What Citizens Say About Poverty

Faith in Research Conference

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Greater Manchester Context Headlines

- Home to 2.7 million residents and 1.2 million jobs

- Key economic centre in the North of England

- High levels of poverty and disadvantage
  - 15% of working age residents claim an out of work benefit
  - 20% of households experience fuel poverty
  - 28% of children live in poverty

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GM Poverty Commission January 2013

- Established by cross-party group of local MPs

- Chaired by former Bishop of Manchester

- Tasked to identify key components of poverty and practical solutions

- Published evidence and 16 recommendations
  - Establish GM Poverty Action Group
  - Develop GM Poverty Index

GM Poverty Index Project Proposal

- To gather and make local poverty statistics accessible to community groups
- To explore the potential for a single GM poverty index
- To update testimonies and perceptions of poverty
- To design a pilot survey to explore proof of concept

CITIZEN SOCIAL SCIENCE

A working definition …

- Draws from established approaches in natural and social sciences
  - crowdsourcing
  - citizen science
  - participatory research methods
  - mass observation
- Involves volunteers in the systematic collection and analysis of data

rspb — giving nature a home

" We've an arrangement
He owns the garden and I do the smiling "

Big Garden Birdwatch 2015

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Works well where …

- Data isn't readily available
- The action doesn't require specialist expertise
- Participatory approaches are a research priority

"… this report is about citizens' perceptions of poverty, and is also research done by citizens"

Citizen poverty researchers

- 15 volunteers recruited by Diocese of Manchester
- Clergy and lay people
  - Parish priests
  - Training curates
  - Project workers
  - Mothers' Union members
  - Diocesan staff

- *Conduct 3 interviews in reference week*
- *Upload data to project website*
- *Develop the coding framework and analysis (optional)*

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Who we chose to speak to …

- People with experience of poverty
  - not in work
  - in work but on low pay
  - on pension credit
- 81 interviewees accessed via existing networks and contacts
  - snowball sampling

- *"Struggling or really struggling on current income" (38)*
- *"Neither comfortable nor struggling on current income" (17)*
- *"Comfortable or very comfortable on current income" (22)*
- *Did not say (4)*

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What we asked …

- What does poverty mean to the person?
- Perceptions of the amount of poverty in their neighbourhood, and the basis of perception
- Perceptions of whether poverty has changed, in what direction, and basis of perception
- What questions they would ask in relation to poverty, and of whom
- Perceptions of the role for statistics and evidence in changing poverty

REALITIES OF POVERTY

Rising poverty

- Two-thirds of interviewees thought that the proportion of people living in poverty had increased in the last 12 months

- Perceptions are linked to belief that factors driving up poverty are continuing trends – rising costs and downward pressure on wages and jobs

"I see a lot of people going to the food bank in town. More people cannot buy the basics, they are relying on food banks and charity and their situations are getting worse."

Really struggling

"Bills are going up and wages are staying the same. It becomes more difficult every year, even when economising and being careful with shopping."

Struggling

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Food and debt

- Difficulties of affording food is the overriding feature of how people experience and perceive poverty
- Debt is also a significant feature – paying for essentials and non-essentials associated with a decent quality of life

"I see it. I live it. I pass through the job centre, I see frustrated people. I go to the church food banks and other food banks."

Really struggling

"Eating is a luxury. Not putting the heating on because can't afford to … Not being able to afford to feed grandchildren or give them a treat."

Struggling

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Shame and blame

- Sense of shame is strongly associated with experiences of poverty

- Mirrored by attitudes that blame individuals and set one group in poverty against another

- But also clearly expressed resistance to narratives of blame

"Poverty is depression, hopelessness … shame, humiliation … [it] erodes the human spirit."

Living comfortably

"I know quite a few people … in Glodwick, and most are struggling to make ends meet. There are many refugees and asylum seekers here who are not allowed to work."

Struggling

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Poverty damages

- Experienced as all-consuming and impacting on different areas of life

- Viewed as harmful to well-being and family relationships

- Associated with run down homes and neighbourhoods, rising crime and anti-social behaviour

"It's so hurting when you are poor – it affects you, your family and we suffer a lot … When you are poor nobody likes you."
Struggling

"Rise in dodgy behaviour because people are bored, short of money."
Really struggling

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BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

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Policy Change

- Rising poverty attributed to austerity policies and impact of welfare changes

- Lack of jobs and low pay perceived as underlying causes

- Responsibility to "do something" rests with Government (yet no faith in democratic process as means to achieve change)

"The Government is cutting back on things and making things worse such as giving us the bedroom tax. People are ready for anarchy."

Really struggling

"Why is nothing more being done to address inequalities and support for lower paid workers?"

Neither comfortable nor struggling

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System Change

- Dissatisfaction expressed with concentration of wealth at the top.

- Banking sector also held responsible for rising inequality

- Some interviewees link this with questions of wider systemic change and what kind of society we want to live in.

"Why can't you [bankers and politicians] make things better? You have the money."

Living comfortably

"People without clothes or food in the street is not OK in a rich country like this."

Really struggling

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Personal Change

- Dominant theme is that the changes required are external

- For some interviewees the necessary changes are personal

- Strong emphasis on the need for education and attitudes to and behaviour in relation to money

"I have an attitude to manage with what I have got … maybe education is needed about this."
Living really comfortably

"Some are living like this because they've never tried to change their life, some have tried but just can't. Writing, reading and education for the young is most important."
Really struggling

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Statistics and change

- Pessimism and mistrust of official statistics expressed by many

- Some argue that statistics can be used to lobby and convince policy-makers

- Others see them as bearing witness - correcting misinformation and leading to collective action for change

"Nobody is going to make changes without some facts and figures."

Struggling

"Young people need to be helped to understand the situation of those who go to school without good shoes. We need to rise up."

Struggling

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

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University of Manchester

- Project finance
- Time and expertise
    – Liz Richardson (Senior Lecturer in Politics)
- Training for citizen researchers
- Publicity and communications

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- Sub-regional cover
  - "a Christian presence in every community"
- Access to "hard to reach" groups
  - asylum seekers
  - food bank users
  - hostel residents

- *Administration*
- *Volunteer recruitment*
- *Fieldwork support*
- *Event organisation*
- *Report design*

Key Outcomes

- Confirmatory data that builds on findings of GM Poverty Commission

- Updated data on experiences of poverty post welfare changes

- Original material on lobbying and the role of data in tackling poverty

- Learning about the practice of citizen social science (roll out potential)

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