

1 The number of Scottish people in deep poverty has grown despite thoughtful welfare reforms.

The Guardian, 30 April 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/30/the-guardian-view-on-poverty-in-scotland-a-contradictory-history>

More will be needed. Social security is an investment in people, yet politicians in England have often treated it as a handout that should be almost impossible to survive on. The Scottish government has taken a different attitude. In place of George Osborne's two-child limit on benefits, it has established a new weekly payment of £25 for each child. To mitigate the bedroom tax, it introduced discretionary housing payments. While the Department for Work and Pensions rolled out huge changes to benefits without consulting those who use them, Scotland commissioned "experience panels" to involve people in the design of policies.

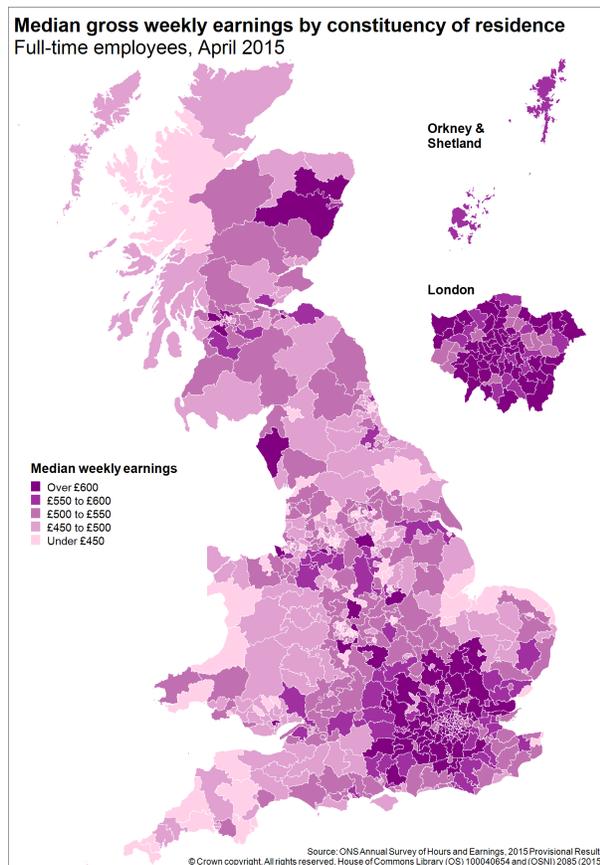
Despite these laudable attempts to ease the pain of Westminster's swingeing cuts, the longer story of poverty in Scotland is one of bleak contradictions. As new research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) shows, while overall poverty levels have fallen, the number of people in very deep poverty has grown dramatically. Over the past two decades, a population the size of Dundee has been pushed into extreme poverty (households with less than 40% of the median income). People in this group are more likely to be single adults, from minority ethnic backgrounds, or disabled. Many of the causes – such as low-paid jobs – are national phenomena. Destitution is rising across Britain. But its increase in Scotland should also be a warning about how policies are targeted.

The JRF research suggests that a focus on child poverty may have pulled up those who were just below the poverty line while leaving behind those in deep poverty, particularly childless adults. That Scotland even has a Child Poverty Act, which was passed one year after Mr Osborne dropped the national government's target to end child poverty, is admirable. But targets can have a distorting effect. New Labour lifted about 700,000 children out of poverty between 1996 and 2004. This was a significant achievement, which relied on huge cash transfers. Despite this redistribution, the number of families that experienced multiple disadvantages, such as living in poor housing, or having unemployed parents, remained static. The risk is that targets create pressure to spend money on a single problem, without addressing the structural forces driving it.

The Scottish National party made its name from universal policies such as free tuition. Its recent focus on targeted support is a departure from this script. The introduction of the weekly payment in 2021 was a reflection of the reality that child poverty remains stubbornly high, despite pledges to reduce it. Since his election as leader of the SNP, charities have urged Humza Yousaf to stop chasing "headline-grabbing" initiatives and adopt a more systematic approach. Policymakers must avoid equating problematic behaviours with disadvantage and stigmatising poor people.

There are limits to what Mr Yousaf can achieve. When further powers were devolved in 2016, the Scottish government gained control over only 15% of its social security spending. Large parts of this system – such as universal credit – are still in Westminster's control. Tackling poverty will also mean ruling out zero-hours contracts and creating better jobs; Scotland has no statutory powers to do either. Gordon Brown's recent proposal to devolve job centres would be an improvement, but only if aspects of universal credit, such as the punitive sanctions regime, are also devolved.

So far, Scotland has shown a willingness to travel in the right direction. Its government has committed to developing a "minimum income guarantee" that would set a floor below which nobody could fall. It is also due to review the adequacy of benefit payments. Mr Yousaf should accelerate these efforts. A universal guarantee would be a fine place to end up – and would set an example that others should follow.



Map published by the House of Commons (2015 data).

➤ Using the documents and your knowledge, describe social inequalities in Scotland and discuss the policies aimed at fighting poverty.