



Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

Working paper, Analysis series No.4

Attitudes to necessities in the PSE 2012 survey: are minimum standards becoming less generous?

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Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

Overview

The Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Project is funded by the Economic, Science and Research Council (ESRC). The Project is a collaboration between the University of Bristol, University of Glasgow, Heriot Watt University, Open University, Queen's University (Belfast), University of York, the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The project commenced in April 2010 and will run for three-and-a-half years.

The primary purpose is to advance the 'state of the art' of the theory and practice of poverty and social exclusion measurement. In order to improve current measurement methodologies, the research will develop and repeat the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey. This research will produce information of immediate and direct interest to policy makers, academics and the general public. It will provide a rigorous and detailed independent assessment on progress towards the UK Government's target of eradicating child poverty.

Objectives

This research has three main objectives:

- To improve the measurement of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and standard of living
- To assess changes in poverty and social exclusion in the UK
- To conduct policy-relevant analyses of poverty and social exclusion

For more information and other papers in this series, visit www.poverty.ac.uk

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Attitudes to necessities in the PSE 2012 survey: are minimum standards becoming less generous?

Summary

This working paper¹ reports the findings from the 2012 Omnibus Survey of UK module on attitudes to necessities² conducted as part of the ESRC Poverty and Social Exclusion research³. It describes and discusses the items and activities that are necessary for an acceptable standard of living in the UK for adults and children in 2012 according to the views of the adult population and examines the degree to which there is a consensus among different groups as to what is a necessity. This survey updates previous surveys undertaken in 1983, 1990, and 1999 in Great Britain and 2002/3 in Northern Ireland. This enables changes in people's perceptions of what is a necessity to be tracked over the last thirty years. The paper examines whether in the more constrained economic conditions of 2012 people had become less generous than in the past and if so why.

About the authors

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¹ An earlier version of this working paper was presented to the Social Policy Association conference, July 8-10, 2013, Are minimum standards becoming less generous?

² The 'Necessities of Life' survey was carried out between May and June 2012 and is based on a sample of 1,447 adults aged 16 or over in the Britain and 1,015 in Northern Ireland. The survey was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) in Britain and by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in Northern Ireland as part of their Omnibus surveys.

³ **The PSE: UK research** was financed by the [Economic and Social Research Council](#). It is a major collaboration between the University of Bristol, Heriot-Watt University, The Open University, Queen's University Belfast, University of Glasgow and the University of York working with the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. ESRC Grant RES-060-25-0052.

Introduction

Since the Second World War, it has become increasingly accepted by social scientists that poverty in the UK is a relative concept in which needs should be determined by contemporary living standards and social mores. While political challenges to this view remain⁴, it is now widely accepted in academic circles. This development owes most to the work of Peter Townsend. 'Society itself is continuously changing and thrusting new obligations on its members', he wrote in 1962. 'They, in turn, develop new needs.'⁵ The concept was developed further in his pioneering and large scale survey of poverty conducted in 1969. '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 ... in the societies in which they belong.'⁶

To translate his theoretical concept into a practical way of measuring poverty, Townsend drew up a list of 60 indicators of living standards ranging from diet and clothing to home amenities and recreation. From this he drew up a 'deprivation index' of twelve of these items. He then went on to identify a poverty line using a statistical technique that related household incomes to the degree to which households lacked the items in the index.

Townsend's work was a significant advance on earlier work, but it suffered from a key weakness. The items chosen were essentially arbitrary. Why these twelve and not others? For Townsend, it is sufficient that the items represent common activities, widely practised and which are negatively correlated with income. 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'. Critics, such as David Piachaud, argued that this was a fundamental weakness that left the term poverty devoid of any "moral imperative that something should be done about it".⁷

The concepts of need and deprivation do not stand outside people's perceptions but are dependent upon it. As argued by Amartya Sen in his seminal work on *Poverty and Famines*: "Townsend has rightly emphasized the importance of 'the endeavour to define the style of living which is generally shared or approved by society'...One must, however, look also at the feelings of deprivation in deciding on the style of living the failure to share which is regarded as important".⁸

Seeking to overcome these limitations of the Townsend deprivation approach, Mack and Lansley developed the concept of *socially perceived necessities*.⁹ In 1983 they carried out

⁴ See, for example, Lansley S. (2011), *Redefining Poverty*, poverty.ac.uk; <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/analysis-poverty-measurement-life-chances-government-policy/redefining-poverty>

