

Poverty in Britain and the UK Sociology essay



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This paper will explore poverty within Britain and some of the key features that are surrounding it. The broadness of poverty, various ideas and social implications is a massive area of discussion. Much of which will not be covered in depth in this paper - primarily due to the constraints due to word count that is placed upon this paper. I will look at such issues as class, education, health and addiction. I will also look at 'Breadline Britain' studies, Rowntree's works and various sociological viewpoints surrounding poverty. The idea of this paper is to touch upon various key elements that surround poverty in Britain - one of the world's wealthiest countries. I will also explore official statistics released from the British government in order to highlight the extent of poverty.

Even this simple question rouses debate and controversy! Poverty has many definitions, for the purpose of this paper poverty shall be defined as "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong" Townsend - Poverty in the United Kingdom A survey of household resources and standards of living pg 31.

Poverty can however be measured, and therefore quantified in various ways - mainly 'absolute' and 'relative'. The following quote from The House of Commons Committee

"There are basically three current definitions of poverty in common usage: absolute poverty, relative poverty and social exclusion.

Absolute poverty is defined as the lack of sufficient resources with which to keep body and soul together. Relative poverty defines income or resources in relation to the average. It is concerned with the absence of the material needs to participate fully in accepted daily life.

Social exclusion is a new term used by the Government. The Prime Minister described social exclusion as "...a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown"

The House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee.

Peter Townsend has conducted several studies concerning poverty. He argues that the society we live in determines people's 'needs'. Townsend puts forward the argument that some things must only be measured in relative terms. He states "resources that are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities." So, relative poverty looks at the inclusion of various British 'traditions' such as a Sunday lunch, fresh produce, holidays, sporting activities and the expense usually related to events such as Birthdays and Christmas. Townsend argues that people who cannot afford these activities do indeed live in relative poverty. Townsend also states that the people most at risk include the low paid. Typically lower paid workers hold less secure roles of employment and are less likely to receive 'fringe benefits' often associated with more skilled, higher paid positions.

Income Poverty -stats and facts.

Income poverty is a widely used formula that is used to indicate poverty. The government releases, on a yearly basis, a survey of poverty in the UK this is known as the Households Below Average Income (HBAI). The poverty 'formula' used for defining poverty is simplistic - it is where the income of a home, and indeed family, is below 60% of the median income of the United Kingdom (UK) after the housing costs associated with the property in question have been accounted for. (www.cpag.org.uk)

HBAI has shown that income poverty was on the increase in the years 2004-2006 but fell a little the following year. With the recession that Britain has recently endured latest figures have yet to be released, but one would take an educated guess that these figures have risen again, given the recent economic climate.

HBAI shows that 13.4 million people in the UK are 'income poor'. That equates to almost a quarter of the UK households (22%). Of these 13.4 million people over half, (53%) include at least one child, 15% are pensioner households and 32% are of people of working age with no dependants. As these figures show almost 70% of these households contain persons whom one could be classed as 'vulnerable' ie elderly and youngsters.

It must be noted that by using the HBAI statistics one can assume that poverty has most certainly been on the increase. In 1979 it reported that five million, (9%) of the British population were residing in poverty - as this paper has already shown, that figure now stands at 25% of the population. The 25% statistics are also agreed to be correct according also to Oxfam (www.oxfam.org.uk).

oxfam.org.uk) "One in four people - 25% of the population are living on or below the income support level."

It is also noted that the Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) survey is not based upon a 'breadline' but is more down to perception www.jrf.org.uk states that within this survey "Poverty and social exclusion in Britain incorporates the views of members of the public, rather than judgments by social scientists, about what are the necessities of life that all adults and children should be able to afford". Using their methods of assessment they found in 1999 14.5 million people in Britain were living in poverty (Howard. M et al)

One must draw a comparison to the recession of the 1980s and what is happening, or some would argue just happened, in Britain today. During the 80's the huge increase of poverty could be attributed to the recession, interest rate hikes and the swift decline of the manufacturing sector of the economy. The government at the time has also brought changes, some of a radical nature, that saw cuts in spending costs which resulted in the loss of many public, and private sector employment contracts. These key events can all (except the interest rate hikes) be mirrored in the British economy today. If 25% of our population is already living in poverty one shudders to think what the statistics in the coming few years will show us.

Poverty – explanations

According to Mary Liddell, writing in the Guardian (Sunday 29th April 2001) "our child poverty rate is the third highest in the industrialised world." One must agree that this is a shocking statistic and must be tackled with some

urgency. So, what do sociologists have to say about poverty, its causes and implications?

