Editorial.

Poverty: Social Work Perspectives.

The original idea for a Special Issue focusing on poverty stems back several years when it seemed timely to take stock of how continuing austere times were impacting upon service users and the social work profession. Although evidence is mixed due to various financial strategies introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the UK at least the rise in the use by families and individuals of foodbanks and disproportionate experiences of poverty within sections of the community (eg Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black ethnicities in the UK context (Joseph Rowntree, 2023)) reveal that poverty remains a primary concern for social work (BASW, 2023).

In keeping with the journal aims we requested in the Call for Papers that authors might propose papers considering social justice and social structural aspects of poverty, but also dimensions incorporating emotional and relational, lived experiences of poverty. The COVID 19 pandemic interrupted and slowed the process of gathering papers and we wondered whether the impact of poverty and psychosocial restrictions facing practitioners, service users and academics alike, made the subject too present and too overwhelming for authors to consider. However, our focus on psychosocial elements of poverty's influence broadened as we began to receive papers from writers based in a range of countries, thus indicating how poverty is of ubiquitous concern to social workers in many parts of the world. These papers were more concerned with directly highlighting the role taken by individual social workers, and the professional discipline itself, in driving forward development aims in nations facing much greater challenges than those experienced in relatively wealthy western countries. In finalising the selection of articles for this issue, we felt it important to include some papers addressing this international discourse within social work and the shared concern within the profession regarding the relentless impact of poverty in the lives of many people. In the end, taking an ecological perspective, the papers in this SI range from those with wider, social structural, developmental themes through to medium level themes concerning social work interventions and agencies and to papers which reveal the more personal, lived experiences of poverty and social work's interaction with these. This SI thus encompasses articles that touch on various aspects of poverty and the many ways in which poverty can negatively influence lived realities across a spectrum of dimensions.

While the quantification of poverty is provided in some articles, it was never our intention to only focus on numbers. For decades, there has been a strong focus on the quantitative study of poverty including how to measure an adequate level of income, how to assess wealth, how to count the numbers of people who live in poverty, and for how long. The quantitative study of poverty is important in order to inform strategies to combat poverty, but it can only provide insight into part of the poverty picture. Numbers can reveal patterns, extremes, and failures in protective systems, and they are essential tools in efforts by social workers and others to provide critical and actionable responses to poverty. But only focusing on the statistics of poverty can render other dimensions invisible, such as the

emotional, social and psychological dimensions. It is these latter dimensions which this SI aims to highlight and draw attention to. While it may seem that the debate surrounding poverty has, for decades, mainly focused on the statistical analysis of its presence, there has existed an awareness that counting the numbers of people affected in different ways by poverty was not enough in and of itself. For example, writing over 40 years ago, Daly (1988, p. 4) stated

> "Poverty is not just about lack of money …. It is also about rights and entitlements and the extent to which one is allowed the same access to opportunities and resources that the majority of people in society enjoy. In addition, poverty is about feelings – about how one regards oneself and how one is regarded by others. Being poor often involves feelings of powerlessness, exclusion and rejection and being treated as inferior, as lacking in status or being in some way inadequate."

The importance of understanding and appreciating the multifarious impacts of poverty on the individual, the community and society has been echoed repeatedly in the intervening years by writers such as Lister (2004), who argues for a broad conceptualisation of poverty within which there is understanding of the many aspects of a person's life which can be eroded by poverty, including relational, social, cultural, and citizenship dimensions. For Lister (2004, p. 178) the issue of power is central to the experience of poverty:

> " inequalities of power manifest themselves at both the material and the relational/symbolic level. More powerful actors control the wages, benefits, services and opportunities available to people in poverty. They also have the power to construct 'the poor' as Other through words, images and deeds."

Similarly, McCartan et al. (2018), drawing on Thompson (2016), highlight how poverty can intersect with inequality to produce negative outcomes for individuals and families. They caution against the conflation of poverty with risk behaviour or neglectful behaviour, emphasising the need for social workers to understand the implications and consequences of poverty for families, and in particular parents, who are trying to provide for their children.

