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Publish a series of weblogs (blogs) over the duration of this module, identifying and critically reflecting on your insights and understanding of the issues that are explored over the course of this semester.

BLOG ONE

The impacts of poverty on childhood wellbeing

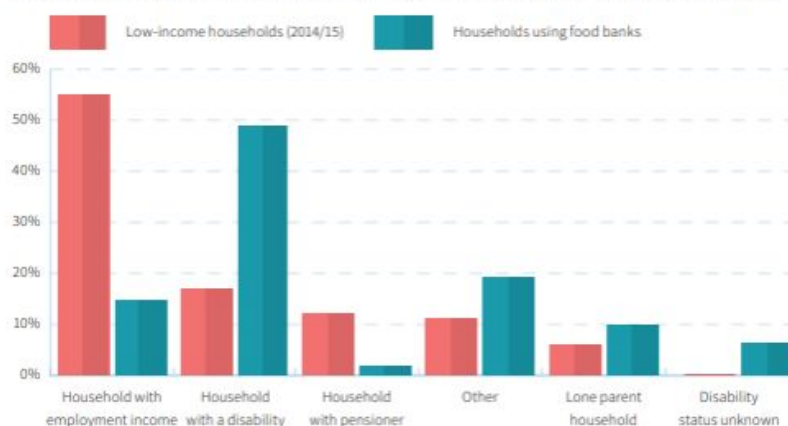
In 2009, 32% of children in Wales were living in poverty., (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009). Back in 2015, the Welsh Government published its child poverty strategy in order to tackle inequality. One of its aims was to ensure that “no child is living in poverty in 2020”, (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 2). To those policy writers in 2015, 2020 must have seemed like a time much further in the future than today, and as inspirational as this policy is, it could be questioned as to how realistic it is. It is too early to interpret data on child poverty for 2020 as yet, but it is possible to interpret data for 2019. In Wales at the end of last year, there were still over 30% of children living in poverty in some constituencies. The ranges of poverty were from 21.1% in Gower, to 34.6% in the Cynon Valley, (End Child Poverty, 2019). This data clearly shows that the Welsh Government have not, as yet, achieved their aims in ending child poverty in Wales.

Generally, a household is thought to be in poverty if their household income is less than 60% of the median average, when household size and housing costs are taken into consideration (End Child Poverty, 2019). What can be understood from this then is that the children living in poverty in Wales, generally live in households where the income is around £18,200 per year. This means that any parent or guardian working a full time minimum wage job at £8.21 per hour (UK Government, 2019) for 37.5 hours per week would be earning well under this threshold. This begs the question as to why there is such a seeming tolerance to the glaring social and economic inequality in Wales. Should those who work be poor? Those working full time on minimum wage to provide for their families earn around the £16,000 per year mark, £2000 or so less than the poverty threshold. Factor in childcare costs to actually

attend the workplace, and utilities and other payments and it becomes quite easy to see how quickly a family could descend into even greater poverty.

This seems like a rather unfair trade off. The social idea that those in poverty are somehow lazy, or those dependent on benefits are bad people is an archaic and ignorant stereotype. Work is not always the way out of poverty; those who work should be able to have enough to live well, but even in our seemingly democratic society, those who work can be poor. There are more food banks in the United Kingdom than there are McDonalds restaurants, and the majority of those who use food banks, around 86%, are unemployed. However, 1 in 7 people who use food banks are actually living in households where someone is actually working (The Trussell Trust, 2019).

Figure 1: Compared with low-income households in the general population, low-income households using food banks are more likely to contain someone with a disability.



Notes: Categorisation of low-income households and population frequencies are from Tinson, Ayrton et al. (2016). Categories are mutually exclusive. These were applied to households in the study sample. Households classified with a disability are those not in work and who do not contain a pensioner. Lone parent households are those that do not include someone with employment, a pensioner, or someone with a disability.

(Loopstra & Lalor,

2017)

From observing the graph it can be noted that the profile of those receiving aid from the Trussell Trust foodbank network are almost 50% more likely to have a disability. This is a worrying trend; being poor and disabled puts individuals in an increased

vulnerable state. This graph does not distinguish between disabled adults or children, but it is probably fair to suggest that counted amongst these figures could potentially be children with disabilities. It is not only those with disabilities, but all children, who face not only economic obstacles, but also social challenges as well. Being labeled poor has many negative connotations, and in the following blog these impacts will be explored further.

