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Tackling poverty-related stigma

Authors: Charlotte Morgan Josh Coles-Riley & Amanda Hill-Dixon

Background

Our Poverty and Social Exclusion review (2022) revealed that tackling stigma is a key priority for people with first-hand experience of poverty. This is because poverty stigma damages people's mental health and can keep them from getting support or playing a full part in their communities. Partly as a result of this work highlighting the mental health and stigma-related dimensions of poverty, as well as repeated examples of poverty stigma revealed in its official consultation exercise, the Welsh Government included the need to address poverty stigma as one of five objectives in its Child Poverty Strategy (2024).

To build on this work for the Welsh Government, and to support public services to address poverty stigma, in 2023 we began a programme of work to explore poverty stigma, looking at existing research and having conversations with policy makers, practitioners, academic and lived experience experts.

Having taken stock of these initial findings, we held a series of workshops in November and December 2023, in collaboration with the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) and Co-production Lab Wales. The overarching aim of the workshops was to help us identify what WCPP or others could do next to support public services in Wales to use the best available evidence to tackle poverty stigma more effectively.

This briefing summarises key messages from our initial desk review of existing research. Learning from the workshop series is summarised in a separate report.

Read the main report at wcpp.org.uk/publication/lifting-the-lid

What is 'poverty stigma'?

The influential sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) defined stigma as ***'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance'***. For Goffman, stigma is ultimately a relationship between people, taking place within social interactions in different ways, from facial expressions through to more overt forms of discrimination, such as name-calling. Drawing on Goffman's work, 'stigma' has also been defined as the co-occurrence of four processes within an exercise of power:

- Labelling differences;
- Stereotyping these differences;
- Separating those labelled 'different'; and
- Status loss and discrimination against those labelled (Link and Phelan, 2001: 363).

Building on these broad definitions, poverty stigma can be understood as a specific form of stigma in which people and communities are ***'devalued because they live in poverty or access services designed to support people living on low incomes'*** *(Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Poverty, 2023: 7)*. As part of our Poverty and Social Exclusion Review, we held a series of workshops with people with first-hand experience of poverty. Participants highlighted how poverty stigma affected their mental health and wellbeing and impacted access to services and support. One participant described how stigma affected the experience of using a foodbank: ***'I was mortified when I had to phone a foodbank. I hated it, absolutely hated it. Never been more embarrassed in my life'*** *(workshop participant, in Roberts, 2021: 16)*.

Another participant described using nail varnish remover to remove marker dates on food tins from foodbanks: ***'when friends go in your cupboards and see [the marker dates] you feel 'hang on a minute'. Not that they're gonna care because they're your friends, but you don't feel that inside: you feel embarrassed. […] I shouldn't have to […] But that's society, isn't it?'*** *(workshop participant, in ibid).*

Workshop participants were clear that shame and stigma significantly contributed to poverty's negative impacts on mental health:

Participant 1: "Morale is really low. You've got no, 'Oh yes, I'm going to get a house in a couple of years' time. Oh yes, I'm going on holiday next year'."

Participant 2: "It's the pure shame of it for me."

Participant 1: "You just feel shit."

Participant 2: "Yes, it's pure shame, shamefulness."

(workshop participants, in ibid: 17)

As these quotes demonstrate and we highlight below, poverty stigma is complex and multi-dimensional, taking place at multiple levels of society, from the interpersonal to the structural. Pointing to the social, interpersonal dimensions of poverty stigma, Ruth Lister describes how people experience poverty ***'not just as a disadvantage and insecure economic condition, but also as a shameful and corrosive social relation'*** (2004).

Different forms of (poverty) stigma

While developed from an analysis of stigma about mental illness rather than poverty stigma specifically, the conceptual framework in Table 1 draws some useful distinctions which might also provide insight into how poverty stigma manifests and is experienced.

The framework distinguishes between two types of stigma: public stigma (social or perceived stigma) and self-stigma (internalised stigma) (Corrigan, Kerr and Knudsen, 2005), showing how the impact of stigma is therefore twofold, with both external and internalised stigma being experienced at different levels through stereotypes (i.e. beliefs), prejudice (emotion and feelings), and discrimination (overt behaviours) (Corrigan and Watson, 2002).

