

Poverty and its effects on the society essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



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Poverty is a life long phenomenon that has been with us from historical times and has transcended through generations. The word poverty connotes an undesirable state which individuals or groups may be experiencing and need some assistance in changing. Early efforts by the Moyne Commission report sought to relieve poverty by implementing a system where the poor would receive social welfare provisions. In addition to this, Harewood and Henry () p. 4 highlighted that the Economic Planning Machinery that evolved from the inspiration of the Arthur Lewis industrialization model, had as its objective the elimination of poverty through job creation and the redistribution of income through public sector expenditures such as education and health. However, despite these efforts as well as the intensive research on poverty, the Caribbean still has not been successful in improving the standard of living of its general population. Farley Brathwaite (), p. 3 notes, " the pervasiveness and the conditions of the poor are the two perplexing problems facing the Caribbean society." Poverty in the region has been estimated at 38% of the total population. Consequently poverty is not only endemic to the Caribbean societies but it is also a persistent and problematic social problem throughout the world. Poverty is correlated to many other social problems such as inequality, crime, environmental degradation, poor nutrition, inadequate health services and unemployment which makes it more wide spread, difficult to identify and solve.

Schaefer (2001), p. 213, notes " the efforts of sociologists and other social scientist to better understand poverty are complicated by the difficulty of defining it." Jeffrey Dellimore in his study of An Approach To The Challenges

Of Poverty Alleviation And Reduction highlighted the fact that “ there is no internationally accepted definition of poverty.” Esmond D. Ramesar stated that poverty could be defined as narrowly as “ the condition which exists when people lack their basic means of survival or as broadly as the condition which exists when people lack those requirements which reflect the prevailing standard of living of their community.” Dellimore further notes that poverty can be seen as a “ state of physical and social deprivation, especially in income, resources and assets, that is associated with marginalisation in an economic and social system.” This is on the basis of one or more of the following factors:

1. Physical weakness especially due to a lack of strength due to malnutrition, illness or disability.
2. Discrimination or social isolation associated with race, ethnicity, gender, or class, which results in inequitable access to employment, social services and political decision-making.
3. Dependency on limited natural resources such as agriculture for survival.
4. Powerlessness due to lack of skills, knowledge, information and self-confidence which limits their ability to advocate on their own behalf as well as to self actualise.
5. Severe susceptibility to natural disasters, social and economic changes.

According to Zastrow (2000), p. 134, “ there are two general approaches to defining poverty: the absolute and the relative approach.” The absolute

approach is based on the subsistence that is the basic minimum to sustain life. This measure of poverty is concerned with the quality and amount of food, clothing and shelter necessary for a healthy life. Absolute poverty is estimated through the use of a poverty line, which involves placing a monetary value on a consumption basket of goods needed for basic survival. People are seen as being in poverty if they fall below this line or do not have the funds to purchase the basket of goods.

There are many criticisms of the absolute approach. Firstly, there is no agreement as to what constitutes basic or minimum needs. Zastrow (2000), p. 134, notes that “ depending on the income level selected, the number and percentage of the population who are poor change substantially, along with the characteristics of those define as poor.” Secondly, the approach does not take into account that people are poor not only in terms of their needs but also in relation to others who are poor. Thus, it is based on the condition of one’s society and how affluent it is. Thirdly, the absolute approach does not regard poverty in terms of time and place. For instance those in the Caribbean today would not be considered poor by the standards of 1960’s nor would Barbados be viewed as poor by the standards existing in Haiti. Fourthly, according to Harlambos and Holborn (2000), p. 291, there is a controversy as to “ whether poverty can be defined purely in material terms or whether the definition should be wider,” to include access to non-food items such as education, drinking water and proper sanitation.

The relative approach was then developed because of the flaws which existed in the absolute approach. Harewood and Henry emphasised that “

the concept of relative poverty is based on the consideration that in any society, any given person will be conceived as poor or not in relation to the general standards and norms of the society." In other words there will always be a place within society for the poor because there will constantly be individuals at the bottom of the socio economic ladder.

Poverty is relative to time and place. For example a family of four living in a rural area earning \$ 15, 000 per year, with no rent to pay and growing their own food may view themselves as being poor. On the other hand a family of four living in the urban area earning \$20, 000 per year, with rent to pay, food to buy and in debts may consider themselves as poor also. Relative poverty can be measured based on the state's standard of poverty, relative income standard of poverty and the relative deprivation which refers to resources available to individuals and households and standard of living (Townsend 1979).

Zastrow 2000 p. 135 postulates that, " by defining poverty in these terms, we avoid having to define absolute needs, and we also put more emphasis on the inequality of income." Thus poverty will exist as long as there is an inequality in income distribution. Like the absolute approach, the relative approach has been criticised. The major weakness of this approach is that it fails to highlight how bad or how well the people at the bottom of the income distribution ladder really live. When measuring poverty, we are not only interested in how many are poor but how desperate their living circumstances are.

Diez 1998, p. 12-21, identified a socio-demographic poverty profile within Barbados and found the following characteristics were also present within other Caribbean Islands. He found that larger households (5 persons or more) or (3 or more per bedroom) were closely linked to poverty especially those headed by females (59%) rather than males. These tend to have a large number of children (5-14 years) and were more extended rather than nuclear and more rural than urban. Educational attainment was also a factor where households headed by those who had only a primary education accounted for 54% of the poor and another 40% had only secondary level education. In relation to age, the younger as opposed to the older population were seen as poor since they are engaged in educational activities rather than income earning.

In Summation, O'Donnell (1985), p. 123, refers to poverty as a "vicious cycle, in which poverty breeds poverty, occurs through time and transmits its effects from one generation to another." Thus, there is no beginning or end, which makes it difficult to define and to measure. To the Caribbean poverty is a serious problem, which cannot be addressed unless there is a sound definition of the term as well as a reliable source of measurement.

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