This paper has already explored the work of Townsend, but Mack and Lansley (1983, 1990) endeavoured to build upon this research, and in doing so conducted two further studies for a British television programme named 'Breadline Britain'. Within this research they conducted a survey designed to understand what the people of Britain considered to be the basic necessities in order to live in an acceptable manner. The results of this survey showed them that the public assumed there to be 26 elements that were key in order to sustain a reasonable lifestyle.

Mack and Lansley's works, along with other new evidence of the poverty crisis were highlighted in a survey commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), and conducted via the ONS (office of national statistics) It highlighted some key issues as well as astonishing stats and statistics. It showed that

9.5 million people could not afford to heat their homes

4 million people could not afford to eat the 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day that were government guidelines.

8 million could not afford to replace what one could consider key household appliances ie fridges and freezers

Over a third of our children were going without key items such as coats, social events and items that one would consider a necessity for educational attainment - ie calculators, school pens, books etc

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The report highlighted that poverty was unevenly distributed and the key groups of people most likely to experience poverty included the unemployed, low wage earners, families, disabled and the elderly.

Mack and Langley (1985) claimed that the welfare state provision would need to be increased by 150% in order to lift the welfare state dependant out of poverty. " PEOPLE NEED TO ACCEPT THAT THE PROBLEMS OF THE POOR SHOULD BE TACKLED, AND THAT THE STATE HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO TACKLE THEM " They also stated that the employed in Britain would ' welcome' a one penny in the pound income tax rise in order to assist the poor.

According to JRF on 11TH September 2000. the " highest rates of poverty were found in homes of adult unemployment, part-time employment, lone parent households, disabled and sick families, ethnic minorities and large families"

In 2000 Sue Middleton (a key analyst on the piece of research) stated that " Britain's children are going without items that are widely accepted as being vital to the health and development of children"

Marxists state that the existence of poverty is actually beneficial for the ruling class and that the threat, or realisation of poverty dramatically increases the desire amongst the working class to find employment. Marxists also argue that the rewards for work are unevenly distributed and that the low paid work harder for less than the owners. Whilst this theory is well known there are questions that need to be asked of its philosophy. Such as it doesn't give explanations as to why certain groups are more vulnerable.

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Jones and Novak (1999) state that it is essential for capitalism that poverty is allowed to happen, and that it should be well managed. They go further and say that the available welfare benefits, just like the welfare state, are not actually designed to help people out of the poverty they are experiencing. Rather the welfare state is there to assist poverty, not eradicate it and that it is there to ease the capitalism, whilst ensuring that harmony and the status quo is still successfully maintained.

J. C. Kincaid claims that "from the point of view of capitalism the low-wage sector helps to underpin and stabilize the whole structure of wages and the conditions of employment of the working class." They also argue that the difference in wage structure is a thought-out process which serves to fragment the working-class. If the wages of the unskilled workers were all identical there would be a risk of greater unity and a single class-consciousness might be encouraged, with a possible threat to the capitalist class as a result. Kincaid argues "It is not to be expected that any Government whose main concern is with the efficiency of a capitalist economy is going to take effective steps to abolish the low wage sector."

Herbert J. Gans has identified a number of functions that make poverty "useful" to capitalists. He states that temporary menial jobs are taken by the poor. And also that poverty assists in the creation of careers for middle-class people. "poverty creates jobs for a number of occupations and professionals that serve the poor, or shield the rest of the population from them. Poverty helps to guarantee the status of those who are not poor." He also stated, "The defenders of the desirability of hard work, thrift, honesty and monogamy

need people who can be accused of being lazy, spendthrift, dishonest and promiscuous to justify these norms.”

Holman (1975) states that “ The existence, even the creation, of a group identifiable as the poor serves to set them apart from the rest of the population. Further, the poor act as a warning. They demonstrate the fate of those who do not conform to prevailing work and social standards. Their plight is needed to reinforce the will of others to work for low returns in unpleasant and even degrading conditions from which the economic output gives a disproportionate financial reward to a minority of existing resource holders. Not least, those in poverty act as scapegoats, a vulnerable group on whom the blame for social problems can be placed, so diverting attention away from that minority which has some control over social affairs”

Poverty in ethnic minority households

Richard Berthoud - Essex University, 1998 conducted a study on ethnic minority households (2500 homes) and he found that key issues were as follows

31% of African origin families were living below the poverty line.

Unemployment in the males, absences of employment within the females and large, growing families were all key factors that lead to 60% of the ethnic minority households living below the poverty line.

