



Poverty and  
Social Exclusion in the UK

Volume 2 - The dimensions of disadvantage



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## CHAPTER

# One Fifty years of poverty in the UK

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## Abstract

This chapter examines fifty years of poverty measurement, in particular the development of deprivation-based measures from Townsend's definition of being 'excluded from ordinary patterns' of behaviour through Mack and Lansley's idea of 'socially-perceived necessities' to wider frameworks based around Sen's concept of 'capabilities'. It argues that these developments have contributed to a widespread acceptance that poverty is relative, with what is seen as inadequate living standards changing as society changes. The chapter charts trends in deprivation and income poverty, and their growing divergence. While both measures reflected the sharp rise in income inequality in the 1980s, in this millennium deprivation-based measures have continued to rise while relative income poverty has stabilised. This indicates that deprivation measures better reflect the adverse impact of stagnating wages, rising insecurity and declining public provision. The chapter concludes that poverty research needs to be firmly positioned within wider debates about growing economic and social inequalities.

**Keywords:** Deprivation, Income poverty, Necessities, Well being, Inequality, Poverty measurement, Poverty trends, Living standards, Insecurity

**Subject:** Social Stratification, Inequality, and Mobility

## Introduction

Over the last fifty years, poverty in the UK has been researched extensively. There has been much debate about definitions. Should it be relative or absolute? Should it be judged by income or living standards? Or should poverty be a wider concept, focusing on overall well-being? This chapter examines the development of these different approaches to poverty measurement and their relationship to different understandings of deprivation – and how these impact, or otherwise, on the political and policy process.

The chapter goes on to examine what different measures say about trends over time. Examining both income-based and deprivation-based measures, it will show that there has been a rise in relative poverty.

This chapter argues that the processes that create poverty stem from those that create inequality – and that more attention needs to be given to these underlying social and economic inequalities if poverty is to be tackled.

## The ‘rediscovery’ of poverty

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Poverty research, with a long pedigree in Britain going back to the pioneering work of Booth and Rowntree at the end of the nineteenth century, was re-energised in the mid-1960s. By that time, there was growing concern that, despite the social and economic progress of the post-war years towards greater affluence and greater equality, the problems experienced by some groups, notably older people and sick and disabled people, showed no signs of diminishing. Faced with a lack of information about the living conditions of such groups, Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend set about re-examining existing data from National Income and Expenditure surveys to identify the numbers, and characteristics, of those they described as having ‘low levels of living’. ↪ The result was the publication of *The poor and the poorest* (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965) and the start of the ‘rediscovery’ of poverty.

*The poor and the poorest* used a simple threshold – based on a percentage of what was then the National Assistance scale – as a measure of ‘low living standards’. It did not, and did not set out to, re-conceptualise poverty. That was left to Abel-Smith and Townsend’s next project – a detailed national survey of living standards and resources. Funded by the (now) Joseph Rowntree Foundation, this became the landmark 1968/69 ‘Poverty in the UK’ survey.<sup>1</sup>

This was an ambitious undertaking. Four qualitative pilot studies were carried out of groups at risk of poverty to crystallise which issues in people’s lives might be used as indicators of deprivation. The resultant questionnaire, over 40 pages long, included 60 indicators of living standards – ranging from diet and clothing to home amenities and recreation – as well as in-depth questions on household resources. It resulted in a mass of data to analyse in the days when computers were laboriously programmed using pre-defined holes on ‘punch cards’ and took all night to run.

The project was beset by delays and, in mid-1968, Abel-Smith left to become a senior advisor at the Department of Health and Social Security. Townsend’s book, *Poverty in the UK*, eventually came out in 1979. It became an authoritative statement of the need to think about poverty in *relative* terms. In his much-quoted definition, Townsend saw people falling into poverty when:

... their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary patterns, customs and activities.

(Townsend, 1979: p 31)

To operationalise this norms-based approach, Townsend devised a ‘deprivation index’, based on twelve of the living standards indicators, and identified a ‘poverty line’ by using a statistical technique that related household incomes to the degree to which households lacked these items.

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However, not doing or not having something that most others do or have does not in itself necessarily mean that people’s lives are being diminished or limited. David Piachaud, one of Townsend’s most influential critics, identified two key reasons for this (Piachaud, 1981). First, the lack of an item may have been out of choice. And second, the fact that something is commonly done or possessed does not on its own make it important. Conversely, just because something ↪ is not widespread or common within a particular society does not make it unimportant. This lies behind the argument, put forward most strongly by Amartya Sen, that a relativist view struggles to take adequate account of absolute conceptions of poverty. There was ‘an

irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty', argued Sen. 'If there is starvation and hunger, then – no matter what the relative picture looks like – there is clearly poverty' (Sen, 1983). Townsend rejected this criticism and disputed the tenability of the concept of absolute needs.

Yet, a problem remains with a definition of relative poverty based on norms derived from *what is commonly done*. If a society is in the depth of a famine where malnutrition is widespread, this approach, definitionally, would not identify those suffering as in poverty. This is clearly untenable. More generally, there is a problem in that basing your measure on what is average, or commonly done, in each country embeds into the concept of poverty an acceptance of deep international inequalities.

Townsend had aimed to exclude value judgements from the selection of indicators but in doing so failed to take account of, or relate to, any generally accepted view of 'need'. As Piachaud argued, it leaves the term 'poverty' devoid of any 'moral imperative that something should be done about it' (Piachaud, 1981). Or as Amartya Sen put it: 'material objects cannot be evaluated in this context without reference to how people view them' (Sen, 1981).

## The concept of socially perceived necessities

The next development in this debate about poverty measurement came in 1983 with the *Breadline Britain* survey (sometimes known as the *Poor Britain* survey). The origins of this survey are quite different from the academic background of what had come before: it stemmed from a television series.

In the early 1980s, I was working as a producer/director at London Weekend Television (LWT), one of the companies that formed part of the ITV network, and was asked to make a series of four one-hour programmes for one of the network's 'adult education' slots. It was the first term of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, brought to power with a radical agenda to roll back the state and promote market forces. By the early 1980s, the UK was in the depths of recession, while unemployment was reaching record levels with more than a million having been unemployed for over a year. We decided that the focus should be on 'poverty'.

p. 30 When this was mooted, there were some worried murmurs: was not the subject of 'poverty' too political? It was certainly not in the same category as the general run of 'adult education' programming which was more likely to look at English literature or Art or how to sail a boat. The senior executives at LWT stood by the decision, arguing that it was important to place the question of living standards firmly on the public agenda in a way that asked viewers to think about the kind of society they lived in and wanted to live in (Browne and Coueslant, 1984).

