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# Public Attitudes to Poverty, Inequality and Welfare in Scotland and Britain

Poverty



social  
research

# **PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND WELFARE IN SCOTLAND AND BRITAIN**

**Scottish Government Communities Analytical Services**

**2015**

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## KEY FINDINGS

This report sets out public attitudes to poverty, inequality and welfare in Scotland and in Britain. When the same question is asked in both Scotland and Britain as a whole, findings are broadly similar (though any significant divergences are noted). British figures are therefore presented as a proxy where Scottish data is not available.

### **There is a high level of concern about poverty and inequality and support for government action**

- In 2013, nearly all people in Scotland (98%) felt it was important to tackle child poverty.
- Three-quarters felt that tackling child poverty is the job of the Scottish Government, although a wide range of agents were seen to have a role to play.
- 83% of people said that the gap between those on high incomes and those on low incomes was too large.

➔ Policy implication: The findings provide a clear mandate for Scottish government action to tackle poverty.

### **Views on the nature of government intervention are mixed**

- In 2014, 48% of respondents in Scotland agreed that the government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off, while 25% disagreed.
- Almost half of people (48%) thought that taxes and public spending should be kept at the same level, while a large minority (44%) thought they should be increased. Only 4% thought that taxes and spending should be decreased.
- In Britain as a whole, support for extra spending on benefits declined between the 1980s and 2011, but increased in 2012 and 2013.

➔ Policy implication: The mixed views underline the importance on engagement on these issues and gaining a clearer understanding of the range of views and the motivations that underpin them, as well as the experiences of those that live in poverty.

### **Knowledge of poverty levels and policies is limited**

- Only 20% of survey respondents in 2013 in Britain accurately estimated child poverty rates.
- Perceptions of changes in poverty levels over recent decades were linked to economic circumstances: the view that 'poverty has increased in the last ten years' increased sharply after the early 1990s recession and during the late 2000s recession. However, there was no similar recognition of the fall in the poverty rate over the last decade.

➔ Policy implication: Evidence shows that people may disengage from poverty issues if they feel the problem is overstated. This highlights the importance of wider dissemination of poverty figures to promote a more realistic picture.

## **Official definitions of poverty do not resonate with the public**

- In British qualitative research carried out in 2013/2014, participants believed official income-based poverty measures to be too narrow, as poverty was considered to be about more than just income. The term poverty was seen as more appropriate to conditions in the developing world and was seen to overstate the problem.
- Research participants preferred terminology around 'ability to meet basic needs' and conceptions of poverty considering access to a wide range of material and social resources.
- There was a high level of public agreement in 2012 about the 'necessities of life' everyone should have access to. The most basic essentials for living such as a heated and damp free home and two meals a day were agreed as necessities by nearly everyone. However, some activities and basic participation in social life, such as being able to visit friends or family in hospital, were also widely seen as necessities.
- While survey respondents became slightly less generous since 1999 about necessities for adults, responding to the climate of austerity, definitions have stayed remarkably stable since the 1980s. The agreed set of necessities for children showed almost no change over the period.

→ Policy implication: Given the strongly-shared understanding of necessities, communications drawing on needs-based definitions may help build public engagement in, and support of, policies to tackle poverty.

## **Individual explanations of poverty are more common than structural explanations and attitudes have hardened over recent years**

- In 2010 in Britain, 23% of people thought that people live in need because of laziness or a lack of willpower, while 21% thought it was due to injustice in society. Attitudes have hardened over time, with the individual explanation increasing from 15% in 1994, and the structural explanation decreasing from 29% in the same year.
- Looking at child poverty specifically, 72% of people in Scotland in 2013 felt that this was caused by individual factors such as parents not wanting to work, with only 28% attributing it to structural factors such as inadequate social security payments. Parental alcoholism, drug abuse or other addiction was perceived as the most common main cause of child poverty in Scotland.
- Qualitative research carried out in Britain 2013/2014, which explored the issues via in-depth discussion, found arguably a more nuanced attitude towards those in poverty. Current economic and structural factors were seen as the greatest cause of poverty, although long-term structural causes and causes relating to individuals were also identified. There was a recognition that poor personal choices may be an outcome, rather than a cause, of poverty.

→ Policy implication: There may be a role for government in promoting a more realistic and balanced understanding of the causes of poverty and the barriers faced by poor people. The qualitative evidence shows that the public appreciate the complexities of causes when given an opportunity to consider them fully.

→ Policy implication: The findings suggest that poverty reduction policies focused on supporting individuals overcome personal barriers, such as targeted employability services, are particularly likely to gain public support.

### **Negative attitudes to welfare recipients are widespread**

- In 2013, negative perceptions of welfare recipients were held by a considerable proportion of the British population. A substantial minority of between 29 and 35% of people, depending on the benefit, thought that benefit recipients should feel at least somewhat ashamed to be claiming.
- Attitudes towards additional spending on welfare differed substantially depending on the type of benefit, with the majority supporting increased spending for carers, working parents on low incomes and disabled people unable to work, but only 15% supporting additional spending on unemployment benefits.
- In Britain in 2013, 54% thought that most unemployed people in their area could find a job if they wanted one. Views on this question stayed at about the same level since 2009, but other attitudes to unemployed people hardened.
- Scottish people's attitudes towards unemployed people softened slightly between 2013 and 2014. In 2014, 47% felt that unemployment benefits were too high and discouraged people who were out of work from finding jobs, compared to 52% in 2013. This represented a reversal of the hardening of attitudes between 2010 and 2013.

→ Policy implication: There is strong evidence that stigmatisation of welfare recipients has negative impacts on their well-being and may reduce benefit take up. This suggests that addressing stigma may make existing anti-poverty policies more effective and help maximise incomes.

### **There is a lack of understanding of welfare issues**

- In 2013 in Britain, 44% felt that benefits for a single unemployed person were not enough to live on. This rose to 56% when respondents were told the true amount of benefit payments.
- People in Britain in 2012 very substantially overestimated the extent of benefit fraud. On average, respondents thought 25% of benefit claims were fraudulent, compared to official estimates of 2%.

→ Policy implication: Government communications could usefully focus on how much money people in poverty (and on benefits) actually have.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report sets out public attitudes to poverty, inequality and welfare in Scotland and Britain, from a range of sources.

### Background

- 1.2. In 2012/13, there were a total of 820,000 individuals living in relative poverty (before housing costs) in Scotland. This represents 16% of the population. The total included 180,000 children (19% of all children); 480,000 working age adults (15% of all working age adults); and 150,000 pensioners (15% of all pensioners).<sup>1</sup>
- 1.3. In 2012/13, the relative poverty (before housing costs) threshold in Scotland was equivalent to £264 a week for a couple with no children, £177 a week for a single person with no children, £317 a week for a single person with two children aged 5 and 14 and £404 a week for a couple with two children aged 5 and 14.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.4. Projections from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) suggest that that the numbers living in relative poverty will increase due to welfare reform. The IFS analysis estimated implications for income poverty on the basis of changes tax and benefit policy and forecasts for the macroeconomy. This concluded that an additional 50,000 children and 150,000 working age adults will be living in poverty by 2020 due to welfare reform (before housing costs)<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.5. The Scottish Government is committed to tackling poverty and taking action to mitigate negative impacts of welfare reform. The approach to tackling poverty focuses on early intervention and prevention, tackling the root causes and building people's capabilities through universal entitlements, income maximisation and promoting children's life chances. This approach is outlined in its three key social policy frameworks, Equally Well, the Early Years Framework and Achieving our Potential<sup>4</sup>.
- 1.6. In addition, the Scottish Government has a Child Poverty Strategy<sup>5</sup> designed to reduce the levels of poverty amongst households with children and to break inter-generational cycles of poverty, inequality and deprivation. Its actions are focused around the three outcomes of maximising household resources; improving children's wellbeing and life chances; and ensuring children grow up in well designed, sustainable places.

### Data sources

- 1.7. This paper outlines public attitudes to poverty, inequality and welfare in Scotland and Britain. It uses published data from the British Social Attitudes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0045/00454875.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0045/00454875.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Communication from the IFS, following from <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7054>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Health/Healthy-Living/Health-Inequalities/Equally-Well>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/03/5304>

Survey (BSA), Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA), a 2013 Scotpulse survey on attitudes to child poverty in Scotland, the Poverty and Social Exclusion “Necessities of Life” Survey 2012, a 2012 survey on benefits stigma and 2013/14 qualitative research on attitudes to poverty from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). Details of the methodology of the five sources are provided in Annex A.

