

Energy poverty or just poverty? A response to ‘what’s the problem?’

We work on energy poverty: people not being able to access sufficient and adequate energy services. By energy services, we mean the benefits that energy consumption provides to people: space warmth or cooling, heat for cooking, lighting and other appliance use, and energy for mobility. As the working paper for this website suggests, there are some clear overlaps here with simply ‘poverty’ or the experience of low-incomes: people who cannot afford to heat also often lack the money for a healthy diet, to travel, or to buy other necessities such as tampons. However, we would argue that whilst there are clear overlaps and linkages, (income) poverty and energy poverty are not precisely the same thing – and that conceptualising energy poverty as at least partially distinct has advantages. Having this conversation about the distinctiveness of different forms of poverty is important, however, because there are certainly drawbacks of categorising energy poverty as distinct, if not approached with care.

One of the major advantages of having a separate concept of energy poverty is that it helps reveal structural and systemic factors producing inadequate domestic energy services that go beyond low-incomes. Most notably, researchers have argued that considering energy poverty separately helps draw attention to the role of materiality and infrastructure in creating deprivation. For example, inefficient and sub-standard housing stock is critical to people not being able to access adequate heat or cooling, whilst the lack of affordable suburban transport infrastructures can result in people being priced out of travelling to work. We would also argue that the design of energy markets, and the expectation of particular forms of behaviour among customers, is structural cause of energy poverty that goes beyond low-income.

This focus on housing, infrastructure and markets also brings new stakeholders into poverty debates and can broaden the range of tools at policy-makers disposal. Environmental Health Officers working for Local Authorities have a responsibility for monitoring the quality of the housing stock, for instance, and can force landlords to make energy efficiency improvements if a home is perceived to be an ‘excess cold hazard’. Equally, problematizing energy markets can create pressure for energy companies to support vulnerable customers. Indeed, as energy poverty rises up the agenda at the EU-level, we see nations questioning the way energy markets work. A low-carbon future may also involve higher energy costs for households, that need to be carefully accounted for, and the energy poverty concept helps bring attention to issues of vulnerability and inequality that might otherwise be marginalised in a highly technical field.

So those for us are the advantages to framing energy poverty as a problem not wholly reducible to income poverty. At the same time, we also believe it is problematic to view them as *entirely* discrete and fail to recognise their overlaps. In recent years, among some academic and policy discourse there has been a hardening of the conceptual boundaries between energy poverty and income poverty, positioning them as entirely separate, distinct issues. This can result in a rather narrow, technocentric characterisation of the problem, focused around buildings rather than people, whilst also (conveniently) reducing the relevance of more controversial issues such as inequality, austerity and energy prices ([see this previous blog on the new politics of fuel poverty by Lucie Middlemiss](#)).

Furthermore, work on the lived experience of energy poverty (inspired by the broader field) has of course shown that people experience energy poverty as only part of a more general feeling of deprivation: paying for energy is frequently seen as a flexible cost, like food, which means that not heating might matter to some, while not eating is the greatest experienced deprivation for others. When we define this problem technocratically, we risk ignoring the intimate connections between forms of poverty as people experience them.

Our position is therefore somewhere in the middle. There are important conceptual, political and practical benefits to framing 'energy poverty' as at least partially different from income poverty. At the same time, we also feel it is vital to recognise there are clear linkages and overlaps between the two problems, and to ensure that broader issues around income, austerity, welfare, and stigmatization that are very much part of broader poverty debates are not marginalised or ignored in discussions around energy poverty. Finally, we appreciate the opportunity to address the broader poverty research community on this topic, and would be interested in finding other ways of bridging the divides between these research communities.