



Poverty and Social  
Exclusion in the UK

Volume 1 - The nature and extent of the problem



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**Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK: Vol 1: The Nature and Extent of the Problem**

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CHAPTER

## Conclusion: innovating methods, informing policy and challenging stigma

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The preceding chapters of this volume have detailed the ways in which poverty and social exclusion are very real and large-scale problems in the UK today. They have also examined the subtle variations in vulnerability to poverty and the impact poverty has on different groups within society. But the aim of this book – and of the 2012 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (PSE-UK 2012) research as a whole – is not simply to document poverty in the UK, but to challenge its prevalence and offer practical insights into how policy and practice may best work towards its end. As Piachaud (1987) enjoins us, any study of poverty must aim to change attitudes and social actions, if it is to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. As noted in the title, here I draw attention to three specific ways in which the PSE-UK 2012 in general, and this volume in particular, might contribute to achieving this aim:

- **Innovating methods:** accurate measurement of poverty is vital to its eradication. We do not claim that the PSE-UK 2012 is a panacea; but it does represent the latest developments in the field. These developments have built on work conducted by the founders of the consensual approach (Townsend, 1979; Mack and Lansley, 1985), and have depended upon the rigour of its critics (for example, Piachaud, 1987). Furthermore, the large sample size of the PSE-UK 2012 has enabled the fine-grained analysis of different population groups presented in this volume. While methodological developments will continue, an increased awareness of the groups within society which face the highest vulnerability to poverty, and the impacts of poverty on different groups, can only help in understanding and combating the problem.
- **Informing policy:** the ways in which poverty is conceptualised, defined and measured within the policy environment, and its prioritisation within policy agendas, are greatly variable over time. Significant changes in both the conceptualisation of poverty and its prioritisation as a social problem are evident in recent history, as detailed below. Studies such as the PSE-UK 2012 can help to inform policy approaches through testing the assumptions they draw on about the nature, causes and effects of

poverty, and can help to promote its inclusion as a policy priority through highlighting the extent and nature of the problem, overall and for specific sub-populations.

- **Challenging stigma:** that those in poverty experience stigma and shame is nothing new; narratives of an ‘undeserving’ poor can be traced back through the centuries. However, recent shifts in UK policy, rhetoric and media have combined to create an atmosphere of extreme hostility and scapegoating towards those in poverty and/or vulnerable to social exclusion. Public compassion towards those in poverty, including via an understanding that recent policy changes increase the risk of poverty for all of us, is a vital step towards policy change. The PSE-UK 2012 can contribute to this through a combination of rehumanising those in poverty through hearing their stories, and providing robust data to challenge ‘othering’ narratives, whatever their source.

This volume adds to a large body of literature highlighting the structural factors which render particular population groups particularly vulnerable to poverty, and the structural barriers which too often prevent them from escaping poverty. Yet, repeatedly, social policies to reduce and eradicate poverty are subsumed by competing priorities such as a purported need for austerity (HM Treasury, 2015), and by ideologically motivated debates about the nature of poverty which disregard empirical evidence and expert opinion in favour of stigmatising rhetoric (Clark and Newman, 2012). This concluding chapter summarises the contribution of this volume in relation to the three themes detailed above, and presents suggestions in relation to directions for future research, via both further analysis of PSE-UK 2012 data and developments which could inform new studies.

## Developing state-of-the-art poverty measures

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The measures of poverty and social exclusion included in the PSE-UK 2012 draw on strong theoretical and empirical bases, detailed in chapter one. This is invaluable in providing data on the experiences of population groups of interest, and in examining where further theoretical and methodological innovation is indicated. Two issues arising from the chapters in relation to potential future developments are detailed here: the useful but problematic nature of households as a unit of measurement and/or analysis; and the tension between generating generalisable poverty measures and paying adequate attention to the specific needs of different social groups.

### The value and problems of the household unit in poverty studies

The household is commonly used as a sampling unit, and as a unit for the purposes of measurement and/or of analysis, in studies of poverty. The shortcomings of relying on household-level measurement, and the somewhat different approach to the use of households in the PSE-UK 2012, are detailed in the Introduction and expanded upon in the chapters on disability, gender, and parents and children. Four problematic assumptions can be identified which underlie the use of households in poverty measurement:

- that resources are shared equitably between household members;
- that there is a high level of stability in household formation and structure;
- that individuals can be easily assigned to a single household; and
- that resources are not transferred between households.

