

'Existing' on the poverty line

By Catherine Marston
BBC News

Oxfam is warning that the economic downturn is creating more poverty in the UK, making life tougher for the fifth of the population already struggling to get by.

Kathleen Carter lives in poverty. At her home in Stockton-on-Tees, she cares full-time for her disabled son and husband.

Her life is a constant round of cleaning, cooking, preparing medication and shopping on a very tight budget. The only income is from her pension and a small amount of benefits.

She says: "It can be very soul-destroying. I've got to think of everything I buy, life is a real struggle because all the time you are thinking about what you are spending."

'Surviving'

Mrs Carter is one of the so-called Freds.

It is a term Oxfam has created standing for Forgotten, Ripped-off, Excluded and Debt-ridden.

" Sometimes it's like a dream and I keep hoping I'm going to wake up "

Oxfam says Freds are despised by the media, left behind by the government, with no future prospects and pay far too much tax.

Mrs Carter feels it pretty much describes her life.

"When you are in my circumstances you don't have a disposable income, because you are using your money to survive, just to get by," she explains.

Food is way down her list of priorities. Rent, electricity and gas bills all come first.

"You just exist. There's no quality to life when you exist, there's no mental stimulation, you've nothing to think forward to," she said.

Mrs Carter used to be a care worker and at one time ran a stall in her local market.

She was able to contribute to the family budget and provide extra income.

WHAT IS POVERTY?

- Defined as having an income of less than 60% of the median
- On 2006/07 figures, that is £112 disposable income a week after paying taxes and housing costs. For a couple with two children it is £270
- On this basis, 13.2 million people in the UK live in poverty

But since her husband and son became ill, she has had to give all that up.

She cannot claim carer's allowance any longer because she lives on a pension. Mrs Carter says she feels society treats her very differently because she can no longer work and now relies on

benefits.

"Sometimes it's like a dream and I keep hoping I'm going to wake up. I feel as though I am a non-person, I have no right to say anything because I am on benefits, I don't have a voice because I am on benefits. I'm not needed and I'm not wanted. I am a drain on society," she said.

She supports Oxfam's six-point rescue plan for people in her situation.

She believes the government needs to do more to help those living in poverty, particularly as the recession deepens.

Thirteen million people are living in poverty in the UK and the charity warns there could be many more if the government fails to act.

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