



**Rural Media
Company**

Executive Summary

Show and Tell: Multi-Media Testimony on Rural Poverty and Exclusion



Key Points

Using an innovative video research methodology this project documents the experience of rural poverty ‘through the eyes of’ those experiencing it. The research describes the impact of poverty not only as a material condition but also as a social relationship characterised by a denial of rights, assault on dignity, shame, stigma, isolation and powerlessness.

- Many participants emphasised the complex and difficult decisions involved in household budgeting and how the precariousness of their situation limited their autonomy, their ability to cope in a crisis, and their ability to escape poverty.
- Lack of affordable and accessible transport in rural areas is a key factor in constraining the opportunities. Maintaining a car is often a necessity of life for low income households in rural areas placing an additional strain on already stretched budgets
- The experience of poverty in rural areas is compounded by geographical isolation, inadequate transport, poor access to services, low pay, insecure and unrewarding work, and the higher costs associated with rural living.
- A lack of information, the complexity of forms, and the inflexibility of the benefits system in understanding participants personal circumstances were key obstacles in restricting their access to the benefits and services to which they were entitled
- Many participants felt guilty because they felt unable to provide for their family, or because of the perceived ‘burden’ they made upon local services, friends and family. Others were embarrassment as a result of unemployment, or not being able to afford quality brands, consumer goods or home decoration, or to pay their way socially.
- Although strong social networks and sense of community are key resources in a rural context in dealing with low income, for many participants physical and social isolation arising from a lack of income exacerbated their exclusion
- Participants’ hopes, aspirations and attitudes mirror those of the wider society of which they are part. For many, low income was seen as a temporary situation.

Too often anti-poverty research, policy and practice has ignored the views of those experiencing poverty. However, effective anti-poverty measures involve seeking the views and opinions of the real experts.

People experiencing poverty are keen to have their say on the obstacles and barriers they face as a result of their financial circumstances. They are very capable of making an important contribution to public debates on poverty, its causes, consequences and strategies for tackling it, and should be supported in making their voices heard.

Background

Although poverty is often seen as an urban problem, recent years have seen greater acknowledgement of rural poverty and the complex issues it raises for service providers and policy-makers. Better evidence on the nature and impact of low income in rural areas is therefore vital in developing effective policies and in the delivery of local services to tackle rural disadvantage. This project contributes to this goal by documenting the experience of poverty in rural communities through the eyes of people experiencing poverty.

This study examined 'video testimony' from 33 people experiencing low income in rural Herefordshire. Based on these video interviews and subsequent follow-up work, this study highlights the personal impact of rural disadvantage on participants' circumstances and prospects, as well as documenting its effects for example in relation to denial of rights, assault on dignity, stigma, isolation and powerlessness.

The Necessities of Life

All participants went without many things taken for granted by most people in Britain today such as adequate diet, basic services and utilities, new clothes, going out socially, and providing for children's activities. Participants frequently referred to 'making do', 'going without', 'tightening their belt' and struggling to 'make ends meet' on low incomes. The challenges of meeting responsibilities as parents were sometimes a source of anxiety, shame, and guilt and many participants went without so that they could provide for their children's development. Many felt that the general public and policy makers underestimate the difficulties involved in getting by on a low income, how little some people have to live on and the impossible choices people are forced to make in budgeting on very low incomes.

Participants emphasised the importance of forward-planning and the very small margin for error in household budgeting which left no room for spontaneity or for even small savings to tide them over in unanticipated crisis situations such as the need for car repairs, or replacement of household goods. Others referred to how their situation limited their opportunities for social contact, and for maintaining relationships with friends and family.

Accessing Services and Opportunities

Lack of affordable and accessible transport for low income households in rural areas was mentioned by most participants as a key factor in constraining the opportunities available to them. The inadequacies of public transport provision both in terms of availability and cost was a major factor in restricting many participants access to suitable employment opportunities, in maintaining strong social ties and contacts, and in accessing the support and services they need. A common problem was the ability to access healthcare and a number of participants highlighted the absence of an NHS dentist in their area. For many low income households in rural areas maintaining a car is a necessity which places an additional burden on already stretched budgets.

Isolation and Powerlessness

Participants emphasised the importance of strong social networks and sense of community as key resources in a rural context in dealing with their situation. Others referred to the vital role of service provision in rural areas in helping them to maintain social networks and to participate in society. Nevertheless, for many participants their physical isolation as a result of rural sparsity, and their social isolation arising from their inability to participate in society and maintain social networks contributed to their exclusion. A lack of autonomy in acting on their decisions as a result of a lack of money was central in understanding the sense of powerlessness reported by many participants.

