HARD TIMES:

Young People's and Young Parents' Experiences

of Living through Poverty in Luton

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Introduction

This research report is primarily concerned with the experiences of young people (16-24 years) and young parents bringing up children within the context of poverty in Luton. It is divided into three sections. Part One provides a general overview of poverty research in the UK. Part Two presents the findings from the study of young people and young parents' experiences of poverty in Luton. Part Three discusses the implications of the findings presented and recommendations that arise from them.

The overview of research presented in part one of this report is organised under the following headings:

- measures of poverty commonly adopted in UK poverty research

- the extent of poverty in the UK including a short discussion of gender and ethnicity

- attitudes to poverty amongst the general public

- the impacts of poverty on children and families

- poverty amongst young people

- parenting in poverty

- patterns of poverty

Part two of the report provides a brief description of the methodology adopted for this study and the sample amongst whom the research was conducted. Key findings are then summarised. Following this a thematic analysis of interview data is presented. This covers the following themes:

- how participants defined poverty

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- how participants explained poverty

- the images of 'poor people' participants employed

- whether participants considered they or their families were poor

- participants' descriptions of living through poverty

- what participants thought the Local Authority should do to tackle poverty

Part three presents a discussion of the implications of the findings from this study and the recommendations that arise from them.

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PART ONE

Overview of Poverty Research in the UK

Measuring and Defining Poverty

Within the context of academic and policy discussions of poverty in the UK, relative measures - i.e. those that measure living standards against the commonly taken-for-granted standard of living in any society at any particular time - are widely accepted. Using this measure, levels of poverty fluctuate over time.

The official measure of poverty most commonly adopted in the UK is based on households whose incomes are 60% (or below) of median income before-housing costs (DWP, 2010a). This is a relative measure inasmuch as median incomes change over time. Household incomes after housing costs can also be employed to study poverty and using after-housing costs measures produces different estimations of the numbers of households in poverty. Using 'before-housing costs' produces lower estimates of numbers in poverty than 'after housing costs' measures (DWP, 2010a; Harris et. al. 2009). Poverty can also be measured in terms of 70%, 50% and 40% of median income - again, all give very different measures of the numbers of people living in poverty in the UK at any particular time (Joyce et. al. 2010).

As well as relative income deprivation, poverty can be defined in terms of 'financial strain' (where individuals or families are struggling to 'get by') and in terms of material deprivation (where individuals or families do not have particular consumer durables such as a washing machine) (Tomlinson and Walker, 2010). In this brief literature review, when 'poverty' is discussed, it is usually referring to measures of 60% (or below) of median income before housing costs.

The Extent of Poverty in the UK

In 2008/09, median income in the UK was estimated at £407.00 per week. An income of 60% of this figure is £244.20 per week. There are however estimated to be 3.6 million people whose incomes are 40% or less of the median income (Joyce et. al. 2010). This would mean their weekly income is

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£162.80 per week. Of this 3.6 million, however, an estimated 1 million have incomes of 'less than £50 per week' (Joyce et. al. 2010:37). Job Seekers' Allowance or Income Support for a single person aged over 25 years was worth £65.45 per week in 2010 which is equivalent to 41% of the Minimum Income Standard for a single working age adult. Young people aged 18-25 receive a lower rate of benefit (£51.85 per week) and 'those under 18 are usually entitled to nothing' (Kenway et. al. 2010:7).

Based on the 60% (or below) of median income before-housing costs measure, there were estimated to be 10.9 million people in poverty (13.4 million after housing costs)in the UK in 2008/09 (Joyce et. al. 2010). There are estimated to be 4.4 million children living in poverty after-housing costs are taken into consideration (Harris et. al. 2009). In 1996/97 over half (55%) of children living in poverty lived in workless households, by 2008/09 the number of poor children living in workless households had reduced to 41% (Bradshaw, 2011). In 2008-09, the number of poor children living in working families rose to 2.1 million – the highest on record (Parekh et. al. 2010) and 32% of children in single parent households where the parent is working are still living in poverty (Harris et. al. 2009). This demonstrates that poverty is widespread amongst working families as well as amongst non-working families.

Since 1996/1997 poverty has fallen for most groups except those of working age who are not parents. In this period, poverty has fallen by 4.2% amongst pensioners; by 4.9% amongst children and by 2% amongst working age parents. However, in the same period, poverty has risen by 2.7% amongst working age adults who are not parents. Poverty levels amongst this group are currently at their highest level since comparable measures were developed in 1961 and by contrast they are lowest amongst pensioners since 1985 (Joyce et. al. 2010).

Additionally, poverty has a regional dimension and some regions of the UK fare worse than others in the poverty statistics (Joyce et. al. 2010; Hirsch, 2006). Some regions have never recovered from

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earlier de-industrialisation in the 1980s (Crisp et. al. 2009) while the 2008-2009 recession impacted more severely on some areas than on others (Joyce et. al. 2010).

Gender & Ethnicity

The headline figures for poverty reported above disguise the fact that poverty is unequally distributed across the UK population and concentrated amongst particular groups. Ethnic minorities, women, those who are sick or disabled, single parents, young people and children are all more likely to experience poverty than the rest of the population (Pantazis, Gordon and Levitas, 2006). Broken down by ethnic group, statistics suggest that 20% of white families, 30% of Indian and Black Caribbean, 50% of Black African, 60% of Pakistani and 70% of Bangladeshi families are living in households with less than 60% of average UK incomes (www.poverty.org.uk/06/shtml?2 q.v. Palmer and Kenway, 2007).

Gender is also an important dimension to take account of when considering the distribution of poverty in the UK. 16% of young women aged 16-24 (without dependent children) are considered to have incomes that are too low to provide basic necessities compared to 5% of young men (Pantazis and Ruspini, 2006). Almost half (48%) of young women in the 16-24 age group who have dependent children are considered to be living in poverty compared to 23% of men in the same age group with children (Pantazis and Ruspini, 2006:384-85).

Attitudes to Poverty in the UK

Poverty can be explained in terms of social forces that are beyond an individual's control (structural explanations), in terms of the individual failings of the poor (individualistic explanations); in terms of 'fate' or it can be understood as an 'inevitable' part of modern life (fatalistic explanations)(Dorey, 2010; Rowlingson et. al. 2010; Park et. al. 2007; Dean and Melrose, 1997).

