



Reflections

Christians are by their very calling concerned about the poor. The Psalmist reminds us "that the poor shall not always be forgotten: the patient abiding of the meek shall not perish forever." (Psalm 9.18), and Jesus abiding concern was for the poor and those relegated to the very margins of society. The historic mission of the Church is to stand up for the poor, and to work for a better society, which equates with working for the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

"Poverty is an offence to God precisely because it breaks and crushes human beings made in his image; and in our society today, poverty is breaking and crushing us all, not only the poor, for it is our humanity, as well as that of the poor, that is lessened and distorted as we allow poverty to exist in our midst." (John Harvey)

"The church's good name is not a matter of being on good terms with the powerful. The church's good name is a matter of knowing that the poor regard the church as their own, of knowing that the church's life on earth is to call on all, on the rich as well, to be converted and saved alongside the poor; for they are the only ones which are called blessed." (Oscar Romero)

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he (Jesus) went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Luke 4:16-19, NRSV)



Further Reading

Poverty and Social Exclusion in Wales and a number of other resources to download as PDF documents are available from the Bevan Foundation website:

<http://www.bevanfoundation.org/>

Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010 and many other reports, facts and figures, are available from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/>

Poverty: A Study of Town Life is a classic historic study of poverty in York by B. Seebohm Rowntree. Life and Labour of the People in London is a similar historic study by Charles Booth. Both are in publication.

The Spirit Level: Why equality is better for everyone (Wilkinson and Pickett, Penguin 2009) looks at international data on inequality and concludes that the more unequal societies do worse according to almost every quality of life indicator.

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Faith in Families

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"The poor you will always have with you"



"You've never had it so good," is the famous misquotation, hallowed by repetition, that derives from a speech made in 1957 by Harold Macmillan. He was Prime Minister and was addressing a large meeting of Conservatives in Bedford. He painted a rosy picture of Britain's economy while urging wage restraint and warning that inflation was the country's most important post war problem. "Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime - nor indeed in the history of this country," he said. "Indeed let us be frank about it - most of our people have never had it so good." This rise in the standard of living was due to a post war boom in the global economy. Just a few years later, in 1965, a study by Peter Townsend and Brian Abel Smith, *The Poor and the Poorest*, reopened the debate on poverty. This challenged the assumption that poverty had been abolished in the post-war welfare state and argued that poverty should be examined in relative rather than absolute terms.

How should poverty be measured?

- The early poverty surveys (1899) by Rowntree in York defined the 'primary' poverty line as the minimum standard necessary for physical health.
- Rowntree's later studies (1936) adopted a "human needs" poverty line, which ensured

You've never had it so good!

The phrase was recently revisited when, in December 2010, Lord Young (a senior adviser to the Prime Minister) commented that the vast majority of Britons have "never had it so good" because of the low interest rates during the recession. He told The Daily Telegraph: "For the vast majority of people in the country today they have never had it so good ever since this recession - this so-called recession - started, because anybody, most people with a mortgage who were paying a lot of money each month, suddenly started paying very little each month. That could make three, four, five, six hundred pounds a month difference, free of tax." He also said "people will wonder what all the fuss was about" when looking back at the Government's spending cuts, the deepest in more than 30 years. He described the loss of about 100,000 public-sector jobs a year as being within "the margin of error" in the context of the 30 million-strong job market as a whole. The comments were regarded as a gaffe and Lord Young offered his resignation. In contrast, an Institute for Fiscal Studies report indicates that 2010 to 2013 will see increases in poverty. And these increases are not increases in relative poverty. They are increases in absolute poverty: the number of people living on less than 60% of the national income adjusted for inflation. And they are not nugatory increases either: by 2013-14 the IFS estimates an additional 900,000 people will have slipped below the breadline.

"health and working capacity" and allowed expenditure for "social participation."

- Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend (1965) concluded that poverty was a relative concept," and defined households to be in poverty if their income was less than "140 per cent of the then current National Assistance scale plus rent".

Snapshot of Britain

An editorial in "The Times" dated 20th August 2010 said:

- ✔ Britain's richest and poorest regions have been drawing apart since 1995. Yorkshire and the Humber now have disposable incomes that are 12% below the national average.
- ✔ Comparative household incomes are subject to huge differences - In inner London, average household income is £30,672, in Nottingham average household income is £10,361.
- ✔ The greatest concentration of wealth in the UK is in Surrey, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire.
- ✔ For a baby born in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, life expectancy is 85 years. A child born at the same time in Hartlepool has a life expectancy of 76 years.

Poverty in Wales

The official measure of poverty is the proportion of households who have an income which is less than 60 per cent of the median income. Over the past ten years in Wales, overall poverty has fallen by three percentage points, compared with two percentage points for the UK as a whole. However, the extent of poverty for all groups in Wales (apart from older people) is slightly higher than for the UK as a whole.

