

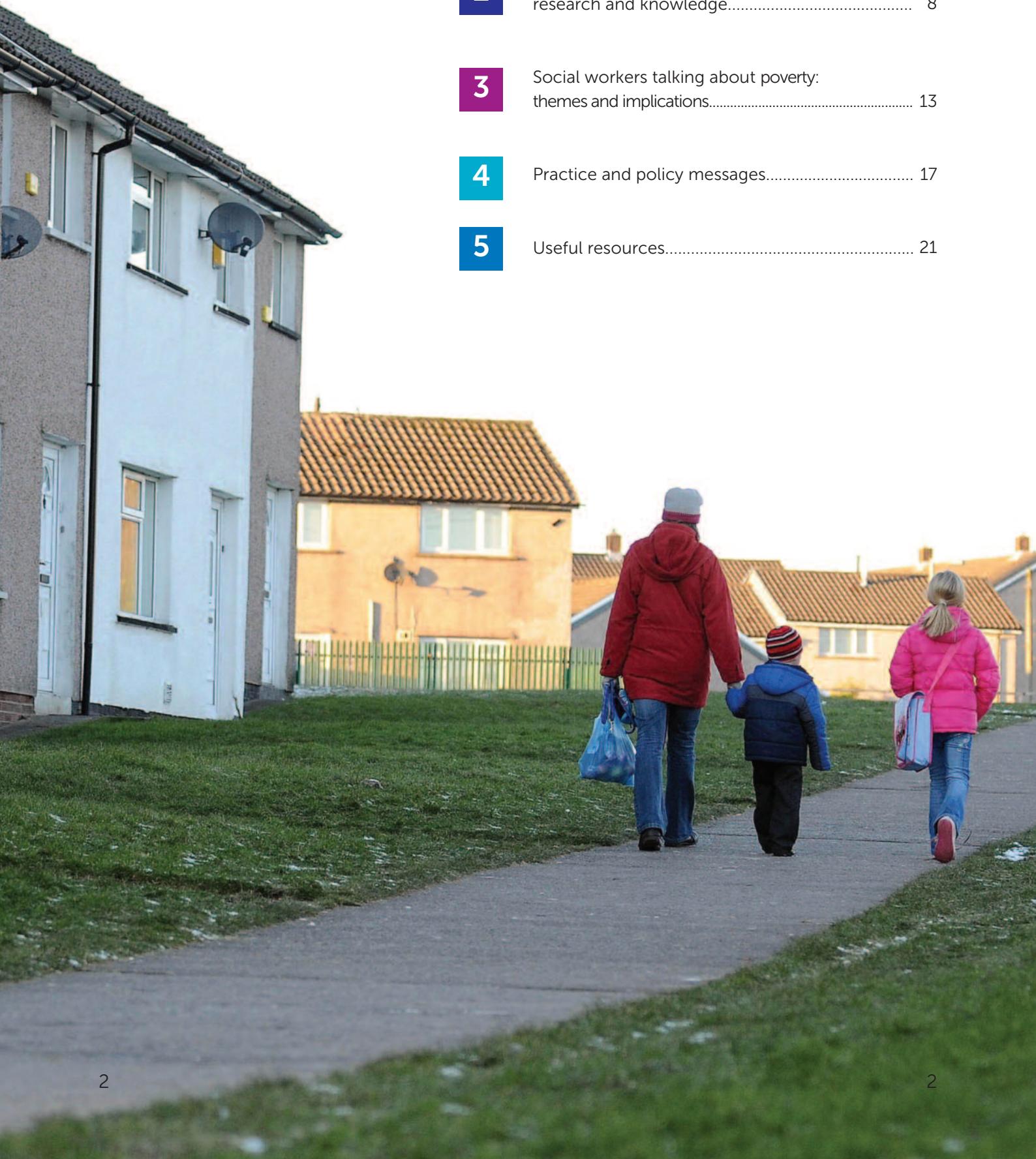
# BASW

The professional association for  
social work and social workers



## The Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work

# STRUCTURE



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# WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) with support from the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) is pleased to publish this Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for BASW members and the broader social work community.**

In this Guide, BASW as the professional body for social work, aims to support the practice of social workers when working with people living in poverty. Poverty is an everyday reality for those needing and using social work services, and yet models and debates about anti-poverty social work practice and policies are underdeveloped. Recent austerity policies have made the lives of many families and communities harsher and harder and social workers routine observe the impact of reduced income, welfare, and state support on people needed services. BASW hopes that this Guide will be a useful contribution in supporting social workers to discuss, develop and reflect on the challenges and consequences of poverty. An objective of this Guide is to provide knowledge acquired from researchers, professionals, and families and communities to social workers to inform strategic policies and guide practice. This is part of a wider campaign by BASW to challenge austerity and its consequences.

The Guide was developed following a series of focus-group consultations with BASW members across the four UK nations. The work has also had support from activists from ATD Fourth World, an advocacy organisation for people with lived experience of poverty. Researchers from the CWIP project (primarily those based at the Universities of Sheffield and Huddersfield) supported the focus groups and led the knowledge summary and used the CWIP research to help inform the suggestions and recommendations.

