not just their work, but their dignity and self-respect in a demoralising and demeaning decade-long spiral of dying industry, and the town has never really recovered.

Sarah says she "escaped" through school, which subsequently took her to London and ballet school. She lodged with a wealthy family and was given elocution lessons to deal with the 'problem' of her Northern accent, but she never felt that she was accepted or fitted in. As Sarah says, looking back: "It is a 'club' among those from wealthy backgrounds which excludes people who grew up in poverty: I don't feel good enough to deal with people from 'better' backgrounds: I have not read the right books, been to the right places and I don't know the unspoken rules that you need to know to fit in. But think about it: why should I have to change to fit in and be 'good enough'?"

Sarah's father was taken into a care home. Her mother fell ill, was misdiagnosed and died while she was in London at ballet school: Sarah was not informed, she found out only when she tried to telephone her mother. Throughout her father's long deterioration and her mother's final illness, the family did not get help from health services, social services or their church: Sarah describes how "the poor are eminently dismissable and not listened to because they are poor".

Even years later, with an outwardly successful life in London, Sarah feels that she is a fake and a fraud and that she still carries "the stink of poverty" about her.

Sarah shared her story as part of the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission in 2012.

the poor are

eminently

dismissable

and not listened to

because they

are poor

media stories about welfare

Comment left on Church Action on Poverty's Facebook page by a person receiving benefits in 2010

make me feel as if my life is public property

when you go to the benefits office,

they talk to you like you are a piece of dirt

Anonymous testimony given to the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission in autumn 2012

poverty is a battle of invisibility,

a lack of resources, exclusion, powerlessness ...

being blamed for society's problems

Testimony given by Wayne Green to the National Poverty Hearing organised by Church Action on Poverty in 1999

This is how it happens

The myths that cause stigma

The experience of stigma is made worse by a constant stream of public messages which encourage distrust and an attitude of blame towards people on low incomes – often based on myths and distortions of the facts.

- In general, the media fail to report properly on UK poverty at all. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that fewer than one in eight news stories about UK poverty feature stories about people's actual experiences.
- Politicians and journalists often set up a false distinction between 'deserving poor' ('strivers', children, pensioners) and 'undeserving poor' ('shirkers', drug addicts, 'hoodies'). This creates the impression that all unemployed people are 'shirkers', despite ONS figures showing that 70% of unemployed people find work again within a year, and fewer than one in five remain unemployed for longer than 24 months.
- Turn2us found that between 1995 and 2011, over 60% of all articles concerning benefits in tabloid newspapers contained negative vocabulary or had a negative theme. In the worst culprit, *The Sun*, the figure was over 80%.
- Because of the constant emphasis on benefit fraud in public messages, people in Britain massively overestimate the level of fraud and false claims. A TUC poll in January 2012 found that on average, people imagine that 27% of the social security budget is claimed fraudulently – almost 40 times higher than the actual figure of 0.7%. (See <http://s.coop/19nje>)
- Politicians such as Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith frequently repeat the message that "work is the best route out of poverty". But the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found in 2012 that 60% of households in poverty have a member who is in paid work. This message is also unhelpful at a time when there is simply not enough work to go round – according to job search experts, there are currently an average of four unemployed people for every vacancy advertised in the UK (see <http://s.coop/19njd>).
- For years now, politicians of all parties have referred to the supposed existence of families where "three generations have never worked". In 2012, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation conducted UK-wide research, and was unable to identify a single example where this was actually the case.
- Political rhetoric about 'strivers' and 'shirkers' has promoted the inaccurate belief that benefits are mainly claimed by people who are not working. The TUC found that on average, people believe 41% of the welfare budget goes on benefits to unemployed people, when the actual figure is 3%.
- Shock stories in the tabloids often promote the idea that welfare spending is out of control because of people having large families while receiving out-of-work benefits. In reality, families with more than five children account for only 1% of out-of-work benefit claims.
- It is often implied that people are only in poverty because they have drink or drug problems – an idea which has led one MP recently to propose that people should not be allowed to spend benefits on alcohol. However, in 2013 the Free Churches' Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) has found that only a tiny proportion of those in poverty suffer from addiction to drugs, alcohol or to gambling. Alcohol consumption is actually lower among people on low incomes, and increases greatly as you go up the income scale. Alcohol is consumed less by the unemployed than by those in work.
- Media stories about people spending their benefits on expensive TVs and cars spread the idea that people on low incomes could manage if they just budgeted more sensibly. However, drawing on figures from the Office of National Statistics, JPIT found that the poorest people spend a much larger proportion of their budget on essential fixed-price items, such as heating and energy, staple foods, and buses. They spend a much lower proportion than middle or high earners on recreation, culture, leisure, eating out and going out for a drink. JPIT point out that "The stereotype of a person on benefits watching Sky on an expensive flat-screen TV is undermined when the average spend on TV and internet for the least well-off tenth of families is considerably less than the cost of the most basic subscription TV package, and is barely enough to pay for a TV licence."
- The current government justifies its austerity programme by claiming that spending on welfare has risen too far. Iain Duncan Smith has even claimed that the deficit was caused by the previous government's efforts to eliminate child poverty. JPIT analysed government data and found that this is simply untrue – the proportion of taxes going on welfare has remained remarkably flat.