⁵ Townsend P. (1962), 'The meaning of poverty', *British Journal of Sociology*, 13, 3, p 225

⁶ Townsend, P. (1979), *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Penguin, p 31. Available at <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/free-resources-books/poverty-united-kingdom>

⁷ Piachaud, D. (1981), 'Peter Townsend and the Holy Grail', *New Society*, 10 September, 1981

⁸ Sen, A. K. (1982), *Poverty and Famines*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press)

⁹ Mack, J. and Lansley, S., (1985), *Poor Britain*, (London, George, Allen & Unwin). Available at <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/free-resources/poor-britain>

the *Living in Britain* survey, conducted by MORI for the ITV series '*Breadline Britain*', in an attempt to implement what might be termed a 'democratic' approach to identifying material and social needs. In this survey, the first ever to explore people's attitudes to necessities, a nationally representative sample was asked which of a list of 35 items, broadly representative of living standards, they thought 'were necessary and which all people should be able to afford, and to which they should not have to do without.'¹⁰

Only those indicators which were regarded as necessary by 50% or more of the population were used to construct a deprivation index. Their approach thus aimed:

"to try to discover whether there is a public consensus on what is an unacceptable standard of living for Britain in 1983 and, if there is a consensus, who, if anyone, falls below that standard. The idea underlying this is that a person is in 'poverty' when their standard of living falls below the minimum deemed necessary by current public opinion."¹¹

This approach, which has come to be known as the "consensual" approach, is different from the norms-based approach adopted by Townsend in that it is asking the public to make value judgements as to what is a necessity. For Townsend poverty was about being "excluded from ordinary patterns, customs and activities"¹² but this consensual approach does not imply that just because something is the norm, it will be seen as a necessity. So for, example most households (74%) have a car but most people (56%) do not see a car as a necessity. Equally, the consensual approach allows for items and activities which are not the norm still to be seen as necessities. It is interesting in this respect that work carried out in other countries using this approach of socially perceived necessities has identified as necessities items and activities which are not held by the majority of the population.¹³

One of the major outcomes of this study was to establish, for the first time, that there was a general consensus on what constituted a minimum standard of living in the Britain. The study found widespread agreement across all groups in society - across gender, age, occupation, income level, geography and even political views - about the relative importance of different items and activities.

One of the most important findings was that the public took a relativist view of poverty. Items considered to be necessities by a majority of people went beyond meeting basic physiological needs and reflected contemporary living standards. The public also took the view that poverty was about more than material goods and included access to a range of activities. The public firmly backed a conception of poverty that had at its core a person's ability to take part in the society in which they live. This finding was to have further resonance in the development of debates on and around social exclusion.¹⁴

¹⁰ Mack, J. and Lansley, S., (1985), *Poor Britain*, (London, George, Allen & Unwin)

¹¹ Mack, J. and Lansley, S., (1985), *Poor Britain*, (London, George, Allen & Unwin), p50

¹² Townsend P., *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Penguin, 1979 p 31.

¹³ See in particular, the work of the University of Oxford's Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy: [Working Paper 9: Socially Perceived Necessities in South Africa: Comparing the Views of Sub-groups of the Population](#) (2011), Gemma Wright

¹⁴ Social exclusion forefronts a person or a group's ability to participate in social, economic, political and cultural life and their relationships with others. While poverty has a profound effect on some, though not all, of these aspects of social exclusion, there are

Mack and Lansley repeated the Living in Britain survey in 1990¹⁵ and this approach formed the basis of the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey¹⁶ and the PSE 2002/3 Northern Ireland survey¹⁷.

While there have been a number of critiques and adaptations¹⁸, this ‘consensual’ method of measuring poverty – one based on majoritarian public opinion - has come to be increasingly widely used both domestically and internationally. In the UK, the Department of Work and Pensions¹⁹ has funded various studies that draw on the PSE studies to develop indicators of deprivation for inclusion in the Family Resources Survey and the Child Poverty Act of 2010 included measures of deprivation based on this past series of work. In 2007, the European Union conducted similar attitudes to necessities across the 27 member states to test out the deprivation indicators used to measure poverty and social exclusion.²⁰

Methodology

The 2012 Omnibus Survey aimed to update these previous Breadline Britain (1983 and 1990) and PSE studies (1999 and 2002/3) so that the items reflected current standards of living and priorities while maintaining a sufficient number of indicators comparable to past surveys to enable trends across time to be tracked. The indicators also needed to reflect the European Union’s anti-poverty targets adopted in June 2010 and the deprivation indicators used as part of these targets.²¹