BASW would like to acknowledge the role of Dr Godfred Boahen, Dr Calum Webb, and Professor Kate Morris in producing this Guide.

Many thanks too to all participants in the focus groups and consultations, including activists from ATD Fourth World.





# 1. WHY IS THIS GUIDE NEEDED?

## Background

Historically, social work has been concerned with poverty not only because of its psychological and physical impact, but also because of the ethical and value base of the profession. As long ago as the 1970s, BASW collaborated with the Child Poverty Action Group to increase awareness and campaign for social policies to tackle poverty.

In the last decade fiscal policies, with the introduction of austerity and the drive to reduce central and local government expenditure have again raised concerns about poverty and its consequences for those that need or use social work services. Repeatedly social workers have reported their concerns about reducing resources and rising needs, fuelled by cuts to local government welfare and social security support.

Within BASW, members formed an Anti-Austerity Action Group (AAG) to campaign against the government's programme of cuts, arguing that these caused harm to children, adults and families with care and support needs. The AAG argued that austerity exacerbated existing social inequalities and led to increasing poverty, which has strong links with other problems such as rising numbers of children in the care system, mental illness, homelessness, and addiction.

Having been commissioned by the AAG, because BASW is a four-nation organisation represented in all the UK countries, members were consulted about what the Guide should contain. The consultations were held in Cardiff (twice), Belfast, Edinburgh, London (twice) and Plymouth. Attendees at these workshops included social workers employed in the third sector, academics, and policymakers. Each workshop was attended by a minimum of eight and a maximum of 16 professionals. There was also consultation with people with lived experience of poverty and involuntary involvement with social workers. The issues raised by these groups are discussed later in Section Three.

## Overview of contents

The contents of the Guide reflect the findings from the UK-wide consultations within BASW, which have been analysed within the context of existing literature on poverty and social work. The Guide has a practice-focus and is organised in a manner which social workers can adopt and incorporate into their everyday work.

**Section 2** addresses theories of poverty and how the lived experience of deprivation impacts on peoples' sense of worth, with knock-on effects on their mental health, their parenting, and participation in society. The key message of this section is that while poverty can be operationalised through 'objective' data and examination of peoples' access to material resources, social workers should adopt a multi-dimensional approach, which emphasises equal rights to participation in society.

**Section 3** discusses themes from the consultations with BASW members and activists, identifying the effects of on-going austerity on the ability of social workers to meet peoples' needs. It explains the different understandings of poverty used by social workers alongside the views of activists from ATD Fourth World. The key learning from this section is that currently, poverty is such a common feature of the experiences of people that, it can sometimes not be noticed and addressed by social workers. For this reason, it is important for social workers to understand multi-dimensional theories of poverty – social, cultural and relational – and their corresponding professional and ethical responsibilities to people living in poverty.

**Section 4** proposes practical, skills-based approaches that can assist social workers in their work with people experiencing poverty. This section explains the need for social workers to understand the communities they work in, and the importance of relationship-based approaches in anti-poverty practice. This part of the Guide provides an analytic thread between the literature on poverty, the messages from social workers and activists, and the skills and knowledge required for anti-poverty practice.

**Section 5** provides useful resources for readers to use in self-directed learning, group discussions, and training on anti-poverty practice.

## How to use this Guide

**The foundational value-base of this Guide is The Code of Ethics for Social Work (BASW, 2014), which reflects the shared principles unifying BASW members; irrespective of their roles, countries of practice, or levels of experience.**

The Code of Ethics for Social Work (BASW, 2014) requires BASW members (and all social workers) to advocate for and demand social justice for people living in poverty and, it commits them to contest all inequalities, which result from uneven access to material resources, political power, and civic participation. Besides values, this Guide seeks to shape social workers' decision-making. It can be used in conjunction with all UK social work practice frameworks, including The Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2018) in England; the Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Work in Northern Ireland; the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 (Section 12) and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (Section 22); and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

This Guide will be useful to all social workers. Examples of where it can be used are:

- **Assessments** – by providing evidence about the impact of poverty on children, their families, and adults, it can be a reference point for identifying needs, including self-assessments.
- **Interventions** – As explained above, Section 4 is a practice-focused exposition of the models and skills that social workers can deploy in anti-poverty practice.
- **Reflective practice** – the Guide is intended to be useful for individual and group reflection on the impact of poverty on social workers' decision-making and judgement. It can assist social workers to reflect on how to appropriately and ethically respond to the needs of people experiencing poverty.





## 2. UNDERSTANDING POVERTY: SUMMARY OF RECENT RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

### What is poverty?

Professionals often think about specific types of poverty, or dimensions of poverty, and understand these very well but have trouble thinking about the common themes that tie them all together. For example, professionals will talk about food poverty, transport poverty, poverty of opportunity, and poverty of health, both physical and mental. However, the holistic nature of poverty is lost when just one experience of poverty is the focus. Peter Townsend's (1979: 31) definition from Poverty in the United Kingdom may help:

*"People are relatively deprived if they cannot obtain, at all, or sufficiently, the conditions of life – that is, the diets, amenities, standards and services which allow them to play the roles, participate in the relationships and follow the customary behaviour which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society. If they lack or are denied the incomes, or more exactly the resources... to obtain access to these conditions of life they can be defined to be in poverty."*

It's hard to overstress how much more helpful a good definition of poverty is compared to a more 'operational' definition of poverty, or a purely statistical definition. We could (and it has been done before) easily instead choose a nutrition-based definition of poverty, such as poverty being when a person cannot afford to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day or a portion of meat every other day. Although this is easier to measure, there is no nuance around how it shapes our participation in society and, most importantly, it neglects the feelings and experiences that people who live or have lived in poverty associate with it.

