

# The poor in the uk



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Discuss whether the poor in the UK are to blame for their poverty and social exclusion?

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the question of whether the poor in the UK are to blame for their poverty and social exclusion. In order to do this, a variety of perspectives will be analysed, in particular looking at political and economic perspectives. We will also consider Levitas' approaches in the area of social exclusion, looking at the three models of social discourse, and also a critical examination of Murray's thesis concerning the underclass.

Definitions of poverty have traditionally been divided within two subcategories, absolute poverty or relative poverty. Each definition is based on different experiences of poverty. Absolute poverty sees there is a basic need for survival and this is measured objectively and comes in forms of statistics. This is mainly used in government statistics. Relative poverty is different in that it counts on an opinion of people in society. Relative poverty uses the idea of what society or a culture sees as the norm.

The earliest attempt to research poverty was by Rowntree, who conducted a study in York, in 1899. Rowntree adopted the measurement of absolute poverty in 1901 based on a minimum weekly income which was thought to be needed to survive. Therefore, a definition of absolute poverty is;

' Absolute poverty occurs when people fail to receive sufficient resources to support a minimum of physical health and efficiency' (2006 dictionary of sociology) p304

This absolute measure was not popular with the government as measuring poverty based on falling below a certain benefit level. When the benefits level increased so did the amount of people living in poverty. This problem was solved when the 1985 conservative government scrapped the Family Low Income Statistics in favour of the Household below Average Income (HBAI). This saw the decrease of poverty in terms of figures because of the change in the way poverty was measured. The term poverty is not mentioned in any of these official government terms, therefore shows that poverty is not acknowledged as a problem to the government.

The feminist argument on using this type of measurement is that it uses statistics taken from the household with a male breadwinner. Females appear invisible in these statistics and very much implies that women are dependent upon men. However, there is no suggestion that the male breadwinner equally shares his income with the household.

Scott (1994) discusses the strengths and weaknesses of absolute poverty. Firstly the strengths, the measurement of absolute poverty can be used universally across cultures and societies. It can be used to draw up comparisons so Policy makers can use this to assess and distribute the income that is needed to eliminate poverty. These policies can then be taken on by researchers to look at if what is being done and if it is helping to reduce poverty.

A Weakness of this measurement is that it is extreme. In today's society it is dominated by consumption and a consumer lifestyle. Some cultures deem it necessary to be able to take part in the consumer society. The goods that

can be bought often have several uses other than just to survive, for example a television is not an item of survival, however to function in society the television plays a major part and a sense of unity is formed in neighbourhoods if people can relate to and discuss items featured on television. The absolute measure ignores this social process as it cannot be scientifically measured as it involves some form of opinion. Poverty measurements need much more than just relying on saying how much money is needed to live.

Relative poverty can be defined as,

‘... comprehensive, should depend as much as possible on independent or external criteria of evaluation, should involve the ordering of a mass of factual data rational, orderly and informative fashion, and should limit, through not conceal, the part played by the value judgement’ (Townsend 1979: 33)

This means that it can be measured statistically; however include some form of judgement. This relative measurement would include more than just income and look at consumer society and culture.

### **Townsend’s, who states**

‘ individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type of diet, participation in the activities and they have the living conditions and the amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong.’ (Townsend, 1979, p. 31)

This definition covers adequately the link between poverty and social exclusion.

Townsend's research of relative poverty conducted in 1968-9 could compare people based on the national average. An important result to come out of this research was the deprivation index which stated the 12 items essential for people in society, for example clothing, diet, fuel health and education. In 1985 more items were included such as a person's taste, lifestyle, and economic social factors.

Using the measurement of relative poverty does come with strengths and weaknesses. It does acknowledge subjectively and are honest in that some form of opinion is needed. Knowledge of people's culture can be explored in terms of what their standard of living is. It explores the kinds of feeling some people have that they may be deprived more than others. Weaknesses of this relative measurement is that it fails to acknowledge those people who chose to go without the items stated in the deprivation index. It does not address the issues of real poverty in that those living in absolute poverty do not have enough to survive. Comparisons with other countries are difficult as others still use the absolute measurement and use statistics rather than opinions.

