

It's not a choice

An analysis of young people's perceptions of poverty and rights

October 2015



Scottish Youth Parliament

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The report was authored by Gareth Brown, Public Affairs Coordinator at the Scottish Youth Parliament in autumn 2015. The research process was managed by Rebecca Marek, Parliamentary and Campaign Officer at the Scottish Youth Parliament in spring 2015.

Foreword

The Scottish Youth Parliament exists to listen to and recognise the issues of importance to Scotland's young people. Together, we work to ensure that the voices of Scotland's young people are heard, loud and clear, by local, national, and international decision makers.

Therefore, I am delighted that we are able to launch **It's not a choice**. As the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people, this research is fundamentally about the voices of young people in our communities. I am proud that we are putting those voices at the heart of discussions about poverty, and how to tackle it, in Scotland.

When the Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) voted overwhelmingly to campaign for child and youth poverty at our National Sitting in October 2014, it was a clear, strong, and resounding message from MSYPs, and the young people they represent in communities across Scotland, that enough was enough. Young people here in Scotland believe that it is unacceptable for child and youth poverty to exist in a country as wealthy as ours.

One of the key elements of this research is that it was youth-led, just as our organisation is youth-led. Led by our MSYPs, it serves as yet another reminder of the power of lived experience, and is again another fantastic example of how MSYPs are ensuring that the voices of Scotland's young people are being heard and their rights realised.

We often see and hear poverty, or people who live in poverty, presented in a negative light by our national media. From stories in the printed press to portrayals on television, the negative stigma often attached to child and youth poverty only contributes to the problem.

It's not a choice seeks to gain a better understanding of how Scotland's young people perceive poverty, its causes, and impacts, and what more should be done to tackle it. The findings demonstrate that young people have accurate understanding of poverty, who it affects, and its causes and impacts. The report also outlines that young people think that both the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government need to do more.

Importantly, the report also highlights that young people see a clear link between poverty and their rights, in particular that the very existence of child and youth poverty is a failure in the protection of those rights.



Jordan Linden MSYP
Chair of the Scottish Youth
Parliament



Crucially for me, our research shows with certainty that Scotland's young people do not think that poverty is a choice. We at the Scottish Youth Parliament hope that the findings in **It's not a choice** will provide valuable insights as we continue to discuss the best approaches to tackling child and youth poverty in Scotland, and the stigmas associated with it.

It's an eternal privilege to serve as the Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, an organisation that continues to champion the views of young people in Scotland, and campaign to affect the change they want to see. I'm delighted to share **It's not a choice** with you, and I thank you for your support of the Scottish Youth Parliament

Poverty isn't a choice, let's work to change the attitudes of those who think it is, and eliminate it once and for all.

It's not a choice seeks to gain a better understanding of how Scotland's young people perceive poverty, its causes, and impacts, and what more should be done to tackle it.

What we found

The findings from **It's not a choice** show that young people:

1

Understand who is affected by poverty.

6

Display a lack of awareness about what governments are doing to tackle poverty among young people.

2

Do not believe that people are in poverty solely because of their choices, and are less likely to believe this is the case than the wider population.

7

Believe the solutions to poverty reside in increasing vocational education, paying the living wage, improving further and higher education, providing affordable childcare, and improving schools in deprived areas.

3

Have a strong understanding of the causes of poverty.

8

Believe governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people.

4

Strongly recognise and understand the emotional, social, and financial impacts of poverty among young people.

9

Believe the views of children and young people must be listened to by decision-makers when deciding how to tackle poverty.

5

Believe governments do not spend enough money tackling poverty.

10

See poverty and the defence of their rights, or lack thereof, as being linked.

1

Introduction

1 Introduction

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people. Among the strongest youth representative structures of its type in the world, the Scottish Youth Parliament exists to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues of importance to them, and to campaign for the change they wish to see.¹

Our current campaign, POVERTY: See It Change It, seeks to raise awareness of child and youth poverty in Scotland, within the context of the rights of children and young people.

As an organisation, our ethos and values are fundamentally grounded in rights, and more specifically the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As such, we seek to promote meaningful participation among young people in local and national policy making. In line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, we believe this is a fundamental right, and therefore it has profound importance for our work.

In 2015, Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) identified the need to develop a more nuanced understanding of how young people perceive poverty, including its causes, its impacts, and what policy responses should be used to address it within the context of their rights.

Furthermore, as well as identifying a research gap in this regard, MSYPs also noted the importance and value of this research being youth-led, to the wider children's rights and participation agenda in Scotland.

The aim of this report is to outline the findings of a survey conducted by MSYPs with young people about their views, namely concerning:

Their understanding and perceptions of poverty, including who it affects, the causes and the impacts;

Their views on the approaches adopted by governments to tackle poverty; and,

Their perceptions of their rights, and the relationship between rights and poverty.

Firstly, the report reviews the emerging trends and policy landscape in relation to poverty in Scotland, in order to present a context for the findings. Following this, the report then presents the findings from the survey that Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament conducted with young people in their communities. Finally, the report highlights a number of key messages and discussion points.

The findings of this report make it clear that young people recognise the negative effects poverty has on families, children, and young people, and that they strongly believe governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people, and involve them in efforts to tackle poverty.

The scale and scope of the survey is modest to ensure as many young people as possible could participate within the short timescales, therefore the primary objective of this research is to ensure the voices of young people are heard, as opposed to challenge existing literature or presenting concrete policy recommendations. It is hoped the findings will provide some valuable new insights into the views of young people, and provide a new rights-based context in which policy responses to child and youth poverty should be considered.

¹ Scottish Youth Parliament, About SYP – www.syp.org.uk

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Context and background

2 Context and background

In Scotland, more than one in five (210,000) of Scotland's children live in poverty; this figure is much higher than the rest of the UK and many other European countries.² There is an extensive body of research pertaining to the definition of child and youth poverty, its causes, impacts, and policy responses. This section reviews some of this existing work to provide the context in which the insights of children and young people should be considered.

Definitions of child and youth poverty and emerging trends

The Child Poverty Act 2010 (the 2010 Act) sets out legally binding targets against four measures, which effectively define poverty in terms of: relative poverty; absolute poverty; combined low income and material deprivation; and persistent poverty. The 2010 Act also: places a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure the targets are met by 2020; establishes the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC) which reports on progress annually; and places a duty on the devolved administrations to produce regional strategies.³

However, recent publications, most notably by the Institute of Fiscal Studies and the SMCPC itself, have shown that the targets set out in the 2010 Act are likely to be missed by a considerable margin, with relative poverty actually increasing over the decade.⁴ Evidence suggests that in Scotland specifically, the number of children living in poverty is expected to rise by between 50,000 and 100,000 by 2020.⁵

The UK Government recently consulted on changes to the way in which child poverty is defined and assessed to encompass a wider range of measures. Following the election of a majority Conservative Government in May 2015, major changes to the definition and measurement of child and youth poverty were announced, which included the proposal to scrap the legislative targets outlined in the 2010 Act.⁶

Although there are legislative obligations on the Scottish Government and Parliament as a result of the 2010 Act, the Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland outlines a set of outcomes, principles, and a measurement framework which go above and beyond the legal obligations, namely; Pockets, Prospects, and Places.⁷ Although the introduction of a measurement framework is welcome among many children's charities and interest groups in Scotland as a positive step, there is growing concern about the lack of an action plan to accompany the strategy, which threatens to undermine progress.⁸

² Scottish Government (2015), Latest 2013/14 Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland figures, Table A1: Relative Poverty in Scottish Households 1994/5 to 2013/14, www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/06/7453/10

³ Child Poverty Act (2010), <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/9/contents>

⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014), Child and Working Age Poverty in Northern Ireland over the next decade, <http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn144.pdf> pg. 27 table B.2

⁵ Scottish Government (2014) Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0044/00445863.pdf>,

⁶ Guardian (2015), Tories have redefined poverty as not just about having no money, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jul/01/tories-redefined-child-poverty-no-longer-finances>

⁷ Scottish Government (2014), (n5) pg.12 and pg. 53

⁸ Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights (2014), State of Children's Rights in Scotland, <http://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/pdfs/SOCRRTTogetherReport2014.pdf> pg. 72 Poverty in Scottish Households 1994/5 to 2013/14, www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/06/7453/10

Who is affected by poverty?