The crucial part is that Townsend's definition includes the important fact that our **lives are social, cultural, and relational**. What we are able to accomplish relative to other people matters to us. What other people think about us matters to us. How much we're able to take part in our society and culture matters to us and, by virtue of being a human being, we are entitled to some level of participation in the human world and some minimum level of respect and recognition from our cohabitants.

Even if we take a very 'objectively' reducible need like hunger, the amount and types of food we require depends on the kind of work we need to do. Further, we have many cultural events that are linked to food. If we do not have the resources required for the types of food needed to throw a modest celebration say, for a family member's birthday, we are not able to fully participate in our customary roles. When we are not able to **participate in life** in this way, it manifests in feelings of shame within ourselves (Walker 2014) and stigma from others (Lister 2004; Shildrick 2016, 2018). These are feelings that are directly related to our lack of resources and therefore poverty.

We are social beings who, for the most part, want to be seen as productive, valuable and valued members of society. When our resources – economic, social, or cultural – prevent us from achieving this, it has an impact. It places a large amount of stress on us – physically and mentally – to try and manage limited resources and participate as fully as we can. Our behaviours and actions can become constrained and we may make sacrifices to balance our investment of limited resources across many psychological, social, and cultural needs.

People can respond to poverty by becoming anxious, withdrawn, depressed, angry, or hopeless. But we also see responses of resoluteness, pride, resilience and resourcefulness at the level of the individual and community. These are often forgotten about. As practitioners, but more importantly as fellow human beings, when trying to understand the impact poverty has on someone's life and how it affects their actions, we need to consider not only their 'failures' to participate and the risks these might entail, but their successes in organising limited resources to maximise balanced participation. A shared conceptual understanding of poverty enables us to do both.

As this discussion implies, poverty is multidimensional and not solely about money. Sociologists have tried to identify these dimensions by speaking to experts, practitioners, and people with lived experience, with earlier ideas proposed by Bob Baulch (1996) and later developed by Ruth Lister (2004) and Paul Spicker (2007).

More recently, a participatory approach across six countries led by ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford has developed a report with more evidence for what they identify as the key dimensions of poverty, including: disempowerment; suffering in mind, body, and heart; struggle and resistance; institutional maltreatment; social maltreatment; unrecognised contributions; lack of decent work; insufficient and insecure income; and material and social deprivation. The OECD have published the full report here: [www.oecd.org/statistics/addressing-the-hidden-dimensions-of-poverty.htm](http://www.oecd.org/statistics/addressing-the-hidden-dimensions-of-poverty.htm)

This participatory approach shows that there are multiple modifying factors that can change the experiences and presentations of poverty. For example, gender inequalities mean women may experience different kinds of poverty than men or are expected to respond in different ways. In particular, there is a greater societal expectation on women to take up caring roles and emotional work which is often an unrecognised contribution (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; 1995).

Similarly, people from ethnic minority groups have been less likely to be employed than white people, even though, in employment, they were usually *overqualified for positions but passed up for promotion and underemployed* in the roles that they are in (The McGregor-Smith Review, 2018). Populations of Caribbean ethnic minority groups also have overall higher rates of children being taken into care than White British children, which may reflect institutional maltreatment (Bywaters, et al. 2019).

## Why social workers need to be concerned about poverty.

Poverty affects people adversely in multiple ways and can be compounded or caused by the actions of the state and state representatives. In the UK, social workers have legal duties, powers, and training to intervene and rectify some of these injustices and prevent risk.

As can be seen below, alleviating poverty is also highly effective for improving adults' and children's outcomes: poverty leads to a spiral of problems, anti-poverty can lead to an updraft of mutually reinforcing positives. But addressing poverty is not purely about it being an effective or efficient form

of reducing risk. Social workers should engage with issues of poverty because it is consistent with their professional values. There are ethical justifications embedded in social work practice that need to be considered.

## Social work values and poverty

The Anti-Poverty Practice Guide draws on the 'Values and ethical principles' and 'Social Justice' domains of the BASW Code of Ethics, namely:

- 1. Upholding and promoting human dignity and well-being:** BASW believes social workers should understand that poverty is a violation of peoples' dignity. It leads to denial of resources required for a decent life. Poverty causes shame and affects peoples' sense of their worth.
- 2. Respecting the right to self-determination:** Poverty causes social exclusion, thereby disempowering people from involvement in issues affecting them.
- 3. Promoting the right to participation:** Similar to the principle above, poverty implies a lack of participation, either voluntarily, or because peoples' involvement is denied by powerful actors and institutions.
- 4. Distributing resources:** Social workers believe that poverty is not a character flaw. Instead, it is the denial of resources and opportunities to others and, consequently, social workers have a role to play in fair redistribution. In practice this can be achieved through welfare advocacy and a rights-based approach to anti-poverty practice.
- 5. Challenging unjust policies and practices:** The ongoing period of austerity exemplifies this point – unjust welfare benefit cuts, cuts to services (Webb and Bywaters, 2019), and restrictions of eligibility to welfare has led to increases in poverty across the UK. Anti-poverty practice entails the profession's collective opposition and intervention in this political decision to reduce benefits for people.

