



An inquiry into poverty-related stigma in Scotland: Key findings and recommendations – February 2023

About the Cross Party Group (CPG) on Poverty

The Cross Party Group on Poverty in the Scottish Parliament is a forum for exploring the drivers of and solutions to poverty in Scotland. It acts to connect MSPs with organisations working to tackle poverty, as well as with people living on low incomes across Scotland, in order to better inform anti-poverty policymaking and contribute to the ending of poverty in Scotland.

About the inquiry

In January 2022, the CPG on Poverty launched an inquiry into poverty-related stigma in Scotland. The scope of the inquiry was to explore the causes and impacts of stigma, as well as potential solutions. In the process of undertaking this inquiry, we:

- Hosted a roundtable with members of the media to explore how poverty-related stigma can be exacerbated and tackled through the media.
- Hosted a discussion event with people with lived experience of poverty-related stigma and MSPs to understand the real impact in people's daily lives.
- Called for written evidence of which we received submissions from 20 organisations and one individual discussing how poverty-related stigma is created, maintained and its impact on different communities in Scotland.
- This report provides an overview of the written evidence submitted to the inquiry and incorporates evidence discussed within the sessions outlined above. The report concludes by making a number of recommendations around how we can tackle poverty-related stigma in Scotland.

Executive summary

The submissions to this inquiry have highlighted that poverty-related stigma is extensive and deep-rooted in Scotland. This stigma continues to manifest in several reinforcing ways, impacting people's mental health and wellbeing; erecting barriers to accessing support; restricting educational attainment; and influencing the design and resourcing of policies that can tackle poverty.

Poverty-related stigma is felt broadly by all low-income communities. However, a number of submissions also noted that specific groups of people who are at particular risk of poverty can experience multiple forms of stigma and discrimination simultaneously. Black and minority ethnic people, women, disabled people and

people with experience of the criminal justice system experience an intersectional double-whammy of disadvantage which intensifies the impact of stigma on the lives of individuals and communities.

Societal perceptions and treatment of those experiencing poverty have become ingrained, not only among the broader population, but in how people experiencing poverty perceive themselves. As a result, poverty-related stigma negatively impacts the mental health and self-esteem of people experiencing poverty by reinforcing feelings of shame and self-blame. This is exacerbated by narratives that present poverty as an individual choice, rather than structural issue.

Negative assumptions about people living on low incomes have been used to justify policy changes and the under-resourcing of services. For example, submissions noted that stigmatising views of those living in poverty often formed part of the rationale for welfare reform by the UK Government. The resulting policy changes have undermined our social security safety net, impacting on awareness of support; how often support is awarded to applicants; and how easy it is to access. People on low incomes continue to experience shame about their situation as a result of these narratives, impacting the uptake of support including free school meals, debt advice and social security.

Respondents were keen to highlight that it is possible to design policies which actively challenge, rather than reinforce, poverty-related stigma. Throughout the submissions to this inquiry, the importance of introducing a “no-wrong door” approach to support; investing in benefit uptake programmes; automating benefits; and prioritising cash-first models were highlighted as best practice in minimising stigma. Moreover, Social Security Scotland’s focus on dignity, respect and human rights was welcomed by respondents in actively challenging stigma in design and delivery.

Submissions to this inquiry highlighted that placing lived experience at the heart of all decision-making and policy design via genuine co-design and co-production processes was key to tackling poverty-related stigma. Similarly, the media should hold politicians to account for their views and give space to people who are experts by experience. We must listen to people with lived experience as experts in poverty-related stigma; its causes, consequences, and solutions, and amplify their thoughts.

The focus and tone that the media adopts in relation to poverty influences how it is perceived and understood by the public. Consequently, the frequent use of stereotypes and inaccurate depictions of people and communities experiencing poverty was identified by contributors as a key cause of poverty-related stigma. Online media and the need to generate clicks was seen as further encouraging sensationalised and narrowly-focused stories about poverty that do not embed compassion towards people living on low incomes.

Social media has also become another arena where people, especially young people, experience poverty-related stigma. The rise of online influencers and a culture which implies that “wealth = value” has contributed to the further devaluing of people on low incomes. By contrast, there was also acknowledgement that those with a public platform can break down stigmatising ideas of poverty. Public figures

such as Marcus Rashford and Martin Lewis were highlighted as increasing awareness of support and sharing content that indicated that struggling with money is not something to be ashamed of. People using their platform in such a manner can reinforce the idea that poverty is not a choice made by individuals, but rather the result of systemic failure.

Respondents highlighted that the UK and the Scottish Government have a responsibility to dispel myths regarding poverty. This report emphasises the long-term implications of language used by politicians, Governments and the media. Much of the narrative and language used throughout the period of austerity around “deserving” and “undeserving” recipients of welfare, and “scroungers” continues to linger large within people’s understandings of poverty. Of great concern is the fact many people on low incomes have internalised this stigma and use these tropes to judge themselves. While politicians and elected members will have different views on poverty, it is clearly possible to retain ideological perspectives on poverty without stigmatising those who experience it.