Poverty can affect anyone and, as the cost of living rises, especially for essentials such as food and fuel, more people are likely to live in poverty at some point in their lives.⁹

Certain groups of people are more at risk of living in poverty than others. Families with children account for 37% of households living in poverty, which is the largest percentage of any group. This is followed by lone parent households (16%), single men without children (15%), pensioners (13%), couples without children (11%), and single women without children (9%).¹⁰ Statistics published in the revised Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland, identify families and single parents with more than three children, families with a severely disabled background, families from an ethnic minority background, and families containing adults with low qualifications as the groups most at risk.¹¹

Families with children are more likely to experience poverty than people without children, as the cost of living increases for families when children are born, while family income may decrease due to parents working less and/or due to the costs associated with childcare. Similarly, lone parents are twice as likely to experience poverty than a two-parent family.¹²

Households where only one adult works are also more likely to experience poverty than households where two or more adults work. In 2009/10, families with one or more workless parents were seven times more likely to live in poverty than those families where both parents had jobs.¹³

Approximately a third of adults with a disability are living in low-income households, which is twice the rate for adults without a disability. Additionally, 60% of working age adults with a disability are not in paid work, compared to 15% of those adults without a disability. A third of these adults want to work, but are unable to find a job.¹⁴

Additionally, certain ethnic minorities are more likely to live in poverty, as workplace discrimination may play a role in decreasing income.¹⁵

Causes, impacts and public perception of child and youth poverty

Child poverty in particular is caused by a range of issues, which include low wages and underemployment, worklessness, and inadequate social security benefits.¹⁶ In 2012/13, 59% of children in poverty lived in households with at least one adult in employment. Therefore, recent trends suggest that employment is not a guaranteed path out of poverty, especially with changes to the quality and nature of work (e.g. part-time work, and zero hour contracts).

Children and young people who live in poverty go without many of life's necessities.¹⁷ Half of children in the poorest income quintile are materially deprived, with 13% of children living in homes where their parent(s) or carer(s) earn less than the living wage. Almost a third of children who live in the lowest income decile live in a home that is not considered to be in a good state of repair, with over 200,000 living in homes that are damp, 350,000 living in cold homes

⁹ Child Poverty Action Group, Who lives in poverty?, <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/who-lives-poverty>

¹⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014), A UK Without Poverty, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/a-uk-without-poverty>, pg. 15-18

¹¹ Scottish Government (2014), (n7) pg. 8-9

¹² CPAG (n9)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ CPAG Scotland, Child Poverty in Scotland, <http://www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Prince's Trust (2011), Broke, Not Broken: Tackling Youth Poverty and the Aspiration Gap, http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/pdf/PovertyReport_170511.pdf, pg. 7-8 - 10% of young people from the UK's poorest families did not have their own bed while growing up. 13% reported that their school uniform was rarely washed. 29% had few or no books in their home, and 28% did not have access to a computer.

in the winter, and 50,000 living in households that cannot afford heat.¹⁸ Furthermore, 30,000 children live in families that cannot regularly afford healthy meals.¹⁹

The negative stigma for those living in poverty can have a detrimental impact, especially among children and young people. Over a fifth of young people from deprived homes believe that few or none of their life goals are achievable, compared to just 5% of young people from affluent families.²⁰ A quarter of young people from poor homes believe that individuals from their background do not succeed in life.²¹ A recent report published by the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, entitled *The Cost of a School Day*, reports that many children are aware of the budgetary pressures faced by families, and note that stigma associated with low incomes can affect friendships in the school environment.²²

Beyond the effects of negative stigma, growing up in poverty can undermine the health, wellbeing, and educational attainment of children and young people. Children who live in poverty lag 10 to 13 months behind their more affluent peers in terms of attainment by the age of five.²³ Recent work with children and young people in a report entitled *Learning Lessons*, produced by Save the Children and Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, highlighted that children and young people are aware of the impact of not having money on their future choices.²⁴

Three-year-olds in households with incomes below £10,000 are two-and-a-half times more likely to suffer chronic illness than those children in households with earnings over £52,000.²⁵ Young people living in poverty are more likely to grow up feeling stressed and depressed, and face bullying from their peers. They are six times as likely to feel that everyone puts them down, and more than three times as likely to feel depressed all or most of the time than those from affluent backgrounds.²⁶

There is evidence to suggest that the causes and impacts of child and youth poverty are often misunderstood. A study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation about public attitudes towards poverty found that participants cited three general causes for poverty:²⁷

- Current economic and structural causes, such as cost of living, lack of jobs, and in-work poverty;
- Long-term structural causes leading to a lack of aspiration and opportunity; and
- Causes relating to individuals, either within or outside their own control.

Often, individual explanations of poverty are more common than structural explanations, and attitudes about this have hardened in recent years. In the UK in 2010, 23% of people believed that people live in poverty due to laziness or lack of willpower, while 21% believed it was due to injustice in society.²⁸

¹⁸ Cited in Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights (2014), (n8), pg. 73

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Prince's Trust (2011), (n17), pg. 7-8

²¹ Ibid

²² CPAG Scotland (2015), *The Cost of a School Day*, [http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Scot-Cost-Of-School-Day-Report\(Oct15\)_1.pdf](http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Scot-Cost-Of-School-Day-Report(Oct15)_1.pdf), pg. 6

²³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014), *Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish education*, www.jrf.org.uk/publications/closing-attainment-gap-scottish-education

²⁴ Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and Save the Children (2014), *Learning Lessons: Young People's Views on Poverty and Education in Scotland*, <http://www.cypcs.org.uk/ufiles/Learning-Lessons.pdf>, pg. 3-5

²⁵ End Child Poverty (2008), *Intergeneration links between child poverty and health in the UK*, <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/files/ECP%20Health%20Summary.pdf>, pg. 3-4

²⁶ Prince's Trust (2011), (n17) pg. 7-8

²⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014), *Public Attitudes Towards Poverty*, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/public-attitudes-towards-poverty>, pg. 5-6

²⁸ Scottish Government (2015), *Public Attitudes to Poverty, Inequality, and Welfare in Scotland and Britain*, <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/03/2695/downloads>, pg. 11

According to the 2013 Scotpulse survey, accurate knowledge of poverty rates is low. However, there is a high degree of consensus that child poverty should be tackled, and acknowledgement that it exists in Scotland.²⁹ Although three quarters believed that the responsibility to tackle child poverty lay with governments, only just over a quarter of respondents felt that it was caused by structural issues, such as access to housing, or insufficient support through welfare payments. Almost three quarters of respondents thought the main causes of poverty pertained to individuals, such as unwillingness to work, or drug and alcohol misuse, which was cited as the most common perceived cause in Scotland.³⁰

A rights-based perspective

There is increasing emphasis in Scotland by non-governmental organisations, charities, and policy makers on viewing child and youth poverty as a failure to protect the rights of children and young people. Recent legislative and policy developments, notably the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, which defines wellbeing in law and places duties on Government and Public Bodies to report against progress on promoting rights, have taken steps to frame policy responses to child and youth poverty within the context of wellbeing and rights.³¹

The rights of children and young people who live in poverty are not respected or protected. Under Articles 27 and 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have a right to an adequate standard of living to meet their physical and mental needs, and to assistance from the government for those who are in need.³²

Although there is considerable evidence and literature in relation to public attitudes to child and youth poverty, and direct consultation with young people in relation to poverty and education through the Learning Lessons and Cost of the School Day reports, there is scope for wider research on young people's understanding of poverty, its causes and impacts, and the policy responses that should be used to tackle it within this rights based context.

As well as build on existing work, this report is a modest attempt to address this gap.