Type of stigma

Level / aspect	**Public stigma**	**Self-stigma**
Stereotype (Belief)	Negative belief about a group (e.g. laziness, incompitence	Negative belief about the self (e.g. weakness, incompetence)
Prejudice (Emotion)	Agreement with the belief and/ or negative emtional reaction (e.g. anger, fear)	Agreement with the belief and/ or negative emtional reaction (e.g. anger, fear)
Discrimination (Behaviour)	Behavioural manifestation of prejudice (e.g. shunning, withholding hekp)	Behavioural response to prejudice (e.g. self-isolation)

Table 1: Conceptual framework on public stigma and self stigma (adapted from Corrigan and Watson, 2002)

Echoing the conceptual framework in Figure 1, researchers have identified five key forms of poverty stigma specifically (Inglis et al.,2022:784):

1. **Internalised negative stereotypes** (self-stigma), leading to low self-esteem or sense of failure related to being in poverty

2. **Beliefs about the prevalence of stigma** (perceived stigma), such as the belief that others view poverty as an issue of personal failure and laziness.

3. **The expectation of experienced stigma** (anticipated stigma). Individuals also report feeling as if they know they are being stigmatised even when they had not directly encountered stigma from others.

4. **Experiences of overt discrimination** (experienced stigma), including an individual feeling devalued or treated unfairly by others because of their financial situation. This could be from social security staff, members of the community or even family and friends.

5. **Institutional practices that disadvantage particular groups** (structural stigma). This can include damaging political or media narratives, as well as limiting individuals' access to social and economic resources that support health and social capital on the basis of their poverty. Other forms of – and approaches to understanding - poverty stigma are explored below.

Intersecting stigmas

Experts advocate taking an 'intersectional perspective' to stigma which allows professionals to think holistically about the impact of living, as many people do, with multiple stigmatised identities (Turan et al., 2019). Specific groups that are at particular risk of poverty may experience multiple forms of stigma and discrimination, and the effects of these stigmas are felt twofold due to the intersection between them (Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Poverty, 2023: 9). Groups likely to experiencing intersecting stigmas include 'Black and minority ethnic people, women, people with problem drug and alcohol use, people with experience of the criminal justice system, single parents and disabled people' (Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Poverty, 2023: 9). The intersection of disadvantage can effectively intensify the impact of stigma on the lives of individuals and communities.

Stigmatised places

Poverty stigma is not restricted to individuals alone; it can also be attached to particular communities and places associated with higher levels of poverty. For example, deprived areas, council estates, and social housing have often been regarded as 'problem areas', 'represented as habitats of troubled families, the 'undeserving poor'... and as sites of welfare dependency' (Harrison et al., 2021: 379). Harrison et al. (2021) analyse how issues of place and space are important in media representation and are associated with the political rhetoric of a 'Broken Britain' or 'left behind places'.

Connected to this, societal perceptions of the quality of a 'place' are critical drivers of place-related distress (Corcoran, 2023). For example, Indices of Multiple Deprivation offer official statistics on geographic deprivation, but this should not matter if people live happily in places that are 'officially' considered deprived (ibid.).

However, statistics such as these alongside stereotypes of certain places can generate stigma associated with living in 'poor' areas.

This can manifest as paradoxical feelings of pride and shame in an individual about the stigmatised area they live in, which can be a confusing experience of wider stigma being internalised (ibid.). Corcoran explains: ***'the downward spiral from place stigma to self-stigma is predictable and can explain some of the resentment expressed by residents' living in these areas, especially in ones where 'top-down neighbourhood regeneration' is being boasted'*** (2023: 9).