- 1.8. This paper presents Scottish data where available. Since the SSA does not ask about poverty as frequently or as comprehensively as the BSA does, for some questions only British data is available. However, Scottish and British attitudes to poverty are relatively similar, as demonstrated where the same question was asked in both the British and Scottish attitudes surveys. Therefore BSA findings can be used as a reasonable proxy for Scottish attitudes. The BSA includes a sample of approximately 300 Scottish respondents in its sample, so Scottish attitudes are included in the British attitudes. However, due to the size of the sample, extracting Scottish data from the BSA findings would not provide reliable findings.

## **2. BRITISH ATTITUDES TO POVERTY**

- 2.1. This section presents findings relating to views on definitions of poverty and their implications on engaging the public in discussions around poverty; views on items and activities necessary to participate in society; and trends over time in attitudes to poverty.

### **Definitions of poverty and ways of engaging the public**

- 2.2. Researchers have been interested to explore how poverty is conceptualised and understood and to explore how this changes over time. Recent qualitative research carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in 2013/14 found that the word poverty itself was seen as problematic. It was felt to be too emotive a term – something associated with the problems of the developing world, rather than the UK. This led participants to feel disengaged when hearing about poverty, as they could feel that the problem was being overstated. In addition, those who lived in poverty were themselves uncomfortable with the term as they found it stigmatising.
- 2.3. Participants did not accept the widely used relative income measure as an accurate definition of poverty. They did not feel that poverty and relative income inequality were the same and that while income inequality was inevitable – someone has to be at the bottom of the distribution – being at the bottom did not necessarily mean that someone would have to be poor in the sense of struggling to meet basic needs.
- 2.4. Participants preferred talking about ‘an inability to meet basic needs’ or ‘a lack of resources’ rather than about ‘poverty’. There was a feeling that an income-based measure did not fully capture the experience of being in poverty, and that outgoings such as childcare costs and debt should be taken into consideration. Poverty was so felt to be about a lack of social capital as well as

material resource and to have psychological impacts, and research participants therefore felt that these should be taken into account when defining poverty.

- 2.5. In terms of engaging the public, communications about poverty taking a life-course view, e.g. showing the impact of being a child in poverty once that person becomes an adult, were thought to have more impact than snap-shots of poverty.
- 2.6. Multi-agency solutions, including government and others such as employers were seen as necessary to tackle poverty.

### **Definitions of necessities of life**

- 2.7. The Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) “Necessities of Life” Survey 2012 investigated what items respondents felt were necessary to be able to participate in society: these are items that a majority thinks adults and, separately, children should not have to go without.
- 2.8. The survey included a sample boost in 2011 and separate Scottish analysis is available for 2011 and 2012. However, the 2012 sample is very small and reliability of findings is limited. Analysis has shown that Scottish respondents held almost identical views on what should be necessities as respondents in the survey overall and therefore UK findings are presented here. This also has the advantage of providing a longer time series for how views have changed over time.
- 2.9. **There was a high level of agreement over what children need.** In 2012, a warm winter coat (97%) fruit and vegetables daily (96%), new properly fitting shoes (93%) and three meals a day (93%) were seen as a necessity for children by nearly all respondents. In terms of activities, celebrations for special occasions (91%); a hobby (88%); and a weekly toddler group or nursery for pre-school children (87%); and were seen as a necessity by around 9 in 10 survey respondents.
- 2.10. Slightly fewer, but over half thought that a computer and internet for homework (67%), some new clothes (65%), family day trips once a month (60%), school trips once a term (55%) and pocket money (54%) were a necessity.
- 2.11. Items or activities not considered necessary for full participation in society, defined as being selected by less than half of respondents, included a mobile phone for children over 11 (26%), clothes to fit in with friends (31%), a bicycle (45%), and having friends round once a fortnight (49%).
- 2.12. **Expectations of what children need have remained relatively stable between 2012 and the comparable survey in 1999, and where there was no pattern evident in the direction of changes** where they did occur. Some items were more widely described as necessities in 2012, including a computer and internet for homework (a 25 percentage point difference, which can be explained by rapid technological change); a garden or outdoor space for playing in safely (24 percentage point difference); and meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent once a day (13 percentage point difference). Other items

were less likely to be seen as essentials in 2012, including going on a school trip once a term (19 percentage points); a holiday away from home once a year (18 percentage points); and at least four pairs of trousers (13 percentage points).

- 2.13. For adults, there was also broad consensus, although slightly less so than for children. The **most commonly mentioned items were essentials for survival**, such as being able to keep the home adequately warm (96%); a damp free home (94%) and two meals a day (91%). Only one activity was selected as a necessity by nine in ten, visiting friends/family in hospital (90%).
- 2.14. Other items seen as necessities by more than half but included fresh fruit or veg every day (83%), a telephone (77%), and clothes for job interviews (69%). In terms of activities, celebrations for special occasions (80%); the ability to go to weddings, funerals and other such occasions (79%); and a hobby or leisure activity (70%) were also selected by a high percentage.
- 2.15. A much larger proportion of items and activities were defined as non-necessities, including going out socially one a fortnight (34%); being able to replace worn out furniture (39%); a home computer (40%); a car (45%); and presents for friends or family once a year (46%).
- 2.16. There was **more change between 1999 and 2012 than for the child necessities, and in general people became less generous**. Percentages identifying basic necessities such as food and adequate housing as necessities remained broadly the same, but there is evidence that in a climate of constrained economic conditions and austerity these are being prioritised over more discretionary items, including expectations of a social life.
- 2.17. Two items to do with technological change, a computer and access to the internet, were more likely to be seen as necessities (by 29 and 35 percentage points respectively), but most other items were less likely to be described as necessities. This includes having a small amount of money to spend on oneself weekly (19 percentage points), being able to save £20 a month for a rainy day (14 percentage points) and keeping the home in a decent state of decoration (12 percentage points).
- 2.18. All PSE responses were very similar across gender, ethnicity, occupation, income level, education, housing tenure, family type, region and political affiliation.

### **Trends in attitudes to poverty**

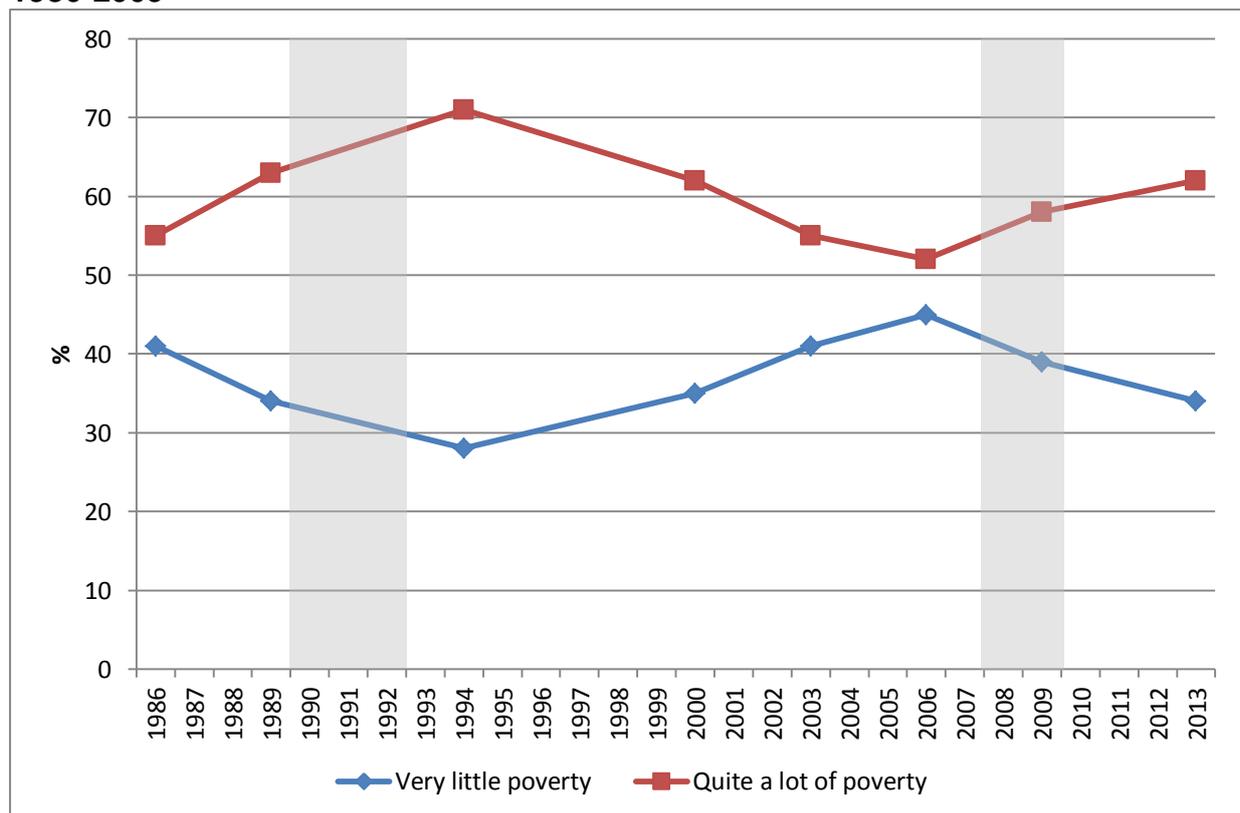
- 2.19. The British Social Attitudes Survey has regularly asked questions on attitudes to poverty and welfare over time between 1983 and 2011. The BSA asks about poverty more frequently and in more detail than the SSA, so in many cases no comparable Scottish data is available. However, as noted above, where both British and Scottish data exists, attitudes tend to be quite similar, so it is reasonable to use British data as a proxy for public attitudes in Scotland.