²⁹ Ibid, pg.13 82% believing it to be a "very important" and 16% believing it to be quite important when asked if tackling child poverty is important and 55% believing there to be "quite a lot" and 34% believing there to be "some" when asked how much child poverty existed in Scotland.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/8/contents/enacted>

³² Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights (n6) pg. 69

3

Research findings

3.1 Our Approach

The research for **It's not a choice** was conducted between 23rd February 2015 and 13th April 2015. The views of young people were gathered using an online survey, administered through Survey Monkey, which included a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions. The questions were developed through collaboration with anti-poverty organisations, organisations from the children and young people's sector, and the democratically elected Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs).

Our approach was predicated on developing a research process that would produce robust findings, but also ensuring that the voices of young people remained the most important objective. Therefore, the process was designed to be peer-led and young person friendly, ensuring that as many young people could participate as possible.

The responsibility for collecting responses lay with MSYPs through promoting the link to the survey through their social media channels, and engaging young people in their communities with hard copies of the survey. The Scottish Youth Parliament also engaged with other organisations who work with children and young people to disseminate the survey.

Although the purpose of the survey was to gather the views of young people in general, the survey asked participants to select whether they lived in a family, or if they lived on their own. The survey groups allowed some questions to be particular to a young person's experiences, e.g. "Why do you think families with children are in poverty?" and "Why do you think young people are in poverty?".³³

In total, 910 young people, aged 12-25, from a range of backgrounds participated in the survey.³⁴

From the 910, 85% (776) stated that they live in a family, and 15% (134) stated that they lived alone. Although answering each question was optional, and participants were not compelled to complete the whole survey, a substantial majority of participants responded to each question both overall, and across each section.³⁵

The findings were grouped thematically using data and text analysis, and are presented in the following sections:³⁶

Understanding poverty – who is affected, why does it occur, what are the causes?

Impacts of poverty – what are the emotional, social and financial impacts of poverty?

Approaches to tackling poverty – do governments spend enough tackling poverty, and what are the priority policy responses?

Rights and Poverty – do governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people, and do governments need to listen to their views about tackling poverty?

³³ Three other questions varied both in question and answer options depending on whether young people lived in a family or on their own

³⁴ The participants varied in age, with 14% (114) aged 12-14, 45% (378) aged 15-17, 26% (277) aged 18-21, and 15% (221) aged 22-25.

³⁵ Across all questions, response rates varied from 66%-92% overall. When comparing responses rates against survey sections, there was no significant difference between the two sections.

³⁶ Where the questions are the same across both the groups, i.e. children and young people who said they either live on their own or in a family, and there are no significant differences in views, the findings are presented together.

3.2 Understanding poverty

This section explores the views of young people in relation to who is affected by poverty, why poverty exists, and its key causes.

3.2.1 Who is affected by poverty?

There was a strong consensus across both groups that appeared to recognise that poverty can affect people from all backgrounds.³⁷

One participant believed that,

“Poverty can affect everyone and crosses all labels”.

Another participant noted that,

“Poverty is ingrained within our society and can affect people across all sectors.”

Not unexpectedly, the three groups which featured prominently, across both survey groups, were those who are unemployed, families, and children and young people the most.³⁸

Participants also detailed groups of young people they believed would be especially affected by poverty, including:

- Young carers;
- Young people with few qualifications;
- Young people estranged from their families and communities (such as LGBT+ young people, and runaways); and
- Young people in care and care leavers.

The types of families participants believe would be affected included:

- Families on a low income or with low wage earners;
- Families with carers;
- Large families; and
- Families living on benefits.

³⁷ Participants in both groups were asked “Which groups in society do you think poverty affects the most?”

³⁸ Other common answers included: refugees or asylum seekers; single parents; single people; those with a disability or long-term illness; older people; students and those on benefits; families who live in areas of multiple deprivation; families with a member with a substance dependency; and young families.

““ All groups in society that are not upper class have the potential to be affected by poverty – poverty does not discriminate based on gender, race, etc...”

““ I think if you're in poverty, it doesn't really matter what group you fall into: Poverty doesn't discriminate. In saying this, children are more vulnerable as they are limited more in terms of how they can improve their situation...”

““ A lot of people from all backgrounds suffer from poverty. Specifically families, single mothers, refugees, school leavers, university graduates, farmers, and the disabled, and many able bodied workers. I feel it is often related to geographical location and local investment in the economy.”

““ The first thought when the word 'poverty' is said is an African child starving and dying of a tropical disease. However, I think it is important that people realise poverty occurs everywhere.”

3.2.2 Why are families and young people in poverty?

Following the question about who is affected by poverty, participants were asked why families and young people were in poverty. The four response options were because of:

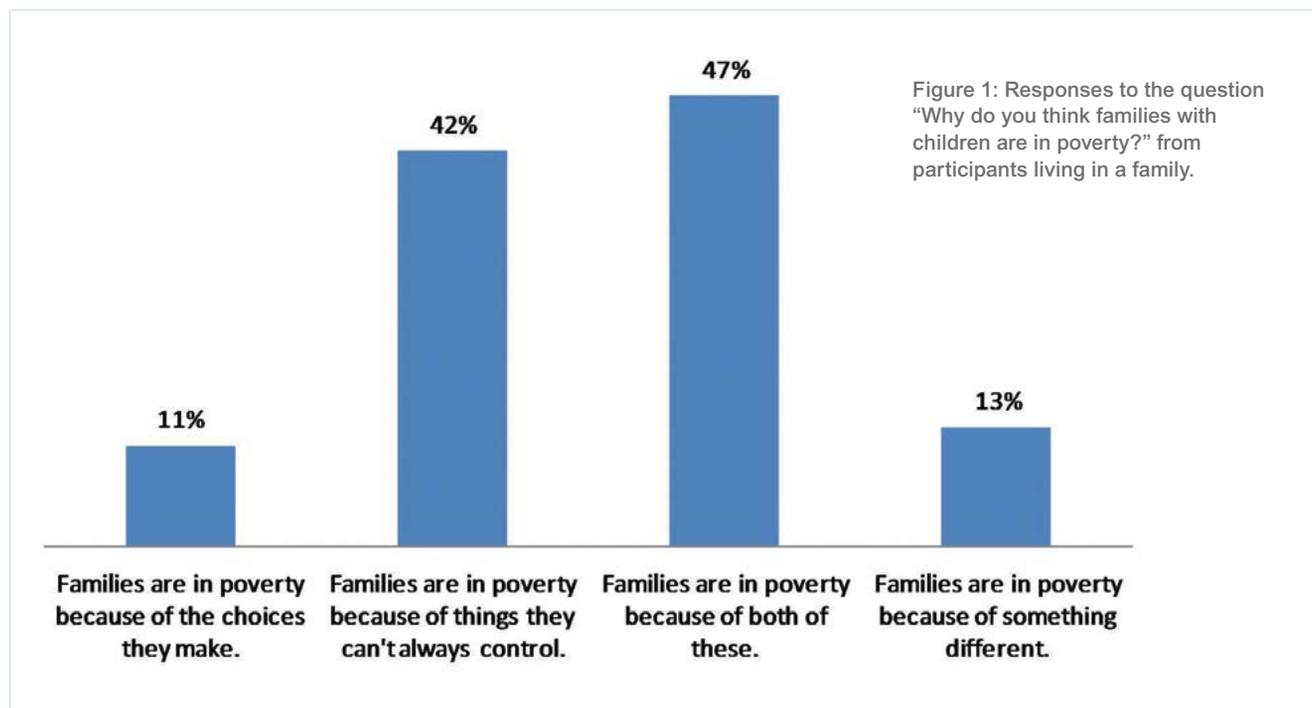
- choices they make;
- things they cannot always control;
- both of these; or
- something different.

Participants were also asked to explain their answer.

There was a strong consensus across both groups, almost 90%, that families and young people are in poverty because of things they cannot control, and a combination of things they cannot control and the choices they make. Slightly more young people who lived on their own (48%), thought that young people were in poverty “because of things they can’t always control.”