## What causes poverty?

It is critical we should also understand a little about what causes poverty, there is a temptation, one that social workers are not immune from, to place the blame for people's poverty completely or almost completely on their own personal choices and characters (Shildrick 2018, Morris et al. 2018).

The idea that people are primarily responsible for their own poverty is false. The reasons people believe this to be true most commonly include ideas of 'cultures' of worklessness, or work shyness, and that, by extension, people in poverty because they are either lazy, feckless or both. Characterisations of people as having undesirable traits with regards to how they dress ('dyed hair', 'grey joggers'), talk, and spend their time ('chatting, drinking, smoking on the street') carry the implication that poverty is an inevitable feature of certain class cultures (Morris et al. 2018).

Tracy Shildrick, Robert MacDonald, and their colleagues (2010, 2012) have studied these claims in detail, largely in the context of the reasons why people are distanced from the labour market. Many would argue that not being employed is the main cause of poverty as this also supports the idea that individualised characteristics and failings are responsible for poverty via the mediator of employment. However, what matters and prevents this are **structural factors**, not individual factors. Shildrick et al. (2010, 2012) found no evidence of cultures of worklessness and that many people out of work wanted and were actively seeking employment, but factors outside their control such as the health of the local labour market or the lack of adequate child- and adult-care services prevented them.

Even this assumes that the labour market is an effective route out of poverty, but this is not so. In 2017/18, 72 per cent of children in poverty lived in families where at least one adult was in work (Goulden 2019). If poverty is due to character and personal choices, and the majority of people have the personal characteristics that enable them to work and then make the choice to work, how can they still be in poverty? The reasons are structural, not personal: low-pay, poor quality work, and job insecurity.

## How poverty impacts on...

### Cognitive, social, and behavioural development

- Numerous high-quality experimental studies in the US (reviewed by Cooper and Stewart, 2013; 2017) found that an increase of \$1,000 in annual income caused an increase of between 5 and 27 per cent of a standard deviation in cognitive development and between 9 and 24 per cent of a standard deviation in social and behavioural outcomes.
- In their review, *Does money affect children's outcomes?*, Cooper and Stewart (2013) estimate that increasing the annual household income for children in receipt of free school meals by £7,000 would be enough to close the attainment

gap between children on free school meals and children not on free school meals at Key Stage 2.

### Healthy diet

- The latest statistics from the Trussell Trust (2019) highlights that the number of food parcels given out has risen by 73 per cent since 2013/14. The number of parcels has increased from around 913,000 to nearly 1.6 million. In comparison, in 2010-11 the number of food parcels provided was 61,468.
- Research from the Food Foundation's (2019) *Broken Plate Report* found that the poorest 10 per cent of households would have to spend 74 per cent of their "disposable" income (income after rent) on food to meet the government's EatWell guidelines. This leads to poorer families choosing less nutritious, but more filling food.
- Pioneering research by Kayleigh Garthwaite in *Hunger Pains* (2016) explores the stigma and shame of people forced to use food banks because of insecure work and low income, as well as their resourcefulness and resilience.

### Participation

- Ferragina et al. (2017) found that material deprivation, social deprivation, and trust hit a low-level floor once income dropped below the bottom third of all incomes.
- There is little research on cultural participation but work by Mark Taylor (2016) found that those with high levels of engagement in state-supported culture (museums, galleries, opera houses, libraries) tended to be wealthy, well-educated, and white.

### Parental conflict

- Fahmy, et al. (2016) report that in households with both low incomes and high levels of social and material deprivation nearly 6 per cent report recent physical abuse from a partner, compared to 1 per cent in non-poor households.

### Stress and parental mental health

- High quality experimental research (also reviewed by Cooper and Stewart, 2013; 2017) found an increase in income of US\$1000 was associated with better maternal mental health.

## Poverty, shame, stigma and how people respond

People who live in poverty have been stigmatised as 'skivers' (Shildrick et al. 2010, 2012; Shildrick 2018; Valentine and Harris 2014) who not only are unemployed but do not want to take up job opportunities. Although most people in poverty living in the UK are employed (Goulden 2019), stigmatisation, particularly through (social) media, results in the creation of 'them' versus 'us', or as people 'undeserving' of social support.

It is important to remember that this practice of stigmatisation is something that takes active reflection to avoid. There is cultural and psychological pressure to participate in the kind of stigmatisation and othering that people do, largely because we live in a society that believes wealth and consumption is an indicator of merit and achievement. More visibly, we see forms of media that paint one biased picture of people living in poverty ('Benefits Street' or the long-running and recently cancelled 'Jeremy Kyle Show'). More subtly, many systems are designed to reinforce negative judgements about people in poverty, such as the high scrutiny of effort that JSA claimants are placed under by the processes of the Jobcentre, perpetuating an idea that they cannot be trusted.