At that time, government statistics took those who fell below the Supplementary Benefit level – the amount paid to those who were not entitled to other benefits such as Unemployment Benefit – as a measure of poverty. But this was entirely arbitrary; the Supplementary Benefit rates were not based on any assessment of need but had simply stemmed from the 1945 Labour government's National Assistance rates. The Townsend survey had looked at people's actual living standards and the ways in which the poor missed out – but, by then, it was fifteen years out of date.

We decided to conduct a new survey.<sup>2</sup> Aware of Piachaud and Sen's criticisms, we felt that a new approach directly addressing the question of judgment and evaluation was needed. The survey organisation MORI was commissioned with the brief to establish 'whether there was a public consensus on what is an unacceptable standard of living' and if so 'who, if anyone, falls below that standard'. For television, this approach had the additional advantage that the understanding of poverty underlying the series would be widely shared by the audience.

Focus groups were held in different parts of the country to develop indicators of deprivation in tune with people's perceptions of what was necessary for living in Britain in the early 1980s. The final questionnaire asked about a wide range of items and activities, covering not just basic items but also consumer goods, leisure activities and social participation – and included a number of more discretionary items to ensure distinctions were being made. For each item and activity, the interviewees were asked (in face-to-face interviews) to distinguish between those they thought were 'necessary, and which all adults should be able to afford and which they should not have to go without' and those 'which may be desirable but are not necessary'. Items and activities classed as a necessity by 50 per cent or more of respondents were taken as part of a minimum standard.

p. 31 The survey went on to ask people about their own living standard. For each of the items and activities, interviewees were asked whether they had them or not; and for those that they did not have, to distinguish between those they 'didn't have and didn't want' and those that they 'didn't have and couldn't afford'. In this way, the question of choice, which Piachaud had raised, was dealt with.

In this approach, poverty was defined in terms of 'an enforced lack of socially-perceived necessities' (Mack and Lansley, 1985, p 45). While maintaining Townsend's conception of poverty as deprivation stemming from a lack of command over resources, what counted as deprivation was determined not by average behaviours but by people's perceptions of need.

The *Breadline Britain* survey established, for the first time ever, that in Britain there was widespread agreement on what constitutes a minimum standard and that it was a standard that reflected contemporary ways of living. A majority saw the necessities of life as wide-ranging, including consumer goods and various social activities as well as more basic items such as food and heating. The survey also found very similar views on the relative importance of different items and activities across gender, occupation, income level, age and, notably, political preference (Mack and Lansley, 1985, pp 73–82). This consensus is important as, otherwise, the interests of minorities could be overlooked.

The *Breadline Britain* television series, setting out these minimum standards and the numbers falling below them, was broadcast in the summer of 1983, accompanied by a range of activities at a local level organised by the ITV regional company network. From the response from the viewing public and the press coverage (both extensive), the concept of necessities as determined by public opinion seemed to have been received favourably (Browne and Coueslant, 1984). The Conservative government dismissed the findings. In the House of Commons, Rhodes Boyson, the Social Security Minister, argued that the items in the list of necessities were such that '50 years ago, or even 25 years ago, people merely aspired to have such things' (Hansard, 1983a) while Margaret Thatcher asserted that 'people who are living in need are fully and properly provided for' (Hansard, 1983b). There was, however, a much more favourable reaction from the Labour Party, including the then newly elected MP Tony Blair who took a particular interest in the majoritarian basis of the measure, seeing it as having political leverage.<sup>3</sup>

## Changing standards

p. 32 In 1990, against a background of sharply rising inequality, a second series *Breadline Britain in the 1990s* was commissioned and a second survey undertaken. This survey confirmed that there was widespread agreement on a relatively based minimum standard of living and found that the percentage falling below this minimum standard had risen since 1983 (Frayman, 1991; Gordon and Pantazis, 1997).

In subsequent years, this approach has been widely adopted in poverty research. In the UK, it formed the basis of the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE-GB 1999) in Britain survey (Pantazis et al, 2006), the 2002/3 PSE survey in Northern Ireland (Hillyard et al, 2006) and the 2012 PSE survey in the UK (PSE-UK

2012). It has been used in studies in a large number of other countries, including Japan (Pantazis, 2014), South Africa (Wright, 2011), Benin (Nandy and Pomati, 2014) and Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2007). The European Union has also used the 'enforced lack of socially-perceived necessities' approach to measure deprivation in every country of the EU and is looking to include these indicators in its poverty targets (Gordon, 2011; Eurostat, 2012). These studies have confirmed the viability of the concept of socially perceived necessities.

In Britain, the 1983, 1990, 1999 and 2012 surveys, having used the same methods, enable trends in attitudes as to what should constitute a minimum standard to be tracked. Table 1.1 shows these trends for adults and Table 1.2 shows the trends in attitudes for children between 1999 (the first survey to ask in-depth questions relating to children) and 2012.

**Table 1.1:** Attitudes to necessities for adults, Britain: 1983, 1990, 1999, 2012

Items and activities	% thinking item to be a necessity			
	1983	1990	1999	2012
Heating to keep home adequately warm	97	97	95	96
Damp-free home	94	98	94	94
Two meals a day	64	90	91	91
Visit friends or family in hospital or other institutions			92	90
Replace or repair broken electrical goods			86	86
Fresh fruit and vegetables every day		88	87	83
Washing machine	67	73	77	82
All recommended dental work/treatment				82
Celebrations on special occasions	69	74	83	80
Warm, waterproof coat	87	91	87	79
Attend weddings, funerals and other such occasions			81	78
Telephone	43	56	72	77
Meat, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every other day	63	77	81	76
Curtains or window blinds				71
↳ Hobby or leisure activity	64	67	79	70
Enough money to keep your home in a decent state of decoration		88	80	69
Household contents insurance		92	83	69
Appropriate clothes for job interviews			70	69
A table, with chairs, at which all the family can eat				64
Taking part in sport/exercise activities or classes				56
To be able to pay an unexpected expense of £500				55
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	67	74	67	54
Regular savings (of at least £20 a month) for rainy days *		68	67	52
Television	51	58	58	51
Regular payments into an occupational or private pension				51
Replace worn-out clothes with new not secondhand clothes	64	65	50	46
Presents for family or friends once a year	58	69	58	46
Friends or family around for a meal or drink at least once a month	32	37	65	45
Car	22	26	36	44