Poverty stigma in rural areas

Other characteristics of place can create an additional layer of stigma. People on low incomes in rural areas may struggle to access affordable public transport and localised services that are designed to support people in poverty, as there is often an assumption that poverty is minimal in these areas. This can exacerbate their experience of poverty stigma. The Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group (2023) found that individuals experiencing poverty in rural areas often feel pressured into hiding their financial worries. For example, research conducted in rural Scotland found that the higher 'visibility' of residents in rural communities can increase the perceived risk of embarrassment and associated stigma of asking for or receiving state assistance, which acts to conceal rural poverty (Scottish Government, 2009).

The causes of poverty stigma

Beyond understanding what poverty stigma is and the different forms it takes, it is also important to ask, as Imogen Tyler argues, 'where is stigma produced, by whom and for what purpose?' (CITE). In answering this question, many scholars of poverty stigma have taken a sociological perspective, considering poverty stigma as a form of social power that allows relatively powerful groups in society to achieve certain aims, including the exploitation and control of disadvantaged groups (Inglis et al., 2022; Tyler & Slater, 2018). From our initial desk review of research on poverty stigma we identify four key mechanisms through which poverty stigma is generated:

- Stigmatising policy design;
- Support seeking processes and services that are bureaucratic, judgmental and/or dehumanising;
- Media and political narratives which stereotype, denigrate and differentiate low-income people, groups or places;
- Social attitudes and biases with regard to perceptions of poverty.

Each of these mechanisms is explored below.

Stigmatising policy design

While not all public policies stigmatise their recipients, it has been argued that polices that specifically target poverty rarely escape being stigmatising, whether this is purposeful, by omission, or through ***'ignorance, neglect or carelessness in the policy design process'*** *(Walker, 2014: 62)*.

Some scholars go further in arguing that this kind of in-built stigma plays a pivotal role in governing welfare, designed to discourage and ultimately break a 'cradle-to-grave' system of government-decided support (Murray, 2009 and Walker, 2014).

An example of stigmatising policy design related to poverty is social housing policy in the UK. From the 1970s onwards, there has been an increasingly normalised perception of stigma surrounding British social housing, and a suggestion that this has been pushed by politicians, policies and even social housing providers (Ejiogu and Denedo, 2021). As the poorest tenants have been prioritised in social housing allocations within government policies, paired with a steady depletion of social housing and the promotion of home ownership policies, social housing is cast as ***'inferior, temporary and tenure of last resort'*** *(Ejiogu and Denedo, 2021:6)*. Social housing stigma also intersects with other policy areas and stigmas in addition to poverty, including crime stigma, mental health stigma and race and immigration stigma.

Another example of stigmatising policy design is the Troubled Families Programme (TFP), introduced by the UK Government in England in 2012 as a response to the riots that occurred in August 2011. The programme includes an intensive 'family intervention' model to support 'troubled families' to 'turn around' their lives in the first phase of the programme and support them to 'progress' in the second phase, all at a time of austerity and welfare reform.

A range of experts have argued that the programme conflated disadvantaged families on low-income or living in poverty with antisocial and criminal families and behaviour, further stigmatising the families that it aims to support (Crossley, 2018).

The design and delivery of public and charitable services

Public and charitable services, and the processes they design and use to enable access, can (often unintentionally) generate experiences of stigma for those in need of support. Key services highlighted in the literature include social security, food assistance and schools, among others.

Social security

A large body of evidence documents experiences of stigma related to social security in the UK. In two longitudinal qualitative studies of the lived experience of welfare reform, participants identified the administration of welfare benefits as demeaning and degrading, describing being looked down on and made to feel powerless in their interactions with the social security system (Patrick, 2016, 2017). Similarly, a participant in a 2019 study exploring how individuals with experience of living on a low income in Scotland experience poverty stigma, shared their experience of accessing social security: ***"I think the way the Job Centres treat people who are on benefits is absolutely shocking… they're the most likely to judge you."*** *(Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Poverty, 2023: 11)*. Such sentiments are widely echoed in several studies on the institutionalised stigma of claiming benefits in the UK, ranging from demeaning treatment at the Jobcentre (Jeffery et al., 2018) and the humiliation of means-testing and associated dehumanising bureaucratic processes (Walker and Chase, 2014), to the role of conditionality and benefits sanctions in imposing stigma on claimants by marking them as 'behaviourally incompetent and hence "undeserving" of social assistance' (Redman, 2020).

