



Lifting the lid on poverty stigma in Wales

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It has been funded over a four-year period from 2020–2024 by the ESRC and is a collaboration between UCL, Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) at Cardiff University, University of Glasgow, Queen's University Belfast, the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information Centre (EPPI), the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), and academic news publisher The Conversation.

Established at the height of the global pandemic, the observatory was quick to produce reviews of evidence on topics such as the impact of school closures on children and young people in education for the UK Department of Education.

The team later widened its scope to explore the challenges posed by Net Zero, Covid Recovery, Place and Spatial Inequality and Socio-Economic Inequalities, and works with governments at the local, national and devolved level to help bring evidence into their policy development.

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Summary

- » This report summarises evidence from a nationally representative survey on poverty stigma among adults in Wales.
- » The survey covered two forms of poverty stigma: received stigma and perceived structural stigma. Received stigma refers to individuals' personal experiences of being negatively judged, excluded, or treated unfairly because they live on a low income. Perceived structural stigma refers to individuals' beliefs that people living on low incomes are treated unfairly by public services, decision makers and institutions such as the media.
- » Approximately one in four (24%) adults in Wales reported that they experienced some form of received stigma "sometimes," "often" or "always" in the past 12 months. This figure rises to more than one in three (35%) adults with annual household incomes under £20,000.
- » The most common type of received stigma amongst respondents with household incomes below £20,000 was "people making negative assumptions about me because I don't have much money," reported by 26% of respondents as happening "sometimes," "often" or "always".
- » Younger people, benefits recipients, people who rent their home and people with disabilities reported higher levels of received stigma. People experiencing food insecurity reported three times as much received stigma than those who are not.
- » Almost nine out of ten (87%) adults in Wales believe that at least one type of structural stigma occurs "sometimes," "often" or "always" in the UK.
- » The most commonly reported type of perceived structural stigma amongst respondents with a household income below £20,000 was "Politicians looking down on people who live on low incomes," which 79% of respondents believed happens "sometimes," "often" or "always".
- » Perceived structural stigma did not vary by household income, and many people who perceive structural poverty stigma are not themselves in poverty or at risk of poverty. This strongly suggests that poverty stigma is a structural issue in Wales and the UK.
- » Perceived structural stigma was higher amongst younger people, benefits recipients, people with disabilities and people experiencing food insecurity.

Lifting the lid on poverty stigma in Wales

YouGov survey key findings



1 in 4 adults in Wales experience poverty stigma 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'



Received stigma

Individuals' personal experiences of being negatively judged, excluded, or treated unfairly by others because they live on a low income



1 in 3 adults in low-income households in Wales experience poverty stigma 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'

Levels of received poverty stigma are...



3 times higher among young people aged 16-24 than people aged 65+



3 times higher for people experiencing food insecurity



More than double for people in receipt of benefits



Double for people in households with an overall income of less than £20k



Double among people limited by disability or health problems



87% of Welsh adults, regardless of household income, believe that at least one type of structural stigma occurs 'sometimes', 'often', or 'always'



Perceived structural stigma

Individuals' beliefs that people living on low incomes are treated unfairly by public services, decision makers and institutions such as the media



The **most common** type of perceived structural stigma is 'politicians looking down on people who live on low incomes'

Levels of perceived structural poverty stigma are higher among:



Younger people



People experiencing food insecurity



People limited by disability or health problems



People in receipt of benefits

Introduction

Background

This report provides an overview of survey data on the prevalence of poverty stigma among adults in Wales. It builds on research conducted by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) on poverty and social exclusion in Wales, which highlighted the role of poverty stigma in linking poverty and poor mental health (Roberts, 2022). As a result, tackling poverty stigma is now one of five objectives in the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy (2024). This research has been developed to enhance understanding of the scale and nature of poverty stigma in Wales to inform actions to address it.

The challenge of poverty stigma

More than one in five people (22%) in Wales live in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024). Poverty stigma occurs when individuals are negatively stereotyped, socially excluded, or treated unfairly because they live on a low income or use services designed to help people living in poverty, such as social security (Inglis et al., 2023). People living in poverty may experience different forms of poverty stigma from various sources, including judgmental attitudes from the community and unfair treatment from institutions and services (Inglis et al., 2019).

People with lived experience of poverty report encountering stigma and discrimination related to their financial situation in the UK and internationally (Bray et al., 2019). Poverty stigma is a significant public mental health issue and a recent systematic review concluded that experiences of poverty stigma are related to several adverse mental health outcomes (Inglis et al., 2023). Research by WCPP in Wales also highlighted how feelings of stigma and shame associated with living in poverty can have a negative impact on individuals' wellbeing (Roberts, 2022). Poverty stigma can lead to social isolation as people avoid participating in their communities to avoid potentially stigmatising interactions and conceal their financial problems from others (Inglis et al., 2023). Additionally, poverty stigma acts as a barrier to seeking help and may affect the take-up of social security benefits (Bennett, 2024) and other support services, such as food assistance or means-tested childcare (Morgan et al., 2024).

Existing research on poverty stigma has been predominantly qualitative, providing insight into the types, sources, and impacts of stigma (Roberts, 2022; Tyler and Campbell, 2024). Comparatively little is known about how common experiences of poverty stigma are exactly, or whether some groups in society are more likely to experience poverty stigma than others.

The purpose of this research was to explore these gaps in the evidence base in Wales for two specific types of poverty stigma that were identified in a recent study of poverty stigma and mental health in the UK (Inglis et al., 2024): **received stigma** and **perceived structural stigma**.

Received and perceived structural stigma explained



Received stigma

Individuals' personal experiences of being negatively judged, excluded, or treated unfairly by others because they live on a low income.



Perceived structural stigma

Individuals' beliefs that people living on low incomes are treated unfairly by public services, decision makers and institutions such as the media.

Research questions

The specific research questions that are addressed in this report are the following:

1. How common is received and perceived structural poverty stigma in Wales?
2. Which groups are more likely to report received or perceived structural poverty stigma in Wales?

Method



The data were collected through the Bevan Foundation's Winter 2024 Poverty Snapshot survey (Bevan Foundation, 2024). The survey, conducted online by YouGov from 15th to 18th January, included a sample size of 1,029 adults. Weighted data were used in all analyses to be representative of the Welsh population (Inglis, 2024).

