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## **BJGP - book review**

### **Poverty Safari, by Darren McGarvey**

It is often said that statistics are human beings with the tears wiped away. Half-way through 'Poverty Safari', the first book by the Scottish rapper, writer and columnist Darren McGarvey, the author provides us with some statistics.

Now in his mid-thirties, he looks back at his upbringing in Pollok, a so-called 'deprived' area of Glasgow, with his 4 siblings:

"Four out of five have experienced alcohol or substance misuse problems at some point. Five have experienced long term financial problems which involve debilitating debt or defaults and poor credit history."

The list goes on, "Five have experienced abuse and neglect at the hands of a care giver... Five have experienced health problems associated with poor nutrition and lifestyle..."

Then, in stark contrast: "Zero have gone to university. Zero are on the housing ladder. Zero have any savings. Zero go on foreign holidays at least once a year. And none of us care for Radio 2, yoga or Quorn-based food products either."

The tears may have been wiped away, but the anger is palpable. McGarvey wants the reader to understand his anger (and, by extension, that of 'Britain's underclass', particularly relevant in the context of Brexit) by drawing attention to the hypocrisy of the political class, the damaging effects of widening socio-economic (and therefore health) inequalities, and the false beliefs that people on both sides of the class divide hold about each other.

So, what should we do about it? "It's not rocket science" he writes, "listen, and those who feel ignored will re-engage passionately."

McGarvey is a gifted communicator; in the first of 32 short chapters (each named after a novel, with titles such as 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', 'A Tale of Two Cities' and 'Trainspotting' providing a hint of what's to come), he describes his approach to engaging a small group of female prisoners in a rap workshop. Challenging and insightful, this is recommended reading for anyone involved in small group teaching or other public engagement activities.

As well as greater empathy, McGarvey's other antidote to fixing our broken politics is to reclaim "the idea of personal responsibility from a rampant and socially misguided right wing". He has changed radically (now sober and living with his partner and baby son), so why can't others?

Alas, if only it were that simple. In keeping with the (rapidly growing) evidence base on Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, McGarvey's apparent 'resilience' may be attributable, at least in part, to the presence of trusted adult support (his child psychologist Marilyn "had a fundamental influence on the direction of my life, one that remains to this day") and to serendipity (recounting a 'sliding doors' moment involving close friends and a crack pipe, he writes "That day I dodged a bullet. But so many others don't.")

Regardless of the route taken, we should be grateful that McGarvey reached a place where he was able to write 'Poverty Safari'. It is an unflinching and invaluable contribution to the debate about how to fix our broken system, from an authentic and articulate voice of the working-class; the likes of which is all too rarely heard in today's political and media landscape.

Review by David Blane, Academic GP, University of Glasgow