As with the previous 1999 PSE survey and the earlier *Breadline Britain* surveys, qualitative fieldwork exploring the public’s perceptions of the necessities of life using focus group research also fed into the design of the survey questions.²² One of the reasons for using

other important causal factors of social exclusion such as age, disability, ethnicity, gender and employment status. These concepts are developed in Levitas, R. (2006) ‘The concept and measurement of social exclusion’ in Pantazis, C., Gordon, D. and Levitas, R. *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, Bristol, Policy Press.

¹⁵ The 1990 *Living in Britain* survey was conducted by MORI for the ITV series ‘*Breadline Britain in the 1990s*’. The survey’s findings are reported in Gordon, D. and Pantazis, C. (1997), *Breadline Britain in the 1990s*, (York, Ashgate)

¹⁶ The PSE 1999 survey was undertaken by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on behalf of a consortium from the Universities of Bristol, Heriot Watt, Loughborough and York and was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. See Gordon D., Levitas R. et al (2000), *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation) and Pantazis, C., Gordon, D. and Levitas, R. (2006), *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, (Bristol, The Policy Press)

¹⁷ The PSENI research was undertaken by Queen’s University Belfast and funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Department of Finance and Personnel. See Hillyard, P., Kelly, G. et al, (2003), *Bare Necessities*, (Democratic Dialogue, Belfast)

¹⁸ See for examples ‘[Consensual Approaches to the Definition of Poverty: Towards and Alternative Methodology](#)’ by Robert Walker (*Journal of Social Policy*, 16, 2, 213-225, 1987) and ‘[Adapting the consensual definition of poverty](#)’ by Bjørn Halleröd, Jonathan Bradshaw and Hilary Holmes (from *Breadline Britain in the 1990s*, Gordon and Pantazis, 1997)

¹⁹ McKay, S. and Collard, S. (2003) *Developing Deprivation Questions for the Family Resources Survey*, Working Paper Number 13, London, Department of Work and Pensions

²⁰ Special Eurobarometer (2007) [Poverty and Exclusion](#) (Brussels, European Commission)

²¹ See Gordon, D. (2011), *European 2020 poverty measurement*, [PSE methods working paper No. 10](#)

²² Fahmy, E., Pemberton, S. and Sutton, E. (2012), [Public Perceptions of Poverty and Social Exclusion: Final Report of Focus Group Findings](#) (PSE website)

focus groups to help inform the survey questions is to address critiques that experts produced the list of indicators. By using focus groups, participants from a wide range of backgrounds can suggest possible new indicators, comment upon past indicators and discuss and agree essential items everyone should be able to afford.

For the current PSE:UK research fourteen focus groups were undertaken involving 114 members of the public, in five locations across the UK, with the aim of trying to reach a negotiated settlement on which indicators best capture the necessities of life. In addition, a range of scientific methods were used to ensure the quality of the survey questions (expert review, cognitive interviews, pilot interviews, etc.).²³

The combined outcome of these activities resulted in a number of changes to the 1999 list involving the removal, addition or modification of questions. A few items in the 1999 survey were excluded including 'beds and bedding for everyone' because they were considered to be so widely achieved that they were no longer useful as indicators of deprivation. Following the focus groups, others were added (e.g. 'regular payments to an occupational or private pension', having 'curtains or window blinds', or having your 'hair done or cut regularly') to ensure that the survey better reflected current concerns about living standards and tested items of particular importance to certain groups and which had been previously untested. A small number of new items (e.g. 'being able to pay unexpected costs of £500') were included to see if items reflecting a broader financial concept of living standards were, or were not, seen as necessities. A few were slightly modified to avoid ambiguity in meaning.

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Respondents were interviewed in their homes and given a set of cards with a description of individual items, activities and services. In order to aid comparability with the previous surveys, a shuffle card approach was used involving respondents putting the cards into one pile if they thought the item or activity was a necessity which everyone should have and which they should not have to do without and another pile for items which were considered desirable but not necessary. The specific question asked to respondents was:

On these cards are a number of different items which relate to our standard of living. I would like you to indicate the living standards you feel all adults should have in Britain today by placing the cards in the appropriate box. BOX A is for items which you think are necessary – which all adults should be able to afford and which they should not have to do without. BOX B is for items which may be desirable but are not necessary.