Ten survey items asked about poverty stigma. These items were adapted from a recent study of poverty stigma and mental health in the UK (Inglis et al., 2024). Five items related to received stigma and five items related to perceived structural stigma. Survey respondents' answers were combined to give two overall scores for received stigma and perceived structural stigma. The total scores for both types of stigma could range between 0 to 20, with higher scores indicating higher levels of reported stigma.

Two main forms of analyses were conducted. First, we sought to examine how common experiences of poverty stigma are in Wales. To do so, we calculated the number of respondents who selected "sometimes," "often" or "always" in response to at least one survey item relating to received stigma and perceived structural stigma. These figures were calculated for the whole survey sample and then specifically for respondents who reported an annual household income of less than £20,000 per year. We chose this income threshold to examine how common experiences of poverty stigma are among low-income households specifically. It should be noted that reported income was not adjusted for the size or composition of respondents' households, and therefore does not take into account the fact that larger households need higher incomes to achieve a comparable standard of living than smaller households.

In the second set of analyses, average scores for received stigma and perceived structural stigma were calculated and compared across social groups. There was particular interest in attitudes toward public services, and so we also compared responses on the two perceived structural stigma items that related specifically to public services: *"People on low incomes receiving a lower standard of public services"* and *"Public services making you feel inadequate when you are living on a low income."* Additional analyses were conducted to test whether any group differences were statistically significant. A statistically significant difference means that we can be confident that there is a reliable difference between two or more groups within the sample. As the survey is broadly representative of the Welsh population, we can be reasonably confident that any differences found between groups in the survey sample will also generalise to the wider population. Therefore, only statistically significant group differences are reported in the text of this report.

It is also important to note that the survey sample size was not sufficient to compare how experiences of poverty stigma vary between some groups. For example, it wasn't possible to examine differences according to individuals' ethnicity or specific forms of benefit receipt. It also wasn't possible to examine how experiences of stigma differ across multiple intersecting characteristics. For example, it wasn't possible to examine whether there were gender differences among people with disabilities specifically.

A detailed summary of the methodology and findings can be seen in an accompanying report (Inglis, 2024).

Key findings

How common is poverty stigma in Wales?

Received stigma



1 in 4 people experience poverty stigma 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'



1 in 3 adults in low-income households in Wales experience poverty stigma 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'

Survey responses on received stigma are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 summarises data from all respondents, while Table 2 focuses on respondents with a household income of less than £20,000.

Respondents were asked five questions relating to their experiences of received stigma in the past 12 months. We initially calculated the number of respondents who selected the option "sometimes", "often" or "always" to at least one of these questions to determine how common experiences of received poverty stigma are in Wales. In total, 24% of all respondents reported that they experienced at least one type of received stigma "sometimes" "often" or "always" in the past 12 months. This figure rose to 35% among respondents with a household income of less than £20,000. Table 2 shows that the most commonly reported type of received stigma among these respondents with a household income of less than £20,000 was "people making negative assumptions about me because I don't have much money," which 26% of respondents reported experiencing "sometimes," "often" or "always".

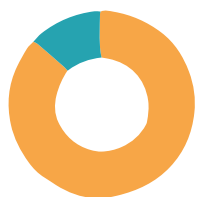
How often, if at all, would you say you have experienced the following over the past 12 months?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Don't know
People making negative assumptions about me because I don't have much money.	60%	13%	11%	3%	3%	11%
People treating me badly because I don't have much money.	70%	12%	6%	2%	2%	7%
People speaking down to me because I don't have much money.	66%	13%	9%	3%	2%	7%
People blaming me because I don't have much money.	69%	9%	7%	4%	2%	8%
Family or friends excluding me from things because I don't have much money.	70%	11%	8%	2%	3%	7%

Table 1: Summary of responses to received poverty stigma survey questions (all respondents)

How often, if at all, would you say you have experienced the following over the past 12 months?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Don't know
People making negative assumptions about me because I don't have much money.	47%	14%	13%	6%	7%	14%
People treating me badly because I don't have much money.	60%	13%	9%	4%	4%	9%
People speaking down to me because I don't have much money.	53%	17%	11%	7%	4%	8%
People blaming me because I don't have much money.	59%	13%	9%	6%	4%	9%
Family or friends excluding me from things because I don't have much money.	59%	10%	11%	5%	6%	10%

Table 2: Summary of responses to received poverty stigma survey questions (respondents with annual household income of less than £20,000)

Perceived structural stigma



87% of people believe that at least one type of structural stigma occurs 'sometimes', 'often', or 'always'



The most common type of perceived structural stigma is 'politicians looking down on people who live on low incomes'

Survey respondents' answers to the questions on perceived structural stigma are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 summarises data from all respondents, and Table 4 summarises data from respondents with a household income of less than £20,000.

Respondents were asked five questions relating to perceived structural stigma in the UK and we initially calculated the number of respondents who selected the option "sometimes", "often" or "always" to at least one of these questions. Overall, 87% of all respondents believe that at least one type of structural stigma occurs "sometimes," "often" or "always" in the UK. Amongst those with a household income of less than £20,000, this figure is very similar at 85%. Table 4 shows that the most commonly reported type of perceived structural stigma among respondents with a household income of less than £20,000 is "Politicians looking down on people who live on low incomes", which 79% of respondents believe happens "sometimes," "often" or "always". This was also the most commonly reported form of perceived stigma among all respondents.

How often, if at all, do you think the following happen in the UK?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Don't know
People on low incomes being looked down on by television programmes	6%	9%	28%	28%	13%	16%
People on low incomes receiving a lower standard of public services	9%	10%	26%	24%	13%	18%
Public services making you feel inadequate when you are living on a low income	12%	8%	25%	20%	11%	25%
Politicians looking down on people who live on low incomes	5%	4%	21%	32%	29%	11%
People on low incomes being looked down on by newspapers.	6%	5%	27%	30%	16%	16%

Table 3: Summary of responses to perceived structural poverty stigma survey questions (all respondents)

How often, if at all, do you think the following happen in the UK	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Don't know
People on low incomes being looked down on by television programmes	5%	10%	22%	28%	15%	19%
People on low incomes receiving a lower standard of public services	6%	10%	28%	24%	14%	17%
Public services making you feel inadequate when you are living on a low income	10%	10%	25%	17%	15%	23%
Politicians looking down on people who live on low incomes	4%	3%	19%	28%	32%	14%
People on low incomes being looked down on by newspapers.	5%	6%	24%	26%	18%	22%

Table 4: Summary of responses to perceived structural poverty stigma survey questions (respondents with annual household income of less than £20,000)

Who is more likely to experience poverty stigma?

