

# scottish justice matters

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## POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE



# THE VIEW FROM UNBROKEN WINDOWS



## Briege Nugent on the impact of poverty on young people in Scotland

**WILSON AND KELLING'S** (1982) influential 'broken windows thesis' argues that broken windows left broken encourage vandalism escalating to more serious crime: they are signs or signals of disorder that create disorder. I argue that they are signals of poverty and although poverty is spreading it is increasingly remaining hidden with these signals unseen. Being poor is something that the individual's themselves are blamed for and in their shame and internalisation of this message, they 'keep up appearances', silently enduring, allowing wider society to turn a blind eye and pretend that everything is fine. It is time that the volume was 'turned up', the silence lifted and the voices heard and responded to.

For over a year 12 young people living in poverty in Scotland let me in to their lives, their homes, their hopes, dreams, fears, past, present to understand what they did from day-to-day, the challenges faced and how they felt about their futures. At the first interview, all 12 were to move on from *Includem's* Transitional Support, a unique service set up over a decade ago to provide emotional and practical support to young adults often without the 'safety net' of parents and no longer entitled to statutory support\*.

There were no broken windows in the homes of those I interviewed but the view was bleak and even if they were not able to afford to eat regular meals they did not complain and still made an effort to look good. Over the course of the year, nine became withdrawn, staying indoors not because they did not want to go out but because they could not afford to. This isolation may be symptomatic of a wider issue in society. The Princes Trust (2015) carried out an online poll of 2,265 16-25 year olds and 35% of those unemployed were too anxious to leave the house, 46% avoided meeting new people and a third admitted to 'falling apart' emotionally on a regular basis. One of the main findings from my study is that even those who were struggling the most did not ask for help. In the follow-up interviews, three were accessing food banks to survive and it was only with encouragement that they asked *Includem* to help them again. They did not want to put anyone out and were too full of pride to admit that they could not manage.

All 12 desperately wanted to get a job reaffirming that the 'culture of worklessness' spread by politicians is a myth (MacDonald et al. 2014). The reality is that the opportunities simply were not there. Since 2008 the number of under-25s unemployed has almost doubled to 90,000 having a detrimental impact on all aspect of their lives (Aldridge et al. 2013). Underemployment is also spreading and reflecting the instability faced this population could be described as 'the precariat.' Standing (2011) warns that they are 'dangerous' because being excluded they are likely to be drawn to extreme politics. I found instead that they are far from dangerous and instead lack in hope, a realistic assessment of their situation.

We now live in a more unequal society than ever in the UK but this trend does not have to continue. Atkinson (2015), a leading economist points out that inequality and poverty is not inevitable and real change is firstly instigated by informed hope and followed by commitment and action that goes beyond taxation. Broken or unbroken windows, it might be more important that the door is able to be opened and leads to opportunities. This study, although small, shows that we are living in a society of young people who have low expectations of what they are entitled to, what they can expect and what the future holds and this needs to change.

\*To see more about the service go to [www.includem.org](http://www.includem.org)

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