Social workers need to reflect on the chains of events and types of disadvantage that might result in a 'cycle of poverty'. To do this, time for reflexive practice, supervision, and training from experts with lived experience is necessary, a striking example being *The Roles We Play*, a book where people with experience of poverty tell their own stories about their place in the community ([www.atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/the-roles-we-play](http://www.atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/the-roles-we-play)).

It has been noted that these patterns of belief lead to people in poverty developing an internalised sense of shame (Brown 2006; Walker 2014). This shame can have a psychological impact on people that social workers should be aware of:

- It negatively affects peoples' sense of their identity and worth – and their relations with others (Gibson 2016). In social work this may manifest itself in mental illness or people's lack of confidence in their ability to offer appropriate parenting to their children.
- For people living in poverty, to escape shame, they may not claim the benefits that they are entitled to or seek support from professionals and their relatives (Shildrick et al. 2010).
- Research has also found that to escape shame, people may limit or stop social interaction because this costs money (Chase and Walker 2014). In social work practice, this is an example of how poverty may lead to increased social isolation.
- Finally, Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) use the phrase 'the normalisation of everyday hardship' to explain how in an attempt to cope with shame people will deny that they are facing hardship because of poverty. This can be difficult issue for social workers because people may obscure their difficulties, thereby making it hard to assess their level of need and hence the effect of poverty on them. The practitioner's response may be to consider the person as 'difficult' or 'lying' when this is a rational response of emotional and psychological self-preservation.





### 3. SOCIAL WORKERS TALKING ABOUT POVERTY: THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS

In this section, the themes from the consultations with BASW members around the UK and focus groups with people with lived experience are discussed. These are strikingly similar to findings from the Child Welfare Inequalities Project research. One strand of that study explored *if and how* social workers talk about poverty, and why they might not (Morris et al. 2018). While social workers recognised the relationship between poverty and child welfare interventions, they felt it was stigmatising to discuss it, as not all families in poverty have children at risk of harm. However, sometimes this reluctance to engage in conversations about poverty would result in social workers moving deprivation into the background, meaning that the impact tended to go unexamined. Similar themes were found in the consultation with BASW members to develop this Anti-poverty Practice Guide even though they were a self-selected group with interest in poverty and social work practice.

We also spoke to experts with lived experience of poverty at ATD Fourth World about their interactions with social workers. They talked about the stigmatising or narrow-sighted views of some social workers alongside their claims that poverty was caused by cultural or systemic pressures above professionals' control.

Thus, when poverty is a factor in risk, how can social workers talk about it in a non-stigmatising way in the foreground of practice? How can social work practice be poverty-aware?

In the next section, the themes from the consultations with BASW members are presented.

#### Consultations with social workers: key themes

*"We're poor too."*

- **Economic resources are required to be able to work in an anti-poverty way.** Even the most empathetic and poverty-aware social worker still needed the financial resources to assist families with pressing needs and the necessary

autonomy to use these resources. In places where social workers were able to do this, even the smallest amounts of financial support were able to stop problems caused by financial strain from spiralling out of control.

- **Non-specialised support services, like family centres, have been defunded so rapidly with no equivalent replacement.** While social workers could previously refer people to services for, say, benefits maximisation or general support, these services no longer exist. Many of the services that have taken their place are designed around psychological or parenting interventions, and do not provide the kind of practical monetary support needed to address poverty. They deal with the consequences, not the causes.

*"We need to know what we're talking about."*

- **Social workers have no single agreed upon definition of poverty to organise efforts around.** While each social worker has their own tacit understanding of poverty, there is very little commonly agreed shared understanding, which makes it difficult to confidently say 'yes, this family is in poverty' without it being easily dismissed. If social workers can say 'yes, this family is in poverty' and be confident that this sentiment will be shared by all, acting with poverty in the forefront of their concerns is much easier.

*"We know how to help people in poverty, but we have no time."*

- **Social workers with high caseloads have statutory responsibilities that they are required to prioritise before they can even think about helping with a family's poverty.** They feel they therefore have to 'offload' the problem of poverty onto either charity or faith-based organisations. This is problematic because these organisations and projects, despite doing important work, are often transitory due to precarious funding or have been set up to deal with very specific types of poverty only, and thus can leave people feeling passed 'from pillar to post'.

*"We have no time to think about poverty, let alone help."*

- **Heavy caseloads and strained services mean that social workers, in practice, often get very little time for reflexive practice and supervision.** When faced with hostility from families, caseload stress, and the emotional strain of the job, this lack of space for reflection can contribute to building up a negative, stigmatised, dehumanised perspective of people in poverty. Reflexive practice is crucial. This is especially a concern with social workers who have no lived experience of poverty in their own lives.

*"It's overwhelming, and we feel helpless to stop it."*

- Similar to above, **anti-poverty practice often feels like a moral imperative taken up by social workers individually, not a core goal of the profession.** For many, this individual responsibility places a great burden on them and can lead to In places where anti-poverty practice was routinized and normalised, social workers felt much more supported by the overall goals of the organisation and able to continue working in a poverty aware way without falling into despair.

