

Child poverty in black & minority ethnic groups

Children in some communities are more vulnerable to the effects of poverty than others. *Mark Willis* highlights the impact ethnicity can have

Child poverty in Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, remains extremely high, with nearly one in four children still living in poverty. But there is very little recent information about child poverty in minority ethnic communities that is specific to Scotland.

Research UK-wide consistently shows child poverty rates for black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are higher than the national average.¹ Statistics available up to 2007 show children of black Caribbean and Indian descent have poverty rates of 26% and 27% respectively, rising to 35% for black African children, and 54% and 58% for Pakistani and Bangladeshi children. Contributory factors for this disparity include social class, unemployment, housing, health and household composition, with institutionalised racism playing a part. However, because of the different histories of migration and integration in Scotland compared to other parts of the UK, it cannot be assumed that the same patterns are repeated.

In answer to a Scottish parliamentary question it was stated that in 2002/03 to 2004/05 an estimated 42% of children with a minority ethnic head of household lived in poverty, compared to 24% of white households.² The 2001 census found the non-white minority ethnic population was just over 100,000 or 2% of the total population of Scotland. Scottish Executive research based on the census did not refer specifically to poverty, but found minority ethnic groups had higher unemployment rates compared to white groups.³

Things have changed since 2001. The expansion of the European Union, Glasgow and Edinburgh's participation in dispersal of asylum seekers, the drive to attract skilled workers and the expanding student population has changed the face of Scotland. Many of these, and black and minority ethnic people from other parts of the UK, have chosen to make their home in Scotland. The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland's advice, training and information has responded to the needs of advisers and organisations working with these communities to try and address some of the recent issues.

People who have claimed asylum in the UK

The position of asylum seeking families means most inevitably live well below the poverty line while waiting for a decision, which can take several months or even years. Asylum seekers are generally excluded from working in the UK by law. They are excluded from benefits and tax credits and are supported at less than the basic level of benefits. Asylum-seeking families are often invisible in the child poverty debate, being outside policy centred on increasing parental employment and measurements based on receipt of benefits and tax credits.

The principles of asylum are founded in the [1951 UN Geneva Convention](#), Articles 23 & 24, which provide that refugees are given the same treatment in social assistance. These rights have direct effect in the UK under European law, [Council Directive 2004/83/EC](#), which established that asylum policy must be based on the 'full and inclusive application of the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which provides the cornerstone of the international legal regime for the protection of refugees'. A person is a refugee within the meaning of the 1951 Convention as soon as he fulfils the criteria contained in the definition.⁴ Based on this principle, asylum seekers who are later recognised as refugees used to be able to claim backdating of benefits to make up for the lower level of asylum support, but this was scrapped in June 2007 and replaced with Refugee Integration Loans. The government had justified this because bills and accommodation are paid for, so amounting to equal treatment. However, a cut from November 2009 now allows a single adult asylum seeker £35.13 a week to live on, compared to £64.30 in benefits, so it is hard to see how this could still be said to amount to equal treatment.

Children in asylum seeking families are allowed substantially less than the equivalent in benefit and child tax credit, since April 2008 when the commitment to maintain child amounts at these levels was broken. The amounts for children are variable but there is a general pattern of penny-pinching from the most vulnerable people in the community. Although in 2004 the government gave in to a campaign to provide extra support to pregnant women and young children, this has not been increased, so a baby is allowed an additional £5.00 a week compared to £6.20 through Healthy Start vouchers, a maternity grant is halved and additional payments stop a year earlier. In September 2008, the Home Secretary lifted the immigration reservation on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which had previously meant that asylum seeking children were not covered. Article 26 recognises the right of every child to benefit from social security and Article 27 recognises the right to an adequate standard of living. Article 2 of the Convention provides that states shall respect and ensure these rights without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child or guardian's nationality or status.