Our analysis reveals several factors associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing poverty stigma, either received or perceived structural stigma: being younger, having a lower income, living in a household where the chief income earner works in a manual occupation or is non-working, food insecurity, disability, benefits receipt, and renting. In contrast, experiences of poverty stigma were equally likely across men and women, whether respondents had experience as a carer or not, and across regions of Wales.











Received and perceived stigma	Received stigma only	No difference
 Being younger	 Low income	 Gender
 Food insecurity	 Household occupational type (manual or non-working)	 Carer experience
 Limiting disability or health problem		 Region of Wales
 Benefit receipt		
 Renting home from local authority or housing association		

Table 5: Summary of individual and household characteristics associated with increased likelihood of experiencing poverty stigma

Who is more likely to experience received poverty stigma?

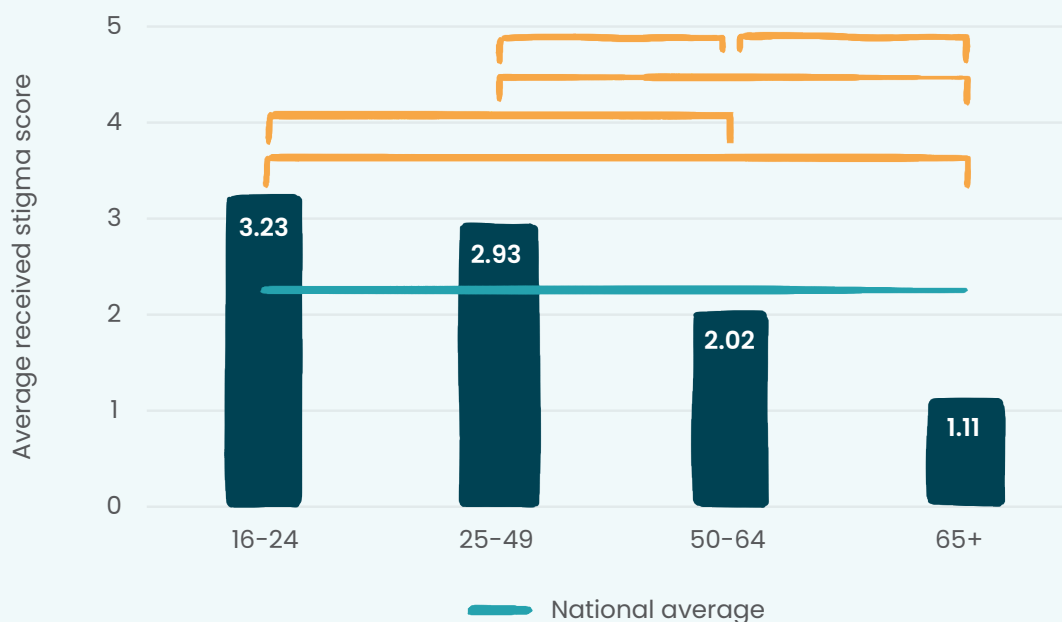
Received poverty stigma refers to individuals' personal experiences of being negatively judged, excluded, or treated unfairly by others because they live on a low income. We examined how experiences of received poverty stigma vary by personal and household characteristics. Total received poverty stigma scores were calculated by summing respondents' answers to the five received poverty stigma survey items, and the average total scores were compared across groups.

Age



Young people aged 16–24 experience three times more received poverty stigma than people aged over 65

Figure 1 shows that younger people reported higher levels of received stigma compared to older people. For example, average reports of received stigma among people aged 16–24 were approximately three times greater than for those aged 65 or over.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

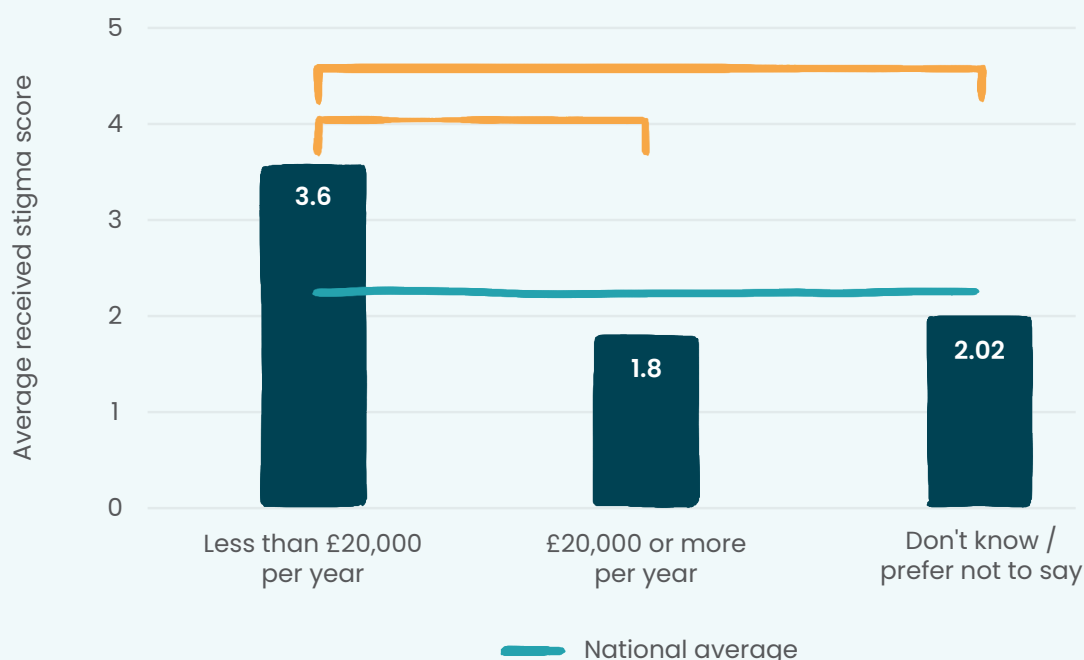
Figure 1: Average received poverty stigma score by age

Household income



Lower income households experience twice as much received poverty stigma as higher income households

Figure 2 shows that the average received poverty stigma score among people living in households with an income of less than £20,000 was approximately twice as great as for people living in higher-income households.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