However, perhaps more significantly, only 11% in each group thought that living in poverty was solely due to choices made.

The responses for the participants who identified as living in a family are shown in Figure 1.



Participants who believe families and young people are in poverty due to circumstances they can't always control identified various reasons including:

- The effects of low wages;
- Unstable income;
- The rising cost of living; and
- Disability, illness, and life changes (i.e. births, deaths, and divorce).

“ People are in poverty because they have lots of things to pay such as loans, tax, buying food. In order to pay for these things you need money and in order to get money you need a job, unfortunately there is not a lot of good jobs around.”

“ My mum tries very hard to make ends meet and no matter how hard she tries, we struggle to pay the bills.”

“ Many families are in poverty because of government policy they can't control and because their wages are sadly not enough for them.”

Participants who believe families are in poverty solely because of the choices they make identified reasons such as:

- Irresponsible spending;
- Drug and alcohol misuse; and
- Having a large family.

“ I have seen TV programmes where people have designer things and x-boxes but they can't even afford to pay the bills.”

“ Some don't try as hard as they can to get jobs or try hard enough to keep one. They also don't always prioritise the money they do have, using the benefits or money they get for unnecessary things such as alcohol or cigarettes.”

“ Because it's up to them what they chose. If they cannot afford money and have kids, they are the ones putting themselves in danger.”

““ My father cares for me 3 out of 4 days per week and if it wasn't for my disability, he wouldn't have had to give up his 2nd job... Often things happen that people can't control, which can leave them worse off money wise.”

““ ...I am disabled, my mum is disabled and my dad is a missing person. We rely on benefits to live.”

““ ...My sister fell pregnant at 18 and had to put her education on hold – not only did she have one baby, she had twins! Affording to raise two babies as a teenager has been difficult for her and she has found that even though she makes good choices for her family, she does not have much money at all.”

3.2.3 What causes poverty?

Participants were asked their views on the causes of poverty against a range of options.

Overall, participants across both groups believe the causes of poverty to be largely economic or choice-based, and are less likely to recognise relationship-based causes or demographics. The perceived causes of poverty for both respondents, living by themselves and those living in a family situation, are displayed in Figures 2 and 3.³⁹

Although the questions were not identical for both groups, the young people who lived by themselves were less likely to view drug and alcohol misuse and making poor choices about money as a cause of poverty, than those who lived in a family. Being out of work and in low paid work featured prominently across both groups.

Participants also expanded on their views of some of the causes of poverty:

“ Gender – women tend to find it harder to gain higher paid, long term work.”

“ I think the education system in communities compared to that in more affluent areas is a big factor. Young people in disadvantaged areas are not given the same chances as those from middle and upper class families.”

“ Going to uni and not being able to meet basic living costs so you get into debt you can't pay, take a job, and then flunk because of the pressure when you should have just been able to focus on studying. This is not a problem for people coming from better off families.”

“ Being self-employed you are not entitled to help no matter how much money you have. If you are working hard 40 hours a week to be successful, which is a slow task, you will be told you aren't entitled because you are working too.”

³⁹ Different options were given to the two participant groups to reflect their different experiences and living situations. The graphs are displayed in order of the most popular response, as opposed to the order in which they appeared in the survey.

Figure 2: Responses to the question “Do you think the following situations or experiences cause family poverty?” from participants living in a family

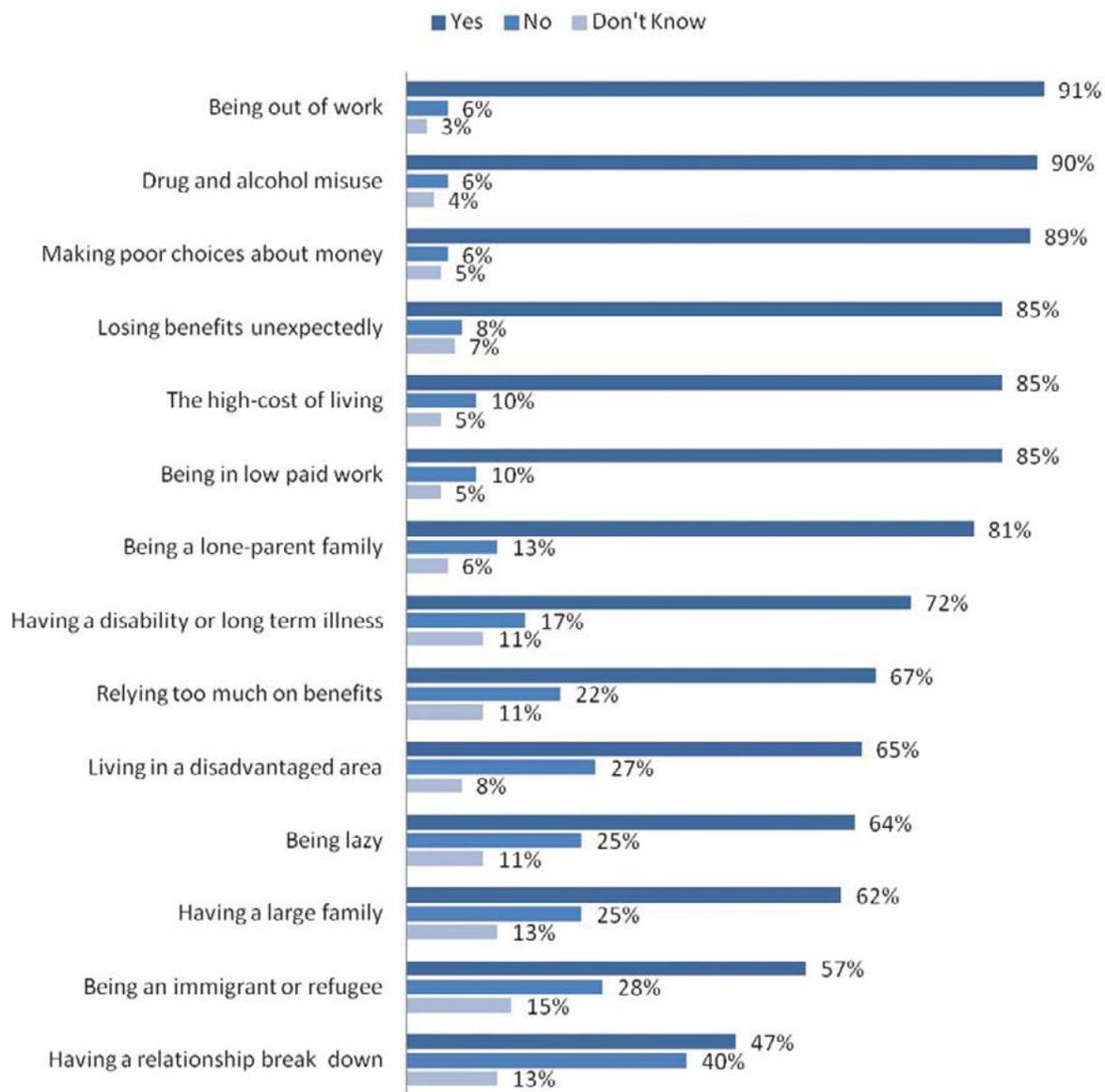
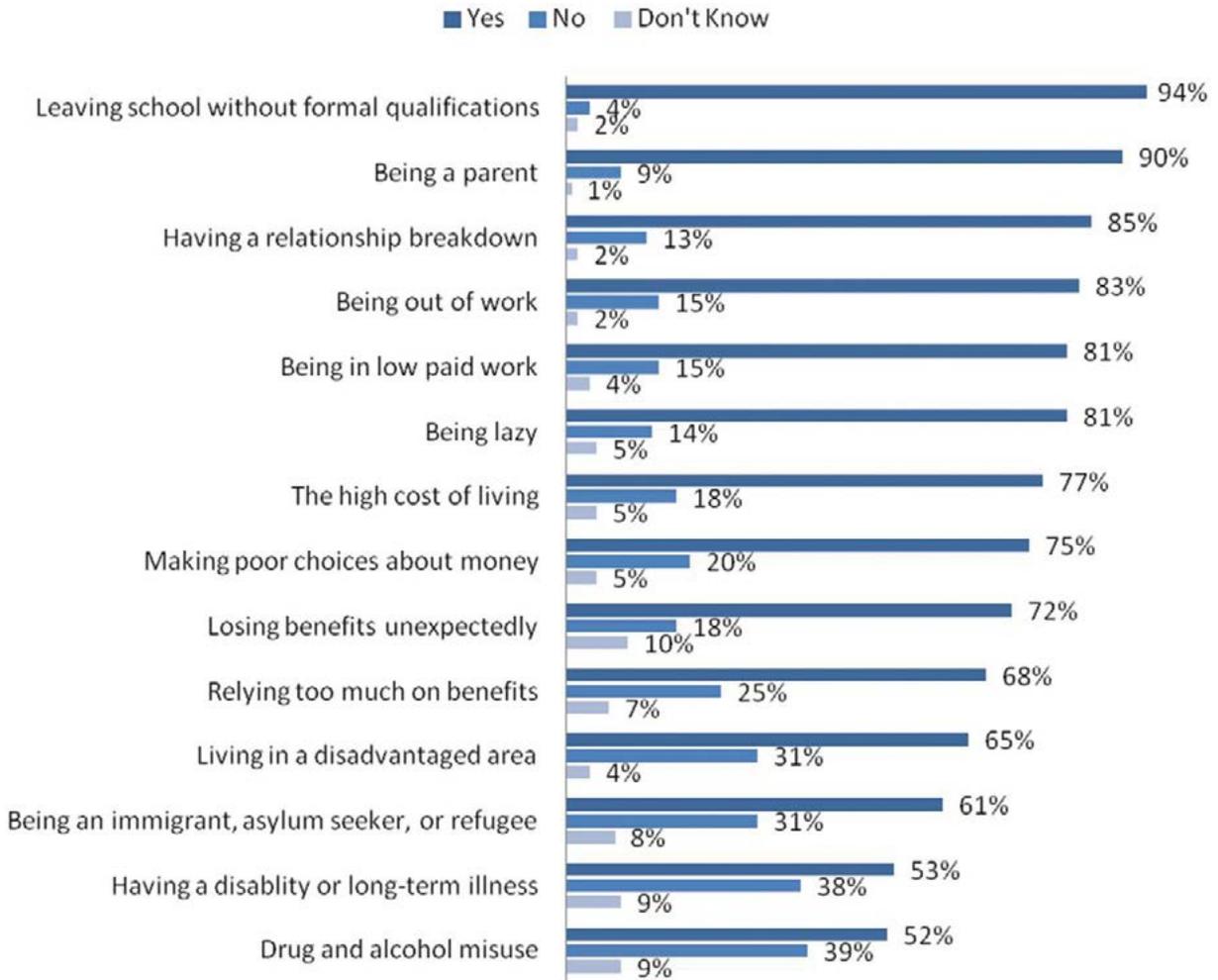