We believe the multidimensional nature of poverty is important for social workers to understand and grasp, particularly in light of how such understanding can inform a critical positionality for social work vis-à-vis its responses to structural inequality, poverty in all its forms and the stigma and othering which people living in and through poverty experience in so many different ways. It is important that social workers consider their own attitudes and viewpoints towards the phenomenon of poverty – why do we think it exists, what can be done about it, how does it intersect with our work? Some research has suggested that social workers may harbour negative attitudes towards people experiencing poverty, such as perceiving that poverty is due to individual culpability (Delavega et al, 2017). In contrast, there is evidence also of social workers being concerned about poverty and formulating responses to it. Feldman (2019, p. 1706), for example, states that poverty, "is central to the core mission of social work", although he criticises the inertia that is sometimes found within the profession in terms of actually doing something about it. As we indicated in the

Call for Papers for this SI, we wanted to provide an outlet for social workers to discuss the multidimensional context of poverty which they encounter in their work and which can include the absence of social parity and social justice, the obstruction of societal participation, and the denial of equality, recognition and respect. From this perspective, the effects of poverty can persist long after the material experience of poverty has been resolved.

Efforts to tackle poverty can be traced back in time over hundreds of years, and indeed there have been many stages in what Rodgers (1969) depicts as a highly fraught endeavour, tracing historical strategies to tackle poverty dating from the medieval period onwards in his book titled *The Battle against Poverty.* As he suggests, the first step requires acknowledging that a problem exists and the second vital step is believing that something can be done about it. In this light, we think it timely to return to the question of what we know about the social, emotional, psychological and relational dimensions of poverty, and then to proceed to consider what social workers can do about these dimensions, many of which may remain problematic for the individual or family long after the material state of poverty has been alleviated.

We received many interesting responses to the Call for Papers for this SI. It has not been possible to include all of the proposed papers, but we want to thank everyone who submitted an abstract. The papers that make up this SI were selected for a range of reasons. We wanted to reveal the widespread concern within the social work profession regarding the issue of poverty, and on that basis papers from a range of countries are included here. We were also committed to including articles that addressed the lived experience of poverty and how social workers need to understand and help to address the insidious nature of poverty in the lives of the people they serve. Finally, we received some papers that highlighted the phenomenon of social workers living and working in conditions of austerity, an aspect of poverty we had not anticipated in our original plan for this issue, but which featured in a number of submissions, thus influencing our own thinking and awareness regarding the importance of this relational dimension of poverty and social work.

We would like to thank all the authors whose work is included in this SI. The first article by Joe Whelan addresses the importance for social workers of looking beyond the statistics, and adopting a 'poverty aware practice' in which they seek to understand the (often hidden) impact of poverty as a multidimensional experience and which depletes the individual's participation in society in many different ways. Next, Hannah Jones' article reports her research conducted in the context of child and family social work practice, where she carried out a small-scale qualitative study. She explores social workers' perspectives on the interaction of UK government discourse, poverty, and social work practice with families since the 2007-08 economic crash. Her findings indicate a sense of conflict felt by practitioners who attempt to balance individualising, blaming discourses with the idea of structural inequalities, while working with families experiencing poverty.

The third article in this collection examines the experiences of homeless children in Czechia and offers an in-depth examination of lives lived in material poverty, revealing the ways in

which this type of context impacts on other dimensions of the children's lives including the emotional and relational.

Debbie Innes-Turnill's article explores highly sensitive issues surrounding parental and professional interactions when children are harmed and how perspectives of each party can differ leading to dissonance and lack of connection where important work could and should take place. She argues that social workers must take into account social environmental and emotional impacts families face when living in poverty, in order to properly connect with them.

Gary Broderick, Gloria Kirwan, Brian Melaugh and Hilda Loughran provide a commentary on the Object Poverty exhibition, which was produced by a community organisation in Ireland in an attempt to stimulate discussion and debate regarding the experience(s) of poverty and how it is viewed by the wider society.

Antonio López Peláez and Amaya Erro-Garcés consider the concept of decent work and the role it occupies within wider strategies to tackle poverty. They highlight the problem of work precarity, including when it is social workers themselves who experience poor working conditions, low pay and precarious employment contracts.