A small amount of money to spend each week on yourself, not on your family			61	42
Holiday away from home, not staying with relatives	63	54	56	42
Internet connection at home			6	41
Home computer		5	11	40
Mobile phone			8	40
An outfit to wear for social or family occasions such as parties and weddings <sup>‡</sup>	48	54	51	38
Roast joint or equivalent once a week	67	64	58	36
Hair done or cut regularly				35
Going out socially once a fortnight	36	42	41	34
Attend place of worship			44	29
Visit friends or family in other parts of the country four times a year <sup>†</sup>		39	41	27
Meal out once a month		17	27	25
Holidays abroad once a year		17	20	18
Drink out once a fortnight			22	17
Going to the cinema, theatre or music event once a month				15
Dishwasher		4	7	10

*Notes:*

\* £10/month in 1990 and 1999.

† Coach or train fares to visit family once a quarter in 1990 and 1999.

‡ In 1990 and 1983 this was phrased as ‘A “best outfit” for special occasions’.

Items that are seen as a necessity by 50 per cent or more are classed as part of a minimum standard. For 2012, this is marked by the dashed line.

**Table 1.2:** Attitudes to child necessities, Britain: 1999 and 2012

Child items and activities	% thinking item to be a necessity	
	1999	2012
Warm winter coat	95%	97%
Fresh fruit or veg at least once a day	93%	96%
New properly fitting shoes	96%	93%
Three meals a day	91%	93%
Garden or outdoor space to play in safely*	68%	92%
Child celebration or special occasions	92%	91%
Books at home suitable for their ages <sup>†</sup>	90%	91%
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent at least once a day <sup>‡</sup>	76%	90%
Place to study	n/a	89%
Child hobby or leisure activity	88%	88%
Toddler group or nursery or play group at least once a week for pre-school aged children	89%	87%
Indoor games suitable for their ages (building blocks, board games, computer games, etc.)	n/a	81%
Enough bedrooms for every child aged 10+ of a different sex to have their own room	76%	74%
Clubs or activities such as drama or football training	n/a	74%
Computer and internet for homework	38%	66%
Some new not secondhand clothes	67%	65%
Day trips with family once a month	n/a	60%
Outdoor leisure equipment such as roller skates, skateboards, footballs etc	n/a	58%
At least 4 pairs of trousers, leggings, jeans or jogging bottoms	74%	57%
Going away on a school trip at least once a term	73%	55%
Money to save	n/a	55%
Pocket money	n/a	54%
Child holiday away from home for at least 1 week per year	63%	53%
Construction toys (like Lego, Duplo etc)	66%	53%
Child has friends round for tea or a snack once a fortnight	53%	49%
Bicycle	54%	45%
Clothes to fit in with friends	n/a	31%
Mobile phone	n/a	27%



MP3 player such as an iPod	n/a	8%
Designer/brand name trainers	n/a	6%

\* Notes: Garden in 1999.

† Books of their own in 1999.

‡ Twice a day in 1999.

Items that are seen as a necessity by 50 per cent or more are classed as part of a minimum standard. For 2012, this is marked by the dashed line.

p. 35 As can be seen, people's perceptions of necessities are relative, moving with the times; as society changes, some items (particularly consumer goods) have become more important, others less. Overall, until 1999, rising living standards were reflected in changes to the minimum standard. In 2012, at a time when household incomes had become more constrained, this was halted with a decline for some items, in particular those related to leisure and social activities, with the result that a number of items dropped from above to below the 50 per cent threshold between 1999 and 2012 (Mack et al, 2013; Fahmy, 2014).

During this period, following extensive (and improved) qualitative development work, new items and activities were introduced into the surveys to ensure that the list reflected new consumer goods and changing priorities. So, for example, a computer, not asked about in 1983, was introduced as an item for adults in 1990 and for children in 1999 and has risen rapidly up the rankings; it is now seen as a necessity for children (Table 1.2). In 2012, other new items, which reflected concerns around financial insecurity and dental treatment that had arisen strongly from the focus groups (Fahmy et al, 2012), were tested and were seen to be necessities.

At the international level, the research introduced a mechanism whereby the minimum standards set for a society could be higher than prevailing standards. For example, a 2006 survey in South Africa by Oxford University's Centre of the Analysis of South African Social Policy found that eight out of 36 of the socially perceived necessities were *not* possessed by a majority of the population (Wright, 2011).

Over the last thirty years, these studies have had an impact. The material indicators of deprivation identified through these surveys have contributed to a number of official measures of poverty, including the 2010 Child Poverty Act in the UK and the poverty targets of the Irish government in 2007. The method is also being adopted by the governments of Mexico, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Uganda and New Zealand. UNICEF has used the EU's deprivation indicators for its Child Deprivation Index (Adamson, 2012).

Most particularly, the consensual nature of the method has played an important part in a wider acceptance of the relative view of poverty – that needs change over time. By the mid-2000s, the Conservative Party had backed the concept of relative poverty, explicitly rejecting the notion that poverty can only be seen in absolute terms (Cameron, 2006). This did not mean that the debate was closed, far from it. Instead the grounds were shifting from the denial that there was relative deprivation that had marked earlier Conservative pronouncements to disagreement about causations – and to proposals for alternative measures (discussed later) (Duncan Smith, 2006).

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## Wider views of deprivation

At the same time, there have been growing criticisms that this approach – based, as it is, on what households can purchase – incorporates too narrow a view of deprivation. The most substantial of these come from the perspective of the ‘capabilities’ approach developed over many years by Amartya Sen. From this perspective, Sen argues that poverty should be seen as the deprivation of a range of basic capabilities – the various ‘functionings’ that enable people to lead a life they choose and value (Sen, 2010; Sen, 2009, pp 231–65). The concept embraces a wide variety of factors – disability, discrimination, age, gender, environmental disadvantages, for example – which can limit people’s ability to ‘flourish’ (Anand, 2016).

This leads to two main strands of criticism of using ‘an enforced lack of necessities’ as a measure of deprivation (Hick, 2012). The first is that linking the concept of necessities to items and activities that everyone should be able to afford, excludes many other aspects of life that are crucial to a person’s well-being. The second is that, having identified these necessities, basing the concept of an ‘enforced’ lack on access to resources ignores other non-income constraints.