The first of these assumptions is addressed comprehensively throughout this volume. The second is alluded to in the chapter on young people, in relation to the growing trend for young people to struggle to leave, or

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make multiple transitions out of and into their parental home (where this is an option for them). The latter two points are ripe for development through future research. In relation to the third assumption, the use of households as sampling units assumes that individuals can be assigned to a single household containing one or more people. The veracity of this assumption is challenged by growing numbers of individuals – children following parental separation or re-partnering – who are members of multiple households. Such children may live in multiple households comprising varying household structures and, furthermore, their lives may be better understood by considering the relevance of extended family members such as grandparents, who may provide extensive care, despite children not technically being members of their household (for example, Statham, 2011). Research with children emphasises the importance they place on links with disparate family members across the multiple households of which they are (or even may not technically be) a member (Davies, 2015). This links to the final assumption, about the transfer of resources between households. Some questions on transfers between households in the form of gifts were included in the PSE-UK 2012 but are not covered in this volume. In combination these issues present an important challenge in relation to the measurement of poverty – how can the experiences of people who may live across multiple households with varying access to income and other resources be captured? And, given the rapid fluctuations which may take place in people's needs, incomes and living arrangements (for example, in the lives of parents and children following parental separation), how can the fluidity of needs and living arrangements best be captured?

As noted in the Introduction, the inclusion of all adult household members represents an important innovation in understanding poverty at an intra-household level; one way in which the PSE-UK 2012 approach could be further refined to more fully account for the perspectives and experiences of all household members would be through the inclusion, where possible, of children as respondents. Allowing for children's perspectives in the classification of child-relevant items and activities as necessities, and for their reports on the deprivations and social exclusion they experience, would enhance knowledge on child poverty and social exclusion and would allow for intra-household comparisons between adults and children and between individual children. As the distribution of resources within a household relates not only to household-level availability, but also to social and cultural norms, interpersonal relationships, differing individual needs, shared and individual priorities, and power, such data would allow for a much more nuanced exploration of the vulnerability of different household members, and how vulnerability may relate to factors such as age, gender, disability and other relevant characteristics.

## Consensual indicators and minority needs

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The basis of the consensual approach to poverty measurement is that it is possible to establish a set of necessities which the majority of the population agree that no one should have to go without – as detailed in chapter one. This allows for the production of poverty measures which are not only scientifically valid and reliable, but also have the backing of popular consensus, lending them a high level of political credibility (see Gordon, 2006). However, several chapters in this volume highlight the tension between achieving a list of necessities which are approved by the general public and ensuring that the different needs of, and costs associated with membership of, sub-populations are adequately addressed. Two issues are of relevance here: whether a sub-population is considered to have different enough needs that a separate set of necessities is warranted; and if so who gets a say in determining the needs of that sub-population.

The manner in which the PSE-UK 2012 differentiates between adults' and children's needs, detailed by Main and Bradshaw (in chapter six), provides an example of how the different situations and requirements of a sub-population can be incorporated into the consensual approach. Many chapters in this volume raise the question of whether a similar differentiation would be valuable for other social groups – for example in relation to people with disabilities; young people; older people; and people living in urban and rural locations. However, adopting multiple lists of necessities based on different subgroup needs raises two

issues. First, the public accessibility and potentially the political sway of a poverty measure may be lessened by increasing complexity and conditionality in understanding its basis. Second, judgements would be required about how to establish which specific subgroups require a separate set of necessities (and how would heterogeneity within these groups – for example, between people with vastly differing types of disability – be handled); and who gets a say in assessing the necessity or otherwise of specific items and activities for these groups. Issues of popular misunderstandings and prejudice (see, for example, DWP, 2014) may compromise the general public's capacity to offer meaningful insight on, for example, the needs of people with disabilities – and as Heslop and Emerson (chapter eight in this volume) note, 'disability' encompasses heterogeneous conditions which will be associated with specific and diverse additional needs. Thus, while there are no clear answers to this issue, future studies would benefit from a careful consideration of how the needs of diverse groups can be represented in order to minimise the risk of misclassification among subgroups likely to have different needs to the general population.