Submissions to this inquiry highlighted that there is a lack of national surveys that capture experiences of poverty-related stigma from the perspective of those who are affected by these issues. Without this data, it is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of poverty stigma; which types of poverty stigma are felt most acutely by which groups in society; or whether poverty stigma is increasing or decreasing over time. It is crucial that we address this data gap. This could be achieved by exploring the feasibility of measuring experiences of poverty stigma through an existing national survey such as the Scottish Household Survey.

In preventing people from coming forward for support and instilling feelings of shame, poverty-related stigma is actively preventing the reduction of poverty in Scotland. Similarly, negative assumptions about people on low incomes have had a tangible impact on the design and resourcing of policies that could tackle poverty. The findings of this inquiry again underscore the fact that tackling poverty becomes substantially more challenging, if not impossible, if we fail to tackle poverty-related stigma.

Key Findings

- Poverty-related stigma is pervasive in Scotland with the public and media holding negative views about poverty and people experiencing poverty.
- The stigma associated with experiences of poverty results in shame and secrecy meaning that researchers, governments and the general public are broadly unaware of the full experience of poverty.
- There is no homogenised experience of poverty-related stigma. Stigma interacts with other forms of disadvantage and inequality which means that Black and minority ethnic (BME) people, women, disabled people, people with problem drug and alcohol use, people with experience of the criminal justice system and single parents have specific experiences of stigma.
- Poverty-related stigma creates barriers to people accessing the support they are entitled to including social security, emergency welfare and support with debt. As a result, stigma can deepen experiences of poverty.

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- Stigma negatively impacts the mental health and self-esteem of people experiencing poverty by reinforcing feelings of shame and causing isolation and withdrawal.
- In addition to impacting individuals, poverty-related stigma can impact particular geographies and areas. This contributes to feelings of shame among local communities and the designation of communities as ‘no go’ areas.
- Neglect of physical spaces where people experiencing poverty live, work and access support can communicate the notion that these areas are not worthy of care or maintenance. This means people accessing these services do not feel valued which exacerbates any feelings of shame.
- Poverty-related stigma has implications for educational attainment, often holding children back from fully participating in school academically, socially and in extra curriculums.
- Assumptions about people in poverty impacts public service delivery. For example, stigma can result in less favourable treatment of people by public service staff or in approaches to debt collection services.
- Poverty-related stigma negatively impacts on the development and resourcing of policies designed to tackle poverty, such as social security.
- Stigma also impacts whether people’s applications for support will be accepted and how difficult application processes are. For example, there is often a large burden of proof when accessing support, especially for disabled people.
- The causes of poverty-related stigma are multi-faceted, including media narratives and coverage of poverty, the use of language by people in position of influence and power, and policy design.
- The emergence of online journalism creates an incentive for content that stigmatises people living in poverty. Reliance on ‘clickbait’ stories to generate clicks and profit coupled with a need to meet tight deadlines often result in articles being published that have not considered the impact of poverty-related stigma.
- Social media has become another sphere where poverty-related stigma is both promoted and experienced. Evidence shows that the framing by social media influencers around their own wealth and opportunities has contributed to feelings of stigma around people experiencing poverty, particularly younger people.
- There is a lack of data relating to experiences of poverty-related stigma from the perspective of those that are affected by these issues. Without this data, it is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of poverty stigma; which types of poverty stigma are felt most acutely by which groups in society; or whether poverty stigma is increasing or decreasing over time.
- There are some positive examples of public services effectively challenging stigma including the formation of Social Security Scotland which has placed emphasis on dignity, respect and entitlements being a human right. This approach helps to remove feelings of shame and promote higher self-esteem among people experiencing poverty.

Recommendations

Based upon the submissions to this inquiry, the Cross Party Group on Poverty make a number of recommendations:

- Ensure the design of social security does not embed stigma by automating benefits where possible and reassessing application processes.
- Increase investment in a comprehensive programme of benefits take up, through both mainstream media and targeted activities at community level to maximise uptake.
- Provide poverty awareness training to all staff in public facing roles, including teachers, health care professionals, social workers and those administering welfare advice.
- Hold the media to account over promotion of negative and/or false narratives about poverty and those experiencing poverty.
- Include education about poverty in the national curriculum to prevent and challenge stigma in younger people.
- Politicians should consider how they frame their perspectives on social security and poverty in their speeches and other communications.
- Ensure that policymaking is informed by people with direct experience of poverty. We must listen to people with lived experience as the real experts in poverty; its causes, consequences, and solutions, and amplify their perspectives .
- Utilise forthcoming work from the University of Strathclyde, University of the West of Scotland, the Poverty Alliance and Mental Health Foundation to develop a measurement on stigma.

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This summary briefing was written by the Poverty Alliance, which provides Secretariat support to the Cross Party Group on Poverty.

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