The first criticism is more a matter of how different aspects of deprivation are usefully categorised rather than a more fundamental disagreement about what might constitute multiple deprivation. One of the most difficult questions in this respect is how to handle those core aspects of our well-being that in some societies are left to private purchases but in others are publicly provided. In the UK, schooling and health services are (largely) free at the point of delivery, which means they are not included in measurements based on household and individual income. But it does not mean that they are unimportant to poverty. Clearly both are.

The 1983 *Breadline Britain* survey failed to include a sufficient coverage of services and was open to the criticism that, in J. K. Galbraith’s iconic phrasing, by concentrating on access to ‘private affluence’ it had ignored ‘public squalor’ (Galbraith, 1958). In the 1990 survey, a set of questions on services was introduced mirroring the approach taken to ‘necessities’ – that is, people were asked about a range of services provided by public bodies and whether they were ‘essential’ or just ‘desirable’ and then about their use of these services and their adequacy (Gosschalk and Frayman, 1991) – an approach that was repeated in 1999 and 2012.

p. 37 Analysis of the 2012 PSE-UK survey finds that those who are deprived (in that they cannot afford three or more necessities) are somewhat more likely than others to have experienced constraints in access to services but, overall, differences and constraints were relatively low for key publicly provided services, notably primary health care and school resources (Bramley and Besemer, 2016) (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). Universal services, such as those found in the UK, provide a crucial role in protecting those who are materially deprived.

In 1999, with social exclusion more prominent on political and policy agendas, the questionnaire expanded in other ways to include, for example, measures of social isolation and support and, taking account of the privatisation of many services, wider measures of service exclusion (Levitas, 2006, pp 123–60). Using a framework referred to as the ‘Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix’ (B-SEM) (Levitas et al, 2007), the PSE-UK 2012 survey furthered these developments with new measures to capture exclusion across a wider range of domains and to reflect underlying changes to society, such as changing labour market practices (see Chapter 6) and increasing concerns about the quality of life, particularly around the environment. These improvements mirror developments at an international level, where interest in well-being has joined with environmental concerns about growth (particularly the dangers posed by climate change) to promote a move away from the money metric measures that have dominated poverty reduction programmes in the past to wider measures of deprivation, such as the UN’s Multidimensional Poverty Index or UNICEF’s child well-being index (Bradshaw et al, 2006).

The second criticism – that linking ‘enforced’ to income ignores other constraints – also raises an important question. As Hick argues:

It is incongruous, however, to argue that something is of serious concern if one is deprived of it because of a lack of resources but of little or no concern if as a result of other constraints.

(Hick, 2012)

For a range of material goods, this has little bearing – for those who do not possess a good, the options are covered by ‘not wanting’ and ‘can’t afford’. But for social activities, this is not the case. A range of potential constraints – including disability, discrimination or time – may also be important, as may a lack of provision. In the 2012 PSE-UK survey, the question relating to participation in social activities was adapted so that, in addition to the options of ‘do’, ‘don’t do and don’t want to do’ and ‘don’t do and can’t afford’, a new option of ‘don’t do for any other reason’ was introduced, along with a range of other reasons for which interviewees could identify all that applied.

Looking at the activities seen as necessities by a majority of people (see Table 1.3), non-monetary barriers on participation are, particularly for adults, significant and indeed more important for some activities than monetary constraints. For some – notably ‘visiting family and friends in hospital or other institutions’ – they are particularly striking. These non-monetary barriers affect all income groups, with similar levels of increased non-participation for each group.

**Table 1.3:** Percentages unable to participate in activities seen as necessities: UK, 2012

	Do not do, cannot afford to do (%)	Do not do for another reason (%)
<b>Activities seen as necessities for adults</b>		
Taking part in sport/exercise activities or classes	11	12
A hobby or leisure activity	8	7
Celebrations on special occasions, such as Christmas	3	1
Attending weddings, funerals and other such occasions	3	4
Visiting friends or family in hospital or other institutions	3	20
<b>Activities seen as necessities for children</b>		
Celebrations on special occasions	2	0
A hobby or leisure activity	6	3
Going on a school trip at least once a term	7	9
Toddler group, nursery or play group once a week	4	10
Children’s clubs or activities	9	8
Day trips with family once a month	21	5
A holiday away from home at least one week a year	26	2

Looking at those who do not participate in three or more activities (see Table 1.4), three constraints stand out as particularly important: lack of time due to paid work; lack of time due to child care; and poor health/disability. While the first of these is closely related to household resources (working more to earn enough), the others shift the focus to other factors – in particular, issues around gender and disability. Identifying these other constraints is important – and provides a baseline for future comparisons. Whether they should be incorporated into deprivation-based poverty measures, or not, is then a question of what provides most clarity. Incorporating too much in one measure can obscure rather than enlighten. Maintaining these wider conceptions of deprivation and non-monetary constraints as separate from a resource-based definition allows the interconnections to be

**Table 1.4:** The factors which are important in preventing non-participation in activities<sup>\*</sup>

	Percentage of those who do not participate in three or more activities mentioning the following factors <sup>†</sup>
Fear of burglary or vandalism	3
Fear of personal attack	4
Lack of time due to child care responsibilities	27
Lack of time during to other caring responsibilities	10
Lack of time due to paid work	29
Poor health/disability	22
No vehicle/poor public transport	14
No one to go out with	11
Problems with physical access	5
Feel unwelcome (eg due to disability, ethnicity, gender, age etc)	5

Notes:

<sup>\*</sup> This includes all activities not just those seen as necessities and includes all reasons for non-participation.

<sup>†</sup> Respondents could identify more than one reason.

p. 39 explored. With rising levels of economic inequality, it is particularly important to maintain the centrality to conceptions of poverty of resource-based measures.

## Income-based measure of poverty

It is useful here to step back and examine income-based poverty measures, which have continued to dominate official measures of poverty as noted in the Introduction. They dominate, at least partly, because income data is already collected, making it easier to track trends or compare across countries.