At the end of the asylum process, people whose applications are refused face destitution as all support stops unless they take steps to return to their country of origin, and even then instead of cash they are given vouchers with limited use. Many failed asylum seekers, including families with children, are supported by churches, charities and communities. Those who are granted permission to remain in the UK face a transitional period in which they must quickly navigate the complex benefits, work and tax credits systems and often face months of delay waiting for claims to be processed.

Migrant workers from the European Union

Migrant workers from the European Union would have been broadly classed as 'White Other' in the 2001 census. At that time they made up 1.5% of the Scottish population. They have much in common with BME groups, including facing discrimination and hate crime. A significant number of minority groups,

such as Roma people, are within this category. Workers from states that joined the EU since 2004 potentially face destitution if their circumstances change. This has been one of the biggest areas of work for the Child Poverty Action Group's advice line in recent years, dealing with a large volume of complex enquiries from advisers. These cases concern claims for benefits and tax credits for European nationals who have been refused all assistance, often incorrectly, during periods of illness, maternity or unemployment. Accession state families are suffering disproportionately in the recession as workers who have stopped work within the first year of coming to the UK may be denied support.

Established Scottish BME groups

Unlike asylum seekers, the more well-established BME communities in Scotland do not necessarily live in the most deprived communities, but may live in households with a high risk of poverty.⁵ Analysis of the 2001 census in Scotland found people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin were more likely to live in private rented accommodation and households with less than the required number of rooms, based on ages of household members and the relationship between them. Generally BME groups have lower take-up rates for tax credits, according to UK-wide statistics.⁶ People from Pakistani and Chinese communities in Scotland are more likely to be self-employed.⁷ Small businesses have been hit particularly hard by the recession but complex rules for self-employed people mean many are reluctant to claim or are turned down incorrectly. Black people report higher levels of dissatisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services, which may also lead to low take-up or under claiming.⁸ Scottish people of black or mixed heritage who have been born and brought up in Scotland are often invisible in official statistics or combined with other groups without much research about their needs or the discrimination they face.

Poverty damages integration as families cannot afford to take part in many activities, and it allows far-right organisations to scapegoat BME groups. Efforts to address child poverty have to be balanced to tackle all issues affecting diverse BME groups as well as the needs of the white population in the most deprived communities without fostering resentment. The 2011 census will provide new information to base this on, with new categories (including Polish, Gypsy/Traveller and Arab⁹), but in the meantime addressing specific economic needs of particular communities in Scotland must involve local organisations working directly with families. A lot can be done simply by promoting information about the wide range of support available for children to reduce poverty: for example, child benefit, child tax credits, health in pregnancy grants, maternity grants, healthy start vouchers, child trust funds, free nursery places for 3-year-olds, free school meals, health benefits, the Young Scot card and local council schemes such as the Kidz card in Glasgow. At the same time, the campaign must continue for equal rights of children who are excluded from most of these sources of support, such as asylum seeking families and European nationals denied benefits. Tackling child poverty in BME groups cannot be separated from wider efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality in society as a whole.

This is a longer version of an article which originally appeared in [Children in Scotland](#) magazine, January 2010.

¹ [Ethnicity and child poverty](#), May 2009 DWP research report No.576

² Scottish Parliament, Written Answers, 28 March 2006 available at <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/pqa/wa-06/wa0328.htm>

³ [Analysis of Ethnicity in the 2001 Census](#) summary report, Scottish Executive, May 2004

⁴ Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention, UNHCR Jan 1992, as quoted in [R\(IS\)9/98](#).

⁵ Groups Vulnerable to Poverty, John H McKendrick & John Dickie, Poverty in Scotland, 2007

⁶ [Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit Take-up by Ethnic Group, 2004-05](#) HMRC 2007

⁷ [Analysis of Ethnicity in the 2001 Census](#) summary report, Scottish Executive, May 2004

⁸ [Jobcentre Plus Customer Service: Ethnic Minority Booster Survey](#), May 2006

⁹ [New Ethnicity classification](#), Scottish government press release, July 2008