²³ For full details of this process see the PSE UK 2012 Methods Development working papers at <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/pse-uk/methods-development>

Now, I would like you to do the same thing for the adult's activities on this set of cards– set H.

Now, I would like you to do the same thing for the items on this set of cards, set I, but this time thinking of children.

Now, I would like you to do the same thing for the children's activities on this set of cards – set J

Respondents were asked about 76 items (46 for adults and 30 for children).²⁴

The 2012 findings – an overview

As in the previous surveys, items and activities thought to be necessary by 50% or more of people are classed as 'necessities'. Of the 46 items and activities asked about for adults, 25 were found to be essential by a majority of people and of the 30 for children, 24 were seen as necessities by a majority. The full list can be viewed here: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/attitudes-necessities-uk-2012>.

The 2012 survey, like all the previous surveys, found that the public takes a relative rather than an absolute view of poverty. This is an important and key finding of this series of research studies.

The public clearly believes that a minimum standard is not simply about subsistence. They back the view that measures of poverty should reflect contemporary standards and should enable people to participate fully in the society in which they live.

The most heavily supported items do relate to what traditionally has been seen as basic needs – shelter, food and clothing. For **adults, the top three** items are:

- Heating to warm living areas of the home 96%
- Damp-free home 94%
- Two meals a day 91%

And for **children, the top four** are:

- Warm winter coat 97%
- Fresh fruit and vegetables once a day 96%
- New, properly fitting shoes 93%
- Three meals a day 93%

But there is also very strong support for a range of other items relating to social participation for both adults and children:

For adults, activities relating to social obligations rank highly:

²⁴ For the full list of items and questions see the [Omnibus 2012 Necessities module questionnaire](#).

- Visit friends or family in hospital or other institutions 90%
- Celebrations on special occasions 80%
- Attend weddings, funerals and other such occasions 79%

For children, a wide range of activities rank highly:

- Child celebration on special occasions 91%
- Child hobby or leisure activity 88%
- Toddler groups or nursery or play group at least once a week for pre-school aged children 87%
- Children's clubs or activities such as drama or football training 74%

Many of the child items gaining high levels of support related to developmental or educational opportunities:

- Garden or outdoor space to play safely 92%
- Books at home suitable for their age 92%
- Suitable place at home to study or do homework 89%
- Indoor games suitable for their age group 81%

For adults there is also strong support for a wide range of consumer goods and for the financial resources to maintain them:

- Replace or repair electrical goods 86%
- Washing machine 82%
- Telephone 77%
- Household contents insurance 70%

Looking at the items and activities that still gain majority support but are lower down the list, we find a similar diverse range of items and activities covering all aspect of our lives. For adults, these are concentrated on items around the home - whether consumer goods such as tables and chairs or the state of the home such as enough money to keep it in a decent state of decoration – with some allowance for activities outside the home such as a hobby or taking part in sport. The 2012 also survey tested a range of items relating to financial security now and in the future and found that there was, by a slim margin, majority support for these items

- To be able to pay unexpected costs of £500 55%
- Regular savings (of at least £20 a month) for rainy days 52%

For children, there is a further range of educational, developmental and leisure items and activities and two relating to money:

- Money to save 55%
- Pocket money 54%

But there are clear limits as to what people think are necessities. For examples, for adults only 15% think going to the cinema, theatre or music event once a month is a necessity and only 10% a dishwasher. And for children, only 8% of the public thinks an mp3 player or i-pod is and only 6% designer or brand name trainers.

The public tend to be more generous to children than adults. Of the 24 child necessities, eight child items were chosen as necessities by more than 90% of those interviewed. A further four received 80% backing. Of the 25 adult necessities, four were seen as necessities by over 90% and a further five by 80%.

Not only are the child items tested more likely to be seen as necessities than the adult items tested but taking like for like items, the percentages seeing the items as a necessity are higher for children than they are for adults. For examples:

	Adults	Children
Celebrations on special occasions	80%	91%
Warm winter coat (adults)/warm winter coat (child)	79%	97%
Hobby or leisure activity	70%	88%
Holiday away from home for at least week a year	43%	53%

A more detail analysis of the child necessities will be provided in a forthcoming PSE working paper on attitudes to child necessities by Gill Main and Jonathan Bradshaw.

A consensual measure of poverty?