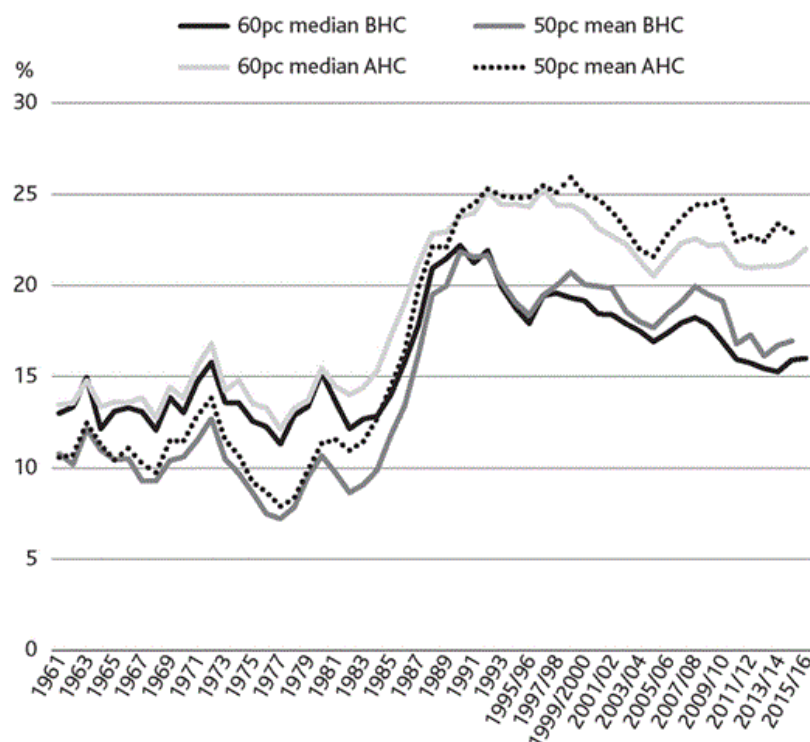
Income-based measures all depend on identifying a threshold, below which people are classed as in poverty. Prior to 1985, the threshold was based on the Supplementary Benefit level but in 1988 this was changed and

the first *explicitly relative* measure of income poverty was introduced, with the new 'Households Below Average Incomes' (HBAI) series. Initially, the government used a threshold of 50 per cent of *mean* incomes, which meant that the threshold reflected the whole income range, moving as incomes at the bottom or at the top rose or fell. During the 1990s, concerns grew that this made 'tackling poverty' too difficult, as rises in incomes of the poorest lifted the threshold. In 1999/2000, it was switched to using 60 per cent of *median* income (the mid-point). This meant that the threshold did not rise as the incomes of the poorest rose (as long as they remained below the median) but it also meant that increases to the incomes of the rich could be ignored.

When, in 1999, Tony Blair announced his ambitious promise to halve child poverty within twenty years, it was this 60 per cent of median income measure that was targeted. However, detaching the measure of poverty from the widening income inequality at the top has a significant implication for the degree of poverty measured.

Figure 1.1 shows the trends in relative income poverty using the 50 per cent mean and 60 per cent median measure for the whole population, both *before* and *after* housing costs (BHC and AHC). In the 1960s and 1970s, mean-based measures were significantly lower

**Figure 1.1:**



Relative income poverty using 60% median and 50% mean incomes, before and after housing costs: 1961-2015/16, Britain

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, table Bn 19; Households Below Average Incomes, 1994/5 to 2015/16, table 3a

Note: BHC = before housing costs, AHC = after housing costs.

than those using the median. During the 1980s, as the rich pulled away from the rest of society, that gap closed and in the late 1990s, the paths crossed over. Since then, mean-based measures have been higher than the median-based ones. In addition, for both median- and mean-based measures, poverty has risen more sharply when based on income *after* rather than *before* housing costs. The 'official' relative income based on 60 per cent of median income before housing costs now produces the lowest level of poverty of all four measures (median and mean, before and after housing costs).

Nevertheless, whichever measure is taken, the trends are striking. There was a very sharp rise in income poverty during the 1980s, mirroring the sharp rise in income inequality during this decade (Atkinson, 2015). This stabilised at much higher rates during the 1990s and, with some fluctuations, ended up at the end of the decade at much the same levels. From the early 2000s, there was some reduction in income poverty, primarily as a result of a range of new means-tested benefits introduced by the Labour government and, with some fluctuations, it ended the decade lower than at the start. The reduction was greatest using 60 per cent of median income (BHC), the official measure, and, on this basis, it can be said that around 1 million children were taken out of 'poverty' during the Labour government years. It was, of course, this measure that was being targeted.

However, while this was clearly beneficial to the children concerned, the measure remains essentially arbitrary. Without external evidence as to what levels of income might be necessary to meet people's needs, there is little justification for saying that it has lifted people out of 'poverty'.

From the mid-1990s, an approach to measuring income-based poverty based on establishing the minimum income level necessary to meet people's needs was developed (Middleton et al, 1994; Bradshaw et al, 2008). This approach used focus groups to establish what people needed, unlike the PSE/*Breadline Britain* approach which uses a national survey. The focus groups, advised by experts where necessary on issues like nutrition, are charged with establishing, for a number of different family types, a minimum contemporary standard necessary to meet basic *needs* rather than *wants*. The budget necessary to achieve this standard is then calculated.<sup>4</sup> This requires a detailed list of *all* the sorts of items that are seen as necessary to be drawn up, unlike the PSE/*Breadline Britain* approach which works using a range of representative items. Since 2008, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has published a Minimum Income Standard (MIS) for different household types, updated annually.

p. 42 This approach has the advantage, when looking at income poverty, of providing a clear basis for the choice of the threshold. It has highlighted the inadequacies of benefit levels and of using 60 per cent of median income as a threshold. Indeed, MIS as a percentage of median income (BHC) has grown for non-pensioner households from around 75 per cent in 2008/9 to between 85 and 90 per cent in 2012/13 (Hirsch, 2015, p 27). In addition, it has clear policy implications and, through the Living Wage Campaign, has had considerable impact.

But the relationship between income and deprivation is complex. Income is just one aspect of the financial resources households can draw on and households can have other demands on their incomes, notably debt repayments. Costs for some key aspects of living standards (notably housing and child care) can vary greatly depending on where you live and who you can draw on for support. In addition, deprivation and income operate on different timescales. Deprivation levels are affected by resources (as opposed to just income) *over time* while income measures are based on a snapshot of income at the current moment in time.