These and similar phenomena have led some scholars to not only describe stigma as 'endemic to most social security systems' (Baumberg, 2016) but to understand this, not as a byproduct, but as a deliberate administrative technique for managing the demand for welfare (Tyler, 2020) and "motivating" people in receipt of welfare assistance into becoming economically active (Walker, 2014). Indeed, social security stigma has been well documented to deter people from claiming and accessing welfare benefits, as we highlight in the section on impacts of poverty stigma below.

Food banks

Food banks are also a site in which poverty related stigma is experienced, perceived or expected. An ethnographic study of foodbanks and stigma identifies a practice of 'othering' (Garthwaite, 2016). When asked about their views of foodbanks, residents living in more affluent neighbourhoods in Stockton-on-Tees voiced perspectives ranging from supportive and sympathetic of people to more negative views, including that ***'drugs, alcohol, poor cooking skills and poor financial management'*** were to blame for foodbank use (Garthwaite, 2016: 284). There was also a belief that food banks ***'breed dependency',*** reflecting popular political messages that increase the stigmatisation surrounding foodbanks (Garthwaite, 2016: 284).

Evidence also indicates a significant amount of self-stigma experienced by people accessing foodbank services. The decision to access a food bank can be incredibly difficult due to the shame and stigma people can feel for needing to rely on it (The Trussell Trust, 2023). In an ethnographic study of a Trussell Trust foodbank in the South Wales Valleys, one interviewee described accessing the foodbank as 'shameful' and feeling ***'the absolute lowest of the low'*** *(Strong, 2020: 77)*.

Exploring why the experience of accessing foodbanks is shameful, compared with other means of accessing 'free food', Strong (2020) finds an interplay between need and choice – claimants of food banks are having to ask for support while having their 'eligibility' assessed, rather than being given it, which stigmatises the experience. Ethnographic studies provide further insight into how foodbank administration practices inadvertently generate additional stigma for recipients.

For example, the use of referral systems, based on the premise that people find it easier to ask for help from a 'welfare professional' they already know, in many cases creates new barriers and feelings of shame and discomfort: study participants described peoples' reluctance approaching schools for vouchers because of the risk of other parents finding out, or fears of their future relationship with the school being affected by being marked as a parent unable to provide for their children (May et al., 2019). Indeed, participants also highlighted how foodbank vouchers themselves are perceived by recipients as a visible marker of stigma (ibid).

Schools

There are a range of ways in which children and families experience or perceive poverty stigma through schools. A substantial literature on approaches to poverty in the education system in the UK has highlighted how a dominant narrative of 'disadvantaged pupils' construes pupils in poverty in terms of what they lack, leading to deficit approaches which locate educational failure in the individual or the home rather than the systems around them (Reay, 2001, Smyth and Wrigley, 2013, Thompson et al, 2016). Building on this, a range of studies highlight how policies and practices in schools designed to support 'disadvantaged pupils' can inadvertently stigmatise such pupils and mark them as other.

For example, stigma attached to the provision of free school meals (FSM) is one of the key factors explaining why some children and young people or their parents refrain from claiming this entitlement. In its 2012 report on free school meals for all children in poverty, The Children's Society found that almost a quarter of children living in poverty across the UK do not access the FSM that they are entitled to due to the stigma surrounding this provision (The Children's Society, 2012).

A more recent study looking at free school meal funding in Wales found that some parents opt to access foodbanks outside their local area rather than claiming the free school meals provision (ap Gruffudd et al., 2017). The study also found that self-stigma was worse in rural areas, with parents being more likely to refuse free school meals entitlement out of 'rural pride' (ap Gruffudd et al., 2017).

However, the policy context around free school meals in Wales has recently changed. As part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, universal primary free school meals are currently being rolled out across Wales. Previously, FSM were only available to low-income families. The Welsh Government is now working with local authorities to meet its commitment for all primary school pupils to receive free school meals by September 2024. This policy approach will be key to increasing take up and reducing the stigma around FSM.