Denial of Rights

Many participants identified significant barriers and obstacles in claiming the services and benefits to which they were entitled, for example, as a result of a lack of information; the complexity of forms, and the inflexibility of the benefits system in understanding the living circumstances of participants. Others referred to feelings of worthlessness and lack of recognition arising from the way they were made to feel by service providers, for example being treated differently', viewed with suspicion, looked down on, or 'processed' without real recognition of their situation and views.

This 'diminished citizenship' is also reflected in the way many participants were made to feel by others as a result of their situation. Some participants reported feeling guilty because they were unable to fully provide for their family, or because of the perceived 'burden' they made upon local services and friends and family. Others referred to feelings of embarrassment arising from their material and social circumstances, for example being unemployed, or not being able to afford quality brands, consumer goods or home decoration, or to pay their way socially.

Aspirations and Opinions

It is clear from the video testimonies that the hopes, aspirations and attitudes of the participants mirror those of the wider society of which they are part. For many, low income was seen as a temporary situation. Many participants' long term aspirations for themselves and their children focused on work as a route out of poverty, for example through more effective job search, improving their skills, and educational and training participation. However, although most participants' accounts emphasised paid work as a route out of poverty, this can be especially debilitating for those for whom it may not be an appropriate option as a result of old age, limiting illness or disability, caring responsibilities, or inaccessibility of employment markets.

Participants' wider views on the extent and nature of poverty in the UK today reflected different 'images of society' and explanations of its causes. For some, poverty was explained largely in individual terms, and the role of the state in tackling poverty was therefore seen as limited with the emphasis placed instead on individual initiative (e.g. upgrading personal skills, motivation and 'marketability'). For other participants poverty was viewed as reflecting deeper social inequalities, and solutions were framed in terms of state action to tackle the 'poverty gap', though many participants were far from optimistic that such action would in fact be taken. However, for many participants their views were complex and often reflected both individual and social explanations for poverty and how to tackle it.

Policy Implications

Although poverty is often perceived as an essentially urban problem this study uncovers the often hidden aspects of deprivation in rural areas. This study investigates both the material situation of people experiencing low income in rural areas and, equally importantly, its personal consequences in terms of social stigma, reduced self-esteem, loss of autonomy, assault on dignity, isolation and powerlessness.

The researchers conclude that the key policy implications are:

- Service providers need to ensure that the views of people experiencing low income are fully taken into account in the design and delivery of services for low income households
- Service providers need to ensure that services are delivered in ways which are accessible to service users; for example, through rural out-reach, better co-ordination or delivery and working towards improved public transport provision in rural areas
- Service providers need to ensure that people are provided with the information and advice they need to access the services and benefits to which they are entitled and that services are delivered in ways which respect the dignity of service users

About the Study

Project fieldwork involved gathering of video testimony from 50 people experiencing low income in rural Herefordshire, of whom 33 were categorised for inclusion and subsequent follow-up qualitative interviews. Participants were recruited via local community and voluntary sector organisations providing services for the following groups: the elderly, families with children, young people, people with limiting illness, minority ethnic groups, and people in receipt of means-tested benefits. Eligibility to take part in the study was determined on the basis of participants' perceptions of their material circumstances. Twenty six follow-up interviews were conducted to give participants an opportunity to reflect on their participation and to consider the wider issues raised. Video interviews commenced in January 2007 with follow up interviews completed by November.

For further information and contacts

The Final Report and accompanying DVD, *Show and Tell: Multimedia Testimony on Rural Poverty and Exclusion*, are available from The Rural Media Company (RMC) at the address below. Further information on the project is also available from the authors, Dr Eldin Fahmy and Dr Simon Pemberton (University of Bristol)

The Rural Media Company:

Jane Jackson (Project Director)
RMC, Sullivan House,
72-80 Widemarsh Street,
Hereford HR4 9HG
T: +44(0)1432 344039
W: <http://www.ruralmedia.co.uk>
E: info@ruralmedia.co.uk

University of Bristol:

Dr Eldin Fahmy
School for Policy Studies
University of Bristol
8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ
E: eldin.fahmy@bris.ac.uk

Dr Simon Pemberton
School for Policy Studies
University of Bristol
8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ
E: s.a.pemberton@bris.ac.uk