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BLOG TWO

In this blog, I will explore the negative connotations associated with being labelled as “poor”, in particular, for children and young people. As a child, I grew up as one of nine children, with a disabled father, and a mother who tried to work part time but found it very difficult due to her duties as a mother. There were not only socioeconomic pressures, but also substance and domestic abuse issues in the home and as a result, social services became involved. I understand first hand the shame and embarrassment of having to queue for a free school meal dinner ticket, and the stigma that is associated with being poor. Not having the latest trendy clothes or tech, not being able to afford to attend social events with peers. Feeling too embarrassed to invite friends back to the house because it was in a deprived part of town and it was over crowded and “poor” looking, and because my dad had a drink problem. No child should feel ashamed of needing a dinner ticket, or because they live in social housing; but the question which needs to be asked is why do so many children feel stigmatised because they live in poverty. Through no fault of their own, many children are living in less than ideal circumstances, not to mention the increased number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

These are first hand experiences, but what does the research show us about how these feelings can affect wellbeing and health?

During their research and work to end child poverty in the UK, The Childrens’ Society found that children and young people who were found to be living in poverty were more likely to have a lower sense of well-being, experience mental health issues, poorer physical health, find school difficult and underachieve academically as well as experience social stigma and deprivation, and later in life they were more likely to

experience employment issues in adulthood and feel unsafe, (The Children's Society, Nd).

Growing up in poverty can mean that children and young people are living in poorer quality housing, or even homelessness, and they might not have adequate or safe places for outdoor play, (Welsh Government, 2015). It can also mean that children and young people face further challenges and vulnerabilities as socially it can lead to feelings of exclusion due to having fewer friends, and decreased access to social activities. This is not only an issue in Wales, but also in other parts of the UK (Health Scotland, 2019).

You could say that poverty is more than just households struggling with having a low income, but it also encompasses other challenges and difficulties. Poverty results in inequality and this in turn can reduce opportunities, aspirations and positive life experiences. Data shows that the local authorities who are most deprived in Wales are the South Wales valleys; this area has the highest number of children and young people living in homes where they are completely reliant on benefits. The lowest number of children and young people living in poverty is Monmouthshire, with the lowest number of households reliant on benefits, (O'Neill, 2012). The South Wales valleys have been challenging to regenerate over the past thirty years and many former mining communities still require intensive support (Brown, 2014).

Some of the issues here paint a rather bleak picture for the children and young people living in Wales in economically challenged households. In my first blog post, I talked about minimum wage not being adequate enough, and arguably, many would probably ask what the point in working actually is. Has the welfare state created this benefit trap, where people are unable to earn enough to come off benefits? It's understandable that in order to make it worthwhile financially, they continue to claim them. The Welsh Government's solution to poverty is to "upskill" parents so they can earn money from doing better jobs, but we know from the data that we have a highly educated population here in Wales, and yet conversely the highest unemployment rates (Department for Education, 2019, Coughlan, 2019).

I'm not so sure we need any more upskilling. The economy has changed, and as a result, so has the workforce requirements. The South Wales valleys is living proof of this. More needs to be done to address the long term effects of poverty.

A potential solution could be to increase the minimum wage, and to lower taxes for those who are earning 60% or under the median average UK income. I'm no economist, but surely there is more that can be done. Another solution to this could be the introduction of single payments and eradicating Universal Credit and other benefits, an idea that has been proposed to the UK government, and it has been piloted in Finland.

In my next blog post, I intend to discuss single payments, and whether these could be successful in supporting low income families escape out of the benefit catch twenty two, and whether they could help to promote and support the well-being of children and young people.

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BLOG 3

In this blog, I will be looking at the idea of single payments, or as they are also known as, basic payments, and whether these could possibly be a replacement to Universal Credit, the controversial benefit from the government which is designed to

eventually replace the other legacy benefits. Currently, Universal Credit is still being rolled out in the United Kingdom, and eventually, everyone in receipt of payments will be moved onto Universal Credit. Universal Credit will eventually replace the following benefits: Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), and Housing Benefit (UK Government, Nd).