The validity of this approach of socially perceived necessities rests on the idea that there is a minimum standard of living which is widely accepted by society. Taking a majority as the cut-off point, gives a strong degree of validity but it is also important that there is more general consensus about what constitutes this minimum standard. In other words, it is important that there is widespread agreement across all groups in society. As Pantazis et al²⁵ argue: "Otherwise, the definition of an acceptable living standard just becomes the opinion of one group against another." If the surveys do not find a high degree of consensus then the interests of minority groups could end up being overlooked if they are not shared by the majority.

The previous studies demonstrated a high degree of homogeneity in public perceptions of what constitute the necessities of life. Writing about the findings from the 1999 PSE survey, Pantazis et al state:

there is little doubt that perceptions of necessities are related to individual circumstances at the time of asking, and to changes in privation and prosperity that individuals may have influenced in the past. Nonetheless, many more people than might have been expected reflect a sensitive awareness of developments that have

²⁵ Pantazis, C., Gordon, D. and Levitas, R. (2006), *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, (Bristol, The Policy Press), p 90 If you're quoting the chapter and not the book the reference should be Pantazis, Gordon and Townsend

*taken place nationally in living standard. There is greater consensus about national living standard than there is direct experience of those standards...*²⁶

So does this consensus as to what is a necessity still hold?

The 2012 survey again found that there was a very high degree of consensus about what constitutes a minimum living standard. For all the groups by which the analysis has been broken down, there are overall very few instances where the majority of one group considers an item a necessity which is not also seen as a necessity by all other groups.

This table - www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/attitudes-necessities-groups-uk-2012 - looks at attitudes to the adult and child items and activities in the UK looking at the views of the whole sample and different groups within the sample. Colour gradients have been applied to reflect the percentage of each group that thinks that item is 'necessary' going from red for 100% support to green for 0%. So where 100% think an item is 'necessary' it is shaded deep red; this gradually changes through orange to yellow to green as the percentages decline; and is the deepest green when 0% think the item is a necessity. So looking at the table as a whole, the more uniform the shading across all groups, the more agreement there is between different groups. Outriders stand out because they are coloured differently (more red if a higher proportion in the group think the item a necessity and more green if a lower proportion do).

You can sort the table by the preferences of the overall sample or by any of the groups. This enables you to see items and activities where the views of the chosen group are different from other groups. By comparing any particular group with the views of the whole sample you can see any item or activity which that group thinks to be a necessity but not the sample overall and vice versa.

We see a very high overall level of agreement. Across gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, health, employment status, occupation, nature of work, education level, dependent children, housing tenure, and income level, there are very similar views on the relative importance of different items and activities. Items seen by high proportions of one group as a necessity are likely to be seen as a necessity by similarly high proportions of all other groups and conversely those ranked lowly by one group will be ranked lowly by all other groups.

Even among those with different political affiliations, there are very few differences. Comparing Conservatives versus Labour supporters (the percentages for these groups are for Great Britain only and not the UK) we find their views are extremely similar. Looking at other ways of breaking down political affiliation such as Conservative/Liberal Democrats versus Labour or coalition supporters versus non coalition supporters (not shown on this table) also shows that political affiliation has very little impact on people's views as to what are necessities.

There are also high levels of agreement between the nations and regions of the UK. Comparing the differences between Great Britain and Northern Ireland items reported as

²⁶ Pantazis, C., Gordon, D. and Levitas, R. (2006), *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, (Bristol, The Policy Press), p 118 as above

‘necessary’ using the harmonised UK Omnibus dataset, there is a high degree of consensus between GB and NI as to what items and activities are necessities.²⁷ No major differences are apparent between respondents about which items rated as necessities with only one item showing differences that are significant: respondents in NI were nearly twice as likely to report that attending a place of worship (church, mosque, synagogue) was a ‘necessary’ activity which people should be able to do with 55% in NI doing so and only 30% in GB.

The differences are greatest between the South of England and Northern Ireland, with people in Northern Ireland being overall slightly less likely to see an item or activity as a necessity. These national and regional differences will be explored further in a future working paper by Nick Bailey and Maria Gannon.