## Focus group of Experts by Experience: key themes

*"You are not an expert on my poverty. I am the expert on my poverty."*

- **If social workers cannot spend time recognising the strengths and coping strategies of people living in poverty, anti-poverty practice can be highly patronising.** Poverty alone is a stigmatising condition, leaving people with heightened feelings of shame. Add to that the stigma and fear of having been referred to, or subject to an investigation by, child protective services, and people are very likely to be on the back foot. Good relationship-based approaches are still essential for anti-poverty practice, even if they may not, on their own, change the structural factors that cause poverty.

*"I am asking for help and now you're investigating me?"*

- **Social workers are often unaware of the context in which families in poverty come into contact with children and family services in the first place; desperation for help often leads to a referral.** Many times, things have got so bad financially – usually from being rebuffed by administrative procedures for benefits - that parents will approach professionals for help

because they are at crisis point. Imagine a person whose medical symptoms have got worse and worse over time and, although their general practitioner has tried to help them, the help has not been intensive enough and the appointments have been too far spread out. It is not unusual to expect a person in this condition to, out of frustration or desperation, turn up to an Accident & Emergency department despite being told that their condition is not something that fits their remit. The same thing happens when someone in chronic poverty, in desperation, contacts or speaks to someone who then contacts children's social services. Imagine how you would feel if you were this person who, after doing so, has a social worker appear at their door who is not interested in talking about the problem, poverty, that they feel they desperately need support for.

*"Budgeting in poverty doesn't look pretty."*

- **People in poverty are often better at budgeting their resources than any budgeting coach.** However, social workers need to recognise that living on a shoestring causes shame and makes life difficult to manage. It's easy to forget that many things are taken for granted because they are bought so infrequently. Curtains, for example, are not essential when you only have enough money to buy school uniform and food. Cupboard and fridges becoming empty right before a scheduled shopping trip is a sign of good budgeting, not bad budgeting. When families feel judged or looked down upon for having old furniture, sparse decoration, chipped paint, empty cupboards with no chance to provide context, they are being shamed for making the correct decisions for their family. They become judged on their appearance and not on their actions. Thus social workers need to be non-judgemental.

*"Report who I am and what I'm doing; not who you think I am and what you think I'm doing. I am not my case notes."*

- **Families describe the painful feelings associated with reading the case notes that have been written about them that were full of character judgements.** Such notes often made no attempt to describe the structural problems and challenges they faced: problems in their community, domestic abuse, the inadequacy of local housing or the impact of poor administration of benefits. They focused almost entirely on the person's perceived limitations, and not their strengths. Past notes were often seen as being accepted uncritically by new social workers.

*"You are in a position of power over me. This might be your everyday, but this is my past, present, and future."*

- **What might be routine to social workers is terrifying to people living in poverty.** People in poverty are accustomed to being stigmatised:

people think the worst of them. Small acts of kindness and respect are of benefit in at least two ways: they stop social workers dehumanising people, and they help people in poverty see social workers are human. In the absence of such actions, both end up being perceived by the other in distorted and unhelpful ways.





## 4. PRACTICE AND POLICY MESSAGES

This section is about models that engender anti-poverty practice for social workers and for practice leaders and managers, it explains the strategic policies and approaches that can address the social work issues arising from poverty within a locality. However, it is critical to note that the issues being addressed are driven by social policies, and individual practices alone are insufficient to change wider systemic patterns and the consequences of economic policies. National, and international, alliances are necessary to try to change the policies that result in communities with the least resources bearing the greatest burdens in terms of lack of hope, well-being and access to support (financial, practical and emotional).

**The long history of social work as a profession concerned with rights and justice means that it is critical that professional bodies, social work agencies and advocates work with children, adults, families and communities to challenge the policies that generate such profound and damaging inequalities.**

This section identifies how local social work policies and practices can assist in addressing poverty, including how specific casework approaches can pay attention to the everyday consequences of poverty. The CWIP research showed that whilst poverty is the 'wallpaper of practice' it is rarely discussed by social workers. It has become both unremarkable and unremarked upon; the CWIP research found most social workers accept that the people they work with are experiencing poverty, but they rarely take this into account in their assessments, care planning, and interventions.

**As a starting point, this guide recommends that practitioners and managers develop mechanisms for provoking discussions about the poverty that the communities they serve are experiencing, how this impacts wellbeing and how it is addressed in individual work plans and local policies.**

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project App has been designed to help strategic leaders, team managers, and social workers engage with some of the recommendations below. It provides data visualisations about levels of deprivation in local authority areas and trends in intervention and resources with the ability to compare different local authorities. The CWIP App can be accessed through the app portal here: [www.cwip-app.co.uk](http://www.cwip-app.co.uk)

### Policies and systems

#### 1. Using and understanding data

The use of data about poverty and indicators of deprivation has an uneven history in social work. In some areas, often those more connected to health and therefore the study of health inequalities, we have seen growing awareness of unequal outcomes driven by socio-economic circumstances. In other areas, such as safeguarding children and/or adults, there is no data collected on the socioeconomic circumstances of the families involved, making it difficult to examine the relationship between deprivation and need for statutory services within localities. The development of robust data about patterns and relationships between poverty and social work involvement will ensure that routine awareness of the links is developed and can support the development of policies and practices (nationally and locally).