## Informing policy

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The timing of the PSE-GB 1999 and PSE-UK 2012 studies is notable in relation to policy – in 1999, Tony Blair's recently elected Labour government had begun the process of putting poverty, and particularly child and pensioner poverty, firmly onto the policy agenda. While Labour's track record on poverty across its time in office (1997–2010) was mixed (see Joyce and Sibieta, 2013), and transfers to working-age adults declined, substantial progress was made, including decreasing ↵ the differential risk of exposure to poverty for people at different stages of the life-course (see Lupton et al, 2013). In contrast, the economic crisis of 2007/8, followed by recession and the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010, resulted in a change in focus from poverty to national debt, and from social investment to austerity. These were the predominant conditions while the PSE-UK 2012 was in the field, and remain so at the time of writing. As such, the PSE-UK 2012, and comparisons between PSE-UK 2012 and PSE-GB 1999, can be used to produce information of high value to policy makers. Three ways in which the PSE-UK 2012 has provided policy-relevant evidence – in relation to the inequities of austerity politics, the status of different social groups, and the role of structural conditions in shaping people's vulnerability to poverty – are detailed below.

## Austerity and its inequitable impacts

Several detailed accounts of the impact of the economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures, in the UK and across the world, are now available (for example, Beatty and Fothergill, 2014). The varied measures of poverty and social exclusion included in the PSE-UK 2012 can contribute to understanding the effects of austerity. This is examined in this volume in relation to older people, young people, children, parents, people with disabilities and people from minority ethnic groups. In relation to this last group, increasingly harsh policy approaches to immigration (see below for more on this) are framed as offering fairer opportunities for British nationals, but risk pushing immigrant and ethnic minority populations further into poverty. Specific details of policy changes adopted as part of the austerity agenda, and recommendations for their reversal, can be found in the chapters of this volume. The overarching message – that austerity has hit the most vulnerable hardest, and that living conditions among these groups are dangerously precarious – challenges both the ideological basis of austerity and its effectiveness as a policy strategy. This latter point is further confirmed by office for National Statistics (ONS) figures showing that the public sector debt as a percentage of GDP grew from 65.2% in May 2010, when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition took power, to 82.9% in July 2016.<sup>1</sup>

## Intersecting identities, multiple dimensions

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A major contribution of the PSE-UK 2012, and particularly the nuanced approach to poverty measurement which combines low income and deprivation, is its highlighting of the importance of intersecting aspects of identity. These can mediate or compound vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion. Despite the importance of these intersecting identities, the chapters presented in this volume are unanimous in their challenge to reductions and increased conditionality in social security provision as little support is found for claims about the ‘undeserving’ nature of any particular group of social security claimants: high levels of deprivation among those in poverty help to debunk claims that poverty is a lifestyle choice; and the attitudes and behaviours of the poor appear remarkably similar to those of the non-poor. Moves towards ‘simplifying’ the benefits system, for example through monthly payments of Universal Credit to the head of household replacing multiple benefit types, should be approached with caution: while decreasing the complexity of claiming is to be welcomed, monthly payments may prove extremely difficult to manage for people surviving on a day-to-day basis, and payments to one household member may exacerbate existing inequalities (see Tarr and Finn, 2012, for a detailed analysis of the Universal Credit plans).

