

Factual – Measured - Critical

Mind the Poverty Gap

Ashli Mullen and Stephanie Allan, University of Glasgow

How can a city designated the [“vegan capital of Britain”](#) also be the heart attack capital of Europe? Health inequalities in Glasgow are so pronounced that the problem has been termed [‘the Glasgow effect’](#). The fact that the Cranhill estate in the east of Glasgow is four miles away from the nearest vegan restaurant may seem like the obvious answer.

Google Maps cheerily informs us that it is nearly two hours walk. Oh, but it's cold and wet so you have little option but to take public transport. The bus service is grubby and unreliable and demands exact change. You take a moment to remember that the [average fare rose by 11% this year with child fares rising by 50%](#) as you take what might be your last tenner out of the cash machine and go to the shop and buy a token item to get that exact change or you are going nowhere near the centre of town today.

It's not only that fare increase is it though? It may be benefit sanctions that are really getting to you. Or the bedroom tax. Or fuel poverty. Or the struggle to feed your family. Or even the horror of finding that dreaded brown envelope on the floor that summons you to be prodded, poked and booted off incapacity benefit by ATOS. Incidentally, in a moment where satire appears to write itself, ATOS is also the official sponsor of Glasgow's 2014 Commonwealth Games. This is merely a snapshot of the many problems that we encounter in a day's work at West Glasgow Against Poverty ([WestGAP](#)).

WestGAP is an anti-poverty community group run by and for people in Glasgow who have firsthand experience of living in poverty. We are totally independent, are not funded by government, and are not part of any political party or organisation. We see no difference between the end we want to achieve and the means by which we achieve it. We operate on a collective basis with an active commitment to equality and the eradication of sexism, racism and homophobia, and of discrimination in any form such as that based on disability, age or class. We believe we cannot expect change of others unless we are willing to start with ourselves, and we work constantly to do so.

We run a free, independent and confidential advice service primarily covering benefits advice, as well as advice on housing problems, homelessness, debt and a wide range of other issues. WestGAP works not from the point of view of experts holding and providing information to 'others'; but rather tries to work *with* people so that we can all be better informed. All WestGAP members have direct experience of poverty; with most being current or recent benefits recipients also.

Factual – Measured - Critical

John arrived at WestGAP after finding our leaflet. He had recently been released from prison and was in poor health. He had been in bed and breakfast accommodation but was forced to leave. We don't know why. We only ask for information that is required and respect a person's right to privacy. He was homeless and seemed desperate. He had been claiming Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA) but because of his ill health we advised him to claim Employment & Support Allowance (ESA), which replaced Incapacity Benefit in 2009. We also helped him apply to the Scottish Welfare Fund (a new fund which replaced the Social Fund in 2013) who assisted him with a deposit to secure a rented flat in the private sector, in the absence of available social housing. Unfortunately his problems were not over. The Department of Work and Pensions sent an essential form regarding new ESA claim to his old address and stopped his JSA. This meant that John was without any income until they had issued a new form and assessed his claim. In order to survive he had sold his mobile phone. He came back to visit us clearly upset. Fortunately, we have recently taken on the responsibility of referring our most vulnerable clients to the local food bank so we were able to ensure that he could at least eat until his payments began again. Unsurprisingly, the stress that John has experienced during this period seems to have taken its toll on his body and appears to have exacerbated his health problems. His wait continues.

Much has been made of the idea that the only real experts on poverty are those living in poverty. This view has been popularised by affirmative activist movements, such as the excellent [Poverty Truth Commission](#) and the [Poverty Alliance](#). This idea is intuitively appealing and has seeming emancipatory power. Yet we feel that contrary to such a view, *we are all responsible for social change* and, similarly, we are all complicit in the acceptance and maintenance of the status-quo should we fail to act. Furthermore, the previous view places all responsibility for change upon those most subject to oppression, individualising the structural and persistent problem that is poverty, while discouraging much needed support from our potential allies in academia and in activism.

It must be borne in mind, however, that attempts to put the principles of participatory collaboration into practice in the context of poverty can often be fraught with difficulty. An example may be drawn from Glasgow City Council's recent establishment of a 'Poverty Leadership Panel' to be made up of policy makers, influencers and 'real people'. A small number of local community members were drawn into five 'workstreams' to feed into the work of the Panel.

In theory, this was a timely and progressive idea. As a research intern, Ashli was privy to the development of this project, attending meetings and contributing work towards its various tasks. Yet it soon became clear that despite the good intentions of the facilitator charged with co-ordinating the work, it was little more than a cynical attempt to appear to be doing

Factual – Measured - Critical

something, in the light of the need to fulfil a manifesto commitment to develop a coherent city wide anti-poverty strategy. The Panel has met three times since May, but in the background the ‘real people’ on ‘The Wee Panel’ have been engaged in a series of time-consuming, emotionally and intellectually demanding meetings on an almost weekly basis, for which they have not been financially compensated. Some of the original members have since abandoned it, and have been hastily replaced by a new stock of authentic strugglers to lend the project credibility.

Did anyone ever ask these people if they wanted to be, or indeed were equipped to be policy makers? This is a question that seems to be too close to the bone for those delivering this initiative to answer. Yet such collaboration, when conducted ethically and sensitively, is far from impossible.

One of the first things we learnt as sociology students was the link between personal problems and societal issues, as famously articulated by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). One of the first things we learned from thinking sociologically in the ‘real world’ was how ubiquitous and pervasive the obscuring of this simple truth is, particularly surrounding contentious issues such as poverty and inequality. For this reason, we are involved in and support anti-poverty research, such as our [joint research project with Oxfam’s UK Poverty Programme and the University of Glasgow](#), produced as a PhD thesis and published as a report by Dr Kirsteen Paton, which persuasively demonstrated the detrimental impact of gentrification on people living on low incomes in our community. This is precisely the sort of work that we would advocate; where academics, activists and communities may collaborate most effectively.

On the frontline, we find ourselves occupying the uncomfortable liminal space between those we wish to help and those who harm them. We act in mitigation, we negotiate, we provide tokens for food banks to those who are hungry, we assist in appealing benefits decisions; but ultimately, we offer much needed solidarity and support to those who need it, which tends, in our experience, to disproportionately comprise of those subject to the harshest consequences of the current austerity agenda. We witness a culture of culpability, wherein structural inequities are not only individualised but attributed to a whole host of perceived personal deficiencies, assertions that are often not founded on evidence.

The recent surge in voyeuristic documentaries that claim to represent the everyday experiences of those living in poverty are symptomatic of the misinformation that can de-legitimise such perceptions (see [‘A Summer of Television Poverty Porn’](#) for further discussion). We act as members of the working class and people on low incomes who have not been seduced by the rhetoric of scroungers and strivers and who challenge any notion

Factual – Measured - Critical

of the deserving and undeserving poor. We work within the cracks, using our direct experience of poverty to connect with our service users and using our knowledge of the system to work it, and to work with those who are trapped within its confines.

Yet we are all too aware that our work, although critically required, has a limited reach. A motto that we identify strongly with is 'think global, act local'. We want to eradicate poverty and we want to change the world, and we believe that the best way to do that is by people getting together locally to effect positive change as individuals and as a community. Such experiences can then be shared in larger groupings, which in turn can exert pressure on governments and policy makers.

***Ashli Mullen** is a final year undergraduate student in Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Glasgow. **Stephanie Allan** is a first year student in Sociology at the University of Glasgow. Both work at WestGAP ([@WestGAP](#)) and enjoy Bourdieu, cats and gin.*