**Building social workers' confidence in interpreting and using data helps ensure that poverty is not overlooked in the provision of services and the development of practice.**

The demographic profile of an area can become taken-for-granted knowledge for social workers, based on everyday practice. But there is enormous value in ensuring this knowledge matches reality – not least in order to ensure services and skills are relevant. **Supporting the development of a working knowledge of the areas served, including deprivation, ethnicity, population density is critical for all practitioners, rather than restricted to strategic or planning staff. Therefore social workers should be assisted to understand the levels of poverty in their locality and they should also ensure that they reflect on this and include this in their decision-making about the people they work with.**

#### 2. Knowing local communities

The research by CWIP revealed that social workers and their managers struggled to access and use data and knowledge about their localities. This was partly caused by their location in remote parts of the communities – this meant that they had to drive rather than walk to home visits, missing the opportunities to interact and understand their areas.

Some social workers in the CWIP study had developed a stigmatising narrative about streets and places, at odds with social work core values. In their narratives, they did not show understanding of the strengths within their localities of work. However, organisations and teams that **prize knowledge of local income maximisation services, anti-poverty organisations, relief services and community informal support**, increase their capacity to recognise and respond effectively to local needs. **Therefore, social workers should understand the local and organisational contexts that they work in, the third sector providers, the religious organisations and others that people draw on for support.** This knowledge is most valuable when it's based on direct relationships with the people involved rather than knowledge of a list of resources.

### 3. Building and maintaining interagency alliances

The extent to which alliances have been formed with anti-poverty organisations varies considerably across teams and localities. There are examples of co-location of income maximisation staff in duty teams and social workers working closely with local food banks, but there is also evidence of lack of partnerships with housing, employment and poverty relief agencies. Attention is often given to partnerships with health, education and therapeutic services despite poverty often being the common experience of those needing services. **Imaginative alliances connecting anti-poverty services with social work offer opportunities to ensure that the core priorities of people experiencing deprivation (for example, for food, warmth, housing and safety) remains the central objectives of social workers. Social workers should draw on their professional leadership skills and build alliances with individuals and organisations that can assist people experiencing poverty.**

### 4. Involving communities and families

For social work to understand the impact of socioeconomic conditions on communities and families, and the extent to which social work services reinforce or help address these determinants, opportunities for meaningful conversations and feedback are essential. For many individuals and families the only means of providing feedback is largely negative and based on the complaints systems. **Developing routine practices that enable feedback from families and communities about the role of social work services in addressing poverty, that are not based on individual complaints, opens up opportunities to create fresh approaches to community participation. These can include**

**involvement in designing, commissioning, and evaluating services. Social workers should therefore seek formal or informal feedback from people they work with and their colleagues, and through critical reflection, explore how they can improve their work with people experiencing poverty.**

## Practice models and skills

### 1. Community social work practice

Social workers should recognise themselves as part of the communities in which they work because they share the space with people who use services. **This 'co location' provides social workers with the opportunities to know the area and understand resources available.** Community social work is a generic term for multiple approaches, reflecting the fact that communities may be based on locality, faith, ethnicity or identity. It is, however, evident that established individual casework models can only achieve specific impact when people's needs are driven by wider systematic patterns of poverty and socioeconomic hardships. Thinking more broadly about the community or communities that surround the individual needing services allows social work to acknowledge social and economic determinants of needs and harms. **Opportunities to develop skills in community social work that are valued and respected by employing agencies increases the possibilities for fresh approaches that address socioeconomic conditions to be built and sustained. To be effective, social workers should assist people to (re)connect to family members and community groups who can provide additional support to them.**

### 2. Relationship-based approaches

Relationship-based social work seeks to understand and address the psychological and emotional impact of past traumatic events on people. Starting from the position that the relationship between the professional and service user can be a conduit for change, the model(s) emphasise empathy, respect of people's dignity, allowing them to tell their stories, and recognising their inner strengths. **Practicing within a relationship-based framework enables social workers to understand people's life histories and to hear their lived experiences, bringing together the wider societal analysis of the determinants of harm with individual support plans.**

As has already been discussed, living in poverty causes people to feel shame and loss of self-pride. Surviving acute socioeconomic hardship is traumatic and increases the risks of a range of harms. A relationship-based approach to anti-poverty practice is therefore important. **A relationship-based approach enables practitioners to build trusting relationships with people, and, in the context of shame and trauma, enables practice to reflect the individual needs and experiences. This is critical to anti-poverty practice. Social workers should anchor their practice in values, recognising that poverty violates peoples' rights to justice and socio-economic wellbeing. Social workers should also draw on established social work skills such as listening, demonstrating empathy, and working alongside and with people experiencing poverty.**

### 3. Advocacy based practice

**Social work interventions with people living in poverty should start from the position that they have socio-economic rights.**

This implies focussing on:

- Empowering people to obtain their legally entitled benefits and support
- Assisting people to challenge any denials of their socio-economic, political, and human rights
- Evidencing how poverty is contributing to the violations of people's human rights – for example, people being unable to access or sustain a healthcare plan because of lack of money; how poverty is compounding their physical or mental impairments

Income maximisation should be one of the core aims of the advocacy strand of anti-poverty approaches. This will involve social workers assisting families to access money and services that they are legally entitled to – for example welfare benefits, unpaid wages, and other payments in kind. Thus, one element is about increasing people's income, but a second is ensuring that families do not wrongly pay for services that they are entitled to – for instance domiciliary care or family support services.