2.20. This section considers attitudes to levels of poverty, the causes of poverty and on how to engage the public and build support for action.

2.21. **The majority of people thought that there was ‘quite a lot’ of real poverty in Britain.** In 2013, 62% thought there was quite a lot of poverty in Britain (as opposed to ‘very little’ poverty). This compares to 58% saying there was ‘quite a lot of poverty’ in 2009. Perceptions of poverty levels were found to be linked to economic circumstances, with the view that there is ‘quite a lot of poverty’ increasing during and after the early 1990s recession and the late 2000s recession, as shown in Figure 1, where the recessionary periods are marked in grey.

2.22. It should be noted that no definition of what ‘quite a lot’ or ‘very little’ means was offered alongside the questions, and the response therefore reflects individual interpretations, which may differ widely between respondents. However, variations in definitions should fluctuate randomly and even each other out over the sample as a whole.

**Figure 1 – Public perceptions of levels of poverty in Britain, by UK recessions, 1986-2009**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey; after Clery et al (2013), p.9

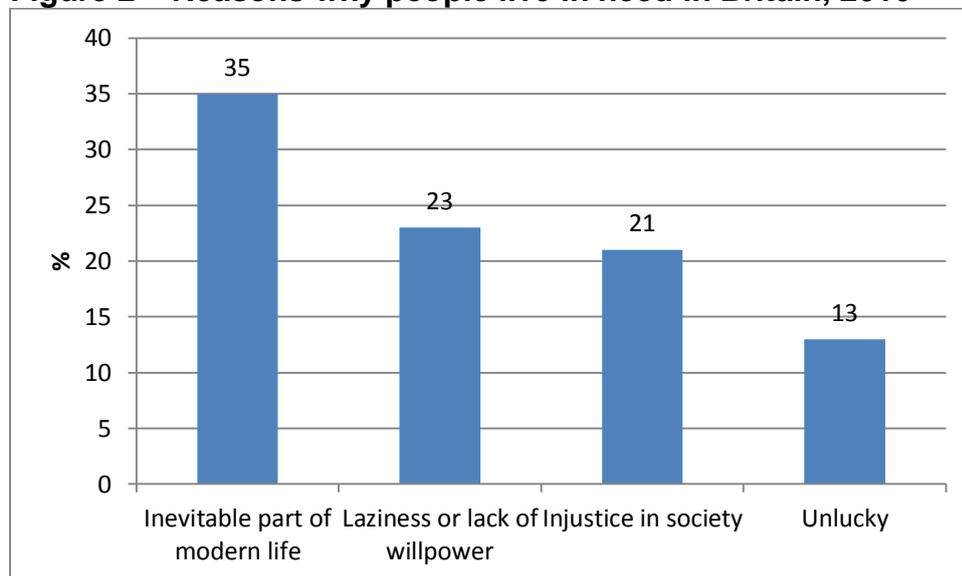
2.23. In 2013, 64% of BSA respondents thought that poverty had risen in the past ten years, an increase from 47% in 2009. This is contrary to actual changes in poverty rates, which show a fall over the last decade. However, perceptions of recent *changes* in poverty levels were also found to be linked to economic circumstances, in line with perceptions of what levels are.

2.24. In terms of expectations of the future, in 2009 over half (56%) thought poverty would increase over the next decade, 29% thought it would stay the same and 11% thought it would decline. These percentages have remained relatively stable since the question was first asked in 1986.

2.25. Qualitative JRF research undertaken in 2013/14 found that, in general, attitudes towards poverty had remained relatively stable, with similar findings to research carried out in 2007 and 2009. There was a continued distinction being drawn between the ‘deserving’ poor, who were seen to be in poverty through no fault of their own, e.g. due to disability, and the ‘undeserving’ poor who were seen to have ‘chosen’ a life in poverty by not working or getting into debt to fund non-essential spending. However, difficult economic circumstances in recent years had led to a slight softening of people’s views. Work was not seen as a guaranteed route out of poverty, and there was a feeling that poverty could affect anyone, due to current economic uncertainties. Findings on causes of poverty are discussed further in paragraph 2.28 below

2.26. **The view that people live in need because of individual rather than societal factors has become more prevalent.** In 2010, BSA respondents were asked why they thought that people lived in need. They were presented with four options and asked which was closest to their own view. 35% thought that living in need was an inevitable part of modern life; 23% saying that it was due to laziness or lack of will power; 21% that it was due to injustice in society; and 13% because people in poverty have been unlucky, as shown in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2 – Reasons why people live in need in Britain, 2010**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

2.27. Over time, the view that people live in need because of individual factors (laziness or lack of willpower) has become more prevalent, whilst an explanation focused on social justice (injustice in our society) has become less common. In 1994, 15% thought people lived in need because of laziness or a lack of willpower, compared to 23% in 2010. During the same period, the

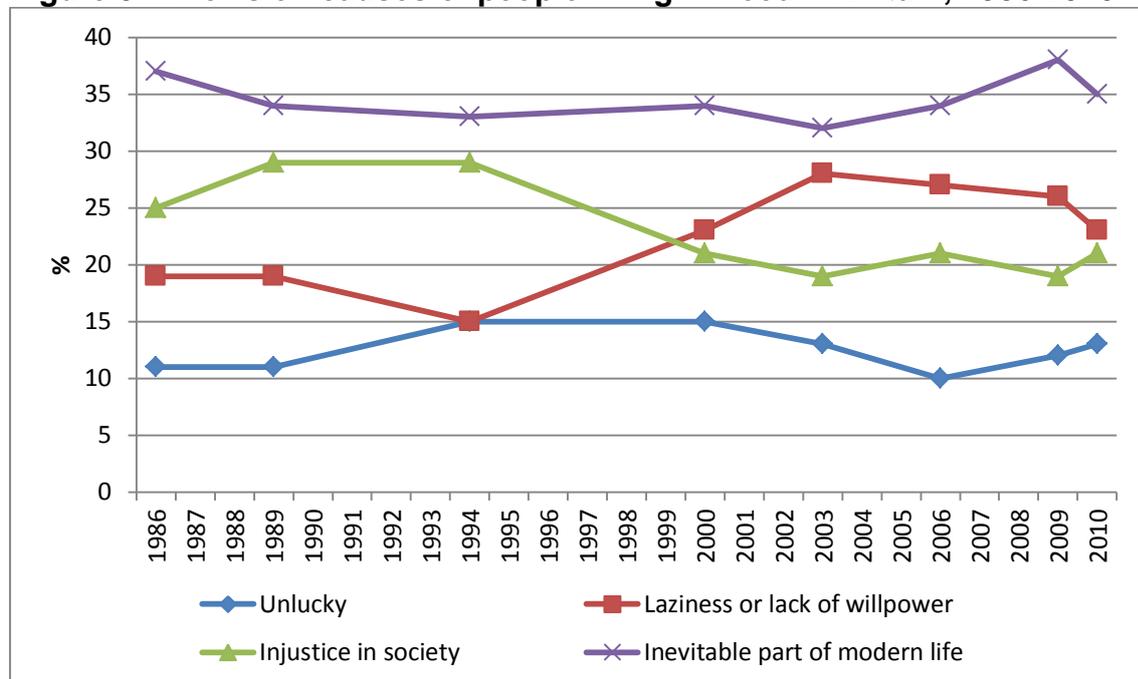
percentage giving ‘injustice in society’ as a reason for people living in need declined from 29% to 21%, as shown in Figure 3, overleaf.

2.28. The view that people live in need because they have been unlucky has never been widely held, but became slightly more common during the early 1990s and late 2000s recession.

2.29. In the qualitative JRF research in 2013/14, participants identified numerous causes of poverty. These fell into three broad categories:

- First, current economic and structural causes were seen to be the greatest cause of poverty, e.g. cost of living, lack of available jobs, low paid or unstable employment, in-work poverty and welfare cuts.
- Second, long-term structural causes were identified, relating to aspirational and opportunity aspects of poverty and inter-generational poverty.
- Third, causes relating to individuals were also identified, including those that people can’t control, such as ill-health and disability, and caring responsibilities, and those relating to life choices, such as substance abuse. A distinction was made between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. However, poor personal choices tended not to be seen as the cause of poverty but were often described as an outcome of poverty. This differs from survey findings, which were more likely to place responsibility for poverty onto individuals living in poverty.

**Figure 3 – Views on causes of people living in need in Britain, 1986-2010**

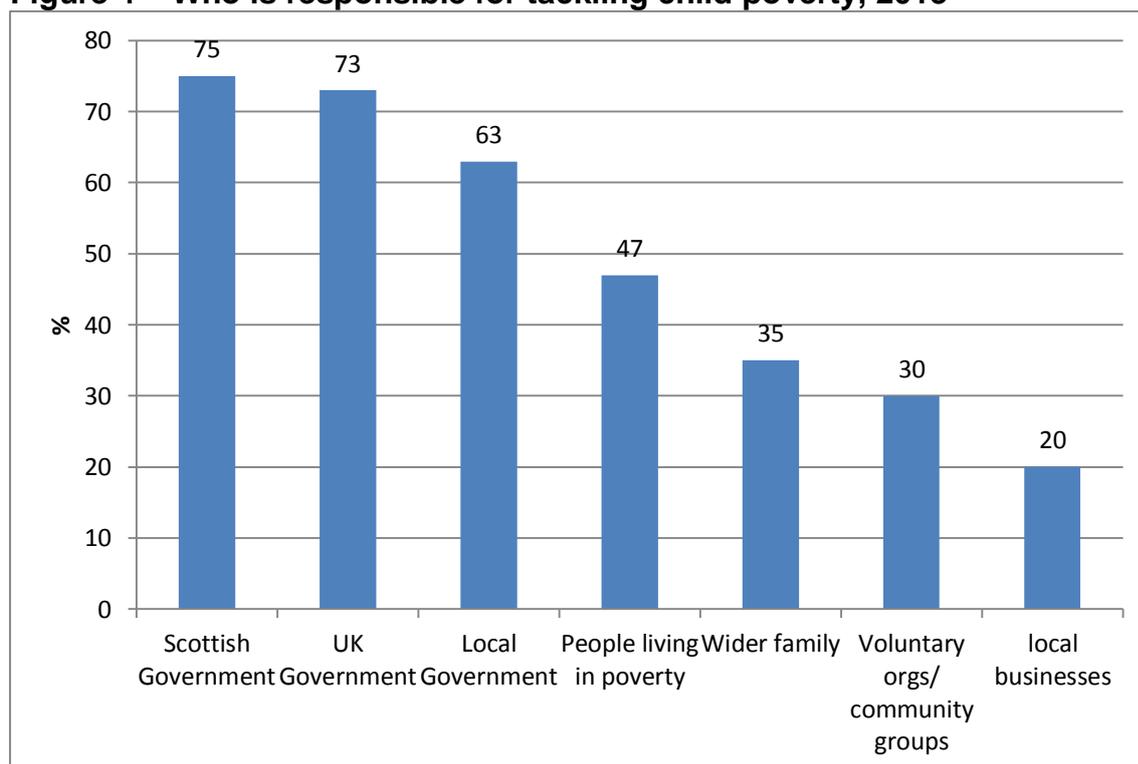


Source: British Social Attitudes Survey; after Clery et al (2013), p13

### 3. SCOTTISH ATTITUDES TO CHILD POVERTY

- 3.1. This section presents findings from a 2013 Scotpulse survey in Scotland on child poverty. British comparative data is only included where there is a marked difference in attitudes between Scotland and Britain as a whole. British data comes from the BSA 2010.
- 3.2. **People in Scotland wanted child poverty to be tackled.** Almost all respondents (98%) thought that it was important to tackle child poverty. This included 82% who considered tackling child poverty to be 'very important', and 16% who considered it to be 'quite important'.
- 3.3. **People acknowledged that child poverty exists in Scotland.** Fifty five per cent thought that there was 'quite a lot' of child poverty in Scotland, with a further 34% thinking that there was 'some'. For comparison, in 2010, 36% of BSA respondents believed that there was 'quite a lot' of child poverty in Britain, and 43% thought that there was 'some'.
- 3.4. **Accurate knowledge of poverty rates was low.** When asked to estimate the percentage of children in child poverty, 20% were about right (defined as between 15% and 25%). 40% each over- and underestimated the true extent of poverty.
- 3.5. **Most people thought that child poverty had increased.** 60% thought that child poverty in Scotland had increased in the last five years. During this period, rates had decreased.
- 3.6. **Half of people expected child poverty to increase in the next five years.** 50% of respondents expected that the proportion of children in Scotland living in poverty would increase in the next five years, with only 15% anticipating that child poverty would decrease.
- 3.7. **Most people in Scotland expected that welfare reform would damage children in Scotland.** Twenty-nine per cent 'strongly agreed' that welfare reform will damage children, while a further 31% 'agreed'.
- 3.8. **Most people in Scotland thought that government is, at least in part, responsible for tackling child poverty.** Slightly more thought that tackling child poverty was a responsibility of the Scottish Government (75%) than the UK Government (73%), while 63% thought it was a responsibility of local government. As can be seen in Figure 4 below, a wide variety of other agents were also seen as having a role to play in tackling child poverty, including people living in poverty (47%), friends of family of people in poverty (35%), voluntary organisations and community groups (30%) and local businesses (20%).

**Figure 4 – Who is responsible for tackling child poverty, 2013**



Source: Scotpulse Survey

**3.9. People in Scotland were more likely to identify individual than structural factors, when considering the main causes of child poverty.** Despite three quarters of respondents believing that responsibility for tackling child poverty lay with government, only just over a quarter (28%) of respondents felt that the main cause of child poverty was a structural reason, such as a lack of access to affordable housing, or an inadequate level of social security payments. Nearly three quarters (72%) thought that the main cause of child poverty was an individual factor such as parents not wanting to work, or parents suffering from alcoholism, drug abuse or other addictions. Poverty was seen as a multi-dimensional problem, with on average more than seven causes of child poverty being identified.

**3.10.** The views of those who have experienced poverty are different from those who haven't experienced poverty. Those living in poverty were most likely to believe that structural causes were the main reason for child poverty. Forty two per cent of those living in poverty thought a structural factor was the main reason for child poverty, compared to 32% who have previously lived in poverty and 23% of those who have never lived in poverty.

**3.11. People in Scotland thought that the most common 'main reason' for child poverty was parents' alcoholism, drug abuse, or other addiction.** Twenty nine% thought that this was the main reason. And 87% identified it as a contributory reason. Other factors commonly thought to be the main reason for child poverty in Scotland included 'inequalities in society' (16%), 'parents not wanting to work' (13%) and 'parents being out of work for a long time' (10%). Table 1, below, sets out the perceptions of the main and contributory reasons for child poverty in Scotland.

**Table 1: Perceptions of main and contributory reasons for child poverty in contemporary Scotland**

Reason	Main	All
Their parents suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse or other addictions	28.7 %	86.7 %
Because of inequalities in society	15.9%	40.8%
Their parents do not want to work	13.4%	66.7%
Their parents have been out of work for a long time	9.6%	73.8%
Their parents' work doesn't pay enough	8.1%	57.1%
Their parents lack education	5.7%	54.3%
They live in a poor quality area	5.2%	55.7%
Social benefits for families with children are not high enough	3.9%	20.6%
There are too many children in the family	3.1%	45.1%
Their family cannot access affordable housing	2%	41.2%
Their grandparents were also poor: it has been passed down the generations	1.4%	25.4%
There has been a family break-up or loss of a family member	1.2%	54.2%
Other reasons	0.8%	8.5%
Their family suffers from discrimination e.g. ethnicity, age, disability	0.6%	25.1%
Their parents do not work enough hours	0.3%	27.6%
They - or their parents - suffer from a long term illness or disability	0.2%	50.8%
Don't know	0%	1.4%

Source: Scotpulse Survey 2013

**3.12. A minority were well informed about what government is doing to tackle child poverty.** Nearly three quarters (74%) of people in Scotland were not aware of the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland (CPSS). The majority of people were also not aware of the UK Government commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020 (59%). A further 36% were aware of it, but did not know any details.

3.13. Analysis demonstrated that awareness of these strategies and goals was closely associated with a more favourable outlook toward tackling child poverty. For example, more of those who were aware of the CPSS considered it to be 'very important' to tackle child poverty in Scotland at 88%, compared to 80% of those who were not aware of the CPSS.

**3.14. The most commonly identified funding priorities for tackling child poverty related to meeting basic needs, after school care and mentoring.** Survey respondents were presented with a list of policies for tackling child poverty and were asked which they thought should be the main funding priorities for helping children in poverty in Scotland. Respondents were not restricted to a number of priorities and on average, four options were selected.

3.15. The most commonly selected action was providing 'food and clothes' for children, which is consistent with recent widespread support for food banks. Other options selected by at least half the respondents included after school care (60%), mentoring services (54%) and community centres or clubs (50%).

#### 4. SCOTTISH AND BRITISH ATTITUDES TO PUBLIC AND WELFARE SPENDING

4.1. Another relevant area of attitudinal research relates to views on taxation and government spending in general and spending specifically on welfare benefits in particular. Support for high levels of taxation and spending can be interpreted as support for redistribution from the better off to the worst off in society, while welfare spending in general is targeted at those most in need.

4.2. The BSA and SSA include a question about desired taxation and public spending levels, where respondents can choose from the following options:

- reducing taxes and spending less on health, education etc.;
- keeping taxes and spending on these services at the same level; or
- increasing taxes and spending more on health, education, etc.

4.3. **In Scotland in 2014, a large minority thought that taxes and spending should be increased.** Almost half of people in Scotland (48%) thought that taxes and public spending should be kept at the same level, while 44% thought they should be increased. Only 4% thought that taxes and spending should be decreased.

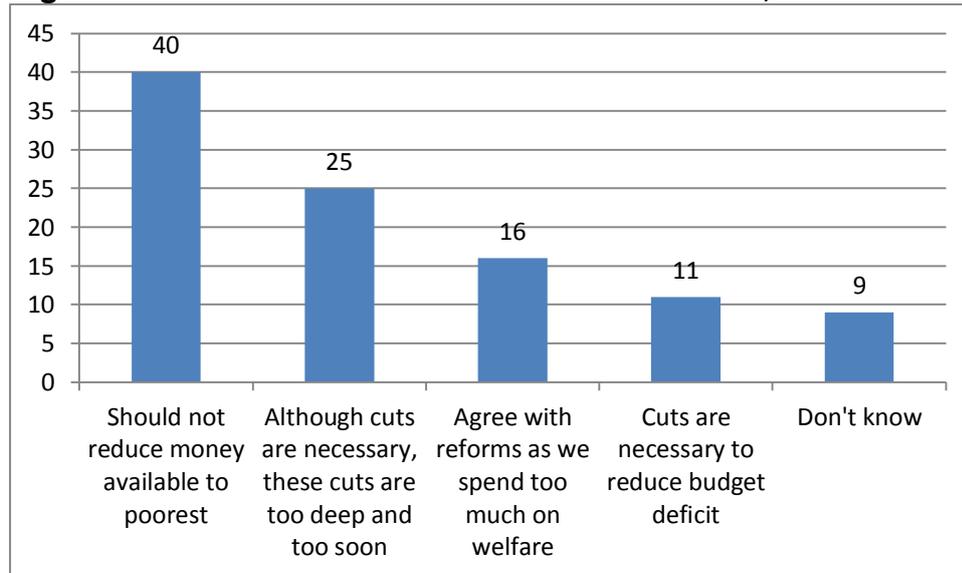
4.4. For comparison, in the equivalent BSA question in 2013, respondents were slightly less generous: 54% were in favour of keeping taxing and spending at the same level, 36% wanted to increase it, and 6% wanted to reduce it.

4.5. The majority of people in Scotland were opposed to any budget cuts as part of UK welfare reforms, or felt that cuts were too deep or were happening too soon. The Scotpulse survey asked respondents to select one from a number of statements about the welfare reforms introduced by the UK government.

4.6. As Figure 5 shows, the most popular response (40%) was that 'we should not be reducing money available to the poorest in society'. However, this is still a minority response.

4.7. A slightly smaller percentage indicated support for the cuts, either because 'we spend too much on welfare (16%), or because 'they are necessary as we need to reduce the budget deficit' (11%). Twenty five per cent thought 'the cuts were necessary but were too deep and too soon'.

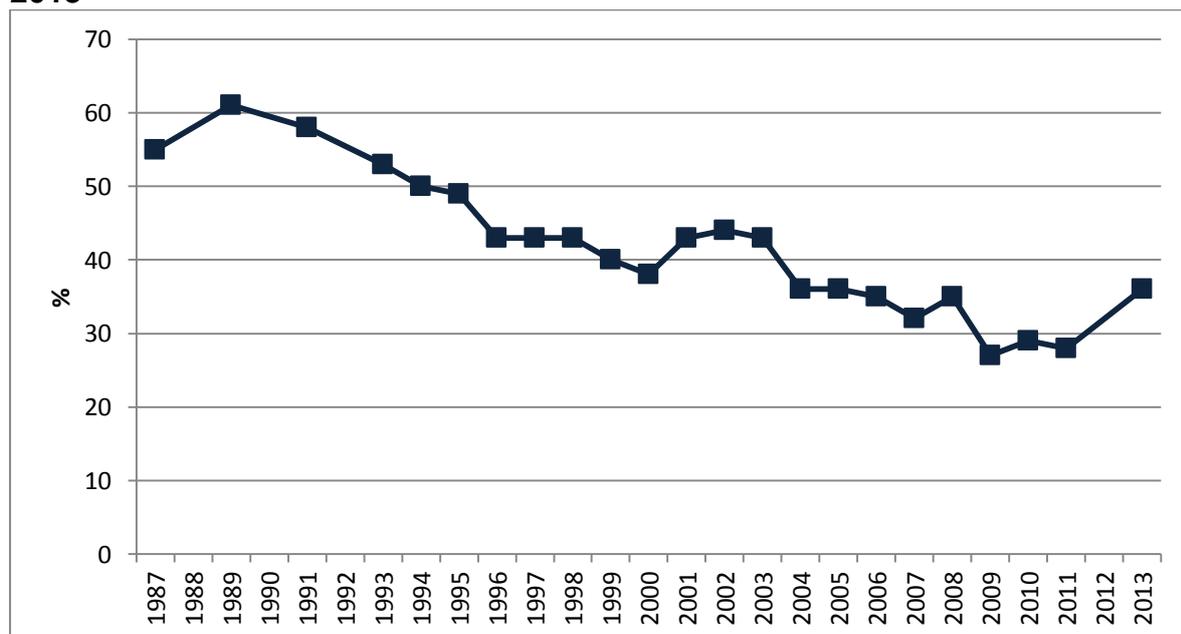
**Figure 5 – Attitudes to welfare reform in Scotland, 2013**



Source: Scotpulse survey

**4.8. British support for extra spending on welfare benefits declined between the late 1980s and 2011, but in 2012 and 2013 showed a slight increase.** The BSA includes another, slightly different question asking if the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor even if it leads to higher taxes. In 2013, 36% agreed with this proposition, whilst 32% disagreed and 30% neither agreed nor disagreed. Over the last two decades, support for more spending on welfare benefits declined up until 2011, and then increased, with an increase of 8 percentage points in the 2013 figure compared to 2011, as can be seen in Figure 6 below.