Piachaud reviews Townsend's deprivation index as a good measurement as it included people that make the lifestyle choices such as being a vegetarian. He claims that not having a fridge for instance is more significant than not having meat. However, this suggests that Townsend's index is not as scientific as it claims. (Piachaud 1981)

There is not only one kind of poor people but many that are or could fall into poverty at any point in their life. The underclass is a term used to stigmatise people and was used in the 1980s early 1990s. Charles Murray worked on the concept of the underclass and characterised them by three things; illegitimacy, violent crime, and drop out from the labour market by young men (Murray 1990)

Murray wrote in 1990 that ' Britain has a growing population of working-aged, healthy people who live in a different world from other Britons, who are raising their children to live in it, and whose values are now contaminating the life of entire neighbourhoods.' (Murray, 1990, p. 6) Murray spoke of those who chose not to work, and instead to rely on benefits as a means of survival, as opposed to joining the labour market. In Murray's view, this reliance on benefits was considered as a superior option, not as a last resort.

A statement by Murray to describe the underclass using a very simple and stigmatising definition ' by underclass, I do not mean people who are merely poor, but people at the margins of society, unsocialised and often violent.' (Murray 2001). The term Underclass is a way of stigmatising a group and that Margaret Thatcher denied there being absolute poverty as there was no official government definition. Deprivation irresponsible underclass.

John Moore secretary state of social security relative poverty was simply another term for inequality he claimed that poverty had disappeared from Britain altogether. (John Moore 1989)

Conservative government at the time used the term underclass to categorise and deny there was absolute poverty in Britain. This view of the underclass supports the idea that the poor are to blame for their poverty and inequality than those structural inequalities at the time. With this negative concept the conservatives were set to cut welfare if the underclass did not change their ways. This widened the poverty gap and the conservatives were thought to be irresponsible and didn't address the problem of poverty in society

‘ Rather than seeing inequality as potentially damaging to the social fabric, the Thatcher governments saw it as an engine of enterprise, providing incentives for those at the bottom as well as those at the top.’ (Walker 1997: 5)

This phenomenon of the underclass tries to address them as an actual class in society being at the other end of the scale such as the upper-class.

However, to be compared with as a class it would suggest there are shared values that are unique to the underclass, there are no evidence of this and should not be a class. (Bagguley and Mann 1992). This underclass perspective draws attention away from the actual cause of poverty and tries to set the notion that this class is biological when there is no evidence.

Field 1989 viewed the underclass from a structuralist view and supported the view that the underclass did not stem from the individual, but from the ideologies that maintained and shaped inequality. These structural causes were stated as; record post war unemployment, widening class difference, exclusion of rapid widening living standards and public attitudes falling in Thatcher Britain.

Direct criticism of Murray's underclass is that it fails to be proven by scientific methods and relies on opinions. The underclass cannot be measured accurately as the group is sometimes made to look huge or small depending on the outcome needed. The underclass perspective can be misleading and not address the real problem that poverty is causing to Britain. (Walker 1990: 49)

However, many writers were critical of this view, including MacDonald, who asserts that 'both young people and adults wanted work. They would fail with flying colours the test Murray sets to prove the underclass's existence: 'offer them jobs at a generous wage for unskilled labour and see what happens'.' (MacDonald, 1997, p. 195) Crompton has been even more dismissal in her criticism of Murray's view, in that 'much of Murray's case... lay in his attempts to demonstrate the individual moral and cultural inferiority of the least well-off members of society.' In some ways then, Murray's underclass thesis, can be seen to be elitist and dismissive of those at the bottom end of the social ladder. Byrne (Byrne, 2005, p. 1) notes the pejorative nature of the term 'underclass' and the much preferred and more commonly used in the UK term of social exclusion.

The term social exclusion was coined in the 1970s following research by French Civil servant, Rene Lenoir, who published *The Excluded*, which said that as much as 10% of the French population were excluded from mainstream society due to factors like mental illness, poverty and disability (Beland 2007). This definition of a broad category of people who, for a variety of reasons, don't fit into the social mainstream was picked up by New



Labour, which created a Social Exclusion Unit when it came to power in 1997. It was based on the idea that

‘ Social exclusion is about more than income poverty. It is... what can happen when people or areas face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown’ (ODPM, 2004, p. 3).