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The PSE-UK 2012 fieldwork was completed in 2012, two years after the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government. Since then, the UK has seen the election in 2015 of a Conservative majority government which has pursued yet more aggressive austerity measures. Continued austerity has been justified through rhetoric focused on contrasting the experiences of purportedly different groups at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, avoiding attention to the growing distance between those at the top and those at the bottom. Examples of this include pitting ‘hard-working families’, who deserve support through policy measures such as the new minimum wage for people aged 25 and over (confusingly referred to as the ‘living wage’; see, for example, D’Arcy and Kelly, 2015) against ‘troubled families’ who purportedly cause havoc in their neighbourhoods and present a high cost to the taxpaying public (DCLG, 2013); and pitting UK national tax payers and social security recipients against ‘benefit tourists’ from within and beyond the European Union (Cameron, 2013). Both of these examples show a disregard for research evidence, which questioned the basis of estimates of the total number of ‘troubled families’ meeting policy criteria (Levitas, 2012) and the legitimacy of claims relating to the success of the programme (Crossley, 2015), and the existence of ‘benefit tourists’ (Metcalf, 2016). Indeed, recent figures released by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) show a substantial deterioration in social security provision for European Economic Area migrants following the implementation of more stringent residence and eligibility tests since December 2013 (DWP, 2016). Pitting disadvantaged groups against one another succeeds in distracting from the extraordinary and growing levels of inequality in the UK, perpetuated by tax breaks primarily benefiting the rich (Resolution Foundation, 2016). The example of ‘benefit tourism’ is particularly troubling in light of consistent evidence that popular perceptions of immigration are among the top issues influencing voters – including the 2015 general election (Ipsos MORI, 2015) and the more recent referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union (Ipsos MORI, 2016). Increases in racially motivated hate crimes following the referendum were confirmed by the police (BBC, 2016a), and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination condemned the ‘divisive, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric’ employed by the campaigns (UNCERD, 2016). In light of the findings presented by Karlsen and Pantazis (chapter five this volume), especially relating to the increased risk of poverty for some ethnic minorities, including white Polish people, and the high risk of discrimination among these groups, recent trends are a cause for concern. A policy priority should be ameliorating the effects of poverty faced by minority groups, rather than exacerbating prejudice and discrimination.

The chapters in this volume have focused primarily on ‘headline’ indicators of poverty, including low income, deprivation and the PSE poverty measure. This valuable analysis provides only a fraction of the insight that the PSE-UK 2012 has the capacity to deliver; many more analyses are available through the companion volume on the various dimensions of poverty; the multitude of working papers available on the

project website; two Special Issues of academic journals edited respectively by Eldin Fahmy and Christina Pantazis; Mary Daly and Grace Kelly's (2015) book on some of the qualitative research undertaken for the PSE-UK 2012 study; and Stewart Lansley and Jo Mack's (2015) book setting the PSE-UK 2012 in the context of three decades of research into poverty and social exclusion in the UK. Examining different dimensions of poverty and social exclusion can help to capture more precisely and accurately the differential vulnerabilities experienced by people and by social groups. Thus the PSE-UK 2012 highlights the policy importance of developing and maintaining a range of poverty and social exclusion measures, allowing for careful monitoring of poverty levels and the risks faced by diverse social groups.

## p. 247 **Bringing structure to the policy debate**

As noted in the Introduction, the focus of this volume is on structural conditions affecting vulnerability to poverty. Indeed, the findings presented here – which indicate strong disparities between different social groups in their vulnerability to poverty along the lines of characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and disability status – support this focus. Differences in vulnerability to poverty according to these characteristics point to structural barriers disproportionately impacting certain segments of the population; this is a problem whether policy commitment is to equality of opportunity or equality of outcome (a distinction which, while widely used, is highly problematic; see Calder, 2016). Yet policy interventions focus almost exclusively on individual agency, rather than social structure – whether through efforts to activate and/or upskill the workforce and thereby address a deficit in motivation or skills, or increase the number of hours people work. This is not a new trend – it was evident under the Labour government of 1997–2010 as well as the previous Conservative governments of 1979–97 (Lewis, 2011). A great deal has been written elsewhere about the changes in international political paradigms over the past three decades which have resulted in both increased vulnerability to poverty, and increased individualisation in national social policy responses (for example, see Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013). The findings presented here contribute to the body of literature challenging the individualised nature of policy portrayals of the causes of poverty, and the interventions arising from these. Little short of a paradigmatic shift in policy thinking on poverty, towards a more structural focus which addresses the multiple and intersecting barriers faced by vulnerable groups, rather than addressing perceived deficits in the groups themselves, is indicated.