Figure 3: Responses to the question “Do you think the following situations or experiences cause young people to live in poverty?” from participants living on their own.



3.3 The impacts of poverty

This section explores the views of young people in relation to the emotional, social, and financial impacts of poverty on young people and families.

3.3.1 What are the emotional and social impacts?

Both groups of participants were asked to list some of the feelings that those living in poverty may experience.

There was a strong consensus across participants who lived in a family and who lived alone that the emotional and social impacts of living in poverty are likely to be profoundly negative. Feelings which featured prominently across both groups were “depression”, “sadness”, “stress or anxiety”, and “anger”.⁴⁰

One participant noted:

“ Many people in poverty suffer from depression due to awful circumstances. Feelings of lesser-beings, inferior to rich people, left out, excluded, embarrassed, ashamed, secretive, and unpopular.”

The children and young people who participated were also asked how likely it would be that those living in poverty would experience a range of feelings. The results are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Significantly, but perhaps not unexpectedly, participants who lived on their own reported feeling “more likely” to experience the various negative feelings than those who lived in a family.

⁴⁰ Other named emotional impacts included: shame or embarrassment, despair or desperation, isolation, loneliness, helplessness, frustration, fear, hopelessness, and shame.

Figure 4: Responses to the question “How likely is it that families with children living in poverty would experience the following?” from participants who live in a family.

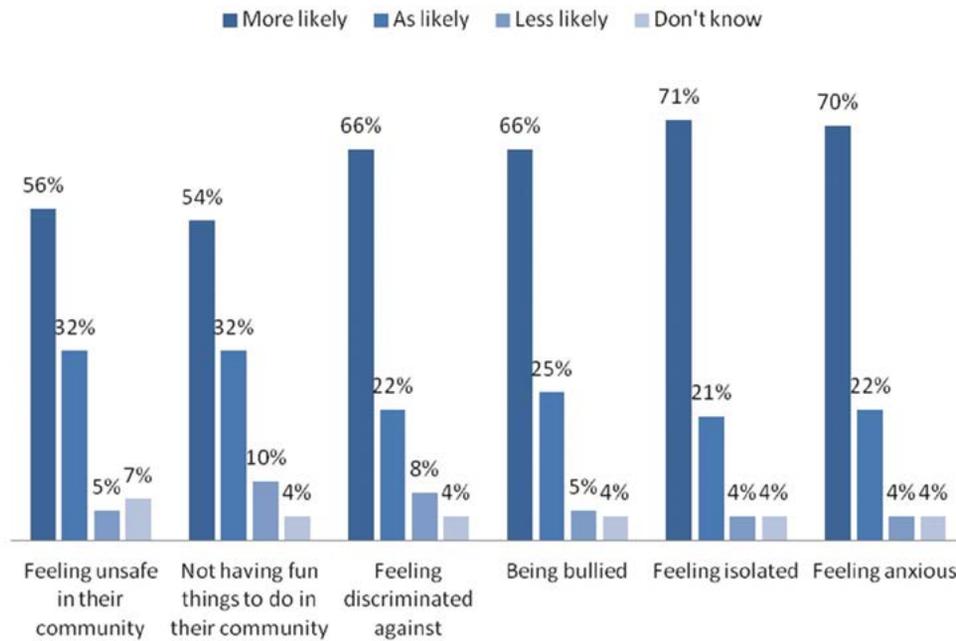
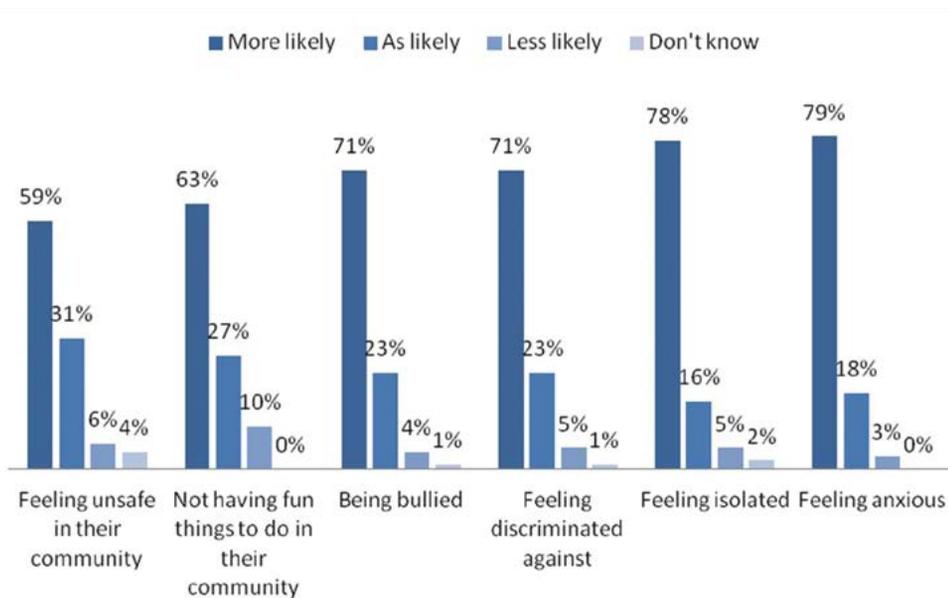


Figure 5: Responses to the question “How likely is it that young people living in poverty would experience the following?” from participants who live on their own.