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Evidence from a number of sources suggests that British public attitudes towards the poor have hardened over recent years and that concern for the poor has declined (Dorey, 2010; Rowlingson et. al. 2010; Crisp et. al. 2009; Hanley, 2009; Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008; Park et. al. 2007; Castell and Thompson, 2007). A proportion of the population has consistently attributed poverty to the shortcomings of the poor (Dean and Melrose, 1997) and an analysis of British Social Attitude data (2006-07) suggests that 'blaming' the poor continues to resonate with some groups, particularly Conservative supporters (Park et. al. 2007). In this survey, almost half the respondents (49%) blamed poverty on 'laziness' or a 'lack of will-power' while just 34% emphasised social factors (Park et. al. 2007). Park and colleagues (2007) classified public attitudes to poverty in terms of 'liberal' and 'sceptics' groups – the former were more likely to explain poverty in terms of social forces beyond an individual's control while the latter were more likely to explain it in terms of the shortcomings of the poor or fate/inevitability. More or less equal proportions of respondents were classified into each group.

Later surveys demonstrated a greater propensity amongst the public to understand poverty as an inevitable part of life rather than individual failings or social injustice (Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008). In the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey over a third (38%) of respondents thought poverty was an inevitable part of life; over a quarter (26%) thought that poverty was caused by laziness; almost a fifth (19%) thought it was caused by social factors and just over a tenth (12%) attributed it to 'bad luck' (Rowlingson et. al. 2010). While the public were concerned with issues of inequality, only about a quarter (27%) supported the idea that 'the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor even if this leads to higher taxes' – this compared with 58% who supported this proposition in 1991 (Rowlingson et. al. 2010).

Public attitudes appear to be no more sympathetic in relation to the issue of child poverty. A survey undertaken in 2007-08 found that almost half the respondents (41%) thought there was 'very little' child poverty in the UK today. Almost half (45%) thought that if children were living in families in need this was the result of parental alcoholism, drug abuse or other addictions and only one fifth (20%) thought that families were living in need because social benefits are too low (Kelly, 2007-08).

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The general public has a very limited awareness of the extent of poverty in the UK (Hanley, 2009) and poverty tends to be associated with developing countries or with historical images of 'Dickensian squalor' (Castell and Thompson, 2007; Hanley, 2009). Public attitudes about what constitutes poverty also seem to have hardened with the public more likely to support the idea that poverty is about 'not having the necessities of life' (absolute measures) rather than not having 'what most people take for granted' (relative measures) (Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008). When poverty is acknowledged the public tend to think it is an individual's responsibility to take action to remove themselves from poverty and there is limited support for government policies to redistribute income or to raise the incomes of those forced to rely on welfare benefits (Dorey, 2010; Rowlingson et. al. 2010). In fact, support for welfare cuts announced by the Coalition government in 2010 gained widespread public support. A YouGov poll commissioned for Channel 4 News found that over half (58%) of respondents were in favour of making welfare more conditional and cutting benefits to those who fail to meet the conditions; almost a quarter (24%) thought that benefits should be cut further. Almost two thirds (62%) of respondents agreed with proposals to cut Housing Benefit even if this meant people losing their homes (Channel 4 News, 11.11.10).

The Impact of Poverty

Living in poverty is known to be associated with a range of negative outcomes. For children and young people growing up in poverty, there is an increased risk of: poor educational outcomes, poor health, being a victim of crime and being criminalised for anti-social behaviour or offending. As children and young people grow up in poverty their disadvantage accumulates, and, as they move into young adulthood they may have lower aspirations and increased risk of experiencing unemployment, low pay and poverty (Harris et. al. 2009; Hooper et. al. 2007). The costs of child poverty have therefore been estimated at £25 billion each year (Harris et. al. 2009, Griggs and Walker, 2008; Hirsch, 2006).

Poverty is geographically distributed and spatially concentrated in particular areas, communities and neighbourhoods (Melrose, 2010; Crisp et. al. 2009; Theodore, 2007). In those areas, it is associated

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with a range of negative indicators such as: poor quality and overcrowded housing – especially social housing; high teenage pregnancy rates; high levels of crime, anti-social behaviour and criminal victimisation; high levels of drug and alcohol use; high levels of young people not in education, employment or training; low levels of subjective well being (Day, 2009; Griggs and Walker, 2008; Seddon, 2006; Macdonald et. al. 2005; Webster et. al. 2004).

Children growing up and living in low-income households are also at greater risk of poor physical and mental health as adults including the risk of 'severe, long-term and life limiting illness' (Griggs and Walker, 2008:1). They are also at greater risk of unemployment, working in low or unskilled occupations and low-paid work as adults (Griggs and Walker, 2008). Evidence from different sources suggests that poverty is associated with:

- Physical health problems including 'anaemia, diabetes, asthma, obesity, cancer, lead-poisoning, neuro-developmental problems, poor dental hygiene' (Griggs and Walker, 2008:1)

- Mental Health problems including depression and higher suicide rates

- Low self-esteem

- Low birth-weight babies, premature births and higher rates of infant mortality

- Higher rates of post-natal depression and lower rates of breast-feeding

- Decreased life expectancy

- Children with fewer safe places to play and a higher number of accidents involving children

- Educational disaffection, school exclusion and higher rates of special educational needs

- Poor educational outcomes and lack of qualifications

- Transmission of educational disadvantage from one generation to the next

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- Behavioural problems in children and young people (hyperactivity, aggression, anti-social behaviour)

- Lack of access to financial services (for example many do not have bank accounts)

- High levels of debt

- Lack of skills in money management

- Higher rates of child neglect or maltreatment and increased numbers of children on child protection registers

(see: Harris et. al. 2009; Griggs and Walker, 2008; Hooper et. al. 2007; Crowley and Vulliamy, 2002).

Young People and Poverty

In 1999, the New Labour government announced its intention to halve child poverty in the UK by 2010 and to eliminate it by 2020 (Townsend and Kennedy, 2004). Towards meeting this end, it enacted The Child Poverty Act 2010. By early 2010, however, when the Coalition government announced its first budget, it appeared that the previous government had all but admitted that its targets for child poverty would not be met by 2010 (Joyce et. al. 2010). Nevertheless, The Child Poverty Act (2010) places responsibilities on governments and local authorities to implement policies and take action to achieve the targets set.

This may be good news for children and families (and as the statistics presented earlier in this document suggest, many of the policy measures introduced under the New Labour administration did make positive contributions to reducing child poverty and poverty amongst working age adults with children). But, it is perhaps less good news for those who do not have children or who are single adults. In the Child Poverty Act (2010) a 'dependent child' is defined as a person aged under the age of 16. Under the terms of the Act, 'a person will also be defined as a child if they are 16-19 years of age _and_ not married or in a civil partnership; _and_ living with a parent; _and_ in full-time, non-advanced

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education or in unwaged government training' (www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/menu/htm accessed 5th March 2011 and see: http://lexisweb.co.uk/Acts/2010/Child-Poverty-Act-2010-C-9/27-General-Interpretation) accessed 5th March 2011 (italics & underlining added).

This means that large numbers of 16-19 year olds who are not married, not living with their parents and/or not in full-time education or training or who, at this age might be married or living in civil partnerships, are not covered by the provisions of this Act. This is despite the fact that under the terms of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, anyone up to the age of 18 is considered to be a 'child'.

