

Attitudes towards poverty: 1850-1950 essay sample

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



This research paper will analyse how English conceptions of poverty changed through the time frame 1850-1950, why it changed and some of the authors who contributed to this change. To explain more clearly the ideas, events occurred during those times will be used to support the arguments. We will proceed in a chronological way. Victorian Era (1850-1900)

1850: Victorian Era. By 1851, the industrial revolution shifted large mass of people from rural areas to urban areas where various jobs were available, however inexperienced and unqualified workers received low and irregular wages. The repeal of the Corn Law and the enclosure movements discouraged people from investing in agriculture in rural areas, so they moved to towns to work in factories. Many Victorians struggled to understand and explain poverty. They did not know whom to hold responsible for poverty: was it the poor themselves because of their laziness and irresponsibility or was it all due to circumstances? However they were numerous in adopting the "self-help" attitude. They believed that everyone should fend for themselves and should be responsible for their own survival and that they should not seek the help of others. According to them, poverty could be overcome by hard work and anyone could be successful. "Many Victorians (not all) felt that the poor were to blame for their poverty".

Historians had mixed opinions about the impact of industrialisation on poverty: on one hand, some believed that industrialisation brought upon better living conditions and higher wages, on the other hand some argued that industrialisation degraded the life quality of workers (unsanitary and overcrowded housing, low wages, poor diet, insecure employment and the

dreaded effects of sickness and old age) unless they were skilled workers.

Slight improvements had been brought about only around 1870s.

Furthermore, the poor relief system (the Poor Law) had been changed during the Victorian age. " Paupers" were no longer allowed to seek refuge in their parish. In order to receive help, the poor then had to go to workhouses.

These were set in place with harsher conditions (unpleasant work, strict rules, disintegrated families) in order to discourage the poor from seeking help.

This measure seemed to work since workhouses were feared by the poor: only orphans, deserted wives, widows, solitary elders continued to stay at workhouses despite the severe living conditions because they had no other options. Thus amendments to the Poor Law forced poor people to rely upon themselves for their basic needs as far as possible. They preferred to fend for themselves instead to working and living in workhouses. The poor helped each other: friends and family cooperated; the slow emergence of trade unions also provided relief to the working class. Nonetheless, workhouse living conditions gradually improved in the late 19th century. Victorians became more tolerant and compassionate towards the poor. As explained above, many independent associations helped the poor. For example, poor children were provided with free breakfast in the 1890s as well as free boots or shoes in the 1890s. Many people were very poor in Victorian Britain and people accepted poverty as a part of life. This was discovered by Charles Booth, a British business and social statistician. Influential authors

Charles Booth

Charles Booth (1840-1916) was one among the firsts to study poverty. To his utter surprise, industrialisation had brought about poverty in major cities to a large extent. Between 1889 and 1891 he published 17 volumes called *Life and Labour of the People in London*, relying on his door to door surveys he had carried out. His poverty maps showing the geographical distribution of different social classes in London are still used today as a reference for social studies in UK. In fact, he publicly criticized about the 35% of people living in abject poverty, compared to the misleading percentage of only 25% given at that time by the Social Democratic Federation leader Hyndman. Booth was able to define a “poverty line” at 10 to 20 shillings as the minimum amount to feed a family of 4-5 members. He introduced the concept of Old Age Pensions by supporting his arguments based on his works. He believed in a healthy workforce for better productivity and fought for the rights of the working class. Another author who was influenced by Charles Booth’s work to further study the issue of poverty in Britain was Seebohm Rowntree.

Seebohm Rowntree

Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954) was a British sociological researcher, social reformer and industrialist. For his First York Study (1899), like Booth, he used the concept of poverty line (the minimum sum required for the basic needs of a family) and also deduced similar results: 27.4% of people were living in abject poverty. He also found out that the reason the poor were poor was because they received low wages and not because they brought it upon themselves and that poverty was not a ‘social evil’ but a ‘social problem’

which could be cured. For his Second York Study (1936), he found that fewer people were living in abject poverty among the working class (50% decrease). The causes of poverty also changed: it was no longer due to low wages but also due to unemployment in the 1930s. Therefore Rowntree's writings allowed the working class to earn a better wage in order to alleviate poverty. Henry Mayhew

Mayhew belonged to the Victorian era. His books *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) were very influential. He did a survey on the poor to influence the government to take actions. He interviewed many poor people to illustrate their daily lives. This allowed the upper social classes to have an insight on the lives of the poor. He classified the poor "under three separate phases, according as they will work, they can't work, and they won't work". Christian Socialists were influenced by his work which permitted them to become aware of the living conditions of the poor.