To look in more detail, we can view this data as a series of scatter plots. Scatter plots are a good way of comparing two mutually exclusive groups within the sample. On a scatter plot, the x axis of the graph relates to one group and the y axis to the other. On the graph, each point represents an item or activity, and its position on the graph is determined by the percentage of each of the groups being compared who think that item is a necessity. If low and high scores from one group are coupled with low and high scores from the other group, the points on the graph will be close together along a straight line running at an angle of 45°, indicating a robust positive relationship (in other words, strong agreement). The more scattered the points are on the graph, the weaker the relationship (that is, less agreement). Scatter plots enable attention to be drawn to any points positioned a distance away from the line, which may require further investigation.

Scatter plots also enable items which the majority of one of the groups being compared thinks to be a necessity but not the other to be easily identified: items and activities falling in the top quadrant (shaded pink) are seen by both groups to be necessities, items in the top left quadrant are seen by the group represented on the y axis as a necessity but not the other and those in the bottom right quadrant are seen by the group represented on the x axis as a necessity but not the other.

You can view the scatterplots showing attitudes to necessities for adult and child items and activities by age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, illness, employment, occupation, nature of work, education level, children/no children in household, owner occupation/tenancy, and political affiliation at www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/attitudes-necessities-scatterplots-uk-2012 . You can filter by adult and child and by items and activities. And you highlight those where the difference in opinion between the two groups is significant (significance has been judged using relative risk).²⁸

While there are some significant differences between groups, there are only a few that effect whether the item or activity is seen as a necessity or not.

For examples, the 2012 survey found that:

- Men and women do not differ significantly on any of the child items thought

²⁷ PSE Statistical briefing No. 4: [Great Britain versus Northern Ireland in the harmonised UK Omnibus 2012](#), Demi Patsios and Shailen Nandy

²⁸ For further details see Gordon D., *Why use relative risk?*, [PSE statistical note 1](#)

necessities by either group. And there are only four adult items thought to be necessities by one group but not the other: 48% of men think two pairs of all-weather shoes is a necessity and 59% of women and 41% of men think having family or friends round once a month is a necessity compared to 50% of women, while 56% of men think savings for a rainy day (of £20/month) is a necessity and 49% of women and 50% of men think that having a small amount of money to spend on yourself each week(not your family) is a necessity and 35% of females.

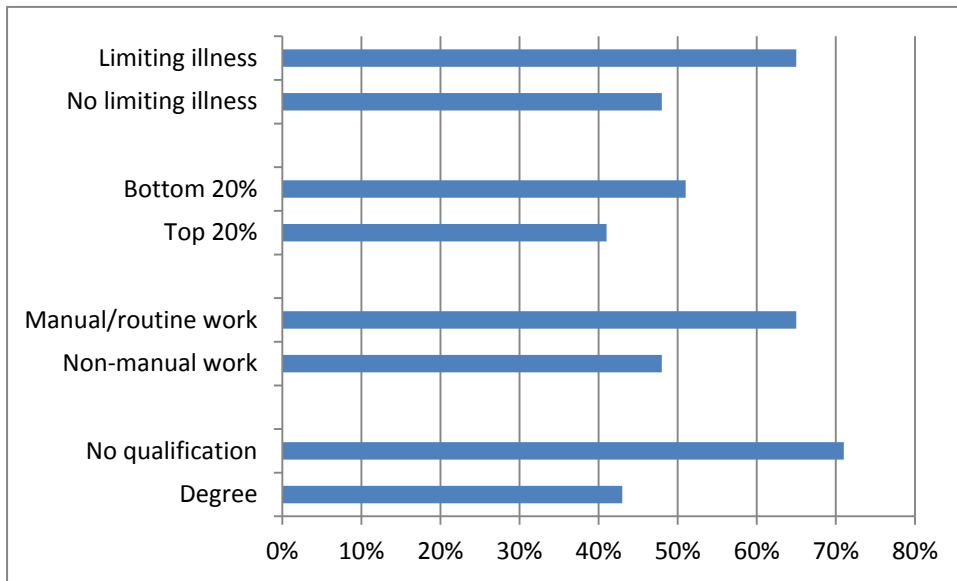
- Education level makes a little more difference but not much. Graduates and those with no qualifications disagree over only three adult items thought necessities overall. Graduates think regular payments to an occupational or private pension and taking part in sporting activities are necessities, but those with no qualifications do not. Those with no qualifications think television a necessity; graduates do not. There are five child items seen as necessities overall, which graduates don't see to be a necessity: money to save, pocket money, going on a school trip, a holiday away from home and having friends round for tea.
- For all 46 adult items, whether they were seen as necessities or not, there were no significant differences between those who saw themselves as Conservative or Labour supporters.
- Agreement between supporters of Labour and Conservatives over the 30 children's items is also high. Of children's items seen as a necessity overall, there is only one where there is significant disagreement. 61% of Labour supporters think children need at least four pairs of trousers, leggings, jeans or jogging bottoms, compared with 48% of Conservative supporters.