Figure 2: Average received poverty stigma score by household income

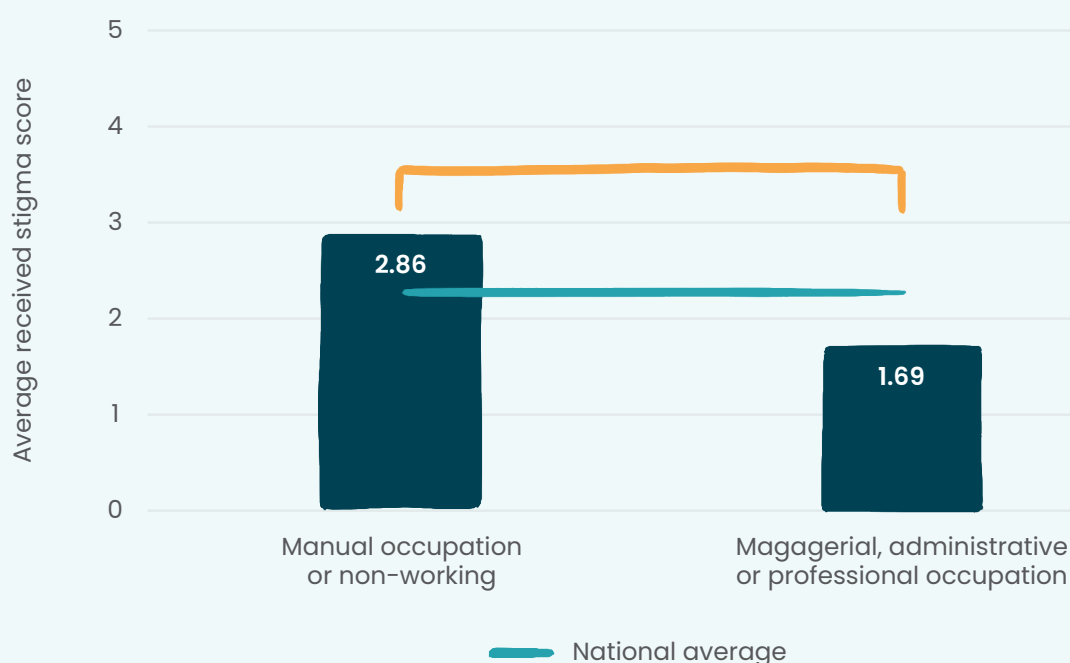
Household occupational type



Manual workers and non-workers experience greater received poverty stigma than managers, administrators or professionals

Households' occupational type was categorised according to the occupation of the household's chief income earner. There are six possible categories, labelled A, B, C1, C2, D and E. Households where the chief income earner works in a managerial, administrative, or professional occupation are categorised as A, B, or C1, and households where the chief income earner either works in a manual occupation or is non-working are categorised as C2, D, or E.

Figure 3 shows that the average received poverty stigma score was higher among respondents living in households where the chief income earner works in a manual occupation or is non-working compared to respondents in households where the chief income earner works in a managerial, administrative or professional occupation.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

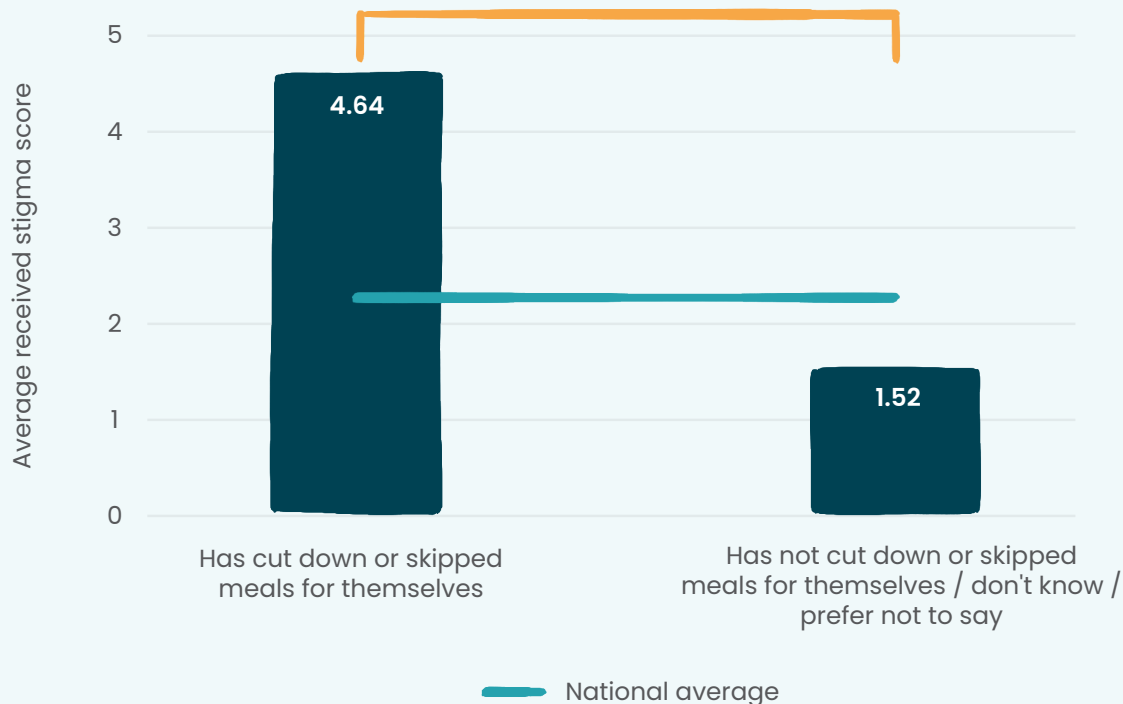
Figure 3: Average received poverty stigma score by household occupational type

Food insecurity



Received poverty stigma is three times greater among people experiencing food insecurity

Figure 4 shows that the average level of received stigma experienced by people who had experienced food insecurity (meaning they had cut down on the size of meals or skipped meals for themselves) was approximately three times greater than those who had not.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