Leandi Erasmus and Retha Bloem draw attention to the importance of social workers' values, attitudes and behaviours vis-à-vis poverty and social justice. They report findings from research with newly qualified social workers in South Africa regarding their preparedness to undertake a developmental, social justice oriented approach in their practice. They find that newly qualified social workers are concerned about levels of inequality and poverty but find the systems within which they work are not always adequately resourced to support their work in this regard.

The article by Lucille Allain, Helen Hingley-Jones, Helen Gleeson, Tricia McQuarrie, Diane Apeah-Kubi, Bola Ogunnaike, and Sarah Lewis Brooke reports an exploratory qualitative study of a project working with children on the 'edge of care' and their families. In a residential setting, families are found to be offered a 'humane' form of social work, in comfortable surroundings where they remain for a short intervention. Issues relating to poverty emerge as families reflect on the differences between this environment and that available to them in their home settings and families and professionals appear to be able to understand each other's perspective in an improved way.

In the final article of this special issue, Ciarán Murphy reports on findings from his research which shed light on the lived experience of child protection social workers and their efforts to work effectively in under-resourced conditions, sometimes on precarious contracts and faced with structural forces that are difficult to address.

Together, this collection of articles provide convincing evidence and commentary regarding the insidious nature of poverty, revealing the prolonged emotional and psychological impact of adversity, hardship or lack of economic security. The complexities of living with poverty are exposed, including the relentless struggle to retain a sense of control and power in contexts where feelings of powerlessness and lack of hope flow from trying to survive with

inadequate resources. The solutions to poverty are also revealed as complex. More research is required to fully reveal how living in poverty affects all domains of the individual experience (Coulton, 1996), including relationships, social connectedness and social inclusion. It can be discerned from the articles in this issue that social workers' understanding of lives lived in the context of poverty will be aided if they can develop critical consciousness and awareness regarding poverty. Also, given the scale and complexity of this issue, social workers need analytic and intervention skills to address its impact and its existence at community and societal levels, and they need to stay attuned to the personal disempowerment and hopelessness that typically plays out for individuals whose lives are adversely affected by poverty in any of its forms. There is much here for social workers to digest and think about. There is a lot of work still to be done.

Helen Hingley-Jones, Associate Professor in Social Work,
Mental Health and Social Work Department,
Middlesex University, London, NW4 4BT.
Email: H.Hingley-Jones@mdx.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-5228-1244

Gloria Kirwan, Senior Lecturer,

Graduate School of Healthcare Management,

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin.

Email: gloriakirwan@rcsi.ie

ORCID: 0000-0002-5663-1325

References

British Association of Social Workers, 2023, Social Work Stands Against Poverty, available at: https://www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/social-work-stands-against-poverty

Coulton, C.J. (1996) Poverty, Work and Community: A Research Agenda for an Era of Diminishing Federal Responsibility. Social Work, 41(5): 509-517.

Daly, M. (1988) *Women Together Against poverty: The Experience of Travelling Women and Settled Women in the Community*. Dublin, Ireland: Combat Poverty Agency.

Delavega, E., Kindle, P.A., Peterson, S. and Schwartz, C. (2017) The Blame Index: Exploring the Change in Social Work Students' Perceptions of Poverty. *Journal of Social Work Education, 53*(4): 664-675

Feldman, G. (2019). Towards a relational approach to poverty in social work: Research and practice considerations. *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(7): 1705-1722.

Joseph Rowntree (2023) UK Poverty 2023, The Essential Guide to Understanding Poverty in the UK. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/uk_poverty_2023_-_the_essential_guide_to_understanding_poverty_in_the_uk_0_0.pdf

Lister, R. (2004) *Poverty*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

McCartan, C., Morrison, A., Bunting, L., Davidson, G. and McIlroy, J. (2018) Stripping the Wallpaper of Practice: Empowering Social Workers to Tackle Poverty. *Social Sciences,* 7: 193-208.

Thompson, N. (2016) *Anti-Discriminatory Practice: Equality, Diversity and Social Justice*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.