

Background Reading

Poverty is a state of precarity, not having enough income and resources to live on that young people and adults can experience throughout their lives. The level of precarity can be different for everyone and has marginalising effects. For children, it affects every aspect of their lives. It can lock young people out of opportunities to participate, learn, and thrive in school. The following overview provides background knowledge for staff to understand the context of poverty and how it affects Young people (1.1). Secondly, the second part (1.2) guides the approach of social action teaching on poverty.

Understanding the Manifestation of Poverty in School

Poverty Facts

A household with less than 60 per cent of the national median income is considered poor or below the poverty line. Between 2020-21, 3.9 million young people were living in poverty in the UK, 27% of young people or nine out of a classroom of 30. Schools may not always be aware of the young people and families facing hardship and their struggle with school costs, particularly if it is hidden. Poverty-related stigma can mean that families expend efforts to hide the circumstances they are living in.

A single factor does not cause poverty. A range of factors, including rising living costs, low pay, insecure work or lack of sufficient working hours, and inadequate social security benefits, mean some people do not have enough resources. These often place a great deal of pressure on families in poverty. Covid-19 has starkly shown that poverty is not something that happens to others. It is something that can happen to almost anyone. But certain groups of people face a much higher risk of living in poverty than others:

- **Lone** parents are more likely to face poverty than couples. It is estimated that 44% of young people in lone-parent families are in poverty.
- **Families with many young people** face higher risks of experiencing poverty because of the extra costs of raising young people and the effect caring for young people can have on parents' working hours.
- People from **Black and Ethnic Minority groups** are more likely to live in poverty. 46% of young people living in minority ethnic families are in poverty.

- Disabled parents often face multiple barriers to work, and additional costs arise for those caring for a disabled child. 34% of young people in families where someone is disabled are in poverty, compared to 28% of young people in families where no one is disabled.

Other inequalities also exacerbate poverty. Some groups are significantly more likely to experience poverty, including Black and Ethnic Minority people, migrants and families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and disabled people or those who care for disabled young people. Many young people and families may experience multiple disadvantages at the same time.

Effects of Poverty on Educational Outcomes

Poverty is the strongest predictor of a child's well-being at school. The level of disadvantage that a child experience arbitrates the overall experience of school. The effects of poverty can manifest through fatigue, poor concentration, hunger, and ill health, leading to bullying by other peers. At the end of key stage 2, Young people living in poverty are often over nine months behind their peers in reading, writing and maths. Young people experiencing a high persistence of poverty have a learning gap of 22.7 months, twice that of those experiencing a low persistence of poverty, with a learning gap of 11.3 months.

This attainment gap persists throughout secondary school. Students eligible for free school meals are half as likely to achieve a good pass at GCSE in English and Maths compared to other young people. In general, young people living in poverty are four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their peers. Even with the same qualifications, disadvantaged young people are 50 per cent more likely to be 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).

Free School Meals for over 80% of time	22.7 months learning gap
Free School Meals for less than 20% of time	11.3 months learning gap
Average disadvantage gap	18.1 months

Table 1. Learning gap, months behind in secondary school

Other links between poverty, health and social-emotional outcomes are made:

- Poverty affects friendships at school, with young people growing up in poverty more likely to play alone and fall out with their friends and less likely to talk to their friends about their worries.
- Many young people entitled to free school meals do not take them, and poorer families will often go without other items to protect their young people from this stigma.
- Respiratory problems such as asthma and bronchitis are more common in young people growing up in poverty and can negatively impact attendance at school.
- Young people living in more deprived areas are more likely to report lower life satisfaction than those living in less disadvantaged areas.
- 23% of parents with young people under 18 reported skipping meals to make ends meet and feed their young people.
- There is a strong stigma attached to poverty, and young people living in poverty are often bullied at school.