Individualist theorists concerning poverty maybe outdated - they seemed to be popular in the 19th century. Such sociologists as Herbert Spencer (1874) argued that poverty was the doing of the individual. He argued that they

were too lazy to work hard, and therefore were deserving candidates to reside in poverty. He also argued that assistance from the state should not be considered an option as this would only add to and encourage idleness, and that if state assistance was to be offered there was no real incentive for one to pursue employment and any initiative to work would be lost within many. Most sociologists do not agree with Spencer's theories and would report that poverty is not the fault of the individual, but is more often than not, a result of social factors that are beyond the control of an individual.

Dependency theorists would argue that the poor need to stand up and take more responsibility for their situation, and their main obstacle is their dependency upon the welfare state, and that this poverty trap often means that the unemployed consider themselves better off not working. According to Taylor et al 1995 (pg 182) " This line of argument has influenced Conservative governments policies for reducing income tax and certain benefit levels "

Marshall (1989) argues that the provision of the welfare state should be kept to a bare minimum and should only be provided as a last resort.

Marshall's views are that the welfare state has overridden other points of assistance such as the family and other agencies that allow the poverty stricken to assist themselves.

Charles Murray developed Marshall's theory even further. His publication ' Losing Ground ' in 1984 is where the underclass theory suddenly emerged. Murray (1990) states that the welfare state is responsible for housing a new ' underclass ' which, in simple terms is a class of people below what one could

call working class. This group of people have a dependency on the welfare state. Key indications could be such things as family instabilities, crime, substance abuse, and poorly educated individuals whom choose to drop out of the labour force.

The 'New-right' sociologists look to the works of C Murray (1989) and they conclude that the welfare state system that is in place does indeed produce a subculture of individuals who no longer wish to support themselves via paid employment and instead favour to live on benefits and subsidisations. It is fair to state that the new right theories have been more influential within politics rather than within a sociological context. One only has to look at the radical reforms of the benefits system that has come into force within recent months and we can clearly see that the new right philosophies seeping through. The underclass theory was argued to have, along with a fever pitch media, contributed to the development of a 'moral panic' concerning lone parents.

Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966) studied the poor in Puerto Rico (although this paper is concentrating on Britain and the United Kingdom comparisons may be drawn) Lewis stated that poverty was cultural, and that these individuals that lived in poverty had a different culture to mainstream society. This resulted in this group of individuals feeling cut off and marginalised from the rest of the society. "As part of an unskilled labour force, the children studied by Lewis suffered from unemployment, under-employment and low wages, which meant a shortage of cash, little food, and over crowded, impoverished, living areas." (Stephens, 1998, p. 289). Lewis referred to this as a 'design for living' and argued that people learn to accept poverty because they can't

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do anything about it. According to Lewis, they adopted self-defeating attitudes, by becoming fatalistic and resigned to the situation, which prevented them from breaking out of it.

Cycle of deprivation

The idea of a “ cycle of deprivation” was coined by Sir Keith Joseph, (Conservative party Secretary of State for Social Services in 1970’s). Joseph argued that it wasn’t just lack of income that caused poverty and that some “ problem families had interrelated difficulties- which were to a greater or lesser extent inflicted from within”(Denham & Garnett, 2002). Josephs cycle of deprivation theory argues that future generations will endure the same cycle of events, Joseph said that children from poor families tend to marry into families with similar difficulties, and so reproducing the said cycle of deprivation. These families would typically “ live in inner city areas, with poor housing, inadequate diet, poor health, do badly at school, leave without qualifications, enter poorly paid work, bring children up in an unsatisfactory manner, are more likely to fall into delinquency and are unable or unwilling to find work”.

The cycle of deprivation theory has not been without criticism. It has been argued, via research that that children of ‘ the poor’ can and frequently do, break free from Joseph’s so-called cycle of deprivation, The cycle of deprivation theory does not make any attempt to address the root causes of poverty and fails to explain why some people get into poverty in the first place. New Labour’s Sure Start programme that was launched in 2000 followed the government’s first extensive annual report regarding poverty,

which went on to say “ we need to break the cycle of deprivation, to stop it being transmitted through generations” (DSS, 1999, p. 5.)

“ This cycle of deprivation is bad for everyone. But it is particularly unfair for children who miss out on opportunities because they inherit the disadvantage faced by their parents, so their life chances are determined by where they come from rather than who they are. “

Social Exclusion Unit (2004, pg 5)

According to www.cpag.org.uk poverty places constraints on the active social participation of children and activities one would usually consider ‘ the norm’ It showed that 18% of families who live in poverty (HBAI) could not afford for their children to have friends over for lunch once every 14 days. It also showed that 12% of these children could not attend educational school trips and activities due to income deprivation. One needs to assess how this impacts children and their social capital growth. If they cannot be party to a fruitful and positive education experience how can they be expected to succeed within academia, the labour market and in turn a successful member of wider society?