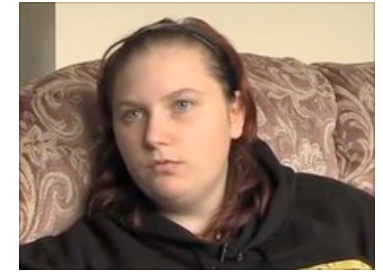
- ✔ For working-age adults - after housing costs have been taken into account 22 % are living below the poverty threshold in Wales. This is the same as ten years ago whilst for the UK as a whole it has gone up by one percentage point.
- ✔ For children - 32 % are living in poverty. This has fallen by four percentage points in Wales over the last ten years whilst for the UK it has fallen by two percentage points.
- ✔ And for older people - 18 % are living below the poverty line. This has fallen by eight percentage points over the past ten years whilst for the UK as a whole it has fallen by ten percentage points.
- ✔ The past decade has seen a shift in the balance of poverty. Ten years ago, the 235,000 children and 145,000 pensioners accounted for almost half of all people in poverty in Wales. Ten years later working age people constitute a clear majority.
- ✔ Just as in-work poverty contradicts simple ideas about work being the route out, the extent of working-age poverty shows the incompleteness of anti-poverty strategies that focus explicitly on children and implicitly on pensioners.

Aspects of Poverty

- ✔ **Education** - Indicators we have show that at the ages of seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen students who are eligible for free schools meals (FSM) in Wales perform significantly below other students and that the gap widens as they get older. Whilst the FSM measurement is by no means a perfect one, it is the most reliable indicator we have of socio-economic disadvantage in the school population.
- ✔ **Housing** - In recent years, the links between housing, poverty and social exclusion have become ever more entangled. What have come to be seen as highly irresponsible lending practices were at the centre of the credit crunch as bundled-up sub-prime mortgages spread their 'toxicity' across the financial world. And the results of these practices are being played out in recession, cuts in public investment and job losses - which will loop back to more households struggling to exist on low incomes. Many areas in Wales have seen significant falls in house prices. But the majority of mortgage products that used to be readily available are now judged 'too risky' and have been withdrawn. Most councils and housing associations are reporting large increases in the numbers of households registering on their waiting lists for rented accommodation.
- ✔ **Health** - Inequalities in Health in Wales as in the UK are widening, despite a continued rise in life expectancy. Between 1999 and 2007, for every 100 people in the UK who died aged under 65 in the richest areas, there were 212 in the poorest. This is higher than in the great depression of the 1930s when, at its peak, the ratio was 100 to 191. In Wales, the early recognition of the importance of the social determinants of health provides a model for addressing health inequalities. However progress is endangered by deep cuts in social spending imposed from outside of Wales and the severity of the economic downturn.

Gemma's Tale: A film about two sisters

Gemma Griffiths is a young woman from Merthyr Tydfil who has just started studying at Merthyr Tydfil College. She has made a film with her sister Donna, about what it is actually like coping with the challenges of unemployment, ill health and lack of opportunity. Their life has been difficult, but they give a frank and honest account of what it is like to experience poverty, and what a huge effort it requires to try and improve your life. Gemma and Donna do not give easy answers to the questions of poverty and social exclusion, but they provide a human face to the subject. It can be accessed on [Youtube.com/enginehouseprod](https://www.youtube.com/enginehouseprod). Gemma narrates the challenges she faces as a university student and part-time worker in a fast-food restaurant, especially now that she has just moved into her own flat: *"At the moment, I am poor. I've got hardly any money at all. I work in McDonalds. It's not very good pay but [I] coped when I was living with my parents, because all I had to think about is paying my share of the rent, which was £60. But now, I've got to think about bus fare, train fare, rent, gas, electric, water, TV licence, phone bills. Oh, there's just so many bills to pay, you know. I'm just like worried I won't be able to afford it. That's the main worry as well, when you move in."*



Child poverty in Wales: Where there's the will, is there a way?

Since the advent of the welfare state, the attention given to childhood poverty by successive UK governments has fluctuated. Through the 'rediscovery of poverty' discourse and lectures of the late Peter Townsend and other notable scholars during the 1960s and 1970s, it became clear that the welfare state had not provided the 'safety net' for families in times of unemployment and worklessness as was initially intended. In the 1980s and 1990s, child poverty rates in the UK reached high levels, reflecting high unemployment and turbulence in global markets.

With the arrival and fanfare of the UK Labour Government in 1997 came much hope that change was on the horizon and that political attention would shortly turn to the need to seek solutions for the growing number of children living in low-income and disadvantaged households.

Meanwhile, in Wales, there was widespread support for this new drive and commitment to tackle child poverty. In June 2004, the then Minister for Children reaffirmed the Welsh Assembly Government position by stating that: *"The Welsh Assembly Government strongly*

believes that child poverty should be eradicated within a generation"

Government statistics, however, show that levels of child poverty grew quite rapidly throughout the 1980s and early 1990s with a peak of almost 4.5 million children living in low-income households when the Labour Party came to power. Although encouraging progress was made between 1998/99 and 2004/05 when the overall figure fell to 3.7 million, child poverty rates have increased steadily each year since. The most recent data available (August 2009) for the period 2007/08 show that there were 4 million children in poverty, around 31 per cent of all children in the UK.

At a European level, the UK has comparatively high levels of child poverty compared to other western nations, with only Poland, Italy and Greece having higher rates of child poverty than the UK (Eurostat 2008).

According to most recent figures, around 200,000 children and young people now live in low-income households in Wales - 32 per cent. Wales has amongst the highest rates of child poverty in the UK and the highest amongst all the devolved nations. Given the present fiscal challenges and the subsequent projected rise in unemployment this figure is projected to rise even further.