## Deprivation trends

Indeed, while income-based measures have shown a decline in poverty, measures based on people's living standards have not. The PSE/*Breadline Britain* surveys allow trends to be tracked. Taking households who cannot afford three or more necessities – as defined at the time of each survey – there has been a sharp rise in multiply deprived households in Britain from 14 per cent in 1983 to 20 per cent in 1990, 22 per cent in 1999 and 30 per cent in 2012<sup>5</sup> (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p 54). Some critics argue that because the items seen as necessities change over time (reflecting changing standards) this invalidates comparisons over time, arguing that 'apples' are being compared to 'pears' (Snowdon, 2013). However, *all* comparisons of living standards over time require changes to the basket of goods included, precisely because society changes. The basket of goods making up the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is updated annually and hence real incomes (adjusted for inflation) – and, in turn, income-based poverty measures – are based on changing baskets. What matters is that, as is the case in the PSE/*Breadline Britain* research, the same methodology is used to determine the items included. On this basis, there has been a rise in overall *relative* deprivation across the last thirty years (Gordon, et al, 2013).

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New items and activities, introduced to reflect changing lifestyles, have come to be seen as necessities, and increasing numbers have been unable to keep up with these higher standards. But the rise in deprivation since 1999 does not stem just from changes to the items seen as necessities. Table 1.5 looks at the items and activities seen as necessities in 1983 and in subsequent years (four items, marked with an asterisk, are included though they were no longer seen as a necessity in 2012). It shows the percentages for each year who cannot afford that item. Across this 30-year period, there were some improvements, in particular a decline in the percentages lacking key consumer goods. But for some necessities, levels of deprivation, which had shown some improvement in the 1990s, are now nearly as high, or higher, than in 1983; notably those relating to housing and heating, items which have been seen as a necessity by large majorities in all surveys.

**Table 1.5:** Percentages unable to afford necessities, 1983, 1990, 1999, 2012

	1983	1990	1999	2012
<b>Household's items</b>				
Can't afford adequate heating in home	5	3	3	9
Live in a damp home	6	2	7	10
Don't have enough bedrooms for children	10	7	3	9
Washing machine	6	4	2	1
Telephone	11	7	2	2
Television	(-)	1	(-)	(-)
<b>Adults' items and activities</b>				
Two meals a day	4	1	1	3
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	8	3	2	5
Warm, waterproof coat	7	4	4	4
Two-pairs of all-weather shoes	9	4	7	8
New, not secondhand clothes *	6	4	6	15
Celebrations on special occasions	4	4	2	4
Hobby or leisure activity	7	6	7	8
Presents for family and friends once a year *	5	5	4	7
Holiday away from home one week a year *	21	20	18	25
Roast joint/vegetarian equivalent once a week *	7	6	4	9

Notes:

\* Not seen as a necessity in 2012 but seen as one in all previous years

(-) Too small to measure.

Since 1999, the picture has deteriorated across the board. As can be seen from Table 1.6, for a majority of the items and activities seen as necessities in both 2012 and 1999 and for all those items seen as necessities in 1999 but not in 2012 (those below the dashed line in Table 1.6), the percentage who cannot afford them has risen and for only one item (a washing machine) has it fallen. Some of these rises,



**Table 1.6:** Households going without: 1999 and 2012

Adult Items and activities	Percentage of households who cannot afford necessities: Great Britain		Percentage point change 1999 to 2012
	1999	2012	
	Lack, can't afford	Lack, can't afford	
Heating to keep home adequately warm	3	9	+6
Damp-free home	7	10	+3
Two meals a day	1	3	+2
Visit friends, or family in hospital or other institutions	3	3	0
Replace or repair broken electrical goods *	12	26	+14
Fresh fruit and vegetables every day	5	7	+2
Washing machine	2	1	-1
All recommended dental treatment *	n/a	17	n/a
Celebrations on special occasions	2	4	+2
Warm, waterproof coat	4	4	0
Attend weddings, funerals and other such occasions	3	3	0
Telephone	2	2	0
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	2	5	+3
Enough bedrooms for every child aged 10+ ‡	3	9	+6
Curtains or window blinds	n/a	1	n/a
Hobby or leisure activity	7	8	+1
Enough money to keep your home in a decent state of decoration	15	20	+5
Household contents insurance	10	12	+2
Appropriate clothes for job interviews *	4	8	+4
Table and chairs at which all the family can eat	n/a	5	n/a
Taking part in sport/exercise activities or classes	n/a	10	n/a
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	7	8	+1
Regular savings (of at least £20 a month) for rainy days §	27	33	+6
Television	0	0	0

	Regular payments to an occupational or private pension	n/a	30	n/a
	Replace worn-out clothes with new not secondhand clothes	6	15	+9
	Presents for family or friends once a year	4	7	+3
p. 45	↳ Friends or family around for a meal or drink at least once a month	6	11	+5
	Holiday away from home, not staying with relatives	18	25	+7
	An outfit to wear for social or family occasions such as parties and weddings	4	8	+4

Notes: Items are listed by the percentage thinking the item a necessity in 2012. Items below the dashed line were not seen a necessity in 2012 but were seen as one in 1999.

\* These items and activities give percentage of adults not households.

† percentage of working age adults: taken as men aged 18-65, women aged 18-60.

‡ for households with children only, for children of different sex.

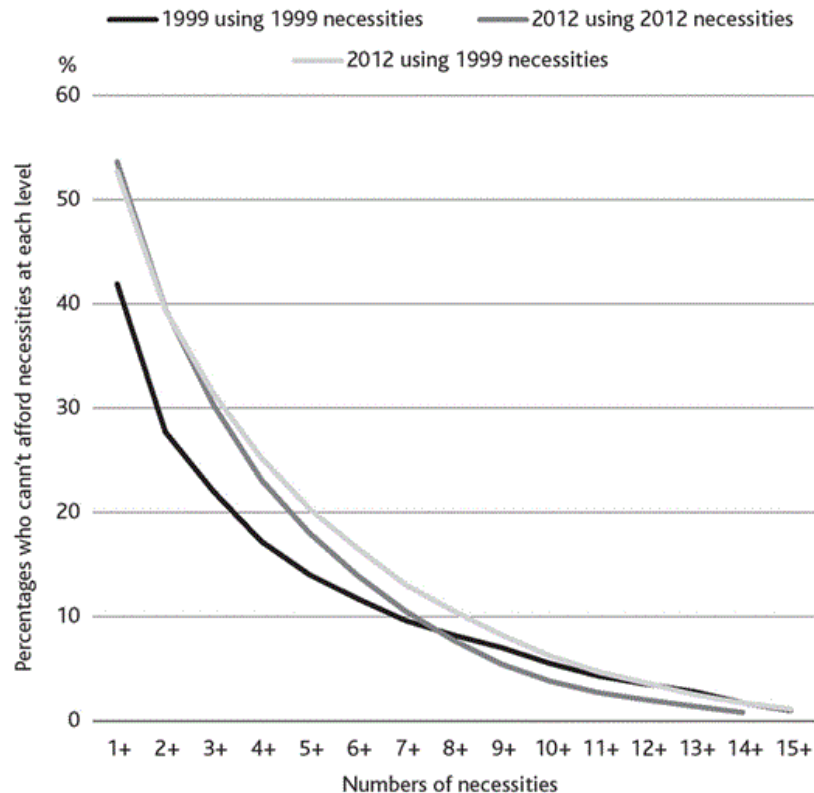
§ in 1999 this question was 'Regular savings (of at least £10 a month) for rainy days or retirement'.