Poverty and health

In the Guardian newspaper on Monday 9 October 2006 the following extract was published within their health section

“ Smoking is inextricably linked to poverty, according to the campaigning group Action on Smoking and Health (Ash), which today launches interactive

maps revealing the close match between cigarette consumption and deprivation.

Derek Wanless, the former chief executive of the NatWest Group who carried out the health trends review for the government, found that 48% of men in the poorest social class died before they reached 70, compared with 22% of men in the richest social group. Half of that difference, he estimated, was accounted for by smoking..... In the Princess ward of Knowsley, Merseyside, said to be the most deprived area of England, 52% of the population smoke, compared with a national average of 26%..”

According to Graham (2000) People’s lifestyles and behaviour are recognised as causes to health problems. Smoking is identified as the major preventable cause of premature death and is a habit that has been associated as common place within the lower class both women and men. The ones who will most likely be affected by poverty. Other causes of avoidable health problems include diet, stress, housing, alcohol and substance misuse and exercise (Alderman et al 2000). These can, and commonly are, associated with the poverty stricken of our society. This paper has already explored such surveys carried out by JRF and this paper argues that the above comments only serve to further compound their findings.

In the month of April 1977 the Secretary of State was responsible for creating a ‘ working group’ to look at health and inequalities. The main objective of this report was to pool all information regarding health within our social class system. The Black Report was produced in 1980 – it looked at

if there was any need for the introductions and implications of social policy along with if any further research should be conducted.

. It highlighted many points, specifically " that the causes of health inequalities were so deep rooted that only major public expenditure would be capable of altering the pattern" (Jenkin 1980).

The results of the report clearly showed how there was a huge gap in mortality between the social classes, and that instead of narrowing the gap was in fact widening. It stated that poor families are locked into poverty which included educational, environmental and social disadvantage for the lifespan of the individual, and indeed in some cases it lasted through the generations... It highlighted how there were large numbers of young working class females that suffered from depressive illness, and that this had a massive impact upon family life and , maybe more importantly child-rearing. It also found evidence to show that twice as many babies born into the families of unskilled workers die within the first month than babies born to the working professionals. It stated that around three times as many infants born to parents whom were unskilled or unemployed die in their first year compared to infants born into the families that consisted of professional working parents. This is undoubtedly linked with social class , poverty education and health,.

It is argued by Alock (2003) that the poorest of our country are subjected to poor housing conditions and undesirable locations that do not give them free access to the local amenities many of us take for granted such as parks, gardens, local shopping facilities, an environment that is free from pollution

and dirt. Jones and Pickett (1993) go further and state that the poverty stricken are subjected to damp homes and lack of insulation and that the rising costs of heating their homes to an adequate standard often mean that they either go without heat (resulting in damp conditions) or they have to accumulate debt to heat their homes

It could be argued that poverty results in more stress, therefore increases illness and the likelihood to be dependent upon alternative substances such as alcohol or drugs. (Jones & Pickett 1993). According to sociologist Nicholas Emler, self-esteem is a risk factor for suicide, depression and victimisation (Palmer et al 2006). If a person is ill, stressed and in substandard housing conditions one can only assume that low self esteem would occur.

Poverty and education

Poverty - the facts (2007) shows us that, growing up in poverty can affect a child's cognitive development as well as their health and well-being.

According to Poverty - the facts (2007), children born into poverty are more likely to suffer such issues as homelessness and chronic overcrowding, which have a significant impact upon a child's physical, mental and social development. These issues can cause health problems and absence from school.

Wedderburn (1994), argues the theory of material deprivation and states that economic poverty is a huge factor in a child's low achievement at school. Furthermore, a study carried out by Ming Zhang, who researches compulsory education at Cambridge University

shows that there is a close link between poverty and truancy among primary school children, therefore further widening the educational achievements of children from poorer backgrounds.

Poverty and gender

In general women are paid less than men. One may argue that this is down to women taking career breaks to raise children, and often only returning to work part time. If a relationship breakdown occurs then the woman is usually left with the role of breadwinner and care giver - this often results in part time, low paid labour. According to Taylor et al 96% of lone parents receiving benefits are women.

David Green, director of the Institute for the Study of Civil Society states: " If you take almost any measure - how well children do in school, whether they turn to crime, whether they commit suicide, etc - it's better to have two parents. It's also the biggest disadvantage of lone parenthood that you're much more likely to be poor."

