

Measuring poverty

November 29 2010

May 2010 saw the launch of the largest-ever research project on Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK. Professor David Gordon, Director of the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research, describes the scope and background of this new study, which it is hoped will make a major contribution to tackling the problems of poverty and deprivation in 21st-century Britain.

Many of the world's most important issues – for example, climate change, immigration and the best way to raise children – are rife with controversy and disagreement. However, there is virtual unanimity among politicians and the public about poverty and its effects. All politicians, from the far left to the far right, argue that poverty and exclusion are 'bad' and something should be done about them. In this sense, poverty is not a political issue: I have never heard any politician argue that poverty is 'good' and what we need are more poor people! The disagreement is not about the aim of reducing poverty and [social exclusion](#), but about the best way to achieve it.

Where aims are not shared, science is of little use for policy-making. For example, scientific evidence is not very important in the debate on fox hunting because that is dominated by differences in values and beliefs. But when political parties and the public all share the same aims, then social scientists can play an important role by providing high-quality evidence about what works, in order to assist policy-makers in creating evidence-based legislation.

Just before the General Election, the Child Poverty Act (2010) was

passed by Parliament with all-party support. This Act writes into law the policy commitment to eradicate child poverty in the UK by 2020. High-quality research that accurately measures poverty and social exclusion is crucial in order to evaluate whether policies are working effectively and targeted correctly so that resources are not wasted. The new survey can thus help the UK Government, and the governments of the devolved national assemblies, to achieve this ambitious goal.

For our new research, two-stage quantitative methodology will be used in both Britain and Northern Ireland: a smaller ‘attitudes’ survey followed by a larger main stage survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion. The main survey will over-sample the ‘poor’ (ie those whose circumstances feature a low income and material deprivation), ethnic minority groups, and respondents in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

This quantitative approach will be complemented by a smaller, qualitative survey involving 72 people. This will explore the ‘life stories’ of people experiencing poverty, in order to understand poverty persistence and the significance of key ‘life events’ in shaping circumstances and prospects. In Northern Ireland, a qualitative survey of around 100 people will focus on the role of family in coping with poverty. This difference in emphasis reflects the social divisions in Northern Ireland, which has led to a greater degree of reliance on family there than elsewhere. Northern Ireland therefore presents a unique opportunity to explore the continuing role of family in the transmission of poverty and in coping with it.

Definitions of poverty change over time, as do public attitudes to it and government strategies for tackling it. These regular surveys provide a detailed snapshot of the stages of evolution they capture. The new Poverty and Social Exclusion survey should provide the most comprehensive picture so far. Information gleaned from the project will be used to address basic issues of methodology – such as how poverty

and deprivation are currently ‘officially’ measured in the UK and the EU, and how these criteria could be broadened – as well as the dynamics of deprivation and the effects of poverty and social exclusion on all areas of UK society.

This will have enormous relevance for policy-makers, since the impact areas covered include health, housing, employment, crime and education. In Scotland, the study will provide policy-makers with greater understanding of the extent of poverty and social exclusion amongst those people included in the new ‘Solidarity’ target measure (ie the 30 per cent of the Scottish population with the lowest household income).

The scale of government debt that resulted from the global recession has only become more apparent since this survey was launched. Large cuts in government spending have already been announced, and more will follow over the next few years, making increases in unemployment, poverty and social exclusion almost inevitable. It is therefore more crucial than ever that high-quality scientific evidence is made widely available to inform the public and the policy-makers about the effectiveness of policies intended to reduce [poverty](#) and exclusion.

Provided by University of Bristol

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