Report highlights 'bleak' poverty levels in the UK

March 29 2013

The Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) Project published its first report today. 'The Impoverishment of the UK' reveals significant levels of poverty and deprivation.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, it is a major collaboration between a group of UK universities including York and is the largest and most authoritative study of poverty and deprivation ever conducted in the UK.

The report is the subject of a special edition of Tonight titled Breadline Britain which is broadcast on ITV at 7.30pm on 28 March.

The PSE approach – now adopted by the UK Government and by a growing number of rich and developing countries - identifies people falling below a publicly-determined minimum standard of living. This method of measuring poverty was pioneered in 1983 and repeated in studies in 1990, 1999, 2002/03 and 2012. The project thus provides detailed, robust and definitive trends over 30 years.

Gill Main and Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, of the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at York, are members of the Poverty and Social Exclusion research team. They were responsible for developing the scale of child necessities and analysing the child poverty and deprivation results.

Professor Bradshaw says: "The findings of this study are shocking,
indicating a level of poverty and deprivation which should be a wake-up call to policymakers and the public at large."

Professor David Gordon, of the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research in Bristol and head of the project, says: "The results present a remarkably bleak portrait of life in the UK today and the shrinking opportunities faced by the bottom third of UK society. About one third of people in the UK suffer significant difficulties and about a quarter have an unacceptably low standard of living. Moreover, this bleak situation will get worse as benefit levels fall in real term, real wages continue to decline and living standards are further squeezed."

Today 33 per cent of the UK population suffers from multiple deprivation by the standards set by the public, compared with 14 per cent in 1983.

For a significant and growing proportion of the population, living conditions and opportunities have been going backwards. Housing and heating conditions, in particular, have deteriorated rapidly.

- One in three people could not afford to adequately heat their homes last winter and 29 per cent had to turn the heating down or off or only heat part of their homes. The number of households unable to heat the living areas of their homes is at a record high – now 9 per cent compared to 3 per cent in the 1990s and 5% in 1983.
- Overcrowding is as high as it was in 1983: today 9 per cent of households cannot afford enough bedrooms for every child aged 10 or over of a different sex to have their own bedroom (back up from 3 per cent in 1999).
- The number of households unable to afford damp-free homes has also risen since 1983 – from 6 per cent to 10 per cent.
One in five households can't keep their home in an adequate state of decoration – up from 15 per cent in the 1990s.

Overall, across all these aspects of housing, around 13 million people (aged 16 and over) in Britain cannot afford adequate housing conditions, up from 9.5 million in 1999.

Increasing numbers of children also lack items considered essential for a stimulating environment and for social participation and development.

The proportion of school age children unable to go on school trips at least once a term has risen from 2 per cent in 1999 to 8 per cent today.

"Levels of deprivation today are worse in a number of vital areas – from basic housing to key social activities - than at any point in the past thirty years," says Joanna Mack from The Open University, who, with Stewart Lansley, devised the study method in 1983. "These trends are a deeply shocking indictment of 30 years of economic and social policy and reflect a rapid growth in inequality. This has meant that, though the economy has doubled in size during this period, those at the bottom have been increasingly left behind."

There is widespread public agreement on what constitutes a minimally acceptable diet. Over 90% agree that, for children, this means: three meals a day; fresh fruit and vegetables; and meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent at least once a day.

Yet well over half a million children live in families who cannot afford to feed them properly.

Our research shows that, in households where children go without one or
more of these basic food necessities:

- In 93 per cent at least one adult skimp on their own food 'sometimes' or 'often' to ensure others have enough to eat.

"It is not as a result of negligence but due to a lack of money that so many children are going without adequate food," comments Professor David Gordon.

In the study overall, more than one in four adults (28 per cent) have skimped on their own food in the past year so that others in the household may eat.

Significant proportions of the population find it difficult to cope on their current incomes:

- One in four adults have incomes below what they consider is needed to avoid poverty
- More than one in five have had to borrow in the last year to pay for day to day needs
- One in three can't afford to save
- One in four can't afford to replace or repair broken electrical goods (12 per cent in 1999).

Overall, people feel poorer:

- More than one in three adults today say they genuinely feel poor some or all of the time compared to 27 per cent in 1999

More information: The full Living Standards questionnaire can be