

Understanding Poverty in All its Forms: A participatory research study into poverty in the UK

“Poverty kills dreams and cages the dreamers.”

— a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

This research project studied the experience of poverty in all its forms in the UK. It was led by a group of co-researchers with direct knowledge of poverty either through their lived experience or through their work. They designed, carried out, interpreted and wrote up the research, with operational support from ATD Fourth World UK. Data was collected from thirteen groups of adults in Scotland and England who discussed what poverty means to people today.

This research is part of a global study carried out in Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, and the United States, as well as the UK. Research in the UK was managed by ATD Fourth World UK, which benefited from tools and discussion with colleagues from the International Movement ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford.

Our title, ‘Understanding Poverty in All its Forms’, recognises that poverty is a multidimensional problem. The term links our research to Goal 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals: ‘To end poverty in all its forms everywhere’. The world’s Governments, including that of the UK, have agreed to meet this goal.

This goal recognises that, while not having enough money is very important, there are other dimensions to poverty — such as poor health or barriers to education — that are important to understand.



This report matters because:

- Poverty is a central problem in the UK today. Too many people are falling through gaps in service provision. Many have no choice but to sleep rough and resort to food banks.
- Given the growing awareness that poverty is multidimensional, this study asked the most affected people what that means.
- We have involved those affected by poverty in how the problem is studied. The voices of people with direct experience of poverty are at the front of our efforts to understand the problem and to ensure their inclusion in the public debate on poverty.

The research **identified six dimensions** that describe poverty in all its forms in the UK:

DISEMPOWERING SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES AND POLICIES

Economic, political and social structures can cause poverty. Policy is operated in a way that disempowers. Systems designed to support people are not working in ways that people want. Systemic cuts in funds for needed services have exacerbated inequality.



STIGMA, BLAME AND JUDGEMENT

Misrepresentation about poverty in the UK and a lack of understanding lead to negative judgement, stigma and blame, which are deeply destructive to individuals and families. Prejudice and discrimination result in people in poverty feeling they are treated like lesser human beings.



FINANCIAL INSECURITY, FINANCIAL EXCLUSION AND DEBT

Financial insecurity means not being able to satisfy your basic needs. Worrying about money every day causes huge stress and misery.



LACK OF CONTROL OVER CHOICES

Poverty means a lack of control over choices and opportunities. Over time this can lead to increased social isolation and risk, as well as restricting people's social, educational and cultural potential. The lack of good options reduces people's control over their lives and traps people in repetitive cycles of hardship, disappointment and powerlessness. Lack of opportunity and choice increases risk and restricts options. Poverty is dehumanising.



DAMAGED HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Poverty is bad for health and can shorten life. It has a negative impact on physical, emotional, mental and social well-being.



UNRECOGNISED STRUGGLES, SKILLS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The wealth of experience and life skills people in poverty possess is not recognised enough. Too often, public discourse undervalues the contribution that people in poverty make to society and to their communities while facing the daily impact of poverty.



‘Being in poverty makes you feel ashamed.’

— a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

Seven messages were identified:

- 1. It is essential that people with lived experience participate** in tackling poverty. This requires time, careful planning and commitment.
- 2. There is a need for better indicators of poverty** that emphasise and capture **the human experience of poverty**.
- 3. Inadequate financial resources** are a cause of poverty that **take away control and shorten lives**.
- 4. The impact of stigma and negative judgement is a particularly painful** part of poverty.
- 5. Participants agreed services should be enabling and supportive;** but some services are experienced as controlling and oppressive.
- 6. The skills and contributions** made to society by people in poverty **often go unrecognised**.
- 7. Individual resilience is no substitute for better systems, structures and policies.**

The full report is available online:

<https://atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/understanding-poverty/>

‘Poverty is not being able to smell the flowers because the stress of life gets in the way.’