## **Challenging stigma**

The predominance of individualised explanations for poverty, noted above, helps to create an atmosphere of stigma around poverty and shame among people unlucky enough to experience it (Walker, 2014). Individualising policy rhetoric and stigmatising public perceptions of poverty can form a vicious cycle, creating a hostile environment for those in poverty as reflected by long-term declines in societal support for spending on social security, and distinctions in public attitudes between the 'deserving' poor – such as pensioners – and the 'undeserving' poor – such as the unemployed (Clery, 2015). An important role of the PSE-UK 2012, and of all poverty studies, is therefore to test the claims which create and perpetuate this stigma and challenge damaging attitudes which increase the harm done by poverty. The PSE-UK 2012 has demonstrable potential to contribute to challenging this stigma through testing and challenging the claims made in, or assumptions informing, policy rhetoric, offering an alternative narrative to popular presentations of poverty and, through ongoing work in communities, giving voice and power to people living in poverty.



## Testing policy rhetoric and the assumptions underlying policies

Through the production of data on the resources, behaviours and experiences of a large and diverse sample, the PSE-UK 2012 provides rich information on the complexities of poverty and how those in poverty differ from, or are similar to, the rest of the population. Such analysis has fed not only into academic outputs from the study, but also into responses to various policy agendas and consultations – the full range of responses, on the topics of child poverty and children's services (Gordon, 2010, 2012; Bradshaw, 2013), the Troubled Families Programme (Levitas, 2012), budget and child poverty consultations in Northern Ireland (Daly et al, 2011; Tomlinson and Kelly, 2011) and fuel poverty (Fahmy, 2012) can be found in the 'policy responses' section of the PSE-UK 2012 website. In many of the chapters of this book – for example in relation to children, parents, young people, and disabled people – strong challenges are raised to current policy approaches based on testing the rationale used to justify particular interventions. Certainly, there is scope for further extending the impact of the PSE-UK 2012 through new analyses. The data from PSE-UK 2012 is freely available for academic analysis via the ESRC's UK Data Service<sup>2</sup>, offering future researchers the opportunity to draw on a wealth of policy-relevant information with a strong potential for impact.

## Challenging and changing popular narratives

p. 249 Patrick's (2016: 2) analysis of the 'scrounger' narrative surrounding claimants of out-of-work social security benefits in and beyond the UK highlights the 'framing consensus on welfare'. Within this narrative, policy rhetoric, print media and television disseminate a shared message: that social security claimants (and in particular those on out-of-work benefits) are a threat to social order requiring discipline and control. Indeed, the term 'poverty porn' has arisen to describe the coverage through multiple media sources of sensationalised versions of the lives of the poor. Communicating the results of the PSE-UK 2012 widely in order to increase public understanding of the issues has been a significant and central feature of the project as a whole. Findings from the PSE-UK 2012 have been the subject of mainstream television programmes and media reports. In 2013 the ITV Tonight documentary *Breadline Britain* (ITV 2013), which depicted the lives of people across Britain who are affected by poverty, was watched by over 3 million viewers. Based on findings from the PSE-UK 2012, it emphasised that poverty in contemporary Britain is not restricted to a small minority and has increased over the last 30 years. In March 2016, the leading BBC documentary series *Panorama* broadcast *Too poor to stay warm*, which drew on PSE-UK 2012 work on fuel poverty and was seen by 2.4 million people (BBC, 2016b). The Radio 4 programme *Thinking Allowed* has had three episodes which drew on PSE-UK 2012: exploring the measurement of poverty; challenging the relationship between poverty and bad parenting; and exploring the extent of food poverty in the UK (BBC, 2015, 2016c). The website [www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk), which provides access to all research outputs from the project, has had 1.5 million page views with visitors from all over the world. While media accounts of poverty remain dominated by negative and sensationalised portrayals, the importance of a strong research base to challenge these narratives cannot be overstated.

