

The Lies We Tell Ourselves: ending comfortable myths and poverty

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1753 John Wesley, the founder of Methodism said, "So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, 'They are poor, only because they are idle'. Yet today many churchgoers and members of the general public alike have come to believe that the key factors driving poverty in the UK are the personal failings of the poor – especially 'idleness'. How did this come about?

The myths exposed in this report, reinforced by politicians and the media, are convenient because they allow the poor to be blamed for their poverty, and the rest of society to avoid taking any of the responsibility. Myths hide the complexity of the true nature of poverty in the UK. They enable dangerous policies to be imposed on whole sections of society without their full consequences being properly examined. This report aims to highlight some comfortable myths,

show how they have come to prominence and test them against serious evidence.

Churches have a special interest in speaking truthfully about poverty. Both the biblical warnings of the prophets and the example of Jesus teach us to pay special attention to the voices of the most vulnerable and underprivileged. The systematic misrepresentation of the poorest in society is a matter of injustice which all Christians have a responsibility to challenge.

The report begins with a case study, *Troubled Families and Troubled Statistics*, showing how facts and evidence were bent to meet the needs of policymakers. The reputations of society's most disadvantaged families became collateral damage in the rush to defend a new policy. Perhaps we are not surprised by this but we should be appalled.

The myths challenged are not a comprehensive list but were chosen because of their prominence in public debate, and their widespread acceptance.

MYTH 1

'They' are lazy and don't want to work

The most commonly cited cause of child poverty by churchgoers and the general public alike is that "their parents don't want to work". Yet the majority of children in

poverty are from working households. Inwork poverty is now more common than out of work poverty. It is readily accepted that across the country there are families in which three generations have never worked. Examples of such families have not been found, and the evidence suggests it is unlikely we ever will. How did we come to believe these things?

MYTH 2

'They' are addicted to drink and drugs

Churchgoers and the wider public cite addiction as the second most common cause of child poverty. While addiction is devastating for the families and communities touched by it, fewer than 4% of benefit claimants report any form of addiction. How did we come to believe this is such a big factor in the lives of the 13 million people who live in poverty in the UK today?

MYTH 3

'They' are not really poor – they just don't manage their money properly

Nearly 60% of the UK population agrees that the poor could cope if only they handled their money properly. The experience of living on a low income is one of constant struggle to manage limited resources, with small events having serious consequences. Statistics show that the poorest spend their money carefully, limiting themselves to the essentials. How did we come to believe that poverty was caused by profligacy?

MYTH 4

'They' are on the fiddle

Over 80% of the UK population believe that "large numbers falsely claim benefits". Benefit fraud has decreased to historically low levels - the kind of levels that the tax system can only dream of. Less than 0.9% of the welfare budget is lost to fraud. The fact is that if everyone claimed and was paid correctly, the welfare system would cost around £18 billion more. So how did we come to see welfare claimants as fraudulent scroungers?

MYTH 5

'They' have an easy life

Over half the British public believes benefits are too high and churchgoers tend to agree. Government ministers speak of families opting for benefits as a lifestyle choice. Yet we know that benefits do not meet minimum income standards. They have halved in value relative to average incomes over the last 30 years. We know the ill and the unemployed are the people least satisfied and happy with

life. Why have we come to believe that large numbers of families would choose this a lifestyle?

MYTH 6

'They' caused the deficit

The proportion of our tax bills spent on welfare has remained stable for the last 20 years. It is ridiculous to argue, as some have, that increasing welfare spending is responsible for the current deficit. Public debt is a problem but why is it being laid at the feet of the poorest?

CONCLUSION

As a coalition of major British Churches, we want to create a new story; one grounded in truth, compassion and hope. Part of our calling as Christians is to seek after truth, and that means facing up to our own blindness as well as calling others to account.

Collectively we have come to believe things about poverty in the UK which are not grounded in fact. We need to develop an understanding of the depth and breadth of UK poverty that is compatible with the evidence available. Just as importantly we need to match the language of public debate with the reality of people's lives. It is a task we must approach with humility; one which puts the lived experience of poverty at its heart, and one which is committed to truthfulness – no matter how uncomfortable we find those truths to be. Please join with us in this challenge.

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<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Truth-And-Lies-Report-smaller.pdf>