3.3.2 What are the financial impacts?

Participants from both groups were asked to rate how difficult families/young people would find affording a number of different items.

An overwhelming majority of young people from both living situations believed affording “nice things like holidays and name-brand clothes” to be the most difficult.⁴¹ The responses from both sets of participants are shown in Figure 6 and 7.

Perhaps surprising, affording “basics” (food, clothes, heating) featured among the lowest options that both groups of participants ranked as “Very Difficult.” Unsurprisingly, child care and transportation featured higher on the scale of items that would be very difficult to afford for those young people living by themselves.

Some participants illustrated their views on the financial impacts further:

“ In work poverty is a major factor for families. The minimum wage is not enough for families to have a comfortable life...It affects the economy from the bottom up... money is spent on Trident when families are in desperate poverty and relying on food banks.”

“ If you’re living in poverty, then the last thing you should be worrying about is the latest Stone Island jacket and this question highlights the main reasons why people are in poverty – because they don’t have their priorities straight.”

“ These things can vary depending on the area and what services are available. Living within a city may mean there is more affordable childcare than in a rural area, however rent could be considerably higher.”

⁴¹ The options for each group varied slightly to account for different costs associated with the different living situations.

Figure 6: Responses to the question “How might families with children living in poverty find affording the follow?” from participants living in a family.

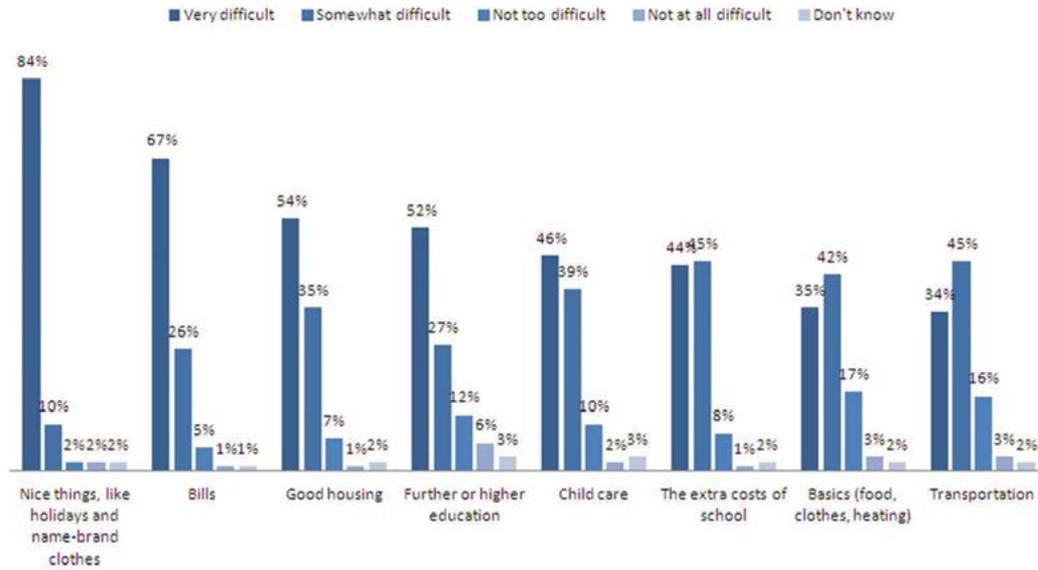
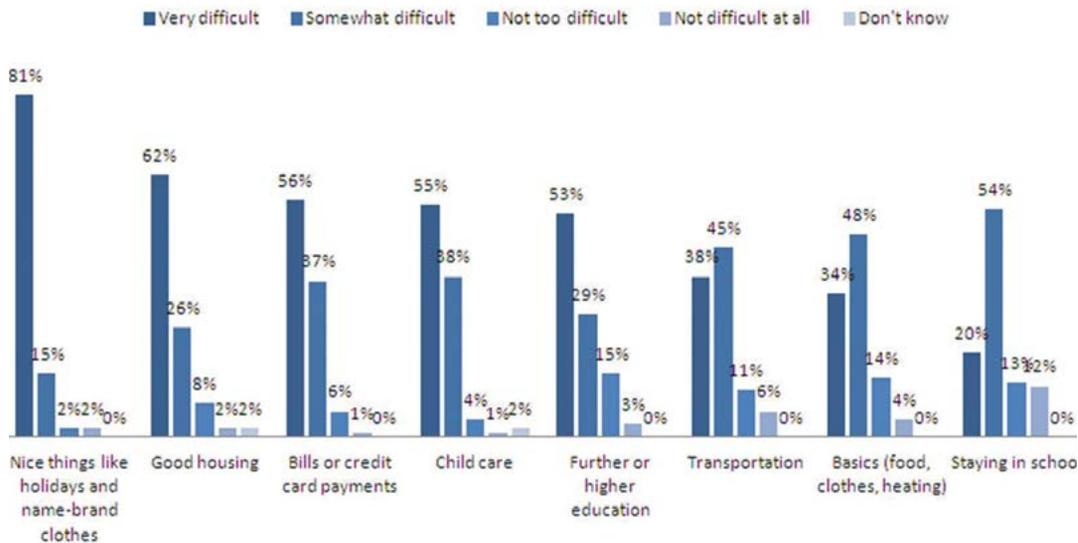


Figure 7: Responses to the question “How might young people living in poverty find affording the following?” from participants living by themselves.



3.4 Approaches to tackling poverty

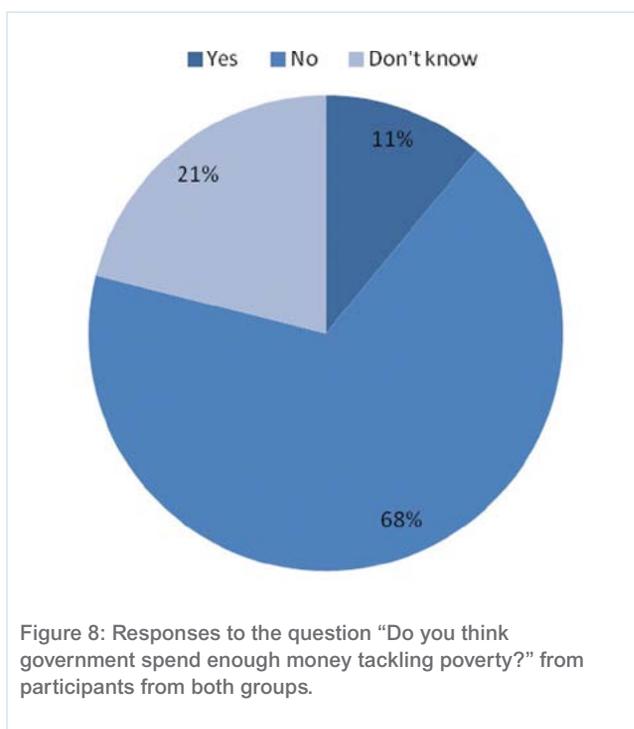
This section explores what young people think about the approaches for tackling poverty, and whether governments are doing enough in this regard.

3.4.1 Do governments spend enough money tackling poverty?

Participants were asked whether they feel that governments spend enough money on tackling poverty.⁴²

A substantial majority of young people believe that governments do not spend enough money tackling poverty (68%), although a significant percentage of young people responded “Don’t know” (21%).⁴³ The responses from both groups are shown in Figure 8.

The participants who answered this question also commented that they wished governments would spend money on ending the cycle of poverty, improving opportunities available to those living in poverty, increasing jobs, and attending to the social aspects of poverty. Young people were notably concerned about benefit sanctions, zero-hour contracts, low wages, food banks, and the stigma surrounding poverty.