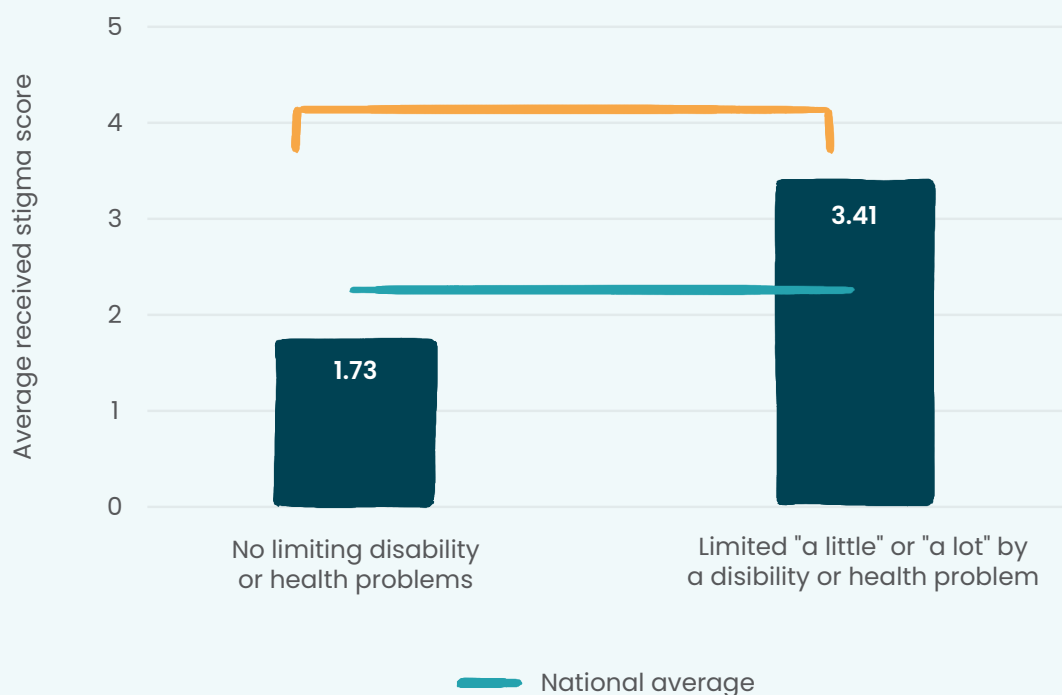
Figure 4: Average received poverty stigma score by food security

Disability



People limited by disability or health problems experience twice as much received poverty stigma

As shown in Figure 5, people living with a disability or health problem experienced approximately twice the amount of received stigma compared to those with no disability or health problem.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

Figure 5: Average received poverty stigma score by disability

Benefits receipt

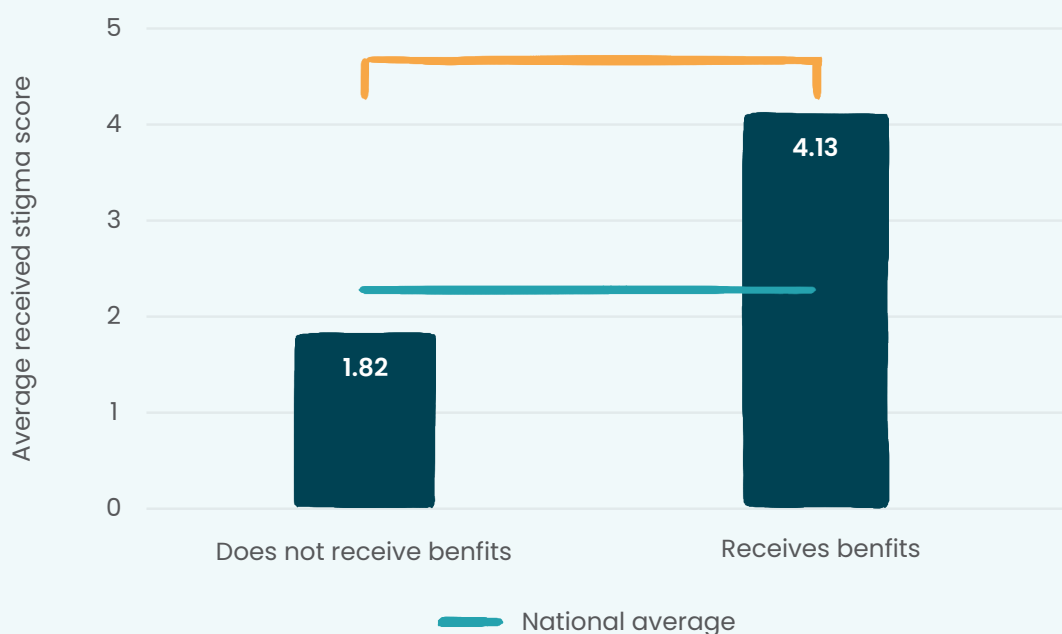


People in receipt of benefits experience more than twice as much received poverty stigma

Survey respondents were asked whether they receive any of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit
- Child Tax Credit
- Income Support
- Housing Benefits
- Working tax credit
- Pension Credit
- Income Related Employment and Support Allowance
- Income Based Job Seekers Allowance

Figure 6 shows that the average level of received stigma reported by people who receive benefits was more than twice as high as that reported by people who do not receive benefits.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

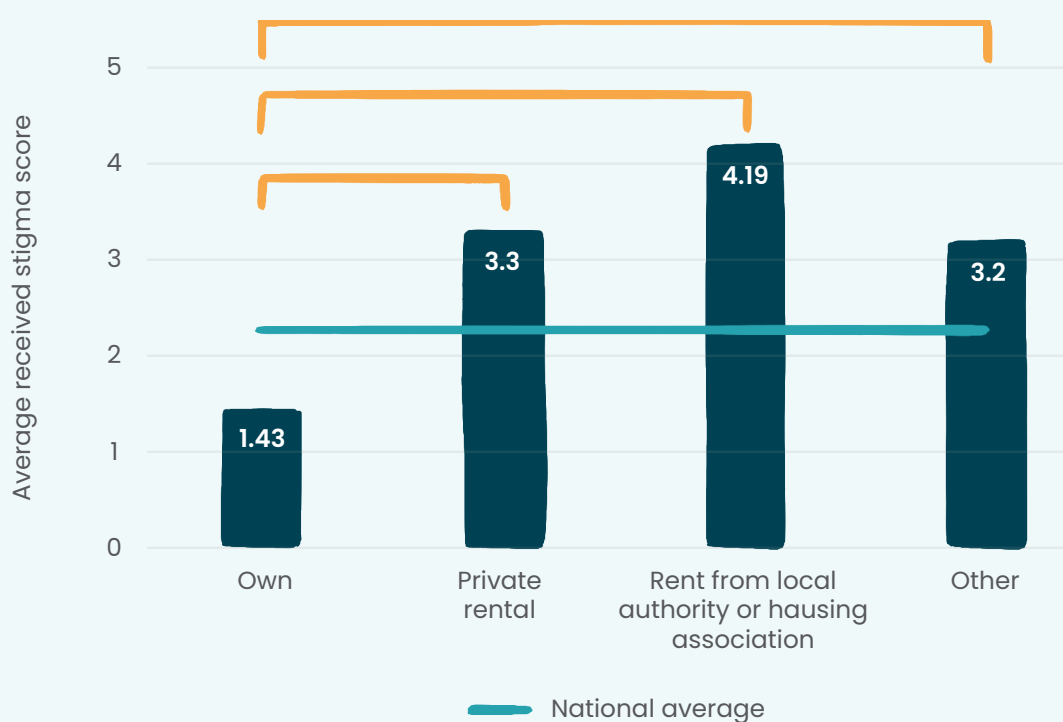
Figure 6: Average received poverty stigma score by benefits receipt

