

ATD Fourth World UK's response to the questionnaire circulated by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

In August and September, activist members of ATD Fourth World used this questionnaire to spark conversations with ten people who have a lived experience of extreme poverty in the UK. This is a summary of their responses to some of the questions. The direct quotations cited are ones that several participants agreed on.

A. GENERAL

1. To what extent do official definitions used by the state adequately encompass poverty in all its dimensions?

In general, the state's definitions focus only on income or sometimes inequality (in the health sector, for example, which cites inequality of life expectancy). The state should have more of a focus on rights and on people's vulnerability due to social isolation, lack of access to education, housing, health, culture, or the possibility of making a social contribution. It should be recognised that poverty jeopardises the right to family life.

2. What is your view on the current official measurement of poverty by the government? What are the shortcomings of the current measurement and what alternatives would be feasible?

- "Poverty is measured by statistics, but that is out of touch with reality."
- "If members of Parliament tried to live for six months on income support (£143 for two weeks) they would see how difficult it is, and what poverty means."
- "Poverty should be measured by lack of opportunities: not being able to have three meals a day, not having secure housing, not having access to a bathroom, not being able to clean your clothes, not having access to school, not having access to a GP, a dentist, or medicine, no access to work, no access to sports and arts facilities, not being able to contribute to society, and not being able to vote."

3. What are the most significant human rights violations that people living in poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom experience?

Hunger, homelessness, and having children removed for forced adoption or put into care due to the poverty of their parents being misunderstood and misinterpreted as neglect.

4. Could you specify how poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom intersect with civil and political rights issues (such as for example the right to political participation or the right to equality before the law)?

People in poverty face limited or non-existent choices concerning their housing, access to schooling, and access to the most basic standard of living.

Parents are afraid to speak out about the way their families are treated by social services because of the threat of having their children removed or because they are aware that any behaviour considered “argumentative” or even “emotional” will be held against them. When parents protest against unprofessional behaviour or challenge professional opinion in child protection cases it is routinely judged as a failure to co-operate, or seen as proof that parents do not take the concerns of social services seriously. It can even be deemed to represent an inability on the part of parents to put the wellbeing of their children above their own needs. These interpretations are highlighted in court reports and contribute to judicial decisions to remove children from the care of their parents or to restrict visitation rights. This treatment of family members (children as well as parents) often includes systematic violations of privacy (during home visits and in residential assessment centres), intimidation, and institutional bullying.

5. Could you specify how poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom intersect with economic and social rights issues (such as the right to education or the right to health care)?

Although there is supposed to be state funding for the costs of schooling, such as transportation and part of the cost of uniforms, administrative obstacles to access to this funding can prevent children from attending school regularly. This includes the requirement that funding applications be made online.

People in poverty don't have the money to look for work because of the cost of transportation and of having proper clothes.

Requesting health care, particularly for mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety, but also for many physical illnesses or disabilities can trigger child protection investigations by social services which can, and do, result in the removal of children from a low-income parent's custody. This constitutes a significant barrier to health care.

6. Which areas of the United Kingdom should the Special Rapporteur visit in light of the poverty and human rights situation in those locations?

The budgets given by Parliament penalise low-income areas. In London, for instance, currently some deprived areas like Peckham and Hackney receive much less than the wealthy areas of Chelsea or Westminster.

B. AUSTERITY

9. Have austerity measures implemented by the government taken adequate account of the impact on vulnerable groups and reflected efforts to minimize negative effects for those groups and individuals?

No. In every part of life, cuts have devastating effects. The cuts to the National Health Service have very harsh effects on the poorest people who cannot seek private care. Crucial operations are delayed. People who rely on medicine that must be kept cold, like insulin, sometimes die because of lost funding for their electricity bills.

People with disabilities are being harassed with the stress of repeated assessments (which are often long-delayed, which multiplies the stress). These assessments treat patients like criminals committing fraud. It is common for an assessor to decide that if a person can pick up a pencil on the floor or walk ten paces, their disability does not prevent them from finding full-time employment.

Budget cuts to schools and the drastic reduction in youth programmes have also devastated the situation for children and teenagers in poverty who no longer find any community centres or affordable activities in their communities. As one parent said, "This explains the growing number of gangs."

12. How have local governments been affected by austerity measures in the last decades? If possible, please specify the impact on public services such as police and fire departments, public libraries, and the administration of the welfare system by local authorities.

- "We have less police on the street."
- "We've lost a majority of the libraries." Anyone who doesn't have a computer needs to be able to rely on library services in order to access welfare.
- "All the post offices in our area have closed." A visit to the post office can be the only social interaction some people will have.

C. UNIVERSAL CREDIT

15. To what extent has the Universal Credit been able to achieve the goals identified above?

It has had the opposite effect, making people much worse off. People who got universal credit had their payments interrupted and often had to survive for six weeks with no payments at all. Information has been lacking about any measures intended to offset or prevent this.

16. What has the impact of Universal Credit been on poverty and the lives of the poor in the United Kingdom until now? It would be helpful to also distinguish the specific impact of Universal Credit on specific groups, including for example children, persons with disabilities, women and other groups which may be more vulnerable on the basis of their identity and circumstances.