⁴² The question and options for response were the same for both groups, so the data was combined during analysis to give a picture of the views of all participants. There was no significant difference between the two groups.

⁴³ The term “governments” includes both the Scottish and UK Governments. The question was kept deliberately vague to account for different knowledge levels of the devolution settlement.

“Because if they did [spend enough] there would not be people living in poverty.”

“I think that more has to be done to combat child poverty. I feel that the Government have a lot of work to do in this area for the one in five children and young people who live in poverty in Scotland.”

“Governments claim to spend millions of pounds on poverty campaigns across Scotland and the UK but personally I have seen no improvement and rates of child poverty are steadily increasing.”

Only 11% of young people said that they felt governments were already spending enough money tackling poverty. Some participants noted:

“They spend a lot of money providing benefits already.”

“It’s difficult to pinpoint how much and where the government are spending to tackle poverty. Sometimes the approach government takes in spending is wrong but enough money is being invested.”

Many of the explanations provided by the young people who responded “Don’t know” suggest that they are not aware of the anti-poverty measures taken by governments, or of how effective they have been. Some notable comments included:

“I think yes and no. The Governments have launched initiatives to solve poverty, but I am not clear on what the results have been.”

“I don’t think it’s to do with the amount of money spent as much as the methods they use. I don’t think the Government has a good understanding of poverty, the different types of poverty or the things that can cause it in someone’s life.”

“I don’t know where to find information about how the government spent money.”

“I have heard about a thing called a child poverty strategy but I don’t know if it is working.”

3.4.2 What are the priorities for tackling poverty?

To find out what young people felt were key priority areas for tackling poverty, participants were asked what areas the Scottish Youth Parliament should campaign on to tackle poverty.⁴⁴ The findings are shown in Figure 9.⁴⁵

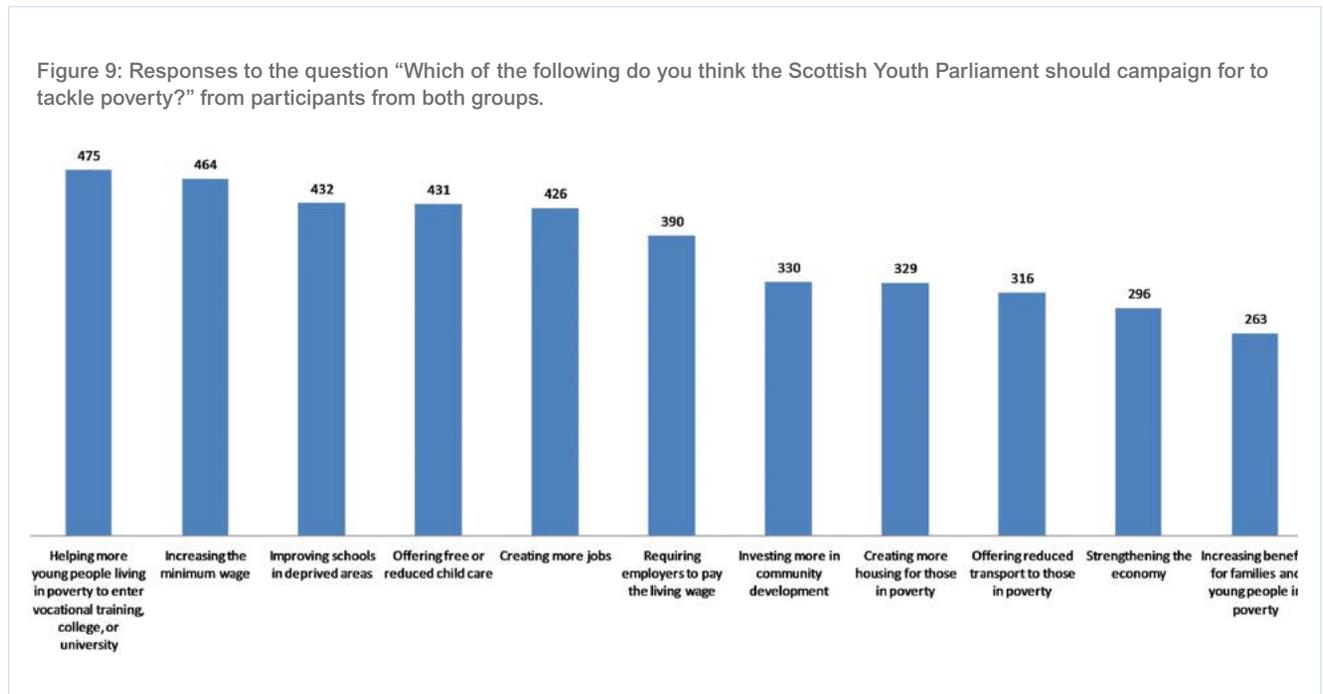
“I don’t think benefits should be higher, but there is more that the government can do, such as getting employers to pay a higher minimum wage.”

“I also believe that free transport would make a massive difference to the lives of young people facing poverty as it will enable them to get to A and B without being concerned as to how they are going to get there.”

“To see real change in poverty status we have to increase the minimum wage to be a living wage, reduce energy bills by breaking up the power the big 6 energy companies have over people, and making education fully free.”

“LGBT+ (MOGAI) rights and human equality. Rights in general.”

“Make sure rural areas get the benefits of this too!”



⁴⁴ The question and options for response were the same for both groups, so the data was combined during analysis to give a picture of the views of all participants. There was no significant difference between the two groups.

⁴⁵ The term “governments” includes both the Scottish and UK Governments. The question was kept deliberately vague to account for different knowledge levels of the devolution settlement.

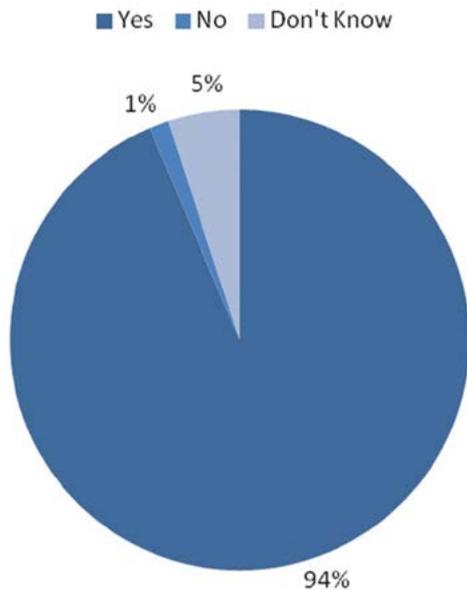
3.5 Rights and Poverty

This section explores the views of young people in relation to their rights, whether they feel governments have a responsibility to defend their rights, and whether the views of children and young people should be listened to when trying to tackle poverty.

Firstly, participants were asked whether governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people.

There was a strong consensus among young people that governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people.⁴⁶ The findings are shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Responses to the question “Do governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people?” from both groups of participants.



“ The UN rights of the child should be followed by all governments in UN countries.”

“ Children do not have the economic and social standing to defend themselves, so governments should have a responsibility to do so.”

“ It’s the moral thing to do and children are as much people as adults are. Their opinions should be heard too!”

“ They are our future – the government have a duty to protect our future. Poor children do worse at school than their peers. All our young people deserve the right of equal opportunity.”

⁴⁶ In both instances, participants were asked to explain their answer. There were no significant differences between the two groups so the data was combined during analysis.

Participants were then asked whether they feel that governments should listen to the views of children and young people when tackling poverty. The results are shown in Figure 11.

