

Life on the Breadline: Christianity, poverty and politics in the 21st century city

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There are over 14 million people living in poverty in the UK. This is morally unjust.

Austerity is an economic policy that has affected people's daily lives in the UK unequally, including negatively affecting the poorest more than the richest.

Beginning in 2018, the 'Life on the Breadline' research has analysed the nature, reach and impact of Christian responses to austerity age poverty.

The project provides original insights about the impact of Christian engagement with poverty and raises new challenges for policymakers on responding to poverty in the UK. Christians respond to poverty experienced by people across society: this is not about Christians working with Christians.

This policy briefing is written for national and regional policymakers across the UK to support Christian responses to poverty and to develop more effective anti-poverty policies.

Policy recommendations

Recommendation: Churches and Christians should not simply fill the gap replacing welfare provision but encourage policymakers to develop structural reforms to tackle post- Covid-19 poverty.

- **Action:** The Government should fully introduce the **Real Living Wage** across the UK and replace in law the National Minimum Wage. The Real Living Wage should not be differentiated by age of adults.
- **Action:** The Government should fund a research-led national pilot of **Universal Basic Income** in order to assess its potential reduce poverty and foster improved well-being, mental health, and social inclusion and cohesion in the UK.
- **Action:** Evidence informed changes should be made to **Universal Credit**, particularly to remove the five week wait between a person applying for Universal Credit and then receiving their first payment.
- **Action:** Funding streams for **youth services** should be reinstated to address the negative combined effects on young people of cuts to youth services and limitations imposed upon young people's life chances as a result of austerity and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendation: Asset-Based Community Development shows what can be achieved by focussing on developing people's gifts. However, funding for community projects often focusses on deficits and stereotypes people on a low-income.

- **Action:** Policymakers and funding agencies need to **reframe the criteria of funding streams** to emphasise the importance of funding work that builds on local communities' gifts and strengths rather than focussing exclusively on deficits.

Recommendation: The link between poverty and poor housing needs to be broken to enable the building of cohesive and inclusive communities where all people can flourish. The problem of unsafe poor-quality social housing needs to become a top policy priority if attempts to address the inequality of housing provision are to be successful.

- **Action:** Policymakers need to agree a new Cross-Party long-term funding formula for the building of far **more high-quality, affordable social housing**.
- **Action:** People living in social housing should be included in **decision making about housing needs** their neighbourhood.
- **Action:** Local, regional and national policymakers need to include social housing tenants in **regular meaningful public discussions** about housing need.



Image: Life on the Breadline and Beth Waters

“I think what there isn’t an understanding about is how disempowering poverty is and how poverty removes your innate sense of self-worth and your capacity... Which is why we used asset based approaches cause it’s about helping people re-believe in themselves and believe that they’ve got capacity and skills and gifts to offer.”

Tim, Hodge Hill Birmingham, focus group, 2020

“Universal Credit is a big one – people are killing themselves you know bab I’ve contemplated it, why struggle like this for another 10, 15 years.”

Samantha, B30 Foodbank client interview, 2019

“Austerity means that life’s been tougher and harder for many people.”

Bishop Paul Butler, Church of England, interview, 2020

Key findings

- Christian social action engages with the complex intersectionality of poverty - **poverty cannot be divided into neat disconnected categories** such as food poverty, housing poverty, or fuel poverty.
- Our engagement with national, regional and local Church leaders and Christian groups has shown that **Christian responses to poverty span across caring, campaigning, advocacy, social enterprise, education and resourcing**. These are not distinct approaches. Churches and groups often engage in a variety of responses to poverty in the UK.
- There is a **growing critique amongst Christians of the unequal impact of austerity in the UK**, which many believe is an unjust government policy that deepens existing structural injustice.
- **Christian social action responds to structural injustice and the causes of poverty as well as its symptoms**. The impact of Christian responses to poverty in the UK is therefore far reaching in not only alleviating the symptoms of poverty, but also working to reduce levels of poverty.
- As a result of its ongoing localised social capital, the Church remains a key player in civil society politics. Life on the Breadline shows **how important it is for local, regional and national policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of the extent, value, variety and impact of Christian engagement with poverty** across the UK. If they are open to learn from such Christian social action local, regional and national political leaders will be better placed to fashion more effective policy that is capable of reducing levels of poverty in the UK.

About the research

The research was carried out 2018-2021 with interviews, and a survey with Church leaders across the four nations of the UK, and time at 6 local churches/groups responding to poverty in London, Birmingham and Manchester:

16

national
Church
leaders

104

regional
Church
leaders

6

case
studies

190

formal research
participants

350

(approx)
informal
conversations

This was the first in-depth, UK-wide, evidence based research project by academic theologians to analyse Christian responses to poverty in the UK.

Further information

For more information including our full report for policymakers visit <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/>

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