Agreement between various groups for both adult and child items and activities is high, but overall it is higher for children than adults. This is reflected in the greater support found overall for child items.

For both adult and child items and activities, those with high levels of support overall see, not surprisingly, little disagreement between groups. The greatest differences are among items and activities which have mid-levels of support.

In particular, there is one item which seen as a necessity by a majority overall where there is some considerable disagreement across groups as to whether it is a necessity - namely a television. While the vast majority of people actually have a television, their attitudes to whether it is a necessity vary. In particular, it is more important to those groups more likely to be in poverty (see Figure 1). Given that the poor are often criticised for the possession of a television, this is of interest.

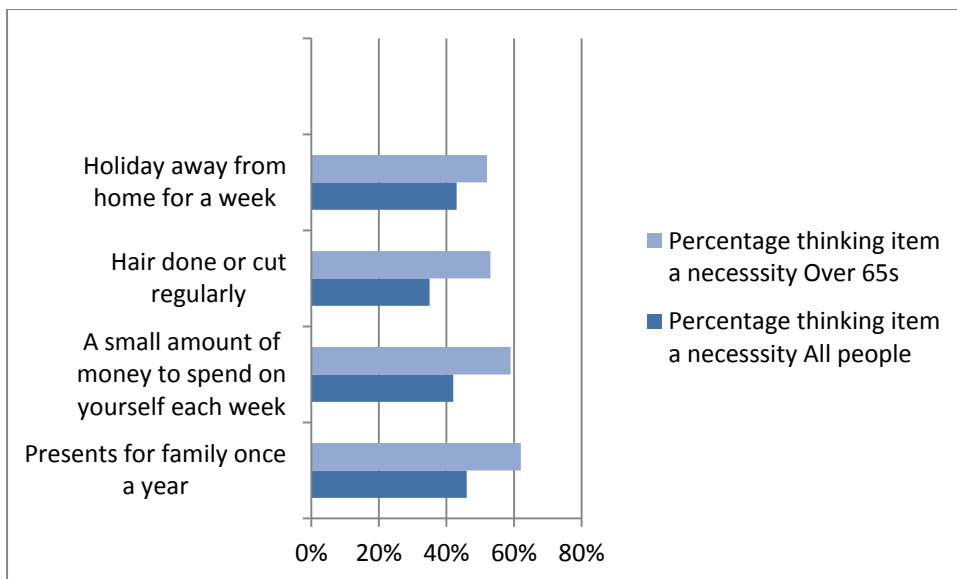
Figure 1: percentage of each group thinking a television is a necessity



While the overall pattern is one of consensus, there are some groupings which do show more differences than others and are worth examining in more detail.

The greatest variation in views as to what is a necessity is by age. Older people see a number of items as more important than people as a whole and there are four items seen as a necessity by those over 65 which are not seen so by the population as a whole (see figure 2). When looking at poverty among the elderly, it may be important to take this into account and include these items in an index of deprivation.

Figure 2: Items seen by the majority of older people as a necessity but not overall