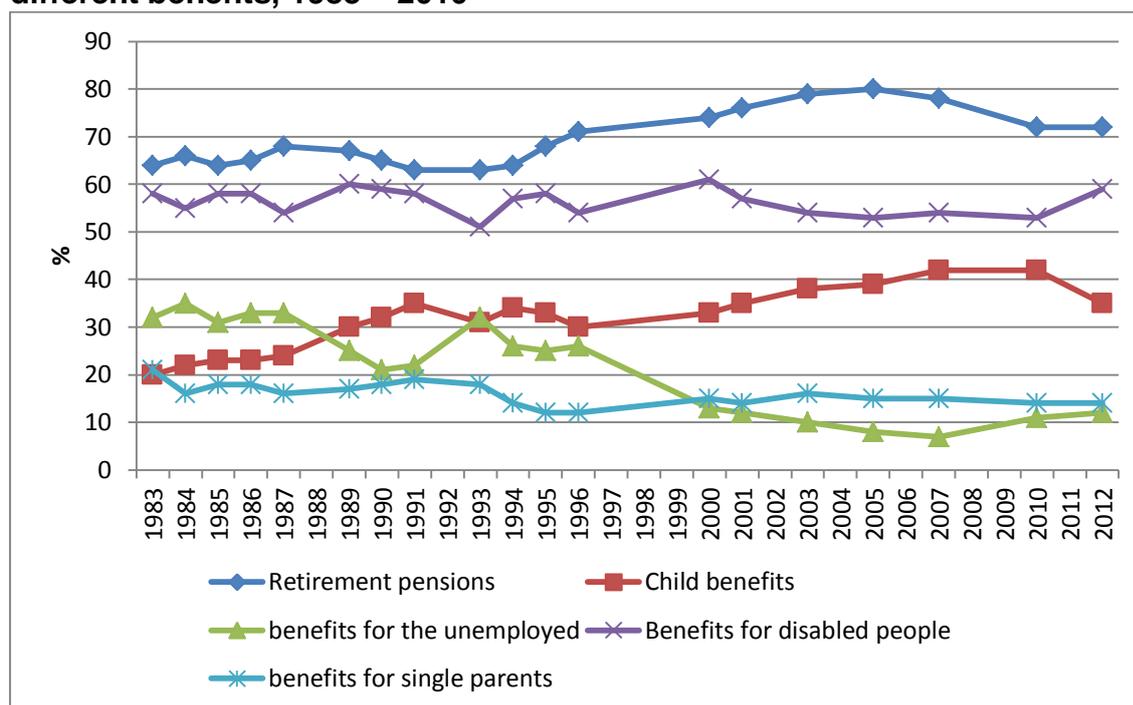
**Figure 6 – Percentage agreeing that “the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor even if it leads to higher taxes”, 1987-2013**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

- 4.9. Figures from 2013 indicated that there was still a strong feeling of there being more deserving and less deserving claimants. In Scotland, the SSA in 2013 asked if the government should spend more or less on benefits for unemployed people, disabled people who can't work and retired people.
- 4.10. Sixty-one per cent wanted to spend more on disabled people who could not work, and 57% wanted to spend more on retired people. However, only 20% wanted to see more spending on unemployed people and 43% wanted to see spending reduced for this group. Note that this represents a slightly more positive attitude towards unemployment benefits than in Britain as a whole as discussed below.
- 4.11. The question in the BSA asked whether there should be more or less government spending on six different categories: benefits for unemployed people; benefits for single parents; benefits for disabled people who cannot work; benefits for people who care for those who are sick or disabled; benefits for retired people and benefits for parents who work on very low incomes.
- 4.12. The majority of British respondents advocated more spending on people who care for those who are sick or disabled (73%); parents who work on a very low income (59%); and disabled people who cannot work (54%). Nearly half (48%) wanted more spending for retired people; but only 15% thought that more should be spent on unemployment benefits. Meanwhile nearly half (49%) thought that less should be spent on benefits for unemployed people.
- 4.13. **Support for extra spending on unemployment benefits remained low, but increased over the last five years.** Respondents in the BSA were asked to choose their first and second priorities for extra welfare spending. They could choose from: retirement pensions; child benefits; benefits for the unemployed, benefits for disabled people and benefits for single parents.
- 4.14. Figure 7 below shows the first and second priorities for extra government spending on different benefits over time. Again, there was more support for spending on some benefits than others, with retirement pensions and benefits for the disabled consistently being the British public's top two priorities for additional welfare spending.

**Figure 7 – First and second priorities for extra government spending on different benefits, 1983 – 2010**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey, after Clery et al (2013), p.33

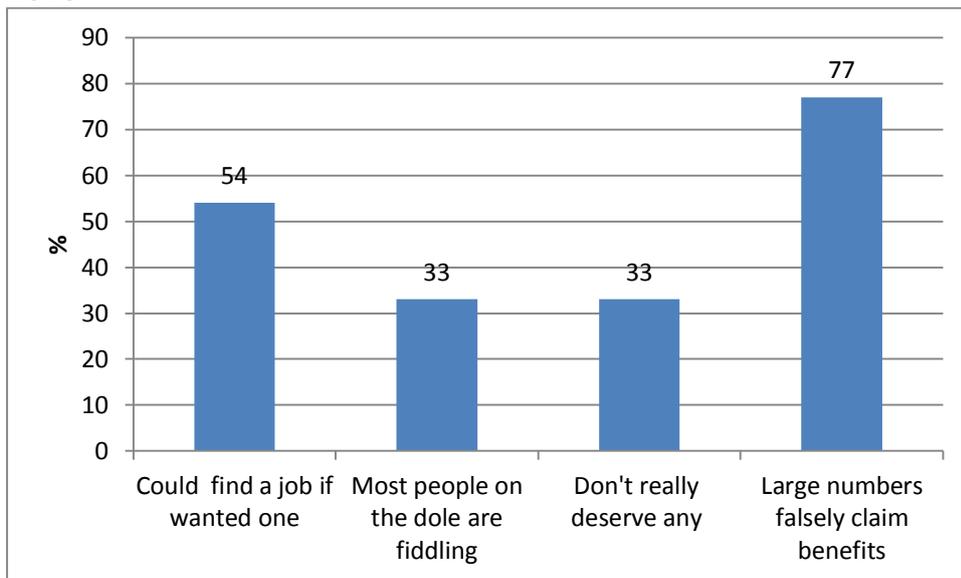
4.15. The public were least likely to advocate more spending for those on unemployment benefits, with 12% in 2012 selecting this as one of their top two priorities for extra spending on welfare. This is substantially lower than levels recorded between the 1980s and the mid-1990s, which fluctuated between 20 and 35%, but was an increase of five percentage points from 2007, where it stood at its lowest ever level of 7%. This might indicate that the prolonged economic downturn has increased support for extra spending on unemployment benefits.

## 5. SCOTTISH AND BRITISH ATTITUDES TO WELFARE RECIPIENTS

5.1. As well as asking about support for various types of welfare benefits, attitudinal research collects information on perceptions of welfare recipients' attitudes and behaviours.

5.2. The BSA found that in 2013 **negative perceptions of welfare recipients were held by many British respondents**, as can be seen in Figure 8 below. The majority (54%) believed that most unemployed people in their area could find a job if they wanted one, while a third believed that 'most people on the dole are fiddling' (33%) and that 'many people who get social security don't really deserve any help' (33%). Over three quarters (77%) agreed that 'large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits'.

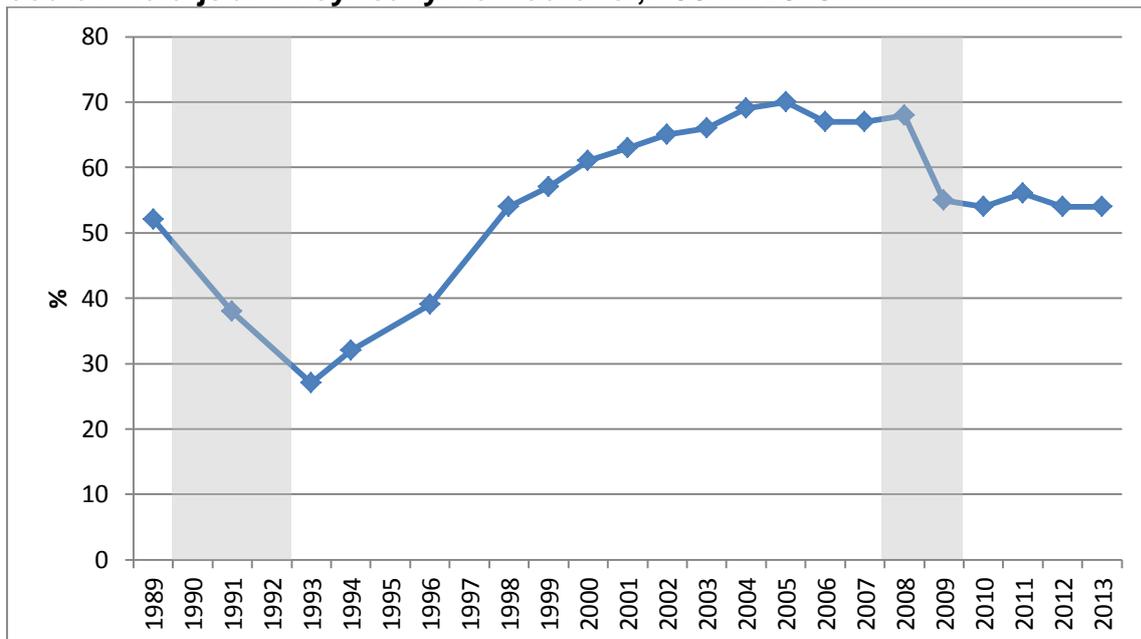
**Figure 8 – Percentage agreement with statements about welfare recipients, 2013**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

5.3. **The experience of recession has some impact on the belief that people could find a job if they really wanted one**, as shown in Figure 9 below. Periods of recession are marked in grey on the chart. In the BSA, in 1989 over half (52%) thought that most people could find a job if they really wanted one, but this fell to 38% in 1991 (during recession) and 27% in 1993 (after recession). At the start of the recession in 2008, 68% believed that most people could find a job. By 2009 this had fallen to just over half (55%) and remained at this level in 2010 and 2011, dropping to 54% in 2012 and 2013.