Studies have identified a range of coping strategies used by children in poverty, centring on nondisclosure or concealment of poverty in order to preserve self-esteem, gain acceptance and reduce fear of stigma (Reutter et al, 2009), something which becomes particularly challenging in the 'public arena' of the school setting, in which children must negotiate a public identity (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019), and in which, as Ridge (2011) among others has shown, schools systematically prevent children from having the option of not disclosing their families' financial status, in particular through a range of additional and often unrecognised 'costs of the school day' that expose and single out children whose families struggle to afford them.

For example, although school uniforms can help to minimise visible differences, strict dress code enforcement or where an exclusive supplier is listed can restrict choice and ultimately add expense, with children and young people saying it is still the 'main indicator of family income' and easy to make fun of when it is wrong (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022).

Children and young people in Wales also feel stigmatised and excluded when they are unable to participate in school trips and extracurricular activities, with students being sent to a different class to stay for the week if they do not attend school trips (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). Although support is available through the Pupil Development Grant, this can vary from school to school, with many trips still arranged outside of the core curriculum.

Media and political narratives

Media and political narratives which stereotype, denigrate and differentiate low-income people, groups or places with discourse such as 'scroungers' or 'undeserving poor' are seen as stigmatising and damaging (Baumberg-Geiger, 2012: 7, Tyler, 2020). Analysis of media coverage of benefits in national newspapers from 1995-2011 found that overall, content within press stories swayed more towards negative representations of claimants and the amount of coverage referencing 'fraud' was very high (21 – 39 percent) in all coverage titles. The main source for pushing stories about fraud, however, is the political sphere (Baumberg-Geiger, 2012), highlighting how media coverage and welfare policy and politics are often linked in generating public stigma. For example, Tyler (2020) argues that some of the very systems of government, including political and media narratives, produce and profit from stigma whilst also bank rolling anti-stigma mental health campaigns.

Wider structural social attitudes and bias

Walker (2014:52) argues that people are expected to behave in discriminatory or biased ways towards certain groups ***'according to the norms of the institution or society at large'*** and that in addition to this, wider structures systematically exclude opportunities for challenging stereotypes. These accepted social attitudes can manifest in an inequality of opportunity due to bias, for example, bias against a candidate due to their address during a recruitment process. Connected to this, research shows that even if an unemployed person had the same qualifications and skills as an employed applicant, the unemployed person has a significantly lower chance of getting hired (Krug et al., 2019).

A recent study also found that unconscious biases could be contributing to the underperformance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, highlighting that identical pieces of work are being judged as poorer quality if they are presented as being written by children of lower socioeconomic-status than if they are presented by children of higher socio-economic status (Doyle et al., 2022).

The impacts of poverty stigma

As we explore below, for those in poverty, the stigmatisation of poverty in society can result in feelings of shame, guilt, otherness and inferiority, leading to poor mental health. It can also limit people's social participation and access to support.

Mental health

Poverty stigma is well documented to have negative impacts on mental health and may be an important mechanism contributing to the broader relationship between living in poverty and poor mental health (Inglis et al., 2022). Studies highlight that stigma does not just discourage people from seeking help but once attached to conditions and groups of people – and most especially in those living in poverty... can trigger anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses. A recent evidence review found that poverty stigma is associated with four aspects of poor mental health (Inglis et al., 2022):

- Negative self-evaluation e.g. poor self-esteem;
- Diminished social wellbeing e.g. social isolation and loneliness;
- Negative affect e.g. shame, stress or embarrassment;
- Mental ill health e.g. depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

As such, poverty stigma can make it more likely that someone will experience poor mental health, as well as making it harder for people to escape poverty.