The design of the Universal Credit model is intended to simplify the social security system, and to provide incentives for people to work due to the fact that it can be claimed whether someone is in or out of work. The amount a person is eligible for decreases the more they earn. So, the more a person earns, the less they get. In theory, this seems fair. A system which effectively bumps up a lower income with a social security net, and helps those who earn more to “wean” off the benefits. Those full time workers on minimum wages can rest assured that their hard work is not in vain because at least they can have support from Universal Credit, right? They don't have to slave away at menial jobs only to still be under the poverty threshold do they? Unfortunately, this just isn't the reality of the Universal Credit system. There are a number of reasons why Universal Credit is controversial and may not work for everyone.

One of the biggest flaws with the system is that the money is paid in arrears. For example, a person who on the old system would be entitled to housing benefit for their rent, and income support to help them with their income, would lose these completely, and would have to wait five weeks for their new Universal Credit payment to come through, in the meantime, they cannot pay their rent (which means they could get into arrears and are unlikely to be able to pay this off), and they may not be able to afford to heat their homes or pay for other bills and utilities. Which means a person would need to have saved enough money to survive the five weeks without any money. Those who have not saved anything to get through the five weeks (and let's be honest, those on lower incomes are unlikely to have enough surplus income to save anything) are given an advance payment, which is effectively a loan which is taken off future Universal Credit payments, (Schraer, 2020). Can those who claim Universal Credit even afford to pay this debt back?

Another flaw is that all rent must be paid from the Universal Credit payment. This is a problem for landlords and tenants, in particular, those with complex needs or substance abuse problems. Housing benefit was previously paid directly to the landlord, which meant racking up arrears was more difficult, and those who had issues with money management did not have to worry about budgeting for their rent. The new system has meant landlords are now less likely to receive their rent payments from tenants who have issues with managing their finances. It is clear how children and young people could potentially suffer in this situation.

A report done by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 2019 found that around 1.9 million adults who transferred on to the Universal Credit system from the legacy benefits would stand to lose at least £1000 a year. The report also found that those on the lowest household incomes would lose more than anyone else. How can this be fair? The rhetoric in theory is clearly not being modeled in practice. The new system was designed to help people become better off, but this just isn't true for millions of people.

These problems are just the tip of the iceberg; not to mention those who are evicted for being in arrears, those who are forced to choose between heating and eating, those millions of children and young people across the country who are victims of a situation that isn't their fault. There must be a better solution. It's evident that the Universal Credit system has some major flaws.

Then there's the idea of basic payments. I'm not proposing this system as some sort of saviour to the broken Universal Credit one, but it does hold some merits which are worth looking at. This idea does have some drawbacks too. The theory behind basic payments is that instead of having means tested social security benefits, every person in society would receive a basic payment once a month, whether they work or not. So, there would be no sickness benefits, housing benefits or any other benefits at all. If a person wanted to work they could, and have this basic payment as a back up income. If a person could not manage their money properly, then this does pose a problem for them, but then again, it could mean that the system for claiming such a

benefit would be simpler. The government would not have any need to verify someone's financial situation because everyone would be entitled to it.

One drawback could be that it may dissuade people from finding work. There is also the fact that taxes would more than likely need to be raised, but then again, everyone in the nation would benefit from it. This system is being piloted all over the world. In Italy for example it's called a "Citizen's Income" (Nagesh, 2019).

Those who support the idea of a basic income believe that having a safety net that is effectively unconditional, supports people to learn new skills and to look for work and it could also help those on zero hour contracts (for example, when those workers are off sick), or for others in insecure jobs. Children and young people could stand to benefit from this system as it would mean their households would be guaranteed an income. It is also worth noting that this basic payment is per person, not per household, which means that couples would get both their individual payments put into the household pot.

It's worth noting that Finland's trial of the basic payments was inconclusive. 2,000 unemployed Finns received a monthly payment of €560 (£490) from January 2017 until December 2018. What they found was that those who were given this payment were happier and had an increased sense of physical, mental and emotional well-being, as well as increased financial security. Great news! However, they were no more likely to have found a job with the support of the payments, than they would without it (Nagesh, 2019).

Could basic payments be the answer for Welsh children and young people in poverty? Now that our income taxes here in Wales go directly to the Welsh government, could we have an individualised social security system in place? One that is uniquely holistic and takes care of our most vulnerable? One can dream.

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