OVER 33% of Britain's children live in single parent households, the majority of those being headed by a female.

The Low Pay Unit estimated that over 70% of the total number of low wage earners were female.

Is poverty regional?

In 2009 Ian Townsend produced a report for the House of Commons, he stated the following " In terms of numbers living in poverty (before housing costs), the North West had the greatest number of children in poverty of any

region/country in 2005/06-2007/08 (1.4 million), followed by London (1.3 million)."

"the numbers of adults of working age living in poverty (before housing costs) in 2005/06-2007/08 were highest in the North West and London (0.7 million)"

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He also states that the North West and London were also hot spots for poverty amongst the elderly, so certainly from an official standpoint it is fair to state that these 2 areas are amongst the poorest. This could be down to many reasons - maybe densely populated areas, maybe it is due to the type of jobs available, or the cost of living. There has always been what is known as the 'North South divide' but according to the above statistics this does not extend to poverty.

It was assumed that poverty was strongly associated with social housing developments, however a survey conducted by JRF reports "The expansion of home-ownership and poverty have rarely been linked together. The prevailing view of home-ownership continues to be one that associates the tenure with affluent households. However, it is only a partial picture of what has become the most diverse of all housing tenures in the UK." Using the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain, a new study by Roger Burrows at the University of York demonstrates that half of all people living in poverty in Britain today are home-owners" One could argue that this report shows that poverty is not inherited, but is a 'situation' that people can fall into due to termination of employment, ill health etc.

Whilst it is shown that the working class are more likely to suffer unstable employment and ill health one must consider the fact that it can happen to any member of today's society

Conclusion

This paper has discussed many of the issues surrounding poverty in Britain today. I have assessed ideas from Marxist and New Right sociologists as well as looking at published papers, surveys and research. The paper has considered such aspects as gender, location, education, health and ethnicity in order to attempt to discuss poverty as a whole.

It is very clear from my research that poverty is very much at large in today's society and the groups of people who are most likely to be impacted are low wage earners, part time workers, women, families, the elderly and sick. It is ironic that today's Conservative Liberal Dem government has pledged to reduce the benefits of these very same groups of people in order to 'encourage' them to help themselves via paid employment. I feel that this paper has explored some of the obstacles and constraints that are placed upon these groups of people. The country is just creeping out of a recession and paid employment - although on the increase is not as available as it was in recent times. Whilst I agree that everyone should help themselves to attain a reasonable standard of living I strongly feel that those with the greatest challenges in life - the sick, single-parents, families, low paid workers should be offered as much assistance as possible, not just economic but a practical assistance in gaining a way out of their 'poverty traps'

It is clear from my research that poverty is unevenly distributed and I fear that will always be the case. I feel that education and the youth of today has to be the starting point, and we should be assisting them in education, self-esteem, and knowledge that they need in order to ensure that they are well equipped in adulthood with the tools to succeed in life.

There will always be people who are less well off than others, but one would like to think that as one of the richest, most developed nations in the world we can equip our people (adults and children alike) with the skills they need in order to prosper in today's society. I do appreciate that this viewpoint is quite idealistic and there will always be a sub culture of people who do not wish to conform with ideals of paid gainful employment, but if we can provide and assist the ones who wish to have a better life it would be a start to tackling poverty in the country.

In June 2009 the Work and Pensions Secretary (Yvette Cooper) spoke about poverty in the UK and went on to state that the government was planning to invest £5bn in unemployment relief in an effort to reduce child poverty. The current government has pledged to continue the work of the past Labour government in its pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020, but yet has frozen the one universal, non means tested benefit relating to children - child benefit and taken it away from what they consider to be 'wealthier families'. Again, we could draw comparisons to the government of the late 80's whom froze child benefit in a cost cutting exercise - much like the government today

“ This bill is about giving every child a fair chance in life. I want a society where children don't miss out on school trips, aren't stuck in poor housing with no space to do their homework and aren't left behind because they don't have a computer or internet access.

This is a big challenge, and one which we will not shy away from. It holds current and future government's feet to the flames and won't allow any government to quietly forget about child poverty or walk away.”

Whether or not the above is an achievable target is yet unknown. Eradication of absolute poverty is certainly a goal I would like to see being accomplished however, there will always be relative poverty within any society. As households start to be in a position to afford to feed and clothe themselves the wish for more 'luxurious' products and items will grow. It will then become a race to 'keep up with the Jones' therefore a cycle of relative poverty will begin again, but this time it will include the want for top of the range TVs and not just the luxury of being able to afford to attend social activities