Social wellbeing and isolation

Stigma has also been found to have an impact on a range of social wellbeing outcomes (Inglis et al., 2022). At a personal level, stigma can cause people to reduce social contact and conceal any financial difficulties, becoming socially isolated in an attempt to avoid discrimination. This can inhibit their access to both wider social and economic resources, leading to diminished social wellbeing. For example, qualitative studies have explored how individuals experiencing poverty can be socially excluded by their peers, with participants explaining that ***'it's the way they stop asking you out and the way they do not visit like they used to'*** *(Chase and Walker, 2013: 745).*

Access to services and support

As we highlight in the section on causes of poverty stigma above, both public narratives about and processes for enabling access to services for people in poverty can serve to (re)produce stigma and, in many cases, present additional barriers to accessing support. For example, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation "poverty stigma design team" have highlighted, the often-confrontational language used in relation to social security and other public services, such as referring to a need to 'combat' public spending on Universal Credit, can alienate people who require support but are afraid of wider perceptions of accessing said services (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023). In a submission to an inquiry into poverty-related stigma by the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group in 2023, representatives of a disability charity reflected on the narrative around "deserving" poor being especially harmful for disabled people. They reported that fear of being viewed as "undeserving" has been listed as a common reason for disabled people hesitating to apply for welfare and other non-financial support.

Members of the alliance also comment that their direct experience of stigma when previously engaging with public services is a big part of their reluctance to access these services (Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group, 2023).

Reflecting this, a 2016 study found that a quarter of non-claimants would be less likely to claim benefits due to reasons related to shame and around a third of people receiving benefits report feeling benefits-related stigma (Baumberg, 2016). Similar views were expressed in a study by Inglis et al. (2019) from participants in Scotland who said they do not use benefits that they are eligible for as they felt they may be judged by others.

Studies have also highlighted how stigma prevents people from accessing other services for people in poverty, such as foodbanks. As we highlight in the section on foodbanks above, this can be exacerbated by processes for administering access to foodbanks, such as referral processes and the use of vouchers. Visibility has also been an issue for people who may be eligible for food assistance. For example, one community in Arfon, North Wales, saw a decline in the number of people seeking support when they moved a foodbank from a side street to a high street, as people did not want to be seen asking for help (Bevan Foundation, 2023b).

What works to tackle poverty stigma?

Evidence on the relationship between poverty and stigma, as well as conversations with experts, suggest that the following approaches may be promising and are worth exploring further:

Involving people with lived experience

It has been suggested that involving people with lived experience in service design, delivery and evaluation, for example, through Poverty Truth Commissions is one of the most effective approaches to reducing stigma (Brewis and Wuitch, 2019). Involving people with lived experience in decision making and service design can address gaps between policy intention and implementation for the people affected. It is particularly important to involve people with lived experience of poverty stigma in any service design and delivery as this inclusive approach is the opposite to an 'othering' approach that many people who experience poverty encounter.

Participants at both of WCPP's tackling poverty stigma workshops also felt strongly that including lived experience throughout any decision-making processes, and building professional relationships with people with lived experience, were important in tackling this issue.

Cash transfers and basic income type approaches

There is consistent evidence from across several studies that basic-income type approaches that directly tackle low income, which is the root of poverty stigma for many people are seen to be effective in tackling stigma, providing mental health and stigma improvements (Wilson and McDaid, 2021).

However, within the context of the fiscal constraints that the Welsh public sector currently faces, this approach may be prohibitively expensive for local governments and public services in Wales. The design and rollout of this approach would also need to be developed in a stigma-free way.

Redesigning social security

Redesigning or re-engineering social security and broader support services to ensure they are accessible, non-judgemental and respect people's dignity and humanity. This could take the form of training staff in non-judgmental practice and avoiding processes which differentiate people. There is also evidence that reducing compliance demands – whereby recipients are required to demonstrated their compliance with conditions of receipt – in the context of unemployment benefit programs leads to improved psychological wellbeing of claimants (Baekgaard et al, 2021).

Tackling damaging narratives and discourse

This could take the form of media and research campaigns, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) 'Talking About Poverty' project which was a collaboration between JRF and FrameWorks UK, a not-for-profit organisation specialising in supporting mission-drive organisations to apply strategic communications research in practice. The project aimed to explore and understand public perceptions of poverty in the UK, using insight from research with 20,000 individuals to develop ways to talk about poverty in a more effective way. To challenge the harmful narratives identified, an evidence-based communications strategy – a poverty framing toolkit – was developed to increase wider understanding of poverty in the UK and provide support for measures to address it (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2019).