New labour used many terms throughout their time, stakeholder society, communitarianism, third way and social exclusion. (Hindmoor, 2005). They can be accused of only selecting terms that would win elections (Stoker, 2004). The Labour government blamed three main causes for social exclusion: the dislocation caused by the breakdown of industry in Britain in the 1980s, the Conservative indifference to the social consequences of these economic changes and the failure of the welfare system to effectively address the needs of those who were affected by the downfall of coal, steel and other heavy industries (Davies, 2007).

Storrey and Childs have commented on the political agenda of the early 1990s, whereby ‘ arguments came to a head over Britain’s high proportion of single-parent families when a government minister claimed that an over-generous state benefit system was encouraging young, single mothers to ‘ marry the state’ and embark on a ‘ benefit career’.’ (Storrey & Childs, 2002, p. 126. These arguments were soon rebutted by organisations such as the Association of Single Parents, but it highlighted the way that discussions on social exclusion and poverty can be seen from a purely political perspective. Of the three models of social discourse to be discussed later, the MUD

discourse is seen as largely right wing, while the other two are more centrist or to the left. One recent government minister has emphasised the SID view, claiming that ‘ Work is the only way out of poverty... the benefit system will never pay of itself (enough to lift people out of poverty) and I don’t think it should’ (Alcock et al., 2008, p. 335)

‘ Social exclusion is seen in the growth of homelessness or urban slums, the declining hopes of the long-term unemployed, the lack of access to jobs and incomes of migrants and some ethnic minorities, the increasingly precarious nature of jobs on offer to new labour market entrants’. (Rodgers 1995: 43)

Ruth Levitas, in her 1998 book, *The Inclusive Society: Social Exclusion and New Labour*, suggested three models of discourse in terms of how we look at the issue of social exclusion, and how those models are applied in politics in particular to economic and social policy, as well as sociological discourse in general. (Levitas, 1998)

- RED. This is known as the Redistributionist’s Discourse. Pierson (2004) observes that ‘ those holding this view argue that only through the redistribution of wealth across society as a whole, through taxation, benefits and services, will poverty and inequality be eradicated in Britain.’ (Pierson, 2004, p. 5). This model rejects the idea that attitudes towards work or moral issues are responsible for social exclusion. Some have noted that a vital component in the RED model of social exclusion discourse is the raising of benefits to an adequate standard as one means of eradicating poverty. (Gordon & Townsend, 2000, p.

359) This model is significantly different from the Moral/Underclass Discourse (MUD)

- SID. This is known as the Social Integrationist Discourse. This model focuses on the value of importance of work. Paid work is seen as a key factor, with entrance into the labour market as the result, providing income, a boost to the economy, and social inclusion by way of paid employment. Levitas argues that this view differs from RED discourse in that 'it tends to equate social exclusion with exclusion from the labour market.' (Levitas 1998, Pierson, 2004, p. 6)
- MUD. This is known as the Moral/Underclass Discourse. The fundamental argument of the MUD discourse is that individuals or groups, through choices of their own choose a method of social exclusion. Such a method may be a deliberate choice not to try to enter the labour market but instead to rely on benefits solely as a means of income. Gordon & Townsend comment that 'MUD tends to replay recurrent themes about 'dangerous classes'...to focus on the consequences of social exclusion for social order, and to emphasise particular groups, such as unemployed and potentially criminal young men, and lone parents, especially young never-married mothers.' (Gordon & Townsend, 2004, p. 360)

We see therefore, three discourses with different answers to the question of whether the poor in the UK are to blame for their poverty and social exclusion. The RED discourse would point to the need to redistribute wealth to the poor in order to end their social exclusion. The SID discourse would like social exclusion and unemployment and would link employment to being

the key to the end of poverty and social exclusion. The MUD approach would suggest for many poverty, or certainly social exclusion, are a choice that is made and then potentially taught to the next generation.

We have examined Levitas' three models or approaches to social discourse, and we have critically examined Murray's theory of the underclass in the context of the UK and of these three models. We have come to the conclusion that there are other factors to play in poverty and social exclusion than the choices of the poor in the UK or any blame that may be attached to them, and we have seen the elitist nature of Murray's thesis.

**Poverty about people social exclusion about structure of society**

' The UK government defines poverty as having an income of 60 per cent or less of the median: using this measure, 13. 2 million people in the UK lives in poverty – that is 22 per cent of the population.' (Oxfam)