Youth Social Action on Poverty

Guidance for teachers and staff to talk about poverty to young people

Likely, some Young people taking part in social action projects in this focus area will suffer from poverty. This section offers practical advice to approach social action planning on poverty. Talking about poverty with Young people is useful because it helps teachers to understand young people's experiences of poverty. It also helps reduce stigma and negative attitudes toward young people who may not have experienced it or not know what it is. In both cases, careful consideration needs to take place at the planning Step to ensure that it is carried out through an inclusive ethos by providing that Young people who may be experiencing poverty do not feel exposed:

- Create a safe space to talk. Ensure Young people have opportunities to approach you and talk about poverty privately.
- If discussing poverty in the classroom or with groups, be mindful not to expose Young people who do not want to be identified as living in poverty. Make Young people aware that you do not wish for anyone to be named at the start of the conversation.
- Avoid having these conversations at the end of the day. That way, Young people can come back to you later if they have concerns.
- Use clear and straightforward language. Try to have the conversations in bite sizes.
- Art, drama and play can help Young people express their feelings and personal experiences without feeling stigmatised or singled out by classmates.
- You can start the conversation with younger people using a story, character or puppet.
- Address Young people's feelings. Learning about poverty can make Young people sad and emotional. Let them know it's natural to feel this way. Try to end positively (for example, "We're finding ways to help").
- Remodel any negative language Young people might use by rephrasing what they say.
- Provide Young people with different perspectives. Children often repeat everything they hear at home, including misconceptions about people in poverty. It can be difficult to discuss, but it's important to recognise that we live in great inequality while still focusing on hope.

Engaging Young People in Social Action on Poverty

Engaging in social action projects is an opportunity for staff to promote and develop their skills to tackle issues affecting young people. Schools have a responsibility to tackle poverty and promote equality of opportunities. However, social action in this focus area is an opportunity for young people to learn how to get involved in schools and community projects that mitigate the effects of poverty. This approach empowers young people who will be making a difference.

Schools may benefit from using a principled approach by linking planning and delivery to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for these topics.

If you are taking a principled approach by linking to the rights of the child during and outside social action planning, it is important to consider how the rights previously listed are facilitated. This can be done by:

- Giving opportunities for Young people to work on topics that matter to them.
- Giving opportunities for Young people to talk about their experiences on certain subjects and, when necessary giving them the knowledge and resources to do so.
- Using their ideas to feed into the school's work to address these issues and inform the work done during social action projects.
- Creating opportunities for them to get involved in projects and social actions that address these issues in school.

Listening to Young people and allowing them to have their voices heard is central to ensuring an equitable school experience. With regards to the area of poverty, guaranteeing responses will be sensitive and led by Young people themselves. This is why it is important to plan in advance how to carry out these interventions before delivery. However, using a social action project is an effective method to place Young people at the centre of the work done by the school to tackle the impact of poverty.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a treaty that sets out the basic rights that all young people everywhere are entitled to.

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that all young people have a right to express their views and have them taken seriously – this includes at school.

Article 12: Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.

Article 2 (non-discrimination): The Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, gender, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background.

Article 26 (social security): Every child has the right to benefit from social security. Governments must provide social security, including financial support and other benefits, to families in need of assistance.

Article 27 (adequate standard of living): Every child has the right to a good standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development. Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this.

Article 29 (goals of education): Education must develop every child's personality, talents, and abilities. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights and care for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment.

Article 31 (leisure, play and culture): Every child has the right to relax, play, and participate in cultural and artistic activities.



Questions to explore

What is the UN convention?

When was it created?

Who is part of the UN convention?

Why was it created?

What role does the UN play in protecting young people and their interests?

Below are a number of projects young people have carried out to tackle poverty

Several Young people at a secondary school in Fife established an anti-poverty group that now runs a uniform swap shop. The young people recognised this was a cost pressure that was affecting Young people at their school and so set up the initiative to ensure everyone could access affordable uniforms.

Children at a school in South Tyneside campaigned to ensure that every pupil received their own water bottle so young people could keep hydrated throughout the day, helping them focus on their learning.

Students in Falkirk took action to ensure every pupil that joined the school received a welcome backpack to help them feel settled. This was identified as a small thing that would make starting school less daunting and remove some of the costs associated with going to a new school.

At a primary school in Newcastle, young people worked with the school council to develop a Poverty Proofing Policy outlining all the actions and commitments the school has made to address hidden costs and poverty-related stigma. This also includes guidelines for staff to ensure the policy was actioned in the classroom.

More information

The Child Poverty Action Group provides statistics on child poverty as well as solutions for actions that need to be taken. The website gives useful background information on previous government action against child poverty and gives an overview of the effects of poverty in the UK:

<https://cpag.org.uk>

Children's Society UK has publications on true stories of child poverty:

<https://childrensociety.org.uk>

The National Education Union provides facts about the impact of poverty on education: <https://neu.org.uk>

The United Nations website gives statistics on world poverty: <https://www.un.org>

The Unicef website contains reports on poverty:

<https://www.unicef.org>