1900-1950

The start of the century was specially marked by a "prolonged fiscal financial crisis" following the expensive and unpopular Boer War (1899-1902) and the international economic recession resulting in massive unemployment and decrease in incomes across Britain for more than half a century. With the help of Booth's and Rowntree's studies, Britain became aware of the severity of the poverty issue. In 1906, some reforms were made by a Liberal government as soon as it was elected. They allowed free school meals to poor children at school. In January 1909, old age pensions were paid for the first time in British history through the 1908 Old Age Pensions

Act. The government set up wage councils; they fought for the betterment of workers (e. g. setting up of a minimal wage for certain factories). During 1914-1930, the First World War resulted in mass unemployment and poverty. Britain no longer had its international financial power. Other countries were rapidly developing financially. In 1920s and 1930s, while some areas flourished with wealth and prosperity, some areas were still overwhelmed with unemployment, poverty and sickness. Poverty was especially higher among lone older families and families with young children. However the rate of poverty was lower than before.

During the interwars of the Second World War, especially after 1940, the government was greatly influenced by the studies of social scientists. However, some historians also say that the government had no choice but to find a remedy urgently to the aggravating problem of poverty. For example, Rowntree's proposed solutions to child poverty, based on his 1936 survey, were adopted by government to provide for wartime family allowances (1936). The following years, more social surveys were carried out to solve wartime problems and for the post war reconstruction.

The most famous one of these is the Beveridge Report of 1942 which recommended the total abolition of the Poor Law and for it to be substituted by national insurances, family allowances, unemployment allowances, and the establishment of a national health system. Beveridge Plan was regarded as the foundation of the now British Welfare State. Poverty was no longer an issue for the poor only but was a concerning matter to the whole nation.

Successive social studies showed regressing percentage

of poverty although it was not totally eradicated. During those times, it is said that someone living off on pension was living as comfortably as a skilled worker. By 1950, it is said that absolute poverty was almost eradicated from Britain. Reasons for the change in attitude

Indeed, the attitude towards poverty has changed during the period 1850-1950. There is more than one factor accountable for it. * Writings on poverty Many authors produced works on poverty: social scientists, artistic writers like Dickens. These works influenced Britain to look into poverty more seriously. * Britain's realisation During wartime (Boer war), Britain realized that it was the nation's responsibility to look after the poor and sick if it were to win wars. It couldn't possibly win with a sick army. Most of the men (about 60%) were too sick in order to be recruited in the army to fight for wars. *

Extension of the right to vote

The Great Reform Act of 1832 allowed middle classes to vote. Thus, the parliamentary Liberal and Conservative Parties emerged to represent them. In 1867 the Second Reform Act was passed by Disraeli's Conservative government, which allowed the richer, urban working class to vote. A third reform act in 1884 increased the total voters to about six out of ten men. Hence, by 1890 most of the voters were working class and they could now vote for people and parties who would fight for their rights. The Conservative or Liberal Party had to defend the working class, if not they would lose their support. * Spread of socialism

Socialists no longer wanted the laissez faire attitude of government towards the flaws of the society. They wanted the government to take action. * Trade unionism

The workers had trade unions to help to improve their conditions. They were able to make themselves heard to the government through the trade unions.

* Emergence of the Labour Party

When first created, Labour party was not so famous among the working class who voted for the traditional Liberal party. But with time, Labour party managed to gain in popularity and proved to be an adequate rival to Liberal party. Labour party fought exclusively for the working class, unlike the Liberals who at first believed in the self-help and the non-meddling of government in the society. Conclusion

In the late mid 19th century, almost 30% of people were living in abject poverty. This forced the government to take an active hand in tackling the issue. They discarded the self help theory and provided several measures to alleviate poverty. They were greatly helped by studies of several authors namely Mayhew, Booth and Rowntree. By the end of 1950, extreme poverty almost disappeared from Britain.

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