POVERTY AND ADULTS IN THE UK
Linda Martin
Coventry University

From 1997-2010:
- Child poverty rate fell to 29%
- Pensioner poverty fell to 16%
- Poverty rate for working-age adults without dependent children rose to 20%

Since 2007:
- Fuel poverty has increased
- Most recent trend:
  - Increasing inequalities between rich and poor

TRENDS IN ADULT POVERTY
  - 3 million people aged 55+ lived in low income households
    - Average of 18%:
      - 75+ poverty rate was 20%
      - 65-74 rate was 16%
      - 55-64 rate was 19%
- Compared with 3 year period 10 years earlier all adult groups showed a decrease but an uneven decrease:
  - 75+ decreased from 37% - 20%
  - 65-74 decreased from 25% - 16%
  - 55-64 very small decrease

TRENDS IN INEQUALITIES
- Over 10 years the risk of poverty has reduced for 65+ but there has been little change for those aged 55-64
- There is much wider income distribution among 55-64 year olds than in older age groups
  - Approximately 30% of adults aged 55-59 were in the top fifth of incomes compared with 25% of 60-64 year olds
  - 2009/10 9.2 million households headed by people aged 55+ had savings of less than £1500
    - Of these, 80% had no savings at all
    - 75% lived in owner-occupied houses, 25% in rented houses

SOME CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS
- Government economic policy
- Under-claiming of benefits
- Rising fuel prices
- Definition of 'vulnerable'
- Social construction of 'old age'
- Fanning inter-generational conflict
- Perceptions of self and others

UNDER-CLAIMING OF BENEFITS
In 2008/9:
- 17% of pensioners were not claiming housing benefits to which they were entitled - 300,000 people
- 33% were not claiming pension credit - 1,300,000 people
- 40% were not claiming council tax reduction/exemption - 1,700,000 people
- Although fewer people were missing out on housing benefits the amount they were missing was higher:
  - 66% missing out at least £20 per week for housing benefits
  - 50% missing out on this amount for pension credit
  - 40% missing out on council tax

CHANGING TRENDS IN POVERTY
- Most recent trend:
  - Increasing inequalities between rich and poor
Fuel poverty is defined as having an expenditure of more than 10% of your total income on fuel. In 2005 most of the 1.5 million households in fuel poverty were also in income poverty. Between 2005 and 2007 gas prices rose by a third and electricity prices by a quarter. By 2007 it was estimated that the number living in fuel poverty would have doubled to 3 million with those moving into fuel poverty not living in income poverty. Policies aimed at reducing income poverty may not therefore reduce the burden for those in fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is highest amongst adults living alone: 50% of single households in fuel poverty in 2005, 80% of single households in fuel poverty by 2007.

The government usually defines ‘vulnerable’ as any household where someone is receiving state benefits, that is those experiencing income poverty. This definition excludes a growing number of adults living in poverty. The fuel poverty strategy uses a much broader definition – any household with a child, an older person or in receipt of state benefits. This definition includes 75% of households and yet still excludes the growing number of adults living in poverty. There is no differentiation between high or low risk in either definition.

Discourses, images and stereotypes of older people contribute to a negative construction of old age: unattractive/unfashionable, disengaged/no longer very bright, inactive/slow, labelled – the ‘silver’............dehumanised, burden.

Developing competition for who is more disadvantaged - young or old. This is the first generation of young people since WWII who are not expected to exceed the income of their parents. House prices have soared, salaries have remained stagnant, unemployment has risen. Contributes to a hierarchy of poverty.

Research to reduce excess winter mortality highlighted that people do not perceive themselves as ‘old’. The negative perception of ‘old people’ will deter individuals from seeing themselves as old. People often do not feel ‘old’. ‘Personal risk perception’ - failure to associate with the ‘vulnerable’ group leads to people not protecting themselves from the risks.
WAY FORWARD

- Policy: need to broaden the approach to poverty reduction so it is not wholly linked to receipt of benefits
- Policy: need to move away from an approach to reducing unemployment which is incentive based
- Society: need to reconstruct ‘old age’
- Society: need to focus on inequalities between rich and poor, not between poor and poorer
- Individual: address the values which underpin attitudes towards poverty and those living in poverty

REFERENCES