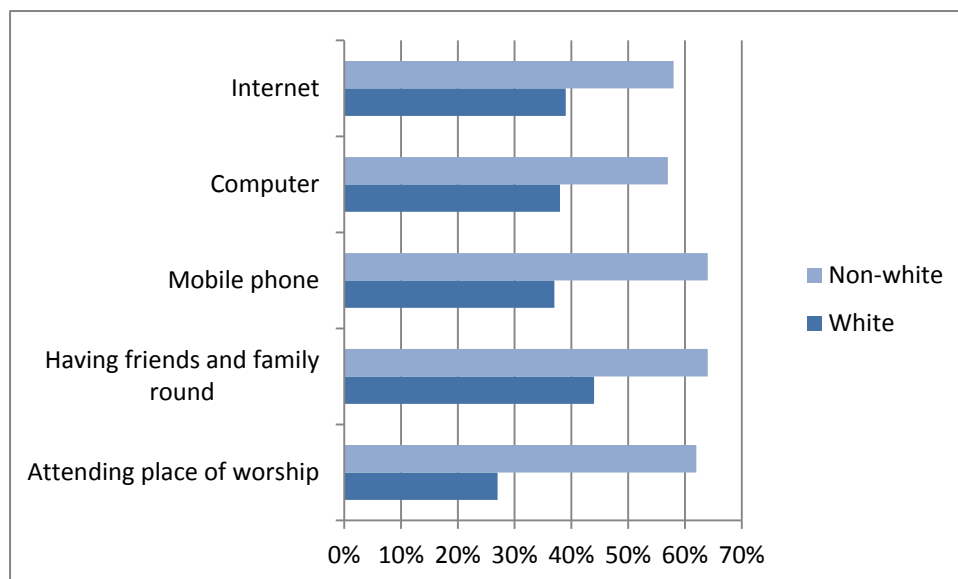


Conversely, with the exception of a few items such as a mobile phone and clothes for a job interview, younger people (16 to 24) are less likely than older people to see items as necessities.

This difference between different age groups continues a trend first identified in the 1999 survey. In the 1983 and 1990 surveys the differences between the older and younger age groups was not pronounced but by 1999 there generational differences were quite strong with, on average and for most items, younger people to be less likely to see them as necessities than older people. This has continued through to 2012 where again difference between the generations is identifiable and where again younger people are less generous than older people. This could be a result of increasing generational differences and priorities or possibly a more fundamental shift in attitudes which emphasises individual choices rather than a collective and shared culture. As we will discuss later this generational shift has implications for overall trends across the past thirty years.

There are also some interesting differences between different ethnic groups. Overall, people who class themselves in the ethnicity/background categories that are seen as white and those who class themselves in categories that are seen as non-white have very similar views as to what is a necessity. However there are a number of differences in views. One is very striking and the difference is large: namely on whether attending a place of worship is a necessity: only 27% of those who class themselves as white think it is while 62% of non-whites do. But non-whites also see having friends or family round for a meal once a month as a necessity (64%), while whites do not (44%). And non-whites also see a range of items associated with wider communications as more important: a mobile phone, internet and a computer (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage seeing item as a necessity by ethnic group



Trends: 1983 to 2012

The 2012 survey uses an identical methodology to the four earlier surveys run in 1983, 1990, 1999 in Britain. Taken together, these surveys show that, there is a core group of items and activities considered necessities across all five surveys, but that attitudes change over time - some items become necessities while others decline in importance.

From the 1983, 1990, 1999 and 2012 surveys trends in attitudes to necessities can be tracked over this period for Great Britain for a wide range of adult items but only three child items. The 1983 and 1990 survey did not have a separate section for children but the 1999 PSE survey did and so attitudes to child necessities today can be compared with 1999. In addition, attitudes to necessities in Northern Ireland can be compared with the PSE2002/3 survey²⁹ though this is not covered in this paper.

The percentage of the survey sample in Great Britain describing the item or activity as necessary in 1983, 1990, 1999 and 2012 for items and activities asked about in 2012 which were also asked in one or more of the previous surveys can be seen here:

<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/trends-attitudes-necessities-1983-2012>. The

trends in attitudes to child items and activities between 1999 and 2012 can be seen here:

<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/trends-attitudes-child-necessities-1999-and-2012>.

The surveys show a sharp rise in support for a number of consumer items over the last thirty years – such as a washing machines, phones and cars. Over this period the relative prices of such household and consumer items has dropped sharply and their ownership has become much more widespread. A washing machine - seen as a necessity by a majority in 1983 - has seen a steady rise in support. This could reflect a general rise in expectations as living standards rise but could also reflect the fact that once a good becomes widespread alternatives disappear – today there are, for example, few laundrettes.

Since 1983 one item has moved to become a necessity - the telephone – with support rising from 43% in 1983 through 56% in 1990 and to 77% in 2012. Again this could reflect the lack of alternatives once an item becomes established – in 1983 there was still a public telephone box on many streets but it is now fast becoming a museum piece. A car – in 1983 supported by only by 22% is well on its way to being seen as a necessity with support now at 44%. We find that, in general, as ownership rises, items tend to become more widely seen as necessities though this is not always the case. There are some items – for example a television – which are almost universally owned about which there is a divergence of opinion (this is one respect in which the concept of socially perceived necessities differs from a norms based approach).

Other items which weren't available to the ordinary consumer thirty years ago – such as mobile phones, computers and internet access – are now close to being considered necessities for everyone. Indeed, two-thