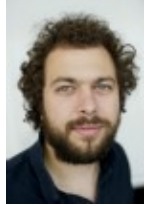


# All Work and Low Pay: We must not forget how people from different backgrounds are affected in different ways

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/all-work-and-low-pay/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/all-work-and-low-pay/)

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*There has been much discussion recently about the issue of in-work poverty in the UK. **Daniel Silver** and **Amina Lone** argue that, to have any chance of transforming the lives of people on low-pay, we need to reveal the complex dimensions of poverty and make visible that which is often neglected in mainstream debates. Highlighting the high representation of ethnic minorities in low-paid work, they write that we must not forget how people from different backgrounds are affected in different ways.*



The nature of poverty is changing, and today more people living in poverty are working than are out of work. The injustice of low-pay is increasing throughout the UK – since 2009 the number of workers earning less than a living wage – the amount considered adequate to achieve a minimum standard of living – has mushroomed, from [3.4 million](#) to [4.8 million](#).

One woman who is supported by [Wai Yin Chinese Women Society](#) explains that “my husband and me work six days per week, ten hours per day, just to manage our daily living. We only can work in Chinese restaurants, because we cannot speak English”



Austerity has contributed towards this, but clearly poverty existed before the collapse of Lehman Brothers and there are persistent structural inequalities that reach deep into the heart of our society, which need to be dealt with. To have any chance of transforming the lives of people on low-pay, we need to reveal the complex dimensions of poverty and make visible that which is often neglected in mainstream debates.

One of these complexities is the clear connection between how levels and experiences of poverty are affected by people’s ethnic identities. We can see this through stark facts which show that young black people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed compared to young white people and almost half of all [Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers](#) in the UK earn less than £7 an hour.

[Around two-fifths of people](#) from ethnic minorities live in low-income households, twice the rate for white people, although there are also clear variations by ethnic group and gender that must be considered. Furthermore, there are also geographical dimensions to this, as although people from ethnic minorities are more likely to be in income poverty than white British people wherever they live, [evidence shows](#) that the extent of the difference is much greater in inner London and the English North and Midlands than elsewhere. The evidence is clear, but as Stephen Crossley asks: are ethnic minority workers in low paid jobs [hiding in plain sight?](#)

The high representation of ethnic minorities in low-paid work means that those who seek to address the issue of low-pay must consider how people from different backgrounds are affected in different ways. At the same time, anti-racism campaigners need to consider the scourge of low-pay more centrally. As local Manchester activist Tony Wright says: “It is beyond black and white now, and is also about the colour of money.”

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is currently undertaking a far-reaching programme to better understand the [relationship between ethnicity and poverty](#). This has included an in-depth look into a range of issues. For instance, the research showed that social networks can provide an essential safety net, but at the same time can limit people within circles of their own communities, which can serve to reproduce inequalities by providing important access to employment, but that is often restricted into low-paid jobs which relied on informal recruitment processes. Research into the relationship between caring and earning reveals the impact of caring for children, disabled children and older relatives that demands more flexible working patterns in order to be able to provide the necessary balance, but can trap people (predominantly women) into low-paid and part-time work. Finally, the JRF’s research into the

impacts of employer behaviour and the nature of local labour markets clearly provides further evidence which shows that discrimination continues to have an impact on people's life chances, particularly those on low-pay.

These results point to a complicated picture of poverty and racism in the UK and provide policy-makers and communities with more knowledge on how to change things for the better. [The campaign for a living wage](#) is an important strategy for improving the position of low-paid workers, but for it to be truly transformational there must also be a consideration of how the labour market currently disadvantages people from ethnic minority backgrounds in terms of trapping them into low-paid work.

The JRF's research shows us the importance of access to good jobs and progression opportunities once people are in work. Within this, the intersecting dimensions of ethnicity and gender must be considered throughout. As [Fran Bennett points out](#): 'workers who are female, part-time on temporary or casual contracts and working in the private sector are at greater risk of low paid work.' More secure positions are needed for the many women that are often forced into taking on part-time and low-paid work in order manage their caring responsibilities and survive daily life. The very nature of work must change to become more flexible for workers and not just employers, while affordable childcare needs to become more accessible for all communities, particularly those on low-pay. Beyond this, more value must be placed upon the role of un-waged caring in our society; anti-poverty strategies have to recognise that employment alone must not be the only approach, as [many women rely on access to non-income resources to maintain financial security](#) and are being further exposed by austerity.

The beauty of the Living Wage campaign is the simplicity of its message: that everyone deserves to be paid a wage that can ensure a decent standard of living. But for it to be truly successful, it must not forget the complexity of inequality and poverty that we face in twenty-first century Britain.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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