

Our Turn to Talk: Ending Child Poverty

Transcript

Bethan 00:00:02 Welcome to Our Turn to Talk. This is the first ever episode of this show, which hopes to encourage open conversations between young people and decision-makers, experts and influencers on particular topics. This podcast was created by young people with the National Children's Bureau, an organization aiming to put children at the heart of decision-making and who work with other organizations for a better childhood for the UK's Young People. I'm Bethan (and I'm Carys) and we will be your hosts for this episode.

Carys Today we'll be speaking about ending child poverty. 4.3 million children were living in poverty in the UK from 2019 to 2021, that's 81% of children. Despite this, child poverty is a topic that doesn't always get talked about. As young people living through the pandemic, we want to highlight the varied experiences that everyone faced, and also talk about why it is still such an issue in 2022. In this episode we're speaking to Anna Feuchtwang, Chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition and CEO of the National Children's Bureau. The coalition, set up in 2003, aims to promote the end of child poverty by working with the public, private and voluntary sectors. Anna welcome to Our Turn to Talk. Thank you so much for joining us. We're so grateful that you decided to join us today and talk about child poverty and your role in the Child Poverty Coalition. Before we start getting into questions about the Coalition itself, can you tell us some of the ways in which we can measure child poverty?

Anna 00:01:33 There are a couple of ways we can measure child poverty. You've got relative poverty or absolute poverty. And interestingly, there is some controversy around which of those measures to use. So in the Child Poverty Coalition, we use both, but we're really more interested in relative poverty and that's because relative poverty looks at the income a family gets and compares it to what the average household gets, and the amount an average household gets can change depending on the economy. So it sort of keeps moving. Whereas absolute child poverty statistics look at the amount of money a household has and compares this to an amount from the past, which doesn't change. It's like a benchmark. We publish our own child poverty figures using government data, and that looks

at relative poverty numbers and also takes into account the cost of housing. And that's because housing costs can be such a massive chunk of your budget. So if you look at income and then you take out the cost of rent or a mortgage, you get the actual amount of money a family has to live on. The amount they can spend on food, toiletries, costs associated with going to school, childcare, and all those other things. Because housing costs are very high the money you have to live on could be much lower. And we also break our figures down to constituency level, meaning that MP's can see what level of child poverty they have in their constituency. And, uh, and what we find from that is that it tends to be constituencies in large cities like London and Birmingham, where you have the highest rates of relative child poverty.

Carys 00:03:11 That's really interesting. Thank you. And how has the number of young people living in poverty changed over recent years?

Anna 00:03:18 Well, generally we've seen a rise in child poverty, um, in the last 10, 15 years. Um, for example, our latest figures show a really large increase in the Northeast overall in this region. Um, child poverty rate has risen by over a third from 26% of 37% of children living in poverty in the Northeast and that's happened in the last five years. Um, and the real tragedy about this is that it isn't inevitable. So back in the 1990s, the then labor government introduced measures to tackle child poverty. They had an ambition to end child poverty by 2020. Um, and because they put a really concerted effort into it, child poverty began to fall and they were on track to addressing child poverty by that time. And that was mainly as a result of extra money being paid to families living in poverty via the benefit system. But since then, without that concerted effort, numbers have begun to rise once more so that there were 4.3 million children living in poverty in the UK, um, in the last year. And that's 31% of children, or one in nine, or nine in a classroom of 30. So if you imagine that in your school there might be 30 kids there who are living in poverty.

Bethan 00:04:37 Well, that's really interesting. Those figures out two really strong and quite upsetting obviously to hear. Do you think that the coronavirus pandemic has affected the number of young people living in poverty?

Anna 00:04:47 Well, we can, we can assume that it will definitely have put strains on households because of, um, uh, you know, not being able to do their jobs, losing work, that kind of thing. But actually we don't know yet because the data always lags behind a little bit. So when the data comes out, um, this year in March, which will then be used to, to, to develop our own stats around may time will tell us much more about what the pandemic has done over the last couple of years to children living in poverty. Um, it's even possible that we'll see a decrease in child poverty in some areas because of the, uh, schemes that the government introduced to help people impacted during lockdowns. Like for example, the small increase in the amount of universal credits. Some people saved, but for some families, particularly those families already living on very low incomes, it may have pushed families further into poverty. And as we know, there are other impacts to, for example, children and much lower income families may not have had access to computers during lockdown for schoolwork, or have, may have found keeping up with schoolwork much easier. If you're living in very crowded conditions while the government has put some schemes in place to help, I think it could be for those young people will find in the future. It's hard of them to break out of that cycle.

Carys 00:06:08 I think, for me, at least the pandemic sadly served to highlight the problem of child poverty in our society. For example, the free school meal scheme, which focused on preventing children going hungry, made me think about how sad it is that in our current society that there are still children, even nowadays, having to go hungry and live in poverty. Which impacts obviously not only their health, but also as we know several other areas of their lives like education and things like that.

Bethan And I think that's a really interesting point because another aspect of poverty, which was highlighted by the pandemic, was obviously digital inequality and how difficult it is for some young people to access a basic human right, that being of education. Um, and even just being able to stay in contact with friends and family in that period must have been so much harder, especially if you live in rural areas where it's hard to access the internet. And at a time where everyone felt so alone, this must have been extremely isolating. As part of your work at The End Child Poverty Coalition, I'm sure you often have to hear and see the quite startling effects of child poverty on young people and families. Is there any chance you

can tell us a bit more about what the, tell us a bit more about what the End Child Poverty Coalition aims to do and the difference it makes for young people?

Anna 00:07:26 Yeah, so we, we bring together more than 70 organizations who work on various aspects of poverty, including child poverty in the UK. And they work with organizations from big international charities, like Save the Children to really small organizations like the Hackney Food Bank. And we believe that if you bring enough organizations together that really care about this issue and are doing something about it, we can show the government that we all want things to change and then we can provide a sort of louder voice, a bigger platform, um, to highlight the needs of, of children in the UK and those living in, and the particular issues faced by children, living in poverty. Um, and we do this across Westminster, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. We want to create policy change, policy changes and legislation changes, which then will impact the lives of young people. And it really important in quite a new development for the child poverty coalition. We also want to hear from young people themselves and understand what it's like to grow up living in poverty. And that's why we formed our Youth Ambassador Program, which aims to give a voice to young people, recognizing that if you are living in those circumstances, you may feel that there isn't much you can do to change things. And we really want to give children and young people the opportunity to speak for themselves and say, and tell government directly that this is what it's like, and this is what we want to change.

Carys 00:08:52 Thank you so much for sharing your work. I think it's really good to hear because, uh, while we all know about child poverty, it isn't always acted upon. I think we can all agree that especially during the pandemic, it was pretty startling to see just how terrible the situation could be and how much it was highlighted. But the problem was around way before that, and apart from the recent effects of the credit virus pandemic, I was wondering what you think some of the factors contributing to high child poverty rates are?

Anna 00:09:25 Well, of course, like everything, it's not straightforward. It is complex. There's not one reason for this. And that's why it makes it sometimes difficult to tackle. And also probably possibly why there isn't a concerted effort because there are so many different reasons for it. But it's interesting to note that it's the majority of families living in

poverty there is at least one adult in that family working. So it's not just about not having a job. It's also about poorly paid jobs. Um, so if you haven't got enough money to pay for the basics, um, because either you're in a low paid job or it's very insecure, like a zero hours contract, then also the amount you receive and welfare payments such as universal credit may not be enough to cover the cost of everything that's needed. So we've seen more insecurity in jobs, lower pay and, um, uh, and benefits have decreased over time. And that's all leading to, uh, lode to, to low-income and, and, and more families moving into poverty for some young people themselves who may have come from lower income families and so haven't had the opportunities that other young people from middle and high income families, they find themselves at a real disadvantage in the future to jump over the hurdles that have been created for them and break out of the cycle of poverty. There's a lot of evidence around that, um, that, you know, once you've fallen behind, it's harder to catch up again. And I think really critically, more recognized now is the part that racism plays so that children from black and minority ethnic groups are much more likely to be in poverty, 46% in poverty of black kids compared with 26% of children and white British families. And I think really paying attention to that, um, as campaigning organizations in the End Child Poverty Coalition is going to be really important in the future.

Bethan 00:11:23 They are some really interesting points, especially the one about racism within the system as well. And the way that we don't often acknowledge the differences that different minority ethnic groups might face compared to white British households as well. Um, I guess it leads on quite nicely to our next question, which is about how we could work to address poverty. It's always quite easy for people in power to speak about how they want things to change, but putting in effective methods to help actually achieve goals is often something so much easier said than done. Um, so let's look at what other different bodies could do to make a change. What can the government do to make a difference?

Anna 00:12:04 Well, firstly, and really, really importantly, is to recognize that it's real. Um, one of the battles that we've had in the last few years is to convince the government that child poverty is increasing. And this is where the controversy around, you know, what, how you measure child poverty comes into play. Um, a couple of times in the last 18 months, the End Child Poverty Coalition has directly challenged the Prime Minister for making

statements in parliament that we believe are incorrect about child poverty, claiming that it's going down when all of the statistics that we use, which could come from government's own data shows that it's going up. So what we think the government needs to do is to have a cross departmental action plan, to tackle all aspects of child poverty, um, and they could use initiatives like the Leveling Up agenda to ensure children in some of the poorest areas are considered. There are opportunities to do so. And I think it's really recognizing that this is a moral issue that governments must tackle. I mean, it is unbelievably unbelievable that, that we have such a stark contrast between those who are living in poverty and those who aren't. And so another thing government can do is ensure that working families are able to earn enough to pay for the basics is that welfare payments are sufficient for families to cover the cost of living. And that also then means not just government, but the private sector in particular, should be honoring things like, uh, the living wage and paying a proper salary for that, for, for, for work that, uh, that families do.

Carys 00:13:42 Interesting answer thank you. I think it's really good to how you use data to challenge the government and fight for the rights of children, which as you say, is a crucial and a moral issue. You kind of touched on this already, as you were talking about the private sector, but I was just wondering if there is anything further you think organizations can do to make a difference?

Anna 00:14:03 We talked about the private sector and I think, um, the voluntary sector charities like, um, the National Children's Bureau and the other ones in the Coalition, um, should also think about joining our coalition so that, because I think the more of us there are the stronger we'll be. Um, but I do think that charities included and all of us really need to look at how much we paid people, um, and should sign up to schemes like the London living wage or the little, the living wage scheme to make sure that, you know, if we are employing people, we are thinking about what it's, how much people really need to earn to be able to afford to live. Um, because it impacts not just on the individual you're paying obviously, but the whole family. Um, and I go back to the point that it is the majority of, of children living in poverty, live in families, or at least one of the adults in their family is working. So it's not this sort of image that we have, that some people have of people who are, um, sitting around doing nothing and not making an effort, which is one of the sort of cliches that are put out

about families living in poverty. But it is where people are really struggling to find enough money to, from the work that they're doing or to find work that pays enough because the other really important aspect of this is to think about things like childcare and the high cost of that. So for a lot of families, it isn't really, you know, work. You would be doing a job that doesn't even pay for you to go out and do that job in terms of childcare.

Carys 00:15:35 So I think that the real overwhelming impression that I'm getting from this is that all members of society, um, from all different organizations across different sectors need to join together and work together to solve this really important issue. Uh, obviously as young people, I think it's quite easy to feel like there's little we can do, um, in comparison to organizations and to the government who seemed to have more power. So I was wondering what your take is on what young people can do to make a difference?

Anna 00:16:08 I think there's lots that young people can do to make a difference. And the first is to getting engaged and understand this, the issues and particularly don't accept that the situation has to be like this, poverty is a political issue. I mean, I think one of the things that I've been most shocked about in the last few years is how normal food banks have become. I really, really commend all the organizations that provide food and food bags, but we shouldn't have to rely on food banks. And I think we, I would want to make sure that young people realize that it isn't a normal part of life to be living in poverty. Um, so, so I guess to, to educate young people and children and to, to find out about it, and then also to hold your MP, the government to account, ask them what they're doing to tackle child poverty this year in parliament, there is a really good template letter on the end child, poverty coalition's website. And you can use that to ask, you know, you are the voters of the future, ask MPS what they're going to do about it and how they're going to make sure that things change in the course of the next parliament. I think also call out businesses on social media, ask them if they pay their employees a living wage. As young people get into work themselves this becomes a really important issue because young people's wages are, or even lower than older people's wages, they tend to be. We run a young person ambassadors scheme, um, and we would really want to get as many young people involved in that as possible, particularly those who have direct experience of living in poverty.

Bethan 00:17:44 I completely agree. And I think it's really great to hear about that young ambassadors scheme. And hopefully by putting this podcast out more people will feel courage to join and share their experiences and stories. I completely agree with you as well, I think the half of the battle when it comes to ending child poverty is holding people accountable and spreading awareness. We have such extraordinary power as young people to bring to light injustices or things that we think of wrong and helping to hold people and governments accountable is so important.

Carys I totally agree. I think it's so important to realize that although change needs to be made from a governmental and a societal level, we can all in our lives, do little things to help solve the problem. One step at a time, if everyone took these steps to make changes in their local community and to hold our society and government accountable, we may be in a much better position than we are currently. As child poverty remains such a very significant problem, and it could be argued that it has taken a very long time for any meaningful action to be taken to address the issue. Why do you think this could be?

Anna 00:18:53 Because there has to be, as I said before, there really has to be a concerted effort and political will to change it. Um, and so before, under the previous leave with government, it was a priority. Um, and poverty did fall as a result of that, of making it a priority in 2010, the child poverty app was passed with cross-party support it, wasn't just the labor issue. And it was enshrined in law, the pledge to end child poverty by 2020. And it's actually when the End Child Poverty Coalition was formed to help support the government in that, uh, decision to end child poverty by 2020. And it really demonstrates that when child poverty is prioritized and action is taken to address the causes, the number of children living in poverty does decrease. However, there does need to be that political will and desire to tackle the issues and tragically in 2016, the child poverty act was abolished, um, meaning that the legal requirement to reduce child poverty no longer existed. And I think what would make a real difference is bringing that back in again,

Carys 00:20:06 As you say, I think the problem is, especially with the government, as you touched on earlier, is how people are oblivious to how deep rooted the problem of childhood poverty is. If you've never personally had to deal with the issue or never had close friends

who have, I think it's often very difficult to consider how some things within society in our system may force people into poverty. And it's vital though, that meaningful action is taken as child poverty impacts all areas of a young person's life.

Bethan Yeah, I agree. I think we're all really upset at the lack of meaningful action, as those in power seem to not take what we have to say as a priority, even though it's affecting millions of people's lives. Lack of meaningful action will hopefully change now that the pandemic has forced us to highlight the obvious issues, such as via social media, and now we can hold people to account better. Our final question is, where can young people suffering from the effects of poverty go to get support?

Anna 00:21:13 Okay. And the answer to that, isn't straightforward either. There isn't a single place to go because the reasons we're living in poverty are very varied. Um, if they're, if they're family and families is often recommended to speak to citizens as citizens advice advisors who can check, whether they're getting the right levels of benefit, for example, and then put them in touch with local support services, um, NOCCA food banks can be a great source of help and support for older young people, as they often have advice services alongside the provision of food. Um, but you may need to be referred to a food bank, fine officials, such as a doctor or a social worker, and a lot of the charities and other organizations involved in the ancho poverty coalition provide help lines and run, um, uh, schemes for children and young people. And I think if you look at the work that, um, people like Marcus Rashford, the footballer, has done to really highlight this issue and provide children and young people with a bit more of a visibility in their voice, I think that probably helps people feel less invisible in all of this. Um, but for direct support, there are obvious places like Childline or the National Youth Advisory Service. Um, and I guess it's also about talking to your teachers at school or any of the other adults in your life, um, that might be able to help you, because I think, you know, things like not being able to, um, have a bed to sleep in or, um, have access to the digital equipment that you need to do, your schoolwork really does have such an impact. So for children and young people that are really looking for support, um, I would advise that they will speak to as many adults in their life as possible, whether it's a teacher or a social worker who can then give them the specific help

that they might be looking for, whether that's helped with access to a laptop or, or, um, or thinking about other charities that might be able to support them. For example, with, um, finding, um, a bed to sleep on it. I mean, there it's, it is really true in the case that there are some young people that don't even have a bed to sleep on in their homes. And there are lots of charities that can help with that.

Carys 00:23:28 Anna thank you so much for coming to speak to us today and giving us such an insight. We've definitely learned a lot and we really admire the work that you, the coalition and countless other organizations and charities across the UK are doing to make a difference, especially in such challenging times. Thank you once again and have a very happy new year.

Anna Thank you. Nice to speak to you.

Bethan So that's it for this episode of Our Turn to Talk: Ending Child Poverty. Thank you so much for joining us and taking your time to listen to what we and others have to say. Here at the YNCB we will have more podcasts coming up about a variety of topics that we want to talk about. Follow our instagram, [@national_childrens_bureau](https://www.instagram.com/national_childrens_bureau), and our Young NCB newsletter to find out about upcoming episodes.