Similarly, the Poverty Alliance's previous 'Stick Your Labels' campaign, which attracted support from the public, private and voluntary sector, aimed to tackle poverty stigma in Scotland, wider societal myths around poverty, and the judgemental language used by the media and some politicians, by focusing instead on the reality of individual experiences of poverty.

Changing the stigmatising language used in support programmes

Although there is limited empirical evidence on this, several studies have found causation between purposefully destigmatising the language used in support programmes and an increase in take-up of said support programmes Lasky-Fink and Linos, 2022 and Schanzenbach, 2009).

Looking at government-provided rental assistance in the United States, Lasky-Fink and Linos's study (2022) explored whether subtle changes to the framing and language of this program increased take-up. The study included the design and testing of a communication intervention that targeted both external and internalised stigma associated with emergency rental assistance programs in two randomised field experiments. Within these experiments, one group was approached with either just the information about the program or approached via outreach that uses destigmatising language. For the group exposed to destigmatising language they received messages which shifted the blame away from them as individuals, with the additions of comments such as 'it's not your fault' and 'We are here to help all eligible'. It was found that the de-stigmatising approach delivered via email increased engagement with the relevant rental assistance application by 36%in comparison to the information only approach.

Cultural competence training

This can take the form of photovoice training, case studies, community-based activities and poverty simulations. Poverty simulations are designed to be immersive experiences in which participants, for example practitioners and policy makers, 'role-play life as a member of a low-income family' and have been shown to be effective in increasing both the knowledge of, and empathy towards, the challenges of living in poverty (Murray et al., 2022: 25).

The effectiveness of simulations in changing attitudes in professional environments is also evidenced in the literature.

For example, the Missouri Community Action Network Poverty Simulation (CAPS) has been used extensively among nursing students and shows that participation is associated with a more external, understanding view of poverty that takes into account the lack of opportunities and structural barriers that people experiencing poverty face. A study by Murray et al (2022) used a simulation format in which participants role-played four weeks in the life of someone living in poverty over the space of one hour. The results showed that attitudes towards poverty in the areas of stigma and structural perspective increased post-simulation but only mean stigma scores showed sustained improvement (Murray et al., 2022). Similarly, participants gave feedback that poverty simulations generate 'feelings of compassion and empathy' (Murray et al., 2022: 24).

Conclusion

This policy briefing sets out our initial learning about poverty stigma following initial scoping desk research and conversations with stakeholders and the series of workshops we held in Winter 2023. A summary of the workshop discussion is published separately.

Our initial scoping research points to multiple reasons why tackling poverty stigma is so consistently identified as a policy priority by people with first-hand experience of poverty. Research shows how stigma creates a whole new dimension to the harm of poverty, by damaging people's mental health and psychological wellbeing, cutting them off from social connection and community participation, and limiting their access to services and support. As this briefing also establishes, poverty stigma is not an inevitable feature of poverty or poverty-related services.

Indeed, in the case of media and political narratives, it is often intentional – an argument which has been extended by some scholars of poverty stigma to the design of public policies themselves, particularly those relating to welfare and social security. Moreover, even well-intentioned services and support for people in poverty can inadvertently reproduce stigma and create barriers to access.

Finally, while evidence on what works to tackle poverty stigma is more emergent, we highlight some promising avenues for further enquiry above. We also know from our public engagement that determination to tackle poverty stigma is only growing among policy makers, practitioners, and people with lived experience of poverty. Facilitating connections to researchers and to research evidence will have a critical role to play in future policy and practice efforts to tackle the injustice of poverty stigma.

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For further information contact:

Charlotte Morgan

+44 (0)29 2087 5345

charlotte.morgan@wcpp.org.uk

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Wales Centre for Public Policy

Cardiff University, Sbarc | Spark,
Maindy Road, Cardiff CF24 4HQ

www.wcpp.org.uk

029 2087 5345

info@wcpp.org.uk

@WCfPP

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