n/a – not asked in 1999.

p. 44 for example repairing or replacing broken electrical goods (which are increasingly manufactured in a way that makes them more difficult to repair), are particularly sharp. Similarly, levels of deprivation among children have risen since 1999, with the percentages going without because of their families' lack of money increasing for the majority of necessities (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p 45).

The overall impact is that, between 1999 and 2012, there has been a rise in both relative deprivation levels, using a changing standard, and absolute deprivation, using a fixed standard. This can be seen from Figure 1.2. This shows the cumulative counts for adults for: the percentages in 2012 unable to afford the items and activities *seen as necessities in 2012*; the percentages in 2012 unable to afford the items and activities *seen as necessities in 1999*<sup>6</sup>; and the percentages in 1999 unable to afford items and activities *seen as necessities in 1999*. When compared to the 1999 count, the 2012 count using the 1999 standard therefore shows changes in absolute (fixed-standard) deprivation, while the 2012 count using the 2012 standard shows changes in relative deprivation.

**Figure 1.2:**



Rise in absolute and relative deprivation: adults, Britain

Source: Lansley and Mack (2015), p 56, 268

This rise in relative and absolute poverty since 1999 is a very different trend from that found using income measures (see Figure 1.1) – these ↴

showed a decline in relative income poverty during this period for both before and after housing costs (though greater before housing costs). The difference is a result of a number of trends.

While the incomes of those at the bottom have risen compared to the median (hence the fall in relative income poverty), their incomes fell in real terms from 2008 as the recession and wider austerity began to bite, having been stagnating since 2004. The result was that in 2012/13, the incomes of those in the bottom quarter were no higher than in 2000 (IFS, 2016). Indeed, what's been happening is that the proceeds of growth have been increasingly skewed to the top 10 per cent and, in particular, the top 1 per cent. While overall measures of inequality such as the Gini coefficient (which is constructed in a way that means that it is more sensitive to changes in the middle, and less to changes in the extremes) showed a flattening of the rise in inequality from the 1990s, looking at the growth in incomes of different deciles ↴ shows the top pulling away from everyone (OECD, 2015; Atkinson, 2015).

At the same time, levels of debt among poorer households rose, partly because of declining incomes and partly because of the ease of credit. This had significant implications for the amount left to pay for everyday needs (Lansley and Mack, 2015, pp 58–60; see also Chapter 11). In addition, there have been differential changes in the cost of living with the prices of items brought by those on lower incomes rising faster than the CPI (Hirsch, 2013). This is particularly true for what had become private utilities, such as the energy companies (Hall, 2016).

There have also been fundamental changes in the nature of work that have led to greater insecurity in employment and great instability of incomes. It is marked by a rise in the use of 'self-employment' status

by companies, short-term and zero-hours contracts, deteriorating holiday and sickness benefits, shorter and unpredictable hours and higher rates of job turnover (Standing, 2011; Bailey, 2016; see also Chapter 6). This has left people struggling to get by when in work, and unable to build up reserves for times out of work. Combined with increasingly inadequate levels of benefits and tougher conditionality tests for those excluded from the labour market, this has led to higher levels of deprivation and, in some cases, severe poverty and destitution (as described in Chapter 3).

The improvement in relative income poverty is misleading. It does not reflect the increased strains and stress on people's lives that stem from insecurity, indebtedness and the privatisation of risk and it hides the ways in which benefit changes have severely and adversely affected some groups. This underlines the value of using the PSE/*Breadline Britain* measures of material and social deprivation based on consensually agreed minimum standards. By allowing both multiple aspects of deprivation and specific areas of deprivation to be examined, it offers a much fuller view of what really matters in people's lives.

## A changing political backdrop

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In 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government came to power determined on an aggressive programme of austerity, targeted largely on benefit cuts. Faced with the evidence of already high levels of deprivation and with their tax and benefit changes set to hit the poorest the hardest (Browne and Elming, 2015), they were keen to shift the debate to new measures based on subjective, rather than objective, indicators of people's well-being, and on lifestyles and behaviours rather than resources or living standards.

During the 2000s, there had been a growing interest in concepts like 'personal satisfaction' and 'happiness', notably from behavioural economics and 'positive' psychology (Layard, 2005) but also the sustainable development movement, and these had fallen on politically fertile ground. David Cameron had been an early advocate and soon after taking office set up a consultation on a National Well-being Index. In 2011, the Coalition government introduced new indicators of subjective well-being into government data collection (Tomlinson and Kelly, 2013; see also Chapter 12). But while such 'happiness' measures may tell us something about an individual's state of mind, for making *interpersonal* comparisons of well-being, they are both restrictive and misleading (Sen, 2009, pp 282–6). This is because people in adverse circumstances adapt to their situation, rating it by what they have come to expect. They 'come to terms' with it (Kelly, 2014).

The moves to undermine child poverty measurement caused greater controversy. Before the 2010 election, both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats partners had signed up to the Child Poverty Act, one of the last acts of the Labour government, which had incorporated both income and deprivation indicators of poverty measurement. But on taking office there was a rapid retreat from these commitments.

In 2012, the Department of Work and Pensions put out a consultation document on child poverty measurement. Ignoring decades of academic research, it drew instead on proposals from the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) – a think tank set up in 2004 under the auspices of Iain Duncan Smith. The CSJ had long argued that poverty was the result of behavioural problems and the government consultation document, directly echoing the CSJ's own proposals (Centre for Social Justice, 2012), proposed a shift to measuring worklessness, alcohol and drug abuse, family stability, parental skills and the like. Radically downplaying the role of income-based measures (misleadingly, using the limitations of these measures, discussed above, to deny the importance of income to people's lives) no mention was made of living standards or low pay. It was widely seen as a mishmash with one defining characteristic – it placed blame on individual behaviour not structural failure (Roberts and Stewart, 2015).