The implication of this discussion is that social workers should include conversations about income, money and poverty in their work with families, including assessments and care planning. However, the findings of the CWIP research indicate that social workers find it difficult to discuss poverty and finances, perceiving them as intrusive and potentially

stigmatising. Yet, for individuals and families, not acknowledging their everyday reality is frustrating and can result in plans that are simply not feasible. **Supporting social workers to become confident in talking about poverty, income and their consequences is a key organisational learning need. Social workers should develop their understanding of welfare benefits and the organisations that provide specialist support.**

### 4. The role of supervision

Research has shown that the organisational and national policy context of social work can adversely impact on how social workers respond to people experiencing poverty. The social workers involved in the development of this Anti-poverty Practice Guide noted that high caseloads, tight timescales and lack of services affected their responses to people experiencing poverty. Given their narrow repertoires of choices, they prioritised safeguarding over provision of holistic support to families experiencing poverty. The CWIP study found that practitioners were experiencing a 'moral muddle'; to identify poverty as a critical issue was felt to be stigmatising, yet to deny its impact was profoundly unhelpful to families. **Managing this complex ethical and emotional territory requires supervisors to be confident in: understanding the relationship between poverty and harm, the impact of poverty on everyday experiences, and the role of social workers in addressing the consequences of socioeconomic hardship.** Developing the knowledge and skills needed to support and supervise staff working with enduring socioeconomic hardship requires specific training, an understanding of the emotional and ethical demands and clarity about the methods by which social work can avoid reinforcing the consequences of living in poverty.



# 5 REFERENCES AND USEFUL RESOURCES

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## Recommended ATD Fourth World publications

**ATD Fourth World UK:** ([www.atd-uk.org](http://www.atd-uk.org)). ATD Fourth World is a human-rights based anti-poverty organisation, with over 50 years' experience of tackling inequality and promoting social justice in the UK. Working in partnership with people affected by poverty, ATD Fourth World has, since 1968, concentrated its efforts on supporting families and influencing policy through work at Frimhurst Family House and our National Centre in London. Below is a list of suggested ATD Fourth World publications.

**The Roles We Play:** Recognising the contribution of people living in poverty. [www.atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/the-roles-we-play/](http://www.atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/the-roles-we-play/)

**ATD Social Worker Training Programme.** [www.atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/social-work-training-programme/](http://www.atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/social-work-training-programme/)

**Unveiling the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty.** [www.atd-fourthworld.org/unveiling-the-hidden-dimensions-of-poverty/](http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/unveiling-the-hidden-dimensions-of-poverty/)

## Recommended CPAG publications

**Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)** [www.cpag.org.uk](http://www.cpag.org.uk) The Child Poverty Action Group works to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be solved – for good. They also provide information, training and advice to the people who work with hard-up families, to make sure they get the financial support they need. Below is a list of recommended CPAG publications.

**Welfare Benefits and Tax Credits Handbook 2019/20.** [www.shop.cpag.org.uk/welfare-benefits-and-tax-credits-handbook-201920](http://www.shop.cpag.org.uk/welfare-benefits-and-tax-credits-handbook-201920)

**Improving Children's Life Chances.** [www.cpag.org.uk/node/3629/](http://www.cpag.org.uk/node/3629/)

**Toolkit for local authorities.** [www.cpag.org.uk/cpla/toolkit](http://www.cpag.org.uk/cpla/toolkit)

## Additional resources

**Citizen's Advice** [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

Citizen's Advice offer independent advice about benefits, work, debt, housing, and legal rights to millions of people every year.

**The Equality Trust:** [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk)

**The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF):**

[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk) The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. It does this through research, policy, and collaboration and frequently publishes leading research about poverty in the UK.

**Child Welfare Inequalities Project:** this Nuffield funded study explored the links between socioeconomic circumstances and state interventions. You can find all the publications at [www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2014/child-welfare-inequality-uk/](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2014/child-welfare-inequality-uk/)

**Everyday inequality.** [www.everydayinequality.org.uk](http://www.everydayinequality.org.uk) A manifesto for a fairer society.

[www.equalitytrust.org.uk / our-manifestos-fairer-society](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/our-manifestos-fairer-society)

**The relationship between poverty, child abuse, and neglect:** an evidence review.

[www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review)

**Does money affect children's outcomes?**

A systematic review. [www.jrf.org.uk/report/does-money-affect-childrens-outcomes](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/does-money-affect-childrens-outcomes)

**How much does money influence health?**

[www.jrf.org.uk/report/how-does-money-influence-health](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/how-does-money-influence-health)

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