Housing tenure



Renters experience higher levels of received poverty stigma

Figure 7 shows that people who rent their home, whether from a private landlord, housing association, or local authority, report higher levels of received stigma than those who own their home.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

Figure 7: Average received poverty stigma score by housing tenure

Who is more likely to report perceived structural poverty stigma?

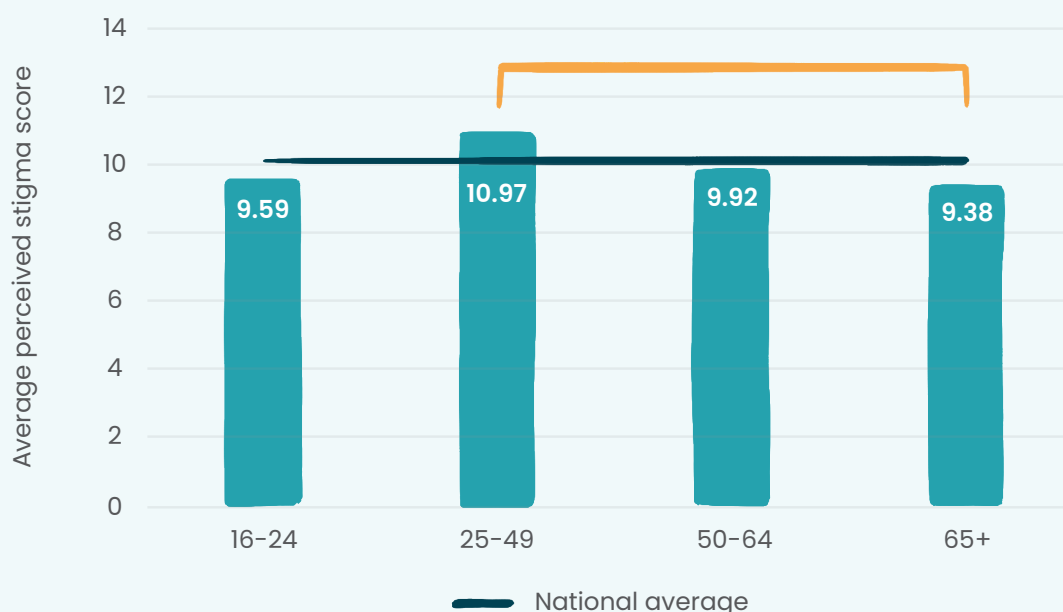
Perceived structural poverty stigma refers to individuals' beliefs that people living on low incomes are treated unfairly by public services, decision-makers, and institutions such as the media. We examined how experiences of perceived structural poverty stigma vary by personal and household characteristics. Total perceived structural poverty stigma scores were calculated by summing respondents' answers to the five perceived structural poverty stigma survey items, and the average total scores were compared across groups.

Age



Younger people are more likely to perceive structural poverty stigma than older people

As shown in Figure 8 younger people report higher levels of perceived structural stigma than older people, although the difference is less pronounced compared to received stigma. There were also age differences in responses to the two questions relating to public services. Specifically, respondents aged 25-49 responded that people on low incomes receive a "lower standard of public services" more frequently than respondents aged 16-24. In addition, respondents aged 25-49 responded that public services make people on a low income "feel inadequate" more frequently than respondents aged 65 and over.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

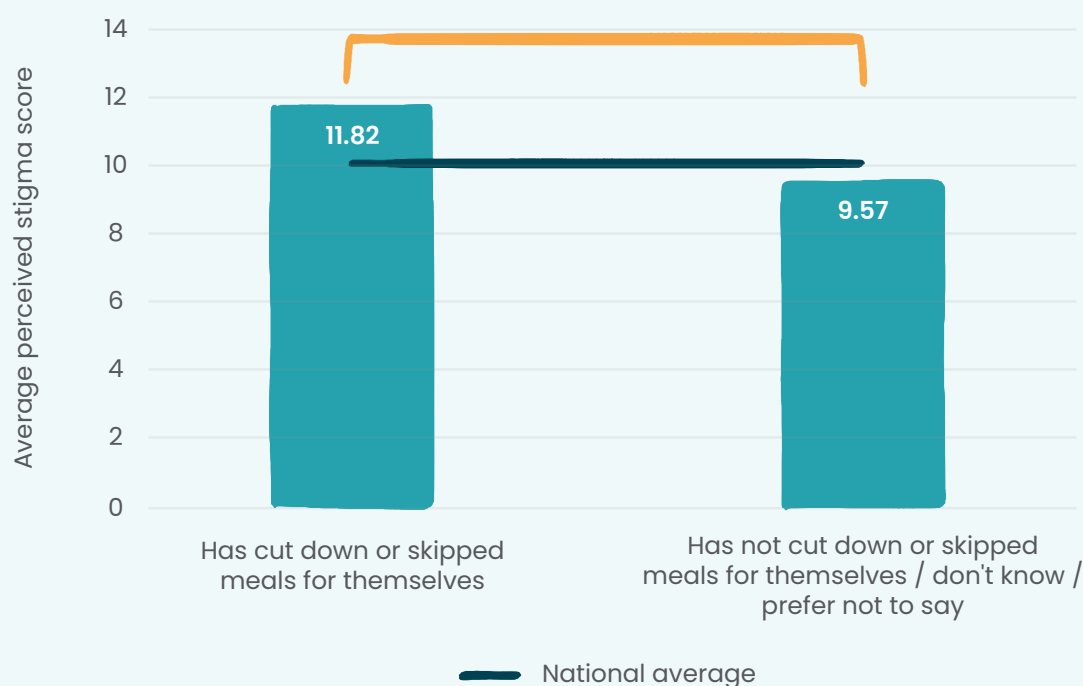
Figure 8: Average perceived structural poverty score stigma by age