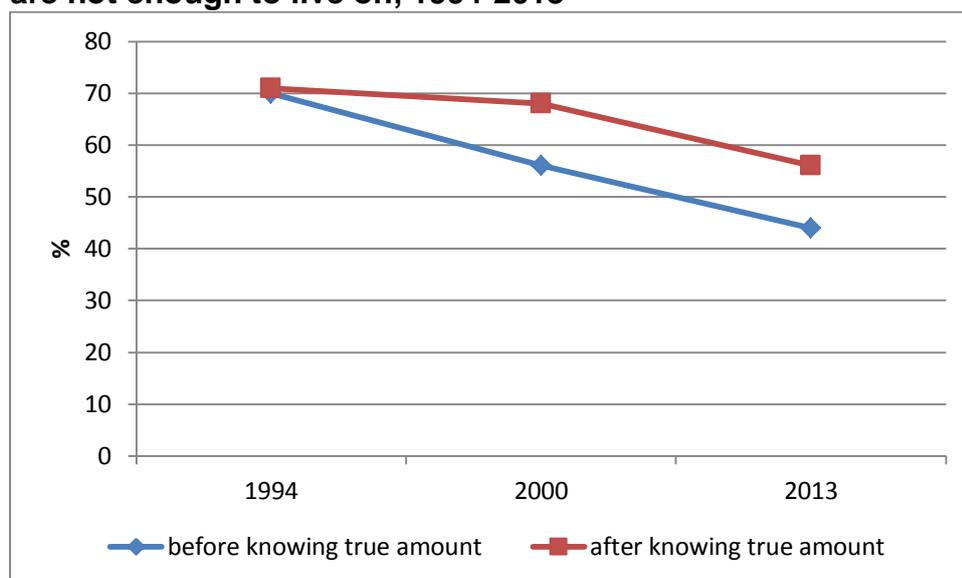
**Figure 9 – Percentage agreeing that ‘Around here most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one’, 1987 – 2013**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

- 5.4. **Attitudes towards those claiming unemployment benefits hardened in 2013, but softened slightly in 2014.** In 2014, in Scotland, 31% of people thought that benefits for unemployed people were too low and caused hardship, whilst 43% felt that benefit levels were too high and discouraged unemployed people from finding jobs. This is a change from 2013, which saw a hardening of attitudes towards those receiving unemployment benefits, with 26% of respondents thinking that they were too low and caused hardship, the lowest level since devolution, and 52% feeling that they were too high and discouraged them from finding jobs, the highest level since devolution. Responses are now more in line with 2010 levels, when 30% felt that benefits were too low and 43% too high, indicating a slight softening in attitudes towards unemployed people following a hardening.
- 5.5. Despite these negative perceptions of welfare recipients, British findings from 2012 showed that nearly half (47%) agreed that cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives, an increase of five percentage points from 2011.
- 5.6. **BSA respondents were more likely in 2013 than in previous years to think that benefits for a single unemployed person were enough to live on.** A question which the BSA occasionally asks (asked in 1994, 2000 and 2013) relates to a 25 year old woman living alone whose only income comes from state benefits. Respondents are asked if they think she has enough to live on. The question is then asked again, but this time including the amount of income the woman has after rent (£72 a week in 2013).
- 5.7. In 2013, without knowing the actual amount of benefit received, 44% felt that it was not enough to live on and 44% thought it was enough to live on. After being given a figure for the actual amount of benefit the woman would be entitled to, respondents became more understanding: 56% thought that it wouldn't be enough to live on, while 42% said that it would be enough.
- 5.8. Over time, there has been a hardening of attitudes towards people living on state benefits, as can be seen in Figure 10, which shows a reduction in the proportion answering that the benefits available are not enough to live on. In 1994, 70% thought that the benefits available weren't enough to live on (which rose to 71% after finding out the amount of benefit), which reduced to 56% in 2000 (rising to 68% after finding out the amount of the benefit). Over this period, the corresponding number believing that benefit levels are enough to live on has increased.

**Figure 10 – Perception that state benefits for a 25 year old woman living alone are not enough to live on, 1994-2013**



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

- 5.9. One of the BSA questions asks people the extent to which they agree that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’. Agreement with this statement has increased over time, with over half (54%) believing it in 2011, compared to 40% in 2000.
- 5.10. In Scotland in 2013, the SSA found that a large majority of respondents agreed that people falsely claim benefits. **Seventy five percent of people agreed that ‘large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits’.**
- 5.11. In a British survey poll carried out in 2012 as part of a study on benefits stigma individuals were asked to estimate what percentage of people claiming out-of-work benefits deliberately deceived the government to claim benefits they would not be entitled to if they told the truth. On average, people thought that 25% of claims were fraudulent. This compares to DWP figures, which estimate that 2% of claims are fraudulent. In the survey, 14% of people thought that more than half of all people claiming benefits were committing fraud.
- 5.12. It is also worth noting that the same as the percentage of SSA respondents as who thought large numbers claimed falsely, **75%, agreed that ‘large numbers of people who are eligible for benefits these days fail to claim them’.**
- 5.13. The British 2012 survey on stigma also asked directly about stigma by asking people to indicate to what extent people should feel ashamed to be claiming a range of benefits: in-work tax credits, Jobseeker’s Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support for single parents; and Housing Benefit. Between 21 and 24%, depending on benefit, thought that people should feel

somewhat ashamed, while between 8 and 10% felt people should feel very ashamed.<sup>6</sup>

- 5.14. People were also asked to give their views on the extent to which people in general felt that benefit claimants should feel ashamed. This showed a higher perceived level of stigma, with between 35 and 37% saying that people thought claimants should be somewhat ashamed, and between 11 and 13% saying people thought claimants should be very ashamed.

## **6. SCOTTISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCOME INEQUALITY AND REDISTRIBUTION**

- 6.1. An emerging area of attitudinal research looks at attitudes to income inequality and redistribution. There are few questions on this topic at this point.
- 6.2. In 2013, 83% of people in Scotland said that the gap between those on high incomes and those on low incomes was too large. This is a slight increase from 2010, where 77% felt that the income gap was too large.
- 6.3. In 2014, 48% of respondents in Scotland agreed that the government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off, 25% disagreed and 27% neither agreed nor disagreed.

## **7. DISCUSSION**

- 7.1. This paper has set out a wide range of mainly quantitative data on attitudes to poverty and welfare. These findings show a complex picture of views that do not necessarily point to a single avenue for policy action. This section attempts to review the key themes across the evidence base and to identify policy implications where possible.

### **There is a high level of concern about poverty and inequality and support for government action**

- 7.2. Evidence shows that poverty is recognised as a serious issue by the Scottish public. Almost everyone surveyed said that it is important to tackle child poverty, and a large majority felt that the gap between those on high incomes and those on low incomes was too large. A majority also agreed that welfare reform is damaging to children.
- 7.3. Three quarters felt that it was the job of the Scottish Government to tackle child poverty, with nearly as many saying that the UK government had a role to play. This provides a clear mandate for Scottish Government action to tackle child poverty.

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<sup>6</sup> Responses were given on a scale of 0 to 10 from Disagree strongly that people should feel ashamed to agree strongly that people should feel ashamed. 0-3 was defined as no stigma, 4-6 as moderate stigma, and 7-10 as high stigma.

## **Views on the nature of government intervention are mixed**

- 7.4. While there is a high level of agreement that government should take action on poverty and inequality, when people are asked about specific actions government might take, views are more mixed.
- 7.5. In general, more people in Scotland are in favour of progressive policies than are opposed, and Scottish views are slightly more generous than those in the rest of Britain. For example, almost half agreed that government should be redistributing from the rich to the poor, while a quarter disagreed, and a large minority of 44% in Scotland were in favour of increasing taxation and public spending while almost no one was in favour of decreasing taxation and spending. In terms of attitudes towards welfare reforms, 40% opposed any cuts as part of welfare reform, while 27% were in favour of reducing welfare budgets. However, it is worth noting that on taxation and spending, almost half are in favour of keeping levels as they are.
- 7.6. This lack of agreement about the form government action should take serves to underline the importance of engagement on these issues across Scotland and of gaining a clearer understanding of the range of views and the motivations that underpin them. The absence of consensus may also emphasise the importance of engaging with and listening to the people who are living in poverty in Scotland, using their lived experience to help develop approaches that are fit for purpose.

## **Knowledge of poverty levels and policies is limited**

- 7.7. Only one in five respondents was able to accurately estimate child poverty levels, with equal percentages over- and under-estimating the current rate. It is likely that knowledge of the wider poverty rate is similarly low.
- 7.8. Most respondents tended to think that there was a lot child poverty and poverty in general, and expected it to become more prevalent in the future. While perceptions of current levels did respond to wider trends in the economy, with higher perceived rates during and following periods of recession, there was no recognition of the poverty rate having fallen over the last decade.
- 7.9. Qualitative research indicated that people can disengage from the issue of poverty if they feel that the scale of the problem is being over-stated. Therefore the Scottish Government might want to promote a realistic picture of child poverty through wider dissemination of its figures, alongside promoting what it is doing to tackle poverty, to try and gain stronger buy in from the public.
- 7.10. Most people are not aware of the Scottish Government's child poverty strategy or the UK government's commitment to eradicate child poverty, and there may therefore be a case for increasing awareness raising activity. However, there are clearly limits to the amount of public knowledge that can be expected about any policy area and the fact that a substantial minority are aware may be acceptable.

## **Official definitions of poverty do not resonate with the public**

- 7.11. Qualitative research has shown that the term ‘poverty’ can be seen as more appropriate to conditions in the developing world and to overstate the problem in the UK, which as noted above, can cause people to disengage from the issue.
- 7.12. Research participants preferred terminologies around ‘ability to meet basic needs’ and conceptions of poverty covering access to a wide range of material and social resources to official income-based poverty measures. The latter were seen as too narrow and to not accurately describe the issues facing individuals struggling to get by.
- 7.13. Survey evidence has shown very high levels of consensus about the ‘necessities of life’ everyone should have access to, with very little variation across different groups in society. While the public have become somewhat less generous about definitions of adult necessities over the last decade, definitions have stayed remarkably stable since the early 1980s. Definitions of child necessities displayed almost no change.
- 7.14. Given this very widely shared understanding of what basic participation in modern society entails, drawing on needs-based definitions of poverty in communications around poverty policy, alongside the official income-based definitions, may help build public engagement in and support for policies aimed at tackling poverty. It may also help to be more explicit about what living in poverty actually means, in terms of money households have to live on.

## **Individual explanations of poverty are more common than structural explanations and attitudes have hardened over recent years**

- 7.15. The majority of people thought that both child poverty, and poverty more widely, were due to individual factors such as alcoholism or individuals not wanting to work, rather than structural factors such as affordable housing. The view that people live in need due to individual factors has become more prevalent over the last 15 years. These understandings may result in individuals blaming people in poverty for their own situation.
- 7.16. There may be a role for government in increasing understanding of the practical issues and barriers faced by people in poverty, to promote a more realistic and balanced understanding of the causes of poverty. This may be important in gaining support for policies to reduce poverty: if people blame individuals for living in poverty, they may be less likely to support government action to tackle poverty.
- 7.17. Additionally, given the continued importance of individualistic interpretations of why people live in poverty, it might be that poverty reduction policies, focused on people in poverty overcoming barriers themselves with support, are particularly likely to gain public support. These might include targeted employability services, improved childcare provision, or disability support services.

- 7.18. More recent qualitative research shows a richer understanding of the causes for poverty, with research participants identifying current economic and structural causes, long-term structural causes and individual causes as working together to keep people in poverty. The former were seen as more important and there was a recognition that poor individual choices can be a consequence rather than a cause of poverty.
- 7.19. These findings suggest that the public appreciate the complexities of these issues when given an opportunity to consider them more fully. This may provide a lesson for developing communications to promote a more balanced understanding of poverty.

### **Negative attitudes to welfare recipients are widespread**

- 7.20. There is also evidence of a high proportion of the public holding negative attitudes towards welfare recipients in particular. Around a third of survey respondents felt that people on various benefits should feel at least somewhat ashamed, and the same proportion stated that 'many people who get social security don't really deserve any help'.
- 7.21. Other survey evidence as well as the qualitative research on poverty suggests that many people draw a distinction between different types of welfare recipients in terms of how 'deserving' they are. Levels of support for additional welfare spending varied substantially depending on the population the welfare benefits were aimed for. The majority supported increasing spending for carers, working parents on low incomes and disabled people unable to work, but only few supported extra spending on unemployment benefits.
- 7.22. Attitudes towards unemployed people were generally unfavourable. Just over half of respondents in Scotland and Britain felt that benefits for unemployed people were too high and discourage them from finding jobs, while over half of respondents in Britain believed that most unemployed people in their area could find a job if they wanted one.
- 7.23. There is thus evidence that welfare recipients in general, and those on unemployment benefits in particular, are stigmatised. Research has found that stigma can reduce people's self-worth and wellbeing, therefore making it harder for them to take action to help themselves. Evidence also suggests that stigma plays a role in non-take up of benefits and tax credits.
- 7.24. Addressing negative attitudes to those in poverty and reducing the stigma associated with being in poverty might therefore make existing anti-poverty policies more effective, as well as maximising individual incomes by ensuring those in poverty are claiming all benefits they are entitled to.
- 7.25. Research on stigma has found negative media coverage of welfare recipients and people in poverty to be a key driver of people's perceptions of these groups. Focusing on challenging these media portrayals may therefore provide a useful avenue for tackling benefits and poverty stigma.

## **There is a lack of understanding of welfare issues**

- 7.26. One of the reasons underlying negative attitudes towards people receiving welfare benefits is a lack of understanding of their situation. Evidence shows that survey respondents overestimate levels of benefit fraud. On average, respondents thought that one in four claims for out of work benefits were fraudulent, when the official estimate is one in fifty.
- 7.27. Research also shows that respondents become more understanding in their attitudes towards benefit claimants after they found out the true amount of benefit they receive - and how little they have to live on. As noted above, communications could usefully focus on communicating how much money people in poverty (and on benefits) actually have.

## ANNEX - NOTE ON SURVEY AND QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

**British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA)**: interviews over 3,000 adults (18+) in Britain every year, including nearly 300 in Scotland. Interviews take place in interviewees own home on a range of topics. Random sample, representative of the British population.

**Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA)**: 1,200 – 1,500 Scottish adults (18+) interviewed in their own homes on a variety of topics. Random sample, representative of the Scottish population. The SSA focuses on poverty less frequently and in less depth than the BSA does, questions on public spending and welfare were asked in 1999, 2001 and 2010.

**Scotpulse Survey**: 1,275 responses to an online survey from members of the Scotpulse panel (12,500 Scottish adults aged 16+ are members of the Scotpulse panel, 3,500 members were invited to take the survey, 36% response rate). Survey results weighted by socioeconomic status, age and gender so as to be representative of Scotland as a whole. Survey was 16 questions based on BSA poverty questions, carried out between May and June 2013.

**Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey - The 'Necessities of Life' survey** was carried out between May and June 2012 and is based on a sample of 1,447 adults aged 16 or over in the Britain, including 111 in Scotland, and 1,015 in Northern Ireland. 2011 For Scotland, the survey was also complemented by a separate survey with a sample of 465 run in 2011. Respondents were shown a list of 76 items (46 items for adults and 30 items for children) and asked to select those which they felt were "necessary and which all people should be able to afford, and which they should not have to do without" and those that they felt "may be desirable but are not necessary".

**JRF Public Attitudes to Poverty** – Eight in-depth interviews with people whose income is below the relative poverty line in London, Liverpool and Birmingham; four discussion groups in areas of high deprivation, split between Liverpool and Birmingham; participants included both those in work and not in work and with a range of incomes; and a day-long deliberative workshop with 50 people in London. The interviews and discussion groups took place in November 2013 and the day long workshop in April 2014. Due to the small sample size, and qualitative methodology findings cannot be considered to be representative of the views of the general public as a whole.

**Benefits stigma survey** is an online quota sample survey of 2383 adults in Britain carried out in May 2012. The survey included a boost sample of benefits claimants but responses were weighted to make the sample nationally representative in terms of age, social grade, region, working status and gender.

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