This is the problem

The impact of stigma and blame

The experience of being stigmatised, blamed and excluded obviously prevents people from living a full life. But the 'blame game' has wider social impacts too:

- Politicians are currently using some of the myths and distortions listed opposite to justify enormous and harmful cuts to the social security budget, and the addition of restrictive conditions to benefit entitlements.
- Because of the stigma attached to receiving benefits, many people fail to take up benefits they are entitled to. (For example, reports in Wales and Scotland found that many children prefer to go hungry than receive free school meals.)
- Stigmatisation can even lead to hate crime. Police figures for 2011 showed an increase of over 30% in attacks on disabled people. (See www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19589602)



This is what must change

How we can put an end to the blame game

Politicians and journalists shape public perceptions of poverty. They need to understand that their words and actions can do real harm to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

- Neither journalists nor politicians should use abusive language to refer to people in poverty – or to any group within society. Terms like ‘shirker’, ‘scrounger’, ‘underclass’, ‘feckless’ and ‘chav’ can never be part of a constructive policy debate.
- Newspapers should make it clear when reporting on examples of benefit fraud that they are not representative of the whole population claiming benefits.
- The Department for Work and Pensions has previously been reprimanded by the UK Statistics Authority for issuing press briefings based on ‘ad hoc’ data before the release of official statistics – allowing them to misuse the data by putting a ‘spin’ on it which promoted some of the myths on page 6. Politicians have a great deal of power because they have privileged access to data. They should not abuse this power. **Official figures should be released to journalists at the same time as to politicians**, and not leaked in advance or connected to political messages.
- We must challenge the trend for both politicians and journalists to use language which undermines the foundations of our welfare state. The benefits system does not exist only to provide ‘welfare’ to the worst off; it is a safety net which provides social security for every member of our society. Benefits and tax credits are not ‘hand-outs’ – they are entitlements, which people earn by contributing national insurance payments and tax.
- When reporting on poverty issues, journalists can provide balance and challenge prejudices by giving a broader context. For example, stories about benefit fraud should also mention tax evasion, losses due to bureaucratic error, and the benefits which go unclaimed.
- News stories should include case studies and interviews which reflect real people’s experiences of poverty. Interviews should be held face to face, and interviewees should be treated with sympathy and respect, and receive travel expenses. Church Action on Poverty and other agencies can assist with locating subjects and setting up interviews. (We also have guidelines to assist journalists in reporting sensitively: see www.church-poverty.org.uk/about-us/capmediaguidelines)

This is what you can do

A call to action

- **Share this report with colleagues and friends.**

Challenge them to think about the reality behind the stereotypes and myths they see in the media. (You can download extra copies at www.church-poverty.org.uk/stigma)

- **Talk to your MP about stigmatisation...**

and challenge them to use more positive language in their own public comments. You can download some notes to help you approach your MP at www.church-poverty.org.uk/stigma

- **Write to your local newspaper...**

ask them to use positive language and stories when reporting on poverty issues. There is a simple e-action which will help you do this at www.church-poverty.org.uk/stigma. It will only take a few minutes, and your letter is very likely to be published.

- **Take part in Poverty & Homelessness Action Week 2013...**

which is on the theme 'Who can cast the first stone?'. Organise or attend a church service or fundraising event. Or follow the online prayer calendar at www.action-week.org.uk, with video stories and ideas for reflection and action.

Further reading

These publications and news stories contain the detailed research referred to in this report, and also further recommendations for action:

- *Are 'Cultures Of Worklessness' Passed Down The Generations?* (Shildrick et al, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012)
- *Read between the lines: confronting the myths about the benefits system* (Baumberg et al, Turn2us, 2012)
- *Reporting Poverty in the UK: A Practical Guide for Journalists* (Media Trust, 2008)
- 'The Indignity of the Welfare Reform Act' in issue 143 of *The Journal of the Child Poverty Action Group* (2012)
- *The media, poverty and public opinion in the UK* (McKendrick et al, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008)
- *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2012* (Aldridge et al, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012)
- *Take-up of Free School Meals: price effects and peer effects* (Angus Holford, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2012)
- *Lying to ourselves: ending our comfortable myths about poverty* (in preparation by Joint Public Issues Team)

About us

IT'S TIME TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR



The gap between rich and poor in the UK is greater now than at any time in the past 50 years. The UK is one of the most unequal countries in the industrialised world.

With support from many national Christian denominations and agencies, Church Action on Poverty is campaigning for changes which would Close the Gap and build a more equal society. Happier. Healthier. Safer. Fairer.

One result of the unjust division in our society is a 'Power Gap'. People on low incomes lack a voice, while wealthy corporations have an undue power over public decisions. The stigmatisation exposed by this report is just one example of this problem.

We invite anyone concerned about these injustices to work with us to Close the Gap. Visit www.church-poverty.org.uk to find out how you can become part of the campaign by Giving, Acting or Praying.

poverty &
homelessness
action week

Church Action on Poverty works in partnership with Housing Justice and Scottish Churches Housing Action to organise Poverty & Homelessness Action Week each year.

In 2013, the Week runs from 26 January to 3 February, and the theme is 'Can you cast the first stone?' This report is being released during Action Week to support that theme, challenging the blame and stigma attached to poverty and homelessness.

Visit www.actionweek.org.uk to find more resources for tackling blame and stigma – including an online prayer calendar, worship materials for churches, video stories, and 'My Story' - a collection of testimonies by people with personal experience of homelessness.