— a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

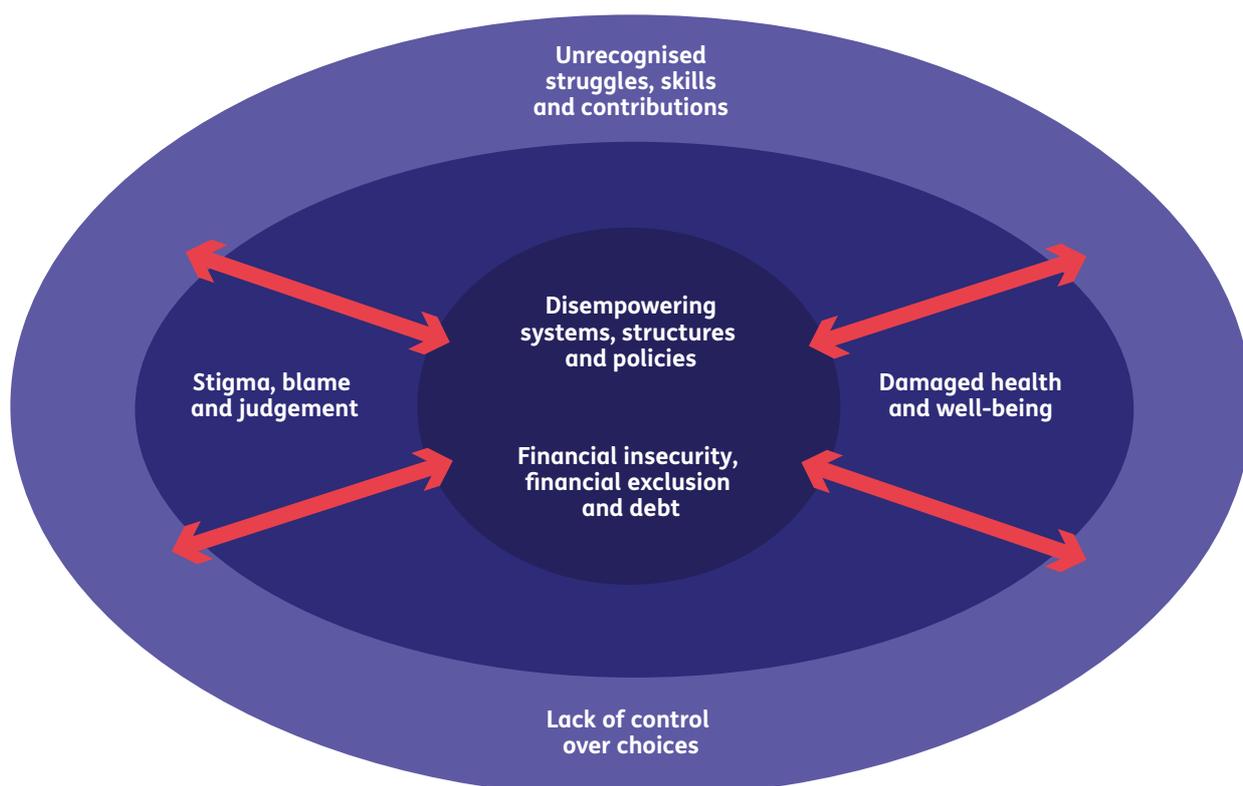
‘Poverty means being part of a system that leaves you waiting indefinitely in a state of fear and uncertainty.’

— a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

‘Poverty is worrying about money all of the time.’

— a professional from the South East of England

We developed a **model** to show how we found these different dimensions of poverty relate to each other:



Our process

Our process values the knowledge and expertise of those living in poverty and those working with people affected by poverty. It is derived from a conversation between these groups conducted as part of the research analysis. This gives weight to our findings which aim to describe poverty in all of its forms in the UK.

Our research was designed and led by ten co-researchers with experience of poverty from their own life or through their work. They were supported by an operations team from ATD Fourth World UK. Throughout, we aimed to be genuinely participatory: co-researchers were involved in leading and implementing the research, from design and data collection to write-up and dissemination. We tried hard to overcome power imbalances between people and learn from one another's experience and expertise.

The research drew on the experience of more than ninety individuals in thirteen groups across the UK: in the Central Belt of Scotland, in the South of England and in towns and cities in the North of England. These 'peer groups' were made up of people with lived experience of poverty and people with experience of poverty from their work (such as teachers, researchers or service providers). They were asked to discuss what poverty is. Most groups met multiple times and discussed their experience of poverty using a series of exercises devised by the co-researchers and ATD Fourth World UK.

These meetings, led by co-researchers and the operations team, allowed time for participants to get to know each other, to hear about the purpose and process of the research and to learn how the information from the discussions would be used.

We asked peer group participants what are the **aspects** that make up poverty (i.e. the individual parts that add to a bigger whole) by asking them what poverty feels like to them. Then we asked: 'What does poverty mean to you?' These aspects of poverty were discussed in the peer groups and progressively clustered under headings which we called dimensions of poverty. Each group named

and described these dimensions. A final step (either during a final meeting or by email) was for participants to check a short report of the **dimensions** they had created in their peer group and discuss how these dimensions relate to each other and which they consider to be most important.



The co-researchers then worked together to interpret these findings. Three 'connector' groups of participants from the original research groups met to provide feedback on the first draft of findings and to discuss how these dimensions relate to each other. Gathering all these insights together, the co-researchers worked together to produce our final report.

The national research team was comprised of the group of co-researchers: Rachel Broady, Amanda Button, Sarah Campbell, Elaine Chase, Judy Corlyon, Andrea Currie, Thomas Mayes, Susan McMahon, Zewdu Mengiste, Moraene Roberts; and supported by an operations team: Corrinna Bain, Susana Castro-Mustienes, Thomas Croft, Paul Dornan, Gwennaelle Horlait, Dann Kenningham, and Lucy Williams.

'Poverty means having to break down barriers.'

— a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

We are extremely grateful for the time and active involvement of all the peer group participants, the support of organisations that recruited participants, and support and encouragement from our colleagues in the global study.

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