

Poverty: an issue for us all

By Kenny Imafidon

Poverty is at the root of many dire issues the UK faces, particularly violent crime and gang culture. Without role models and strong communities, the problem will wear on our collective society

Poverty is indiscriminate. It has no boundaries and affects everyone – directly or indirectly. Despite advocacy groups and government campaigns to eradicate poverty, almost 13 million people in the UK live in poverty, including almost 30 per cent of our children – a statistic that gives the UK one of the worst rates of child poverty in the developed world. Poverty too affects those of us that may not experience it; child poverty alone costs the taxpayer around £29bn a year, a burden that would be more catastrophic if it wasn't for the efforts of charities and government. Society as a whole has a social and moral responsibility to eradicate poverty.

Poverty dictates the basic choices people make on a daily basis, from what they eat to how they heat their homes. It detrimentally affects people's health and reduces their life expectancy. For example, research published by the End Child Poverty Campaign revealed that a boy in Manchester can expect to live seven years less than a boy in Barnet. A girl in Manchester can expect to live six years less than a girl in Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster. Children who grow up in poverty on average tend to get lower academic grades than their wealthier peers.

It is sheer ignorance for those of us who do not live in poverty to stereotype victims of poverty as someone without a job, someone with a drug problem, someone who does not know how to manage money, or single parents or who live on benefits. This is far from the case. Research produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foun-

dation last year shows that two thirds of UK children growing up in poverty live in a family where at least one parent works.

I remember myself growing up seeing my own mum hustle morning and night to put a roof over our heads and keep up with the rent arrears. Annual holidays or a family dinner at a nice restaurant when it was not my birthday were luxuries we could not afford. It is only now that I understand that we were actually living in a deprived environment, despite my mum working overtime.

Growing up in a deprived area, it was easy for me to see first hand how poverty can lead to crime and violence. The lack of employment opportunities, coupled with

We need role models not just in schools, but in homes and communities

the lack of positive role models other than the local drug dealer and/or gang leader, meant that if you wanted to eat good food, wear nice clothes and take the pressure of your mother, you got involved in the local "business". The pressure to engage was unrelenting.

When people talk about role models they think in terms of professionals giving talks at assemblies and in classrooms. While this can be positive, it has its limitations, either because these "role models" are viewed by students as someone who might as well be from another planet, or because the people in greatest

need have often already been excluded from school. In communities like the one I come from, we need role models in the home and in the community too.

In London and other cities, poverty often looks black in colour, as too does street and gang crime. Much has been written about the racial inequality that results in discrimination, ethnic profiling, exclusions from school, poor access to mental health support and a lack of positive representation in the media.

A greater commitment on the part of successful black men and women to spend more time being visible in poor communities could offer a much needed solution. For example, many of my friends would be alive today if they had someone to look out for them, who was stable, who could speak to in the evenings and weekends when they really needed a listening ear.

It is having constant support that has had the most profound impact on my life. My coach, mentor and sponsor has driven me and reprimanded me in equal measure. His presence in my life is not time limited but is conditional on my commitment to helping others in the same way that he has helped and supported me.

Poverty is at the root of many of the more apparent and dire issues we face in this country. One significant issue is crime. A study by the Institute for Economics and Peace highlights how poverty, combined with other socioeconomic factors such as inequality, low education outcomes, a lack of employment opportunities and limited access to basic services, causes violent crime in our commu-



Poverty and poor community services are part of what sparked the 2011 London riots

nities. Its research showed how poverty has a stronger association with violence than income. “The disparity between income levels (the Gini coefficient), while still significant, has a much weaker correlation with peace than poverty,” wrote the report authors. This is because, below a certain level of income, individuals and families struggle to meet day to day needs. This in turn affects health, decreases human capital and increases the chance of living in violent communities with anti-social behaviour.

In 2013 my first “Kenny” report was published. Supported by the social consultancy CorePlan, and entitled “How do politics and economics affect gangs and serious youth violence across the UK?”, I stated how violent crime affects many communities in the UK, in particular those which are disproportionately influenced by poverty, poor employment opportunities, inadequate social services and home to a significant segment of the countries minorities.

Of those I interviewed who were involved in gang activity, many indicated that the biggest barrier they faced in their communities was poverty. Indeed, when examining the link between poverty and crime, the marriage between the two is evident. Clearly not all people living in poverty are violent, nor are

they criminals. Far from it. However, it is not surprising to find that areas such as Lambeth or Lewisham, which have both been identified as the two most unsafe and violent areas in the country, have some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK. Violent crime in in these two boroughs is three times higher than the national average: over the period of 2005-2013 there were 116 people killed here due to violent crime. This is compared

Those involved in gang crime said poverty was their biggest barrier

to nine deaths in the most affluent areas in the capital (Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston-upon-Thames and Richmond-upon-Thames) combined.

The Ending Gangs and Serious Youth Violence Team was formed by the Home Secretary to find out what had caused the 2011 riots, and the extent to which gang culture and youth violence is taking hold in the poorest communities across the country. After carrying out comprehensive reviews across 34 local authorities nationally, the team concluded in its report that cuts to services and the economic downturn were indeed contribut-

ing to increased gang-related and youth-specific violence. Equally, they found that poor coordination of existing services and a failure to address the needs of repeat offenders returning to the community after completing their sentence were also contributing to the lack of safety that the poorest communities experienced.

This two-year review, which engaged with nearly 10,000 professionals and community members, was fed into other associated reviews and resulted in the decision to transform the criminal justice system. This process began with the introduction of Transformation of Rehabilitation Strategy 2013: a nationwide programme to ensure repeat offenders serving under one year have a resettlement package in place when they return to the community. In addition, much greater emphasis is now being placed on community resilience through social action, and community-led networks and consortia that are able to deliver services locally and more effectively.

The importance of focusing on vulnerable families was also re-emphasised as a result of the Home Office reviews, as too was the need to clarify exactly what these families need. By far the biggest gap identified was within genuine community-based leadership. The lack of moral authority, coupled with the overwhelming poverty and resulting despair, created the seedbed for unrest and a culture of abuse that continues to play out both in the home and on the streets.

This is not just an issue for the people who live within these deprived communities. It affects us all. A study by the Institute for Economics and Peace reports that violent crime costs the taxpayer an astounding £124 billion per year. If we break that figure down, it is estimated that violent crime costs every household in the UK £47,004. If we were to reduce violence and crime by just 9 per cent it would save the same as the total cost of the London Olympic Games. If we spent more public money to prevent poverty in our country, through simple measures such as providing credible leadership and effective role models, we could save millions, which could be spent elsewhere. On top of that we would have a much safer Britain, which we would all love.

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