## Ongoing work with communities

The PSE-UK 2012 incorporated many strands of work. This volume has focused on the research findings from the two quantitative surveys; as noted above, Daly and Kelly's (2015) book documents some of the qualitative strand of the research. In addition to these academic outputs, part of the PSE-UK 2012 involved collaborations with community groups, pressure groups, and organisations and networks working for poverty reduction across the UK. Details of this work can be found on the PSE-UK 2012 website.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, several participants in the qualitative and community strands of the PSE-UK 2012 kindly agreed to share videos documenting their experiences of poverty – also available on the PSE-UK 2012 website.<sup>4</sup> This innovative approach to academic research combines quantitative survey data, qualitative interview data, and collaborations with community groups. The resulting mass of data provides a compelling case for action to end poverty in the UK, across the broad range of social groups covered in this volume.

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## Concluding comments and recommendations

The PSE-UK 2012, as with previous PSE studies, takes a structural approach to examine the extent, nature, causes and effects of poverty in the UK. This is in contrast to the more individualised approaches that dominate everyday policy and media representations of poverty, which focus on what the poor should do (but, if we are to believe popular representations, usually do not do) to get themselves out of poverty. As the chapters in this volume have detailed, escaping poverty is much more complex and difficult to achieve in reality; and while all the population groups discussed are heterogeneous, some characteristics are associated with greater vulnerability than others, as a result of disadvantages inherent in social structures (for example, the discrimination experienced by certain ethnic groups, and the disadvantages associated with gender). To conclude, some key messages for different groups with a role to play in understanding and combating poverty are summarised:

- **For academics:** The ways that poverty is defined and measured can have important implications for research, and for the credibility of findings. Different research questions (for example, whether the focus is on household or individual experiences of poverty) and different population groups (for example, the experiences of children, of different ethnic groups and of disabled people) may require different indicators if their needs are to be adequately captured. A genuine understanding of access to resources, and the ways in which income does and does not translate into resources for different individuals and groups – stratified according to particular characteristics such as gender, age, and disability – will help in the production of high-quality poverty indicators.
- **For policy makers:** The dominant position within current policy rhetoric, that individual deficiencies are the cause of poverty and that the poor require upskilling and increased motivation to work, does not stand up to scrutiny. As noted in chapter one of this volume, of Levitas' three discourses on poverty, Moral Underclass Discourse and Social Inclusion Discourse have dominated policy approaches in recent years. A shift towards the Redistributive Discourse, with policies that help to ensure that those facing the greatest disadvantage receive the greatest support, is long overdue.
- **For practitioners:** Interventions into the lives of those living in poverty can be hugely beneficial – just as they can be for those facing other kinds of disadvantage. However, changes to the skills and attitudes of those in poverty will not create more and better paid jobs, and neither will they reduce the structural barriers – such as discrimination – faced by particular social groups. In some areas of life in which interventions have been promoted – such as parenting skills for those in poverty (see Dermott and Pomati, this volume) – there is little evidence that those in poverty are substantially different to

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anyone else. Rather, supporting people in poverty to access the resources to which they are entitled, combating discrimination and advocating individually and collectively for better provision are more likely to make a sustainable difference to the lives of those currently vulnerable to poverty.

- **For the media:** Responsible reporting on poverty, which accounts for the structural causes of poverty and does not ‘other’ those unlucky enough to be poor by engaging with stylised presentations of the ‘deserving’ versus the ‘undeserving’, is vital. This has a role in changing public perceptions of poverty and challenging policy rhetoric – with the potential to generate a ‘virtuous cycle’ whereby the softening of public attitudes and poverty eradication efforts become symbiotic.

As we complete this manuscript, the UK is on the brink of the 2017 general election. The outcome has the potential to consolidate the dominant economic policy of austerity, which will condemn ever increasing numbers of people to poverty, or to challenge this approach. The evidence presented in this volume is largely statistical in nature – behind these statistics are the real lives of increasing numbers of people who are experiencing (among other issues) hunger, cold, stigma and social isolation. Whatever view might be taken on the causes, this situation is patently not acceptable or excusable within the context of one of the largest global economies.

## Notes

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- 1 Figures from:  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/timeseries/hf6x/pusf>
- p. 252 2 ↪ See: <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=7879&type=Data%20catalogue> for the main survey and <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=7878&type=Data%20catalogue> for the omnibus survey.
- 3 See: <http://poverty.ac.uk/community/community-collaboration>
- 4 See: <http://poverty.ac.uk/living-poverty>

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