Children suffer when their parents don't have enough money for their school uniform and for related school expenses. They are sometimes bullied by other children. School sometimes call parents to ask why their children don't have adequate clothes. In some cases, the children can be excluded for this and the parents say they feel like failures.

17. Claimants apply for Universal Credit online. What has been the impact of Universal Credit being a 'digital-only benefit' on the ability of potential claimants to apply for this benefit? How does this relate to broadband internet access in the UK and the so-called 'digital divide'? What is the role of public libraries and Job centres in enabling access to broadband internet for those applying for Universal Credit and have these public services been adequate for the purpose?

- "Applications have to be done on-line which is a problem when you don't have a computer."
- "Job Centres give you access to a computer terminal but there is no help available to show you how to fill out the form. Same problem in the library. It's very difficult to fill out except if you have someone with you willing to help you."

18. What has the impact been of various forms of 'welfare conditionality' in the context of Universal Credit in terms of incentivising work?

- "You have to prove that you are looking for jobs and apply every week. If for any reason you didn't do it one week, you have a sanction of four weeks without any benefits. That's four weeks without anything: no money, no food."
- "See 'I, Daniel Blake'—that's exactly what happens."

19. To what extent has the introduction of Universal Credit reduced the incidence of fraud and error in the welfare system?

- "It has nothing to do with fraud. Nobody *wants* to stay in poverty and on benefits. People just need help to get out of poverty."

D. NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WELFARE SYSTEM

In every job centre or library in a low-income community, not only are the wait times for computers impossibly long, but there are never enough staff trained to help people figure out how to use the computers and how to navigate the very complex forms. Even when a person manages to access a computer and to figure out both the technology and the paperwork, it is frequent for work to be lost when the access to the computer times out. An application that was only 90% completed when a session times out will need to be started again from scratch in a future session.

E. CHILD POVERTY

The effects of poverty on children are inextricable from the effects of poverty on their parents and entire families.

Struggling financially makes it hard for parents to provide nutritious food and safe housing. It can also impact on children's school attendance (for instance when there are delays in accessing funding for uniforms and transportation costs). These struggles can all lead to child protection investigations by social services which cause enormous stress to all family members, even when the final decision is to allow parents to retain custody of their children.

Economically and socially vulnerable parents who are struggling to cope with the consequences of living in poverty are often perceived as neglectful parents and "neglect" is by far the most cited category of abuse in child protection plans which disproportionately affect low income families.

In addition to financial struggles, a significant percentage of British adults who live in poverty were separated from their own parents when they were children, either temporarily or permanently. These family separations often have devastating multi-generational effects. One of these effects is on the well-being of the adults who can be at a greater risk of anxiety, and who may lack the positive extended family ties that can be a lifelong support system. A separate effect is that the history of having been separated from one's own parents as a child, independently of any other factor, can be considered by social services as a risk factor for an adult to become a neglectful parent. This is ironic because of the generally poor outcomes for young adults leaving the care system. British law allows social services to remove children from their parents' custody based only on an estimation that the children are more likely than not to be at risk of future significant harm. This means that a first-time parent whose child has not even been born yet may lose custody of that child forever.

When social services want to collect additional evidence to make the case for a forced adoption, they will place a mother and newborn baby in a residential assessment centre. Social services can often stipulate by court order that a mother is to be filmed 24/7 for six to twelve weeks during a residential assessment, so that every aspect of her behaviour can be dissected and judged. Sometimes a mother's partner is prevented from staying with her during a residential assessment because she is deemed the primary carer. It is extremely rare for any mother sent to an assessment centre under such circumstances to be allowed to raise her child.

In other instances, a parent may be faced with an anonymous accusation of child abuse, perhaps made by a vengeful neighbour with no basis in fact. While this accusation is investigated, depending on the seriousness of the alleged abuse, children can be immediately removed, which often causes them significant trauma due to the removal from their parent and extended family, and often to separation of siblings and interruptions to schooling and friendships. Even when the investigation ends with no finding of abuse and the children are returned to their parents, the context of the temporary removal has sometimes caused so much trauma that it causes long-lasting damage to family relationships.

All of these factors mean that even the low-income families who do manage to retain custody of their children and who have never been found neglectful or abusive by social services feel constantly watched and under suspicion due to repeated child protection referrals. Professionals working in nursery care and early education are trained and encouraged to make such referrals if they have any concerns for a child's welfare. Obvious signs of poverty, such as inadequate clothing, are considered indicators of neglect rather than need. Both children and parents learn very early on that social services can be very harsh judges. Children's own words tend to be disbelieved when they defend their own parents. Parents are reproached both for showing too much emotion and for showing too little emotion. These judgments create severe inhibitions to the freedom of speech of people living in extreme poverty. For some, this can feel like living in a police state.

Most of the adults in poverty known to ATD Fourth World in the UK have direct experience of these situations, either in their own childhood, or as parents, or through their extended family members, neighbours, and friends.

F. 'BREXIT'

- "If it goes ahead, human rights rules won't apply anymore. We will be abandoned."
 - "The government is unaware of the reality faced by poor people."
 - "The food pantries give away food that was surplus in Europe. After Brexit, there will be even more food poverty."
 - "Things are going to get even worse with the risk of people taking their own life."
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