Latest figures show that large numbers of 16-18 year-olds are not in full time education, employment or training (NEET) and 8.5% of this age group are currently classified as NEET (BBC News, 2011). NEET status increases dramatically with age (almost a fifth of 18-24 year olds are currently NEET) and it is estimated that 25% of young people will experience NEET status at some point. By far the largest proportion (43%) will be NEET for 6 months or more (Audit Commission, 2010:14). (NEET figures do not give an indication of the numbers who might be living independently or with parents).

Since the 1980s young people's labour market position has been precarious and youth unemployment has been consistently higher than amongst older adults. Young people are particularly vulnerable to temporary work, short term contracts (which means they are frequently changing jobs), unemployment and low-paid work (Bradley and Devadason, 2008). Gregg and Wadsworth (2010:46) have argued that 'as a general rule of thumb the youth unemployment rate is always double the adult rate'. By mid-2010, however, the unemployment rate amongst 16-24 year-olds was almost 20% - this was three times the rate for older adults and the highest recorded rate for this age group in 18 years (Parekh et. al. 2010). Young people have been affected particularly badly by rising unemployment during the recession. Between June 2009 and June 2010, for example, youth unemployment increased by 107% in North East Lincolnshire (MacKinnon et. al. 2011).

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Redundancy rates are running at 11.8 per 1000 workers for the general population but rise sharply to 17.7 per 1000 workers for those aged 16-24 years old (Bell and Blanchflower, 2010:4). By the last quarter of 2010, the unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds was 20.5% - an increase of 1.5% on the previous quarter (ONS, 2011 published on February 16th 2011 at www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=12).

Given their disadvantaged labour market position, higher than average rates of unemployment and the lower level of benefits available to young people - JSA for a single person aged 18-24 years old was £51.85 per week in 2010 (DWP at: www.direct.gov.uk/en/youngpeople/money/DG_10027506 accessed 26.02.11) - it is hardly surprising that many of this age group are living in poverty. Using 60% of median income before housing costs, there are currently 1.7 million young people aged 16-24 years old living in 'low-income' households in the UK and, of these, 1.1 million are single adults without children – a much greater proportion than for older age groups (www.poverty.org.uk/41/index.shtml?2). Approximately one third of 16-24 year-olds have incomes that are considered insufficient to provide for basic necessities compared to just under a fifth (19%) of older working age adults (Pantazis and Ruspini, 2006). 'This has been the case since at least the mid-1990s' (www.poverty.org.uk/34/index.shtml.2). This situation looks set to get worse from 2011 as from that date, benefits will be updated in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rather than the Retail Price Index (RPI); using the former measure means that the value of benefits will decline in relation to the cost of living.

For young people who live in the parental home, there may be some 'cushioning effect' in terms of their experiences of poverty – living in the parental home may mean that young people do not experience the harsh realities of life on the breadline in the same way as their peers who are living independently or who do not have familial support (Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Macdonald et. al. 2005; Webster et. al. 2004)

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Parenting and Poverty

Despite the fact that there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the association between poverty and poor outcomes for children, we know relatively little about how parents cope when trying to bring up their children in poverty or how parenting through poverty is experienced (Katz et. al. 2007). The evidence that does exist suggests that many parents in poverty struggle to meet the costs of basic living and face difficulties in making their money last from week to week (Harris et. al. 2009). This places enormous stress and strain on families and parents although there is some evidence that parents from different ethnic groups may respond differently to these stresses (Barnes, 2004; Marsh and MacKay, 1994). The stresses associated with poverty may cause parents to be 'more stressed, depressed or irritable' and this in turn impacts on parenting practices and styles (Katz et. al. 2007:37; c.f. Hooper et. al. 2007). In addition to material deprivation, poor parents may experience a range of negative challenges in their lives including poor physical and mental health, isolation, low qualifications, lack of access to the labour market and essential services and domestic violence. Any of these factors may affect a parent's ability to provide material support and a nurturing environment for their children (Harris et. al. 2009; Katz et. al. 2007; Hooper, 2007; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

The relationship between poverty and child maltreatment is complex and although there is no direct causal relationship established between child neglect or mistreatment there are higher numbers of poor children on child protection registers compared to their more affluent peers (Hooper et. al. 2007; Katz et. al. 2007). Research has also found that material shortage in the home affects child rearing methods and may negatively impact child-parent relationships (Wilson, 1974). It has been suggested that parents who live in poverty are more likely to use inconsistent, harsh or erratic methods to discipline their children and they are less likely to supervise their children adequately or to be involved in their child's education (Hooper et. al. 2007; Katz et. al. 2007; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

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The negative impact of poverty on parenting may however be mitigated by community and social support and extended family networks (Katz et. al. 2007, Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) and parents living in poverty have been found to be remarkably resilient in the face of adversity (Harris et. al. 2009; Hooper et. al. 2007; DfES, 2007; Katz et. al. 2007). Many poor parents place their child's needs above their own and make sacrifices, for example, going without food, so that their children need not go hungry (Harris et. al. 2009; Hooper et. al. 2007). Many poor parents also have greater aspirations for themselves and their children to have better lives (Harris et. al. 2009; Katz et. al. 2007). Contrary to the assumptions in many government policy documents suggesting that those who are poor and claiming benefits need to be 'incentivised' to work (e.g. DWP 2008a, 2008b, 2010b), many poor parents are desperate to work, and to have work that pays enough to enable them to raise their families out of poverty (Harris et. al. 2009).

Parents on very low incomes often have great difficulty in meeting any unexpected expenditure (such as replacing broken furniture or white goods) as well as difficulty in meeting planned expenditure (such as buying new school uniforms). In these situations parents are faced with three options: to absorb the costs – meaning that other things are not paid for or bought in order to meet the cost; to use savings if they have them (which is very rare); or to borrow the money (Harris et. al. 2009). Many poor families do not have access to bank accounts (they can be refused a bank account for no reason or because they do not have the necessary means of identification required to open one - e.g. a driving licence or a passport) (Harris et. al. 2009). Their financial exclusion from mainstream services means that poor families regularly pay more for their bills because they cannot take advantage of reductions that may be available by using direct debit systems; they cannot use overdraft facilities and they cannot access bank loans at reasonable rates of interest. Many are therefore forced to rely on loans from Home Credit Companies which charge exorbitant rates of interest. Harris and colleagues (2009:11) provide a case study example of a family that borrowed £100 over 31 weeks from Provident. The interest charged on this was equivalent to 367% APR. That poor people pay more for goods and services than more affluent people has been described as 'the poverty premium' (Strelitz and Kober, 2007).

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Patterns of Poverty

Poverty is a dynamic rather than a static state. Families, households and individuals may move in and out of poverty over the life course (Goulden, 2010). Research has identified three main patterns of poverty experienced by those in low-income households (Smith and Middleton, 2007). These are:

- Persistent poverty (where an individual or household experiences poverty for at least three out of four years) (Harris et. al. 2009; Adelman et. al. 2003)

- Recurrent poverty (where individuals or households move in and out of poverty) (Shildrick et. al. 2010, Goulden, 2010)

- Transient poverty (where poverty is experienced on a temporary basis) (Goulden, 2010, Smith and Middleton, 2007).

Families with children, particularly lone parent families and families where a parent or carer is prevented from working as the result of ill-health or disability may be particularly prone to 'persistent' or 'deep' poverty from which many find it almost impossible to escape (Harris et. al. 2009; Hirsch, 2006). The experience of persistent poverty is strongly associated with multiple transitions in and out of the labour market, low pay, temporary contracts and flexible, low-paid labour markets (Goulden, 2010).

The factors that are thought to increase the risk of experiencing 'recurrent poverty' have been identified as:

- Low Pay

- Insecure employment including temporary contracts and part-time work

- Repeated spells of unemployment

- Working irregular hours

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- Breakdown of adult relationships (divorce, separation)

- Children being born or leaving households

- Health problems affecting employment and benefits

- Previous experiences of poverty

- Single parenthood

(Goulden, 2010; Shildrick et. al. 2010; Jenkins et. al. 2001). These criteria would suggest that young people would be most at risk of experiencing both persistent and recurrent poverty as a result of their precarious labour market position and 'cycling' between low-paid work, which is often based on temporary contracts, and unemployment.

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PART TWO

The Luton Study of Experiences of Poverty

This section of the report introduces the aims of the study, the sample constructed, the methodology employed and the findings from the research. Key findings are summarised before a discursive discussion of the themes emerging from interviews is presented.

Methodology and Sample Construction

This study was commissioned by Luton Borough Council and fieldwork was undertaken by young people from the Prince's Trust. These young people were trained by senior researchers from the University of Bedfordshire and supervised by colleagues from the local Primary Care Trust, NHS Luton. Research instruments were developed by senior researchers from the University of Bedfordshire in consultation with young people from the Prince's Trust. The fieldwork was conducted during February 2011.

The aims of the study were to explore young people's experiences of poverty, young parents' experiences of parenting in poverty, and to elicit the views of young people and young parents in relation to what they thought public services could do to improve the situation for those living in hardship.

In all 28 people took part in interviews all of whom were residents of Luton. Participants were accessed through various agencies and interviews were conducted in different locations in the town. The sample constructed was a 'convenience' sample in the sense that interviews were conducted with people who were approached and agreed to be interviewed. In this sense, respondents represent a random sample. Participants agreed to be interviewed on the basis of informed consent and signed consent forms were obtained from all respondents. A small reward for participation (a £20 shopping mall voucher) was provided. All interviews were conducted in confidence and all data has been anonymised. All interviews have been fully transcribed.

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Of the 28 participants, just over two-thirds (19) were female, a quarter (7) were male, and in one case the sex of the respondent was not clear from the recording of the interview. The ethnicity of the respondents was not indicated. Respondents ranged in age from 17 years old to 35 years old. Just under a fifth (5) were 18 years old or younger while half (14) were aged 19-25years old. One respondent was 28 years old and another was 35years old. In 7 cases the age of the respondent was not clear from the recording of the interview. Almost half (13) the respondents were unemployed and in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance or Income Support. Just over a quarter (8) were in education or training. Three participants were engaged in part-time work and, of these, two were in receipt of means tested benefits (Child Tax Credits). One participant was on maternity leave at the time of the interview, one was studying for a degree and working part-time, one was self-employed, and one was a 'stay at home mother' whose husband was working. Most participants had no or minimum level qualifications while two were qualified teachers.

Over a third (11) of participants lived in the parental home, almost a fifth (5) lived independently in social housing, a similar proportion (6) lived in private rented accommodation, two male respondents were living in hostels, two owned their own home. The living situation of two respondents was not clear from the recording of the interview.

Almost half the sample (13) were young parents. Of these, just over three-quarters (10) were single parents, two were married, and one was an absent parent, not living with his partner or children.

A number of themes from the interviews were identified through thematic analysis. These broadly related to the themes identified in the overview of poverty research presented in part one of this report. This section of the report includes a discussion of:

- How participants measured and defined poverty

- How participants explained and understood the reasons for people being poor

- How participants thought about 'poor people' and the comparators employed when thinking about who was poor

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- Whether participants tended to think of themselves as poor

- Participants descriptions of living through poverty

- What participants thought local public services could do to improve the lives of people living in poverty

Before moving into this discussion some of the key findings from the study are summarised below.

Key Findings

- Most of those interviewed defined poverty in 'absolute' terms – not having a home or not having enough to eat and tended to associate it with destitution.

- Participants tended to explain the causes of poverty in terms of the shortcomings of the poor in combination with factors beyond the control of the individual.

- When describing 'poverty' most respondents evoked images of destitution and/or equated poverty with developing countries.

- When talking about what people might be considered 'necessary' to avoid being poor many appreciated the value of good health and thought it should be in the 'top 10'of what would be considered 'necessities'. Many also stressed the importance of hygiene.

- Most of those interviewed did not describe themselves or their families as 'poor' but they did describe situations in which they were struggling to 'get by'.

- The majority of those interviewed were experiencing 'financial strain' – these mentioned difficulties with affording 'decent' food; paying bills, affording to buy new clothes and being in debt (especially amongst the young parents).

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- Some confused what the government should do with what local public services should do when they were asked about what could be done to make things better for people who live in poverty.

- Specifically interviewees recommended that public services could:

  ➢ Provide more opportunities for training for young people to get them into employment.

  ➢ Provide (free) childcare with training courses so that young parents could take advantage of them – or provide opportunities for training to which parents could bring their children with them.

  ➢ Provide more affordable childcare – more of it AND at less cost.

  ➢ Provide cheaper (or subsidised) leisure facilities so that parents, children and young people would be able to take advantage of facilities that already exist.

  ➢ Provide workshops which would demonstrate to people who are unemployed how they might get a job.

  ➢ Provide workshops that would enable those who are unemployed to 'feel better' about themselves and know that they are valued (workshops that address issues of 'self-esteem').

  ➢ Provide workshops advising on how those on minimal incomes might manage their budgets so as to pay their bills, afford food, and so on.

  ➢ Provide more youth clubs that could engage young people in activities that would enhance their skills and future employment prospects (i.e. opportunities to develop their CVs).

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> Provide opportunities for young parents and other young people who are feeling financial strain to talk about it in confidence (without the fear that their child might be removed if they admitted to such 'stress' or 'strain').

> Ensure that those living in poverty are more aware of facilities and services that might be available to support them in times of difficulty.

The key findings discussed above are elaborated below in terms of the discursive themes that emerged from the interviews.

Thematic Analysis & What Interviewees Said

The thematic analysis below discusses how research participants measured and defined poverty; how they explained why some people were poor and others were not; the imagery of 'poor' people they evoked and the comparators they used when thinking about 'poverty'; how participants described their own experiences of 'hardship' and 'financial strain'; and what they thought the council should do to improve the situation for people who are 'poor', experiencing 'financial strain' or living in 'hardship'. Pseudonym names have been used to protect interviewee confidentiality.

Measuring and Defining Poverty

When respondents were asked what they thought 'being poor' means, almost two-thirds (17) tended to equate it with destitution. That is, for many being poor meant being 'homeless' or 'not having a roof over your head' or 'you don't have anywhere to live, they're homeless' or 'not having enough money to live, living on the streets'. Some participants thought poverty meant 'not being able to put food on the table' or 'when you haven't got enough money to eat' and if someone was poor they would not 'have enough food to eat every day of the week'.

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Just over a third (10) of respondents veered towards broader definitions. Fiona, a 35 year old single parent who was doing a university degree and working part-time thought being poor meant people 'can't do what their peers do'. Ash an 18 year-old young man who was attending college thought being poor meant, 'you have disadvantages and you feel like you can't take part in things because you don't have the money. It's lack of resources'. Craig, a 21 year old young man who was unemployed and living in a hostel thought being poor meant 'maybe you haven't got what you need for your personal needs'. For other respondents, being poor simply meant 'not having enough money to live' or 'just scraping by or struggling to get by'.

Maz, a 17 year-old young man who was attending college on a training course appeared to employ relative and absolute measures of poverty simultaneously when he tried to define what being poor meant: 'You haven't got money to house yourself, have shelter, food and just like an OK life without worrying about money'. Maz also took into consideration that children in poor families 'can't really get a good education because the family worrying about stress, like money and stuff, so they're not going to get support at home because their parents have too much problems'.

For some respondents, poverty was associated with an emotional state. Katrina, a 28 year-old woman who was a qualified teacher and currently on maternity leave thought that people who were poor 'would be normally quite miserable because they can't afford to do anything for themselves' while Nicky, an unemployed twenty five year old single parent of two children thought 'people who have no money are sad'.

When participants were asked to discuss the list of necessities devised by the young people from the Prince's Trust, it was clear that many were employing absolute measures when they were thinking about what was or was not 'necessary' if someone were not to be considered poor. The majority agreed that 'shelter, food, water, gas, electricity, clothes and hygiene' were essential but many did not consider many of the things on the list as 'necessities'. Lauren, a 25 year-old unemployed young woman considered many of the things on the list 'just materialistic' and thought that you could 'get by without them'. Nicky thought that 'holidays and computer and internet access isn't really a

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necessity, that's a luxury'. Kelly, an unemployed single parent mother with two children thought, 'we won't need a mobile phone if we're poor; we wouldn't need make-up' while Katie, a college student who was living with her parents, thought it might be possible to live without a washing machine because people could use launderettes. These findings resonate with those from the British Social Attitudes survey (Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008) which suggest that amongst the general public poverty tends to be constituted by what is 'necessary' rather than by 'what other people take for granted'.

Explaining Poverty

In common with the views expressed in surveys of public attitudes, participants in this study tended to explain poverty in terms of the individual failings of the poor, fate or misfortune, or factors that are beyond the control of the individual. However, in this study, over a third (10) of respondents explained the causes of poverty in terms of individual factors; under a fifth (5) explained poverty in terms of social factors beyond the individual's control and over a quarter (8) explained poverty in terms of individual failings *and* social factors. Just one participant explained poverty in terms of 'misfortune' while another explained it in terms of misfortune combined with individual failings of the poor, and another in terms of factors beyond the individual's control combined with 'bad luck'. Two participants were unable to say why they thought some people might be poor while others weren't.

Those employing individualistic explanations for the causes of poverty tended to associate poverty with 'laziness' and other individual failings relating to the 'culture' of the poor, such as not being educated or having too many children. Matt, a 17 year-old male who was living in a hostel and attending a training course, thought people were poor because of being 'lazy more than anything, they can't be arsed to go and get a job or they can't be bothered to go and find help'. Rachel, a 24 year-old single mother of three children who was attending a part-time training course, thought 'Over here we get a lot of things paid for us and that's why people get lazy, whereas if the

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government wasn't handing it out, people might get jobs'. Lauren, a 25 year-old unemployed young woman who had no qualifications, thought people were poor 'because of the way they were brought up. If they were brought up in a poor family they're generally – I think their aspirations are lower; it's a case that some people just aren't educated'. Carly, a twenty year-old single parent who was working part-time when she was interviewed, thought poor people 'shouldn't breed up, breed up, have so many children and then they can get off benefits'. These findings resonate with research findings from the early 1980s in which Golding and Middleton (1982) found that those most likely to blame the poor for their own condition, and to express the greatest hostility towards those claiming welfare benefits, were low paid workers and those claiming benefits themselves.

Those who explained poverty in terms of social forces beyond the individual's control *and* the failings of the poor tended to blame the government for poverty but also emphasised the individual failings of the poor. Anita, a 23 year-old who was living with her parents and attending college to train as a hairdresser, thought some of the reason people were poor might be 'because of the government' but also stressed that, 'some people who could work don't want to 'cause they can't get out of bed, or just can't be arsed'. Simone, a 23 year-old unemployed single mother of three children, thought 'some of it is the government but see like people who are on jobseekers they can actually go out there and get a job and things like that, but they don't'. Fiona, a 35 year-old single mother of two children who was studying at university and working part-time, thought some people might be poor because of 'where they are brought up, there's some areas where there's no jobs going, there's no jobs'. For these people poverty may result from 'not having the opportunity' but, on the other hand, 'some people don't take the opportunity' and 'you have a lot of kids that get themselves pregnant and everything – that's another factor'.

Those who explained poverty in terms of factors beyond individual control tended to blame the government for the low level of benefits on which people were expected to live. Some of these participants also commented on a shortage of available work. Tanya, an unemployed young woman who was unemployed and living independently, thought it was the government's fault that people

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were poor because 'it ain't giving them no money, and even if they do, they're cutting it off...and they're putting the prices up, everything's just gone up'. Ellie, a single parent who was living with her parents, thought 'there is not enough jobs to go round'. Katie, who was attending college and living at home with her parents, thought the government was partly responsible for people being poor because 'I don't think there are many jobs around'. Katie also acknowledged that people were 'not getting enough money because the wages are not going up'. Jess, a 20 year-old unemployed young woman who was living with her partner, thought people were poor because 'the government don't give them enough money'.

Imagining 'The Poor'

For the most part respondents associated poverty with people living on benefits – only one or two mentioned that wages might not be high enough and the fact that people could be working but still be living in poverty did not seem to occur to most of the participants. When they were asked how they might describe someone who was poor the language chosen was frequently disparaging and pejorative particularly in relation to the personal hygiene and appearance of the poor. Rachel, a 24 year old single mother of three who was attending college part time to train as a chef and who had an NVQ level 1 in cookery, said she would describe a poor person in the following way:

> '...a bit scruffy and probably their personal hygiene wouldn't be – might be a bit smelly and that sort of thing'

Simone, a 23 year old unemployed single parent with 3 children (all of whom were in temporary care), said,

> 'They look sad, scruffy, begging. They beg and stuff like that'

Anita, a 23 year-old young woman who was attending college to learn hairdressing, said a poor person was,

> 'Scruffy, not clean'

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Jess, a 20 year-old unemployed young woman, said 'scruffy' when she was asked what words she would use if she had to describe someone who was poor. Sara, a 25 year old qualified teacher who was working part-time, said the first thing that would come into her head to describe someone who was poor was, 'dirty, in terms of not being able to wash properly and in terms of their clothes as well' she also thought of 'dirty clothes and might be a bit smelly'. Another respondent [R19] who was 19 years old, thought of 'tramp' when asked what word they would use to describe someone who was poor. Fiona, thought she could identify a 'poor' family because,

> *'They are not dressed well...every time you see their kids they're always messy, scruffy, you know, they look malnourished'*

Sara also thought of 'what I see in school and sometimes it really does stand out' when a child is from a poor family. She thought you could identify a poor child because,

> *'their teeth are really bad, like they're brown and got lots of fillings and like you can smell them even before they get to you and their hair is greasy and they've got nits'*

Many other respondents used similar terminology to describe a 'poor' person. Only a minority employed less pejorative terms and imagery which did not refer to cleanliness or hygiene. Naomi, a single young woman who was at college and living with her parents, described a poor person as 'having a lack of things to do'. Ash thought the word that best described someone who was poor was 'weakness'. He went on to explain, 'They have a weakness in them'. Maz thought a poor person was 'humble' while Martin, a 24 year old self-employed young man, thought a poor person 'must have problems to put themselves in that position'. He thought he would describe a poor person as 'unlucky' while Craig, 21 years old, unemployed and living in a hostel, said he would describe someone who was poor as 'someone who hasn't got an opportunity'. Amy, a 22 year-old unemployed single parent thought a poor person 'would probably be sad'.

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Comparators of Poverty

Given that the vast majority of those interviewed were either unemployed, attending training or college or working part-time (and, given that those working part-time tended to be single parents, would probably have been in receipt of means tested benefits) most, if not all, would be defined as 'poor' according to official measures (60% or less of median income before housing costs). However, only three respondents described themselves as 'poor' when they were asked whether they considered that they, or their family, were poor. One of these was a young woman who was unemployed and living in social housing, the other was a 20 year-old unemployed single parent, and the other a 21 year-old unemployed male who was living in a hostel.

Other respondents were more equivocal about defining themselves as poor. This was usually because they associated poverty with destitution (homelessness) or because poverty was something that was associated with 'in other countries'.

Maz, for example, said that when you think of poor people, you think of people in countries like 'Africa and Asia. You think of them as poor more likely because you just see it on the TV like all the charities and stuff'. Simone said, 'I've watched it [on the television] in different countries and stuff like that and I've actually seen that like they've got a toilet that's on the floor, do you know what I mean? Stuff like that. And it's made me realise how lucky that we are'. Using this comparator to judge whether she and her family were poor or not, Simone said, 'I wouldn't say me or my family are poor, we haven't got nothing (*sic*) but I wouldn't say we're poor'. Similarly, Sophie, a 20 year-old unemployed single parent who did consider herself to be poor thought about poverty in terms of 'you know, World Aid, that kind of thing, that's how I'd describe poverty'. Alternatively, the comparators employed were, as described in the section above, in terms of being destitute and homeless. Rachel, a 24 year old single mother of three who was studying at college part-time, thought that being poor meant 'living out on the street, not being in the warmth and having a roof over your head'. When she was asked if she thought she and her family were poor she said they were 'not well off but we're not poor'. Similar sentiments were echoed by several other participants.

Using comparators such as those described above plays an important function for those who are experiencing poverty and deprivation. On the one hand such a device enables them to distance themselves from the stigmatising and disempowering label of 'poverty' (Killeen, 2008; Castell and Thompson, 2007; Hooper et. al. 2007; Dean and Melrose, 1997; Dean, 1992) while on the other it allows them to avoid confronting the depth of deprivation to which they are subject in their everyday lives. Overall then, this enables those who are living in poverty to feel better about their immediate circumstances by thinking 'there are people worse off than me'.

That many respondents did not consider themselves to be 'poor' or associate their own situations with 'poverty' resonates with findings from public consultations on poverty. As Castell and Thompson (2007:11) found 'no-one near to or below the poverty line described themselves as 'poor' or living in poverty'. It also suggests, as Castell and Thompson (2007:iv) have argued, 'The word poverty gives rise to the wrong associations – international issues, absolute rather than relative poverty and historical associations'.

Hard Times: Living through Poverty

Despite failing to describe themselves as poor, most people who were interviewed for this study did say that they, or their families, had to worry about having enough money to cover such things as their rent or bills or that they sometimes did not have sufficient income to meet their personal or social needs. In this sense then, nearly all the participants, or their families, were experiencing 'financial strain' which is a significant feature of 'poverty' (Tomlinson and Walker 2010).

Tanya, for example, said that on her income, 'you can't look after yourself'. She went on to explain,

> *'They give me £50 a week I can't – I don't even eat with that 'cause it's not enough, you paying bills, you paying – by the time you pay your bills you're only left with a bloody tenner'.*

Tanya went on to explain that she could not afford 'proper food', that she could not afford to do up her flat and that she would like 'some new clothes'. Jess also felt that she did not have enough money to live on and that she could not afford to do things like 'going to the cinema. You can't enjoy

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life if you ain't got money; you can't enjoy things if you ain't got money'. Jess experienced this as 'really stressing'. Nicky described her worries about paying her bills, 'I have bills that come out every month, but obviously I'm on income support so I only get a certain amount of money to live on, so it's hard'. Craig also did not think he had enough money to live on but he also had a few friends in a similar situation – that is 'quite a few of them can't afford to eat, can't afford to do anything'. Craig and his friends tended to 'look after each other' but he felt that 'we need to be looked after'. He felt,

> *'It's hard, it's very hard and you have to apply for a crisis loan, sometimes you don't even get a crisis loan. It's just that I'm finding it very, very difficult'.*

Amy explained how difficult she found it to feed herself and her daughter on the money she received to live on,

> *'The money they give me, say £60 a week for her, it costs me that much just to do shopping, you know, and then that doesn't even last a week'*

Sophie also complained that she did not have enough money to meet her basic needs,

> *'I can't even pay my water do you know what I mean? I can barely just pay my gas and electric. Some days I go without electric 'cause it doesn't last; or I go without gas because it doesn't last; can't pay water; can't pay TV licence'.*

Participants also talked about getting into debt as a result of not having enough money to live on week-to-week and the stress that this imposed on them. Fiona explained,

> *'I've had times when I've had no money, I've had times when I've been seriously broke and how to go and borrow because of you know, not having enough money coming in. It's a stress in a way. It's frustrating you know; it's quite frustrating'.*

Fiona recognised that without her debt to pay off she would be better off but there was no alternative to getting into debt to manage her weekly expenditure. Maz explained that his parents sometimes worried about not having enough money to pay for bills but it tended to be his mother rather than his stepfather who did most of the worrying:

> *'It's me and my mum that stresses. Mum will think about everyone together so she stresses more'.*

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When his mum was 'stressing' Maz felt 'scared that she might do something crazy – I don't know, she just might go nuts'.

Rachel also explained that she worried about paying her bills, 'I do get a bit behind with my bills' and she expressed concern that the bailiffs might come and take her stuff. 'All over Christmas it got really hard and I fell behind with my payments'. Simone also explained that after she has paid her bills she has £50 to live on for two weeks. This is not enough to feed herself properly and she sometimes has to go to her father's for a meal. She said, 'It's hard and stuff like that but I just have to get through'. Simone admitted that she gets 'depressed about it'. Amy who talked about how difficult she found it to care adequately for her daughter on her budget also disclosed in the interview that she did not feel she could tell anyone of the stress she was under for fear that her child would be removed from her. She said, 'A lot of people feel that they can't be unwell, or they can't be struggling because they have a fear of someone taking their child from them'. These findings bear out those from other studies which demonstrate that debt, stress and anxiety are a 'normal' experience for those living in poverty.

Living at home with parents did appear to provide a 'cushion' from poverty for some participants – although many were aware that their parents might be facing some financial difficulties (for example, Maz , above). Some of those living at home were also aware that they could not afford to move out from the parental home and live independently and that there were costs such as food, heating bills and so on, that they did not have to worry about because they were living in the parental home.

What should local public services do?

Interviewees were asked what they thought local public services should do to make things better for people, particularly young people, who are living in poverty. When asked this, some participants seemed to be confused between the role of central government, the role of the Local Authority, the role of JobCentre Plus, and the role of other public services. For example, they suggested that the

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council could increase the amount of money they had to live on or create more jobs. Other participants seemed to think of what could be done to improve their particular situation, for example, 'some more green space outside my flat' while another complained about her housing situation (living in a one bedroom, private rented flat with a daughter aged 9 and a baby son) and others wanted the council to 'listen' to them when they go to the council with particular difficulties and to provide the 'help and support' they need. Others suggested the council could lower rents and bills and provide more housing or hostels for homeless people.

A number of specific suggestions in relation to what public services should do were also offered. These included:

➢ Make young people more aware of what help and support is available to them when they are experiencing difficulties

➢ Provide a drop-in where those experiencing financial and/or stress can go to talk to someone in confidence and get help (without fearing that they would have their children removed as a result of admitting to such stress)

➢ Provide workshops that could provide skills in managing money, maximising the effectiveness of the money they have and how to manage debt

➢ Provide funded training opportunities and training which is free

➢ Provide help with knowing how to go about getting a job

➢ Provide training opportunities that would enable single parents to bring their children with them

➢ Provide more childcare and ensure it is flexible so that those who work in the evening can access childcare

➢ Provide free/subsidised/affordable childcare

➢ Provide more parent/child groups that are free to access

➢ Provide opportunities through which those who are unemployed might raise their self-esteem

➢ Provide more youth mentoring schemes

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- Provide more affordable leisure facilities for children, parents and young people
- Provide more youth clubs and opportunities where young people and those who are unemployed can contribute to and feel part of a community
- Provide opportunities for young people to explore creative talents in e.g. music, art and drama
- Provide centres where young people could go for a 'cheap meal' 'where they pay a pound'
- Provide schemes that would help young people get books and other things they might need to pursue education
- Provide financial help for young people who go to college
- Provide a short course explaining to young people the benefits of staying on in education and the consequences of not doing so

The following section of the report discusses the implications of the findings presented above and presents recommendations that result from those findings.

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PART THREE

Implications and Recommendations

It is clear from the data presented above that participants in this study did not, for the most part, consider that they were 'poor' and did not think that 'poverty' described the circumstances of their lives. In this sense, poverty discourse can be understood as disempowering and not something with which these participants wish to be associated. On the other hand, however, it is clear that many participants are experiencing severe levels of 'financial strain' and many are struggling week-to-week simply to provide basic necessities such as enough food and essential services (water, gas, electricity). In one or two cases it was evident that living in such conditions led to overwhelming feelings of utter desperation. Tanya, for example, who did describe herself as poor, told us,

> *'Even when I've been poor all I can say is that I end up really ill, people end up really, really, really ill and can't get track of their lives. They start messing around themselves* (sic) *and not respecting themselves or anything'*

When talking about people who were poor, she said,

> *'They can't go out, they can't eat, they suffer themselves* (sic) *and they'd probably kill themselves* (sic) *something like that, definitely'*

Simone, who did not consider herself to be poor even though 'we haven't got nothing', told us she was suffering from 'depression, fits, anxiety' and was 'self-harming' 'all through not getting the help and support'.

It was clear from these and other accounts provided that living in poverty was a daily grind which, as well as inducing high levels of stress, anxiety and frustration in these participants, was damaging to their self-esteem and undermining their sense of being people who were valued. Having said this, many had aspirations to make their lives better: some hoped that they would be able to return to college and gain some qualifications; some hoped they might be able to pursue Higher Education in the future; others hoped that they would be able to get a 'good job' at some point in the future. Amy had gained a National Diploma in Business and hoped to 'start my own business one day' she

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was not sure what her business might be. Sophie wanted to train to be a nurse and was hoping to access a college course in September 'and work my way up from there'. Craig said he was 'trying to get back to uni' but thought it was 'very hard work' and he was 'looking into training courses at the moment'. Paul, who was unemployed and currently on a drug treatment programme, also hoped to go back to college and said he had evening classes 'set up for September'.

Local public services, therefore, could do much more to support and nurture the aspirations of young people who are single parents and those who are living independently, as well as enabling those who are currently living with parents to successfully make the transition into work and independent living.

Recommendations

The study suggests there are four key strategies that could be developed to address the problems those living in poverty experience: communication, education, prevention, and provision. These are elaborated below.

Communication

Given that the terminology of 'poverty' and 'the poor' does not elicit public sympathy – even amongst those interviewed for this study - and conjures up the 'wrong' connotations in the sense that respondents tended to associate it with destitution, absolute poverty and/or poverty in developing societies, there is an obvious need to change the terminology employed to communicate the problems faced by those in poverty both to people living in poverty and a wider public and to garner public support for anti-poverty measures (see, Hanley, 2009; Castell and Thompson, 2007). Castell and Thompson (2007) suggest terminology such as 'Low Income, Low Opportunity' (LOLI) may be a helpful alternative.

- Using alternative terminology, local public services, should embark on a communication campaign, using traditional and new media, presenting the real-life stories of those living in poverty to engage the wider public in support for anti-poverty measures. Using the voices of

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people who have experience of poverty has been shown to be an effective measure in building anti-poverty campaigns (Hanley, 2009). The intended booklet could be a good vehicle for this.

- Through this campaign, efforts should be made by local public services and Third Sector organisations to engage the public in anti-poverty debates. In doing so, media messages should explain that some people start life with disadvantages and emphasise the difficulties of overcoming those disadvantages. Hanley (2009) suggests that as people experience more job insecurity and financial pressures they become more open to debating the causes of and solutions to poverty. In this sense, the 'cuts' in public sector organisations and elsewhere may provide a golden opportunity to engage the wider public in these debates.

- The communication campaign should also link specific policy interventions to specific solutions to show what in particular can be done to tackle different aspects of the problem.

Education
- Through the communication campaign, local public services (and Third Sector organisations) should aim to educate both the general public and those who are living in poverty about the causes of poverty and the longer term consequences of living in poverty – both for children and adults.

- Efforts should be made to educate the general public and those living in poverty about relative measures of poverty and thus seek to disestablish the view that poverty is associated with destitution or absolute deprivation.

- In explaining the consequences of living in poverty, the costs of NOT tackling poverty should be emphasised. This should take into account the costs of child poverty and the costs to adults of living in poverty. These should emphasise costs to public finances (and hence the

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savings that will be made in the longer term by investing in interventions to reduce poverty in the present). The lifetime public finance costs of the 2008 NEET cohort, for example, are estimated at £13 billion and a £4,000 investment to support a teenage mother can reduce public service costs by nearly £200,000 over a lifetime (Audit Commission, 2010).

- Costs should also emphasise negative outcomes in terms of health and mental health, poor educational achievement, the greater risk of experiencing poverty and unemployment as an adult and so on.

- Those living in poverty, and the general public, should be educated about the greater risk of experiencing poverty for ethnic minority communities and women.

Prevention

- Young people should be made thoroughly aware of the consequences of leaving school without appropriate qualifications. This is probably a message that they need to hear when they are 12-13 years old, and which should be repeated throughout every year they are in secondary school. To reinforce the severity of the consequences facing these young people in the labour market, case study examples that demonstrate the reality of living life on benefits should be presented to them regularly (again, the planned booklet may be a useful tool for this) and/or 'cautionary tales' might be delivered using creative forms such as interactive drama workshops.

- Given that plans to abolish the EMA from summer 2011 have been announced, alternative measures to support young people from the most deprived communities to stay in education should be developed. Those who are at most risk of 'dropping out' need special intervention measures and opportunities to pursue training or vocational courses that will harness and nurture their talents, interests and skills.

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- There is also a case for educating young people about the reality of having children when they do not have the means to support them appropriately. This could be linked to the teenage pregnancy strategy and the economic reality of trying to provide for children while living on benefits should be emphasised (again, the planned booklet may be a useful tool to use for this and again, creative forms, such as interactive drama workshops might be developed to deliver these messages).

- Given that from April 2010 councils have had responsibility for commissioning educational provision for 16-19year olds, this provides opportunities to tailor provision, target the most vulnerable and meet the needs of local circumstances (Audit Commission, 2010).

- It may be possible to engage young people who have left school without qualifications and spent several years unemployed to go into schools and talk about their own experiences (this would be good for young people to whom the messages are delivered and to those asked to do the delivery).

- Parents bringing up their children in poverty need to be made aware of the potential futures awaiting their children and the long-term consequences for children of living in poverty – again, creative mediums may be the most appropriate means to get messages such as these across.

Provision

In terms of the suggestions participants in this study have made about what services and support they would like to see, there are some projects and interventions that might make a real difference to people currently living in poverty. To deliver these interventions, local public services could perhaps work in partnership with Third Sector organisations and the Private Sector. It might be possible to make some of the provision suggested below available through, for example, interactive websites – for example, an on-line quiz type exercise might allow young people to test their 'money management' skills.

- Development of apprenticeships and opportunities for acquiring skills that will lead to 'proper work'

- Work placement schemes might be considered

- There is a clear need for affordable childcare

- Workshops that provide advice about money management and dealing with debt could be provided free of charge. This is important given that research has shown that children growing up in poor households are less likely to acquire skills in money management (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2002)

- Linked to the last point, workshops that might teach young people how to cook nutritional food on a low budget would be helpful

- Young people might be given more opportunities for voluntary participation in community projects (to raise their self-esteem as well as to increase their skills base)

- A drop-in where young people experiencing similar types of difficulties might come together to discuss their anxieties, concerns and worries and receive advice about how to deal with them would be useful for many

- CV writing workshops that encourage young people to focus on the skills and strengths they possess, rather than what they lack, would be useful. These could include role-playing exercises

- Subsidised or free access to leisure facilities (e.g. sports halls, cinema) and to child/adult activities would be appreciated by many – to take advantage of this facility young people may need subsidised travel

- Subsidised travel may also be helpful for those wishing to engage in college courses or training

- Making greater use of youth mentoring schemes might be helpful – these could perhaps involve an element of financial mentoring

- More (free) provision to engage in a range of activities through the youth service

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- A 'youth advocate group' who might lobby on behalf of young people and young parents living with low income and low opportunity might be helpful (this could possibly be constituted by a group of young volunteers who have experienced poverty and deprivation themselves). This group could be trained/supported with resources from the local authority and act as a focal point/central point of contact for young people experiencing disadvantage so that they know exactly where to go when they are experiencing difficulty

Obviously all of the above have cost and resource implications and given the challenges facing public service budgets at the present time it may not be possible to implement everything recommended above. Some elements would carry fewer cost implications than others, however, and the implementation of just some of these measures would lead to longer term financial savings to the public purse.

Conclusion

This study involved young adults aged 16-25 years old. The needs and experiences of this age group are of course different to younger children. The council may then consider repeating the exercise with younger teenagers (12-16years old) and with younger children (7-11years old). A study of the experiences of both these age groups would, in all likelihood, reveal different priorities and needs and would guide the development of policy in relation to these younger age groups.

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