

# Life on the Breadline: Christianity, poverty and politics in the 21st century city

Policy briefing 1 of 2, 2021

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*There are over 14 million people living in poverty in the UK. This is morally unjust.*

*Austerity is an economic policy that has affected people's daily lives in the UK unequally, including negatively affecting the poorest more than the richest.*

Beginning in 2018, the 'Life on the Breadline' research has analysed the nature, reach and impact of Christian responses to austerity age poverty.

The project provides original insights about the impact of Christian engagement with poverty and raises new challenges for policymakers on responding to poverty in the UK. Christians respond to poverty experienced by people across society: this is not about Christians working with Christians.

This policy briefing is written for national and regional policymakers across the UK to support Christian responses to poverty and to develop more effective anti-poverty policies.

## Policy recommendations

**Recommendation: Church leaders and policymakers need to work together in order to address the causes of poverty in the UK at all levels of leadership (local, regional, and national) as well as supporting people experiencing poverty.**

- **Action:** The APPG on Poverty and APPG on Faith and Society should co-host and fund a network – facilitated by the Life on the Breadline researchers - for representatives of national Churches to meet with policymakers on an annual basis to report on key issues and challenges that their Churches are facing in relation to tackling poverty in the UK.
- **Action:** Smaller Christian denominations need to be listened to as well as the larger national Churches. They should be actively encouraged to participate in this network.
- **Action:** Regional and local policymakers should meet regularly with regional and local Church leaders for conversation and collaboration to foster more effective, long-term responses to poverty in local communities.



Image: Life on the Breadline and Beth Waters

**Recommendation: In order to understand the reality and daily struggles faced, policymakers need to spend more time with people experiencing poverty. This is essential not only as a support for Christian action on UK poverty, but also in responding to poverty more broadly.**

- **Action:** MPs should arrange to spend time at local social action projects in their constituency that address different aspects of poverty in order to have meaningful conversations with people using these projects and gain a deeper understanding of the breadth of people's experiences of life on a low-income.
- **Action:** Having gained understanding of the reality of living on a low-income, MPs should use this to inform policymaking.
- **Action:** MPs should provide regular opportunities for people experiencing poverty to directly shape policy, for example by establishing a Poverty Truth Commission in their constituency/area.



Image: Life on the Breadline and Beth Waters

"I think what there isn't an understanding about is how disempowering poverty is and how poverty removes your innate sense of self-worth and your capacity... Which is why we used asset based approaches cause it's about helping people re-believe in themselves and believe that they've got capacity and skills and gifts to offer."

*Tim, Hodge Hill Birmingham, focus group, 2020*

"Universal Credit is a big one – people are killing themselves you know bab I've contemplated it, why struggle like this for another 10, 15 years."

*Samantha, B30 Foodbank client interview, 2019*

"Austerity means that life's been tougher and harder for many people."

*Bishop Paul Butler, Church of England, interview, 2020*

## Key findings

- Christian social action engages with the complex intersectionality of poverty - **poverty cannot be divided into neat disconnected categories** such as food poverty, housing poverty, or fuel poverty.
- Our engagement with national, regional and local Church leaders and Christian groups has shown that **Christian responses to poverty span across caring, campaigning, advocacy, social enterprise, education and resourcing**. These are not distinct approaches. Churches and groups often engage in a variety of responses to poverty in the UK.
- There is a **growing critique amongst Christians of the unequal impact of austerity in the UK**, which many believe is an unjust government policy that deepens existing structural injustice.
- **Christian social action responds to structural injustice and the causes of poverty as well as its symptoms**. The impact of Christian responses to poverty in the UK is therefore far reaching in not only alleviating the symptoms of poverty, but also working to reduce levels of poverty.
- As a result of its ongoing localised social capital, the Church remains a key player in civil society politics. Life on the Breadline shows **how important it is for local, regional and national policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of the extent, value, variety and impact of Christian engagement with poverty** across the UK. If they are open to learn from such Christian social action local, regional and national political leaders will be better placed to fashion more effective policy that is capable of reducing levels of poverty in the UK.

## About the research

The research was carried out 2018-2021 with interviews, and a survey with Church leaders across the four nations of the UK, and time at 6 local churches/groups responding to poverty in London, Birmingham and Manchester:

16

national  
Church  
leaders

104

regional  
Church  
leaders

6

case  
studies

190

formal research  
participants

350

(approx)  
informal  
conversations

This was the first in-depth, UK-wide, evidence based research project by academic theologians to analyse Christian responses to poverty in the UK.

## Further information

For more information including our full report for policymakers visit <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/>

## Contact the researchers

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