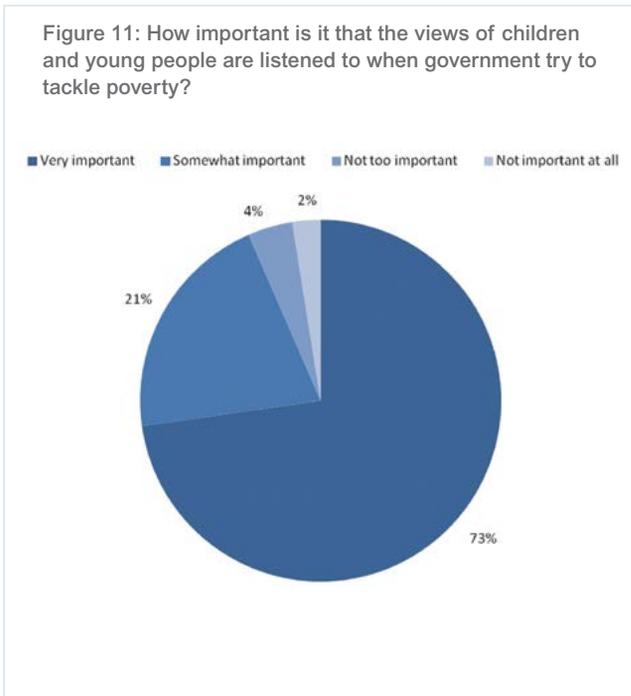
An overwhelming number of young people strongly believe that their views need to be listened to when governments are trying to tackle poverty, with 73% stating this is “very important” and 21% stating it is “somewhat important.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, many participants noted that they have the lived experience of being in poverty, and have been personally affected by poverty and government policies. This gives them an important perspective, which must be considered. An interesting observation is that many of the comments in this section indicate that children and young people see a relationship between the existence of poverty and their rights.

Some participants commented:

“Children and young people need to be involved in the decisions that most affect them. If they grew up in poverty, it was through no fault of their own, and they should be as listened to and supported as possible.”

“We are the future. We do not simply become important the moment we can vote, or the moment we become ‘adults’. We are valuable members of society and our say deserves to be heard.”



“Children and young people need to be listened to in order to break the stigma around poverty and stop the cycle of poverty from continuing generation after generation.”

“Young people and children are often portrayed as victims of poverty whose parent should work harder. No one seems to take into account the feelings of the young people and children and what they would like to see change.”

“In the case of poverty most parents struggle to help their children - it’s time the governments stepped up and solved the problem of poverty.”

⁴⁷ In both instances, participants were asked to explain their answer. There were no significant differences between the two groups so the data was combined during analysis.

4

Key messages and discussion points

4 Key messages and discussion points

The aim of this section is to develop key messages and discussion points from the research findings, and where possible, draw a number of comparisons with existing information about the areas in which we asked participants for their views. Although they may not be directly comparable in some instances, the purpose of this exercise is to better understand how the views of children and young people relate to wider trends.

Understanding of poverty

Young people understand who is affected by poverty. When compared with the existing research, the children and young people who responded to this study appear to have a reasonably strong understanding of the individuals and groups affected by poverty. The key affected groups identified by participants such as families, children and young people, and lone parents strongly reflect the statistics cited in official publications.⁴⁸ More generally, young people appear to appreciate that while there are certain groups who are more likely to be affected by poverty, it can affect anyone.

Young people do not believe that people are in poverty solely because of their choices, and are less likely to believe this is the case than the wider population. A substantial majority of young people who participated in this study believed that the reasons for young people and families living in poverty were due to circumstances beyond their control, or a combination of this and the choices they make. Only 11% of participants believe that people and families are in poverty purely because of the choices they make.

Although not directly comparable, a significantly higher percentage of people in wider Scottish society (72%) believed that individual factors such as parents not wanting to work, or drug and alcohol addiction, as opposed to structural factors, are the reasons behind child and youth poverty.⁴⁹

There is a strong understanding among young people about the causes of poverty. The young people who participated demonstrated a strong understanding of the main causes of poverty, as reflected by the views of experts and through official publications. Young people cited low paid work, unemployment, and welfare related issues as key socio-economic causes, which are mirrored in existing research.⁵⁰ However, a significant number of respondents indicated that there are some choice-related causes, such as drug and alcohol misuse and making poor choices about money.

⁴⁸ CPAG, (n9)

⁴⁹ Scottish Government (2015), (n28), pg. 13-15

⁵⁰ CPAG, (n9)

The impacts of poverty

There is a strong recognition and understanding of the emotional, social and financial impact of poverty among young people. The participants' perceptions of the social and emotional impacts of families and young people who live in poverty strongly align with findings in other work.⁵¹ A significant number, almost two thirds, of young people who participated indicated that they believed that that families and young people who live in poverty are more likely to feel bullied than those who do not. Furthermore, when asked what feelings are most likely to be felt by those living in poverty, depression was the most cited. This finding is of particular concern.

Approaches to tackling poverty

Governments do not spend enough money tackling poverty. An overwhelming majority (68%) of the children and young people who participated in the study believed that governments do not spend enough money tackling poverty. Although not directly comparable, the findings show that young people are more in favour of increasing public spending to tackle poverty than the wider population.⁵²

There is lack of awareness about what governments are doing to tackle poverty among young people. Around one in five participants indicated that they “Don't know” whether governments are spending enough to tackle poverty. There is a clear narrative throughout the qualitative responses, that there is a lack of awareness among children and young people about the policies and strategies employed by governments to tackle poverty. Even among participants who show some level of the awareness, it is often generalised and limited in nature. This finding is mirrored in studies about awareness of the wider population, although the comparison should be treated with caution.⁵³

⁵¹ Princes Trust (2011), (n17), pg. 8

⁵² Scottish Government (2015), (n28), pg. 24

⁵³ Ibid pg. 24

Solutions to poverty reside in increasing vocational education, paying the living wage, improving further and higher education, providing affordable childcare, and improving schools in deprived areas. Around two thirds of young people cited the above areas as priorities for tackling poverty. In contrast, solutions cited by the wider population included “food and clothes”, “after school care” and “mentoring services.”

Therefore, a cautious comparison suggests that young people appear to be more in favour of policy responses that tackle the structural causes of poverty over a longer term than those of the wider population, who appear to be more in favour of policies that mitigate the impacts.⁵⁴

Rights and poverty

Governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people.

An overwhelming majority of young people who participated indicated that they believed governments have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and young people.

The views of children and young people must be listened to by decision-makers when deciding how to tackle poverty. A further substantial majority indicated it was either “Very important” or “Somewhat important” that the views of children and young people are listened to when governments are trying to tackle poverty.

Children and young people see poverty and the defence of their rights, or lack thereof, as being linked. It is clear from many of the qualitative responses that young people see a strong relationship between poverty and rights. Many of the contributions from the young people who participated appear to equate living in poverty and its causes/impacts as a failure to defend their rights.

⁵⁴ Ibid pg. 16

Final Observations

The sole purpose of **It's not a choice** is to give children and young people a voice in the existing wide ranging debates about poverty in Scotland.

Although modest in scope and scale, the findings of **It's not a choice** confirm exactly that; young people do not believe that living in poverty is a choice. This is a significant and important finding given that it would appear that young people are much less likely to believe this than the wider population.

This is a positive story.

In addition, it is a positive finding inasmuch as it demonstrates, along with other findings, that young people have a strong understanding of who is affected by poverty, and its key structural causes.

A further interesting finding is that young people believe that governments should invest in longer term strategies to tackle the root causes of poverty, rather than to mitigate its effects. Again, this would appear to stand in contrast to the views of the wider population.

Finally, the findings confirm that young people believe that governments have a responsibility to protect their rights, and that their voices should be listened to when policies are being developed to tackle poverty. The findings further tentatively suggest that young people see a link between poverty and rights; or rather, they see the existence of poverty as a failure to defend their rights. This finding merits further consideration and research in light of the increasing emphasis on viewing poverty, and approaches to tackling it, from a rights-based perspective in Scotland.

Although there is intrinsic value in ensuring the views of children and young people are heard in the current discussions about poverty in Scotland, it is hoped that the findings and insights in this report will be useful to policy-makers and anti-poverty organisations, as well as building on the existing work on the children and young people's rights agenda and identifying areas for further research.

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