Those wishing to roll back the active state have long argued that the problem of poverty was the fault of the poor themselves, labelling them as ‘skivers’, ‘lazy’, ‘profligate’ and the like. With this consultation, and ministers’ speeches, the rhetoric was being lifted to new levels by the Coalition government (Pantazis, 2016).

p. 49 The consultation paper was condemned as possibly the worst document to have ever come out of the DWP, to have had no coherent concept of poverty, and to have completely muddled measures of poverty with possible causes and consequences of poverty, characteristics and associations (Bradshaw, 2013). In the end, this attempt to redefine poverty was put on the backburner for the duration of the Coalition – but not before it had achieved its primary aim of downplaying the importance of lack of income as a cause of poverty.

On winning the 2015 general election, the new Conservative government turned their attention back to this issue. With income-based child poverty projected to rise sharply, largely as a direct result of the next round of benefit cuts (Browne and Hood, 2016), in 2016 the Child Poverty Act and its targets were repealed. This was a blatant attempt to remove the question of rising poverty from political scrutiny, although, following an amendment in the House of Lords to retain a statutory duty on the government to publish the data for the indicators used to track child poverty, it will not, as explained in the concluding chapter, wholly succeed.

## Conclusion: lessons learnt

Fifty years of poverty research has led to more sophisticated understandings of the different dimensions of deprivation and poverty. More reliable measures that capture and quantify the different ways in which an individual’s experiences may be limited by a lack of household resources have been developed and tracked over time. The use of public opinion to establish minimum standards has helped establish agreement on the need to see poverty in *relative* terms, while at the same time enabling an approach which grounds poverty in concrete deprivations which can provide a basis for absolute, as well as relative, comparisons. This chapter has also argued that it is important to see measures of poverty based on deprivation stemming from a lack of resources alongside deprivations that stem from non-income constraints and lack of access to services.

The PSE/*Breadline Britain* research has shown the devastating effect that a lack of resources has on people’s lives. It has uncovered rising levels of relative deprivation across this period, reflecting the widening of inequality. The PSE-UK 2012 research has also shown that levels of deprivation, both absolute and relative, have risen sharply in the twenty-first century while relative income poverty has remained static. This highlights the importance of looking directly at deprivation, rather than the proxy of income, in measuring poverty.

p. 50 Yet, at a political level, the impact has been limited. The Conservative and Coalition governments have been more interested in trying to redefine poverty out of existence than acknowledging that there is a problem. Most particularly, there has been more effort to demonise the poor than address the underlying structural causes, an effort to which much of the popular media has enthusiastically contributed. While poverty research cannot be blamed for wider political trends, it is worth pausing to consider whether there needs to be a shift in emphasis.

Back in 1965, Richard Titmuss wrote a short essay on ‘the rediscovery of poverty’ (Titmuss, 1965). Noting that it was ‘poverty’, not ‘inequality’, that was being ‘rediscovered’, he warned of the dangers of programmes aimed at the poor ‘as a definable class’, namely that ‘it risks stigmatising the poor by their personal characteristics and circumstances’. He goes on to argue that:

The political alternative to separate, deprecating programmes for the poor is to channel more resources to them through established, socially approved, ‘normal’ institutions. ... But what we are

discussing then is something more fundamental: we are not defining poverty and devising separate laws for the poor, but embarking on a dialogue about inequality.

(Titmuss, 1965)

It is, perhaps, this dialogue that needs to come more to the fore. And it is a good moment to be doing this. Poverty research, itself, is taking us there. The most fundamental conclusion of this research is that deprivation has risen as inequality has risen. Indeed, many are now arguing that it is impossible to tackle poverty without looking at the whole economic picture, including, perhaps most particularly, the increasing share taken by those at the top (Atkinson, 2015, p 25). Moreover, the research highlights an increasing overlap between the issues that many households face and the ones that push the poorest and most vulnerable households into poverty – whether it is rising housing costs and shortages, insecurity at work and low pay, stagnating incomes and rising prices, pressures on time, the additional costs of caring responsibilities, personal debt, coping with long-term illness and poor health, financial security in old age, and much else. In this context, a return to an emphasis on universalism – Titmuss’s ‘normal’ institutions – aligns the interests of low, middle and even higher income groups.

p. 51 There has been a rapid rise in interest, research and discussion around these issues and their interconnections. In particular, there is a growing ↴ critique of the failures of the current model of neo-liberal capitalism (Jacobs and Mazzucato, 2016) and the detrimental consequences it has had on people’s lives (Pemberton, 2016; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; see also Chapter 11).

Poverty research needs to position itself firmly within these debates. It needs to see poverty not as a state but as a process, the poor not as a different group but as sharing the same vulnerabilities as all but the richest do. Poverty research, with its focus on what people need, plays a key part of this debate. It provides an alternative basis from that of the ideological mainstream – that of market forces, competition, profit maximisation – for a discussion about how resources (private and public) should be distributed. It could be said that it is a discussion about how to distribute the products of society to each according to their needs – and that idea goes back a lot further than fifty years.

## Notes

- 1 For details, including original documentation, see: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/townsend-archive>.
- 2 Stewart Lansley, who had worked on the National Institute of Economic and Social Research’s study of low income households, was subsequently recruited to the LWT team.
- 3 From private conversations with author.
- 4 See the MIS project website, [www.minimumincomestandards.org](http://www.minimumincomestandards.org), for further details.
- 5 For comparability across surveys, only those who can’t afford a necessity are counted. If those who can’t do activities for other reasons are included the percentages for 2012 rise from 30 to 35 per cent. Being able to afford an unexpected expense of £500 is excluded from this count as, though a seen as a necessity, it was asked about only on a ‘yes’/‘no’ basis, if included the percentage rises for 30 to 33 per cent.
- 6 That is, the 2012 count includes items and activities seen as necessities in 1999 even if they were no longer seen as necessities in 2012 (those below the dashed line in Table 1.6) and excludes those seen as necessities in 2012 not asked about in 1999. The 1999 count also included four items that were not asked about in 2012, namely visit to school, collecting children from school, a dictionary in the house, and carpets. As the percentages lacking these items in 1999 were small, the effect will be marginal.

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