Food insecurity



People experiencing food insecurity perceive greater structural poverty stigma

Figure 9 shows that people who had experienced food insecurity (who had cut down on the size of meals or skipped meals for themselves) reported higher levels of perceived structural stigma compared to those who had not. Scores on the two items relating specifically to public services were also higher among people who had experienced food insecurity compared to those who had not.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

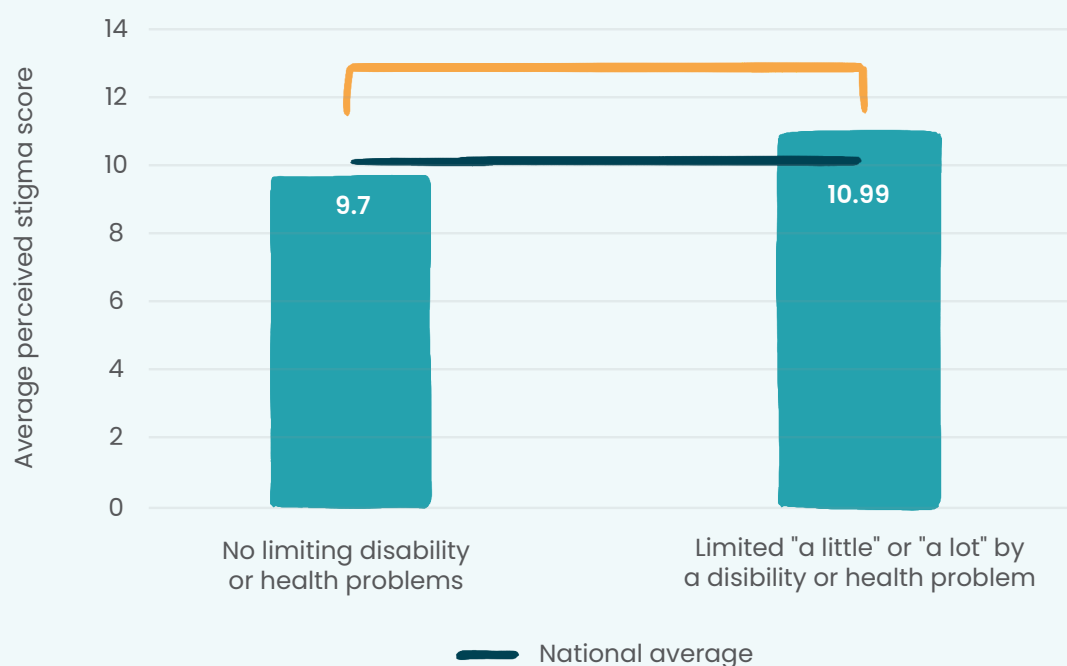
Figure 9: Average perceived structural poverty stigma score by food security

Disability



People limited by disability or health problems are more likely to perceive structural poverty stigma

As shown in Figure 10, people with a limiting disability or health problem reported higher levels of perceived structural stigma compared to those with no disability or health problem. Scores on the two items relating specifically to public services were also higher among people with a disability or health problem compared to those without.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

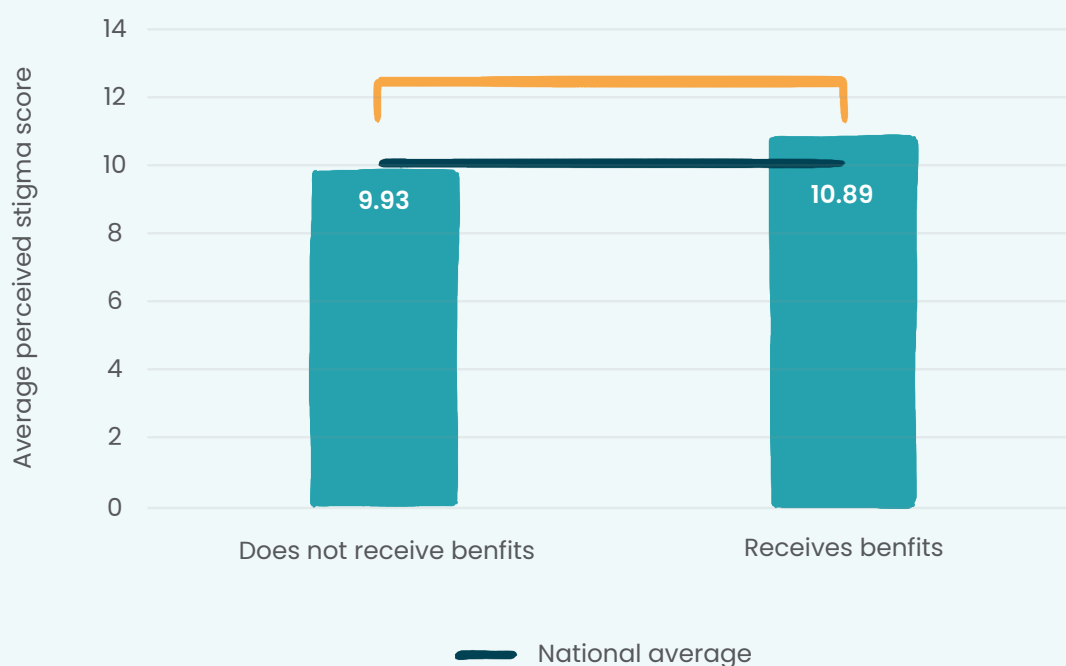
Figure 10: Average perceived structural poverty stigma score by disability

Benefits receipt



People in receipt of benefits perceive more structural poverty stigma

People who receive benefits reported higher levels of perceived structural stigma compared to those who do not, as shown in Figure 11. Scores on the two items relating specifically to public services were also higher among people who receive benefits compared to those who do not.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

Figure 11: Average perceived structural poverty stigma score by benefits receipt

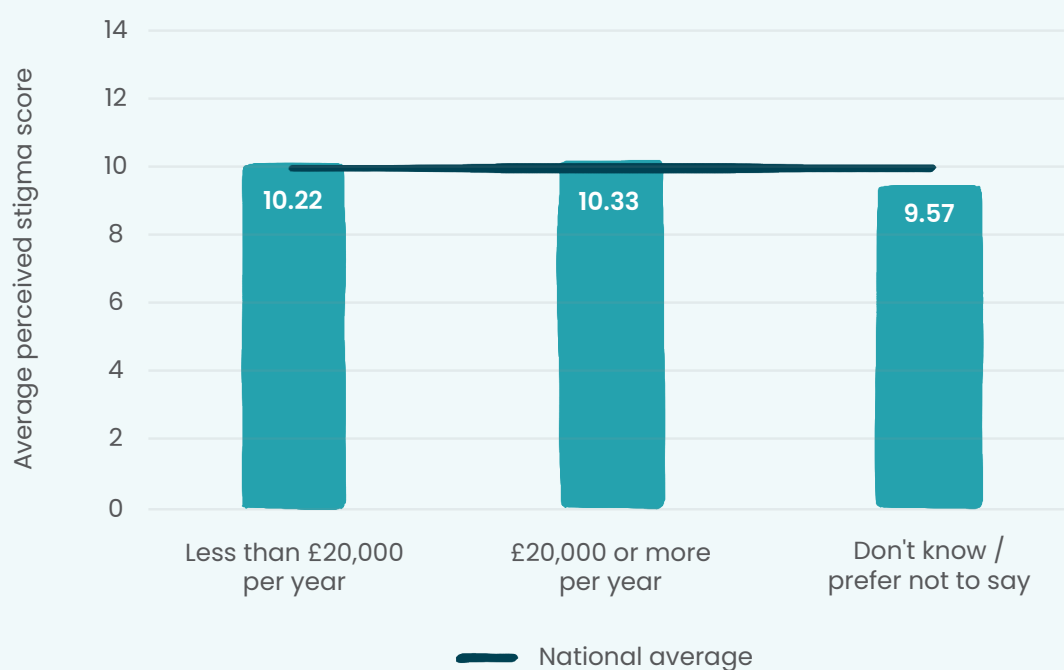
Housing tenure

Overall, there was no difference in average perceived structural stigma scores between respondents who owned their home, rented their home from a private landlord, housing association or local authority, or who reported a different form of housing tenure. There was also no difference between these groups in responses to the item *“People on low incomes receiving a lower standard of public services”*.

However, people who rented their home from a housing association or local authority reported higher scores on the item “Public services making you feel inadequate when you are living on a low income” than respondents who owned their home. There were no other statistically significant differences on this item according to housing tenure.

Household income

Reports of perceived structural poverty stigma did not vary according to household income, and the total average score was similar amongst respondents with household incomes less than £20,000 compared to respondents with household incomes of £20,000 or more per year.



Note: The orange lines show where there are reliable, statistically significant differences between groups.

Figure 12: Average perceived structural poverty stigma score by household income

Conclusion



Poverty stigma is a complex issue that can be defined and measured in different ways. This report considered two types of poverty stigma: received stigma and perceived structural stigma. Based on this research, we now have a picture of the scale of poverty stigma across Wales, including which groups are more or less likely to experience or perceive poverty stigma.

Experiences of received stigma are all too common in Wales; one in four adults report that they have experienced some form of unfair treatment or discrimination from others because they don't have much money "sometimes," "often" or "always" in the past 12 months. This means that many people in Wales are not only dealing with the financial and material dimensions of poverty but also with an additional and intertwined layer of social and psychological challenges that poverty stigma often brings. This can significantly undermine people's chances of escaping poverty (Morgan et al., 2024).

Reports of received stigma are predictably higher amongst lower-income households and those experiencing food insecurity, as well as amongst groups who are at greater risk of poverty in Wales, such as younger people, renters, benefit recipients, and those with disabilities (Welsh Government, 2023). These differences likely reflect greater vulnerability to poverty itself, although some groups may be particularly likely to experience specific forms of poverty-related stigma, often related to accessing particular support services. For example, food-insecure households may encounter additional forms of poverty-related stigma if they access food banks (Purdam et al., 2016), social renters may experience the stigma associated with British council housing (Morgan et al., 2024), and people with limiting health conditions may encounter stigma through claiming disability-related benefits (Saffer et al., 2018).

Perceived structural stigma refers to individuals' beliefs about how people living on low incomes are treated by institutions, public services, the media, and decision-makers. Overall, the majority of adults (almost nine out of ten) in Wales believe that some form of structural stigma occurs "sometimes," "often" or "always" in the UK, and many of the people who perceive structural poverty stigma are not themselves in poverty or at risk of poverty. This strongly suggests that poverty stigma is a structural and systemic issue; decision-makers, institutions, public services, and media platforms are actively contributing to poverty stigma in Wales and the UK, whether knowingly or not. There were some differences in reports of perceived structural stigma between groups, but these were smaller and less consistent than for received stigma.

Poverty stigma is associated with a number of adverse outcomes for individuals and communities, including lower levels of well-being, increased social isolation, and lower access to or uptake of support (Morgan et al., 2024; Tyler and Campbell, 2024). The findings of this survey highlight the scale of poverty stigma in Wales and call attention to the need for policy and practical solutions to ensure that individuals are treated fairly and with respect, regardless of their financial situation. A recent report from WCPP identified several methods that may be effective in tackling poverty stigma, such as including people with lived experience of poverty in policy design and public service delivery, tackling damaging narratives and discourse, and enhancing practitioner awareness of poverty and its impacts through training (Morgan et al., 2024).

Regarding social security specifically, a Citizen's Panel in Scotland with individuals living on low incomes produced several recommendations for challenging stigma to improve the uptake of benefits, including increased investment in advocacy for benefits claimants and the provision of training on poverty and stigma for policy makers and staff within services (Poverty Alliance, 2024). The panel in this research also recommended information campaigns to raise the public's understanding of social security as a human right and a public good to tackle the stigma that individuals encounter within the community. Tyler and Campbell (2024) have similarly recommended using creative methods to produce images and stories that can counter the dominant narratives that stigmatise people living on low incomes. To enhance this evidence base and inform policy and practice, the WCPP is conducting a rapid evidence review (forthcoming) to bring together the best available evidence on preventing and addressing poverty stigma. In a context of constrained public finances and limits to devolved powers held by the Welsh Government, an enhanced focus on tackling poverty stigma may be a particularly effective way of mitigating the negative impacts of poverty and opening up routes out of it.

It is important to note, however, that while challenging poverty stigma may help to mitigate some of the adverse health and social consequences associated with living on a low income, addressing stigma alone is not enough to counter the corrosive social harms of poverty. In other words, it is crucial that any future work to combat poverty stigma is accompanied by efforts to tackle the structural causes of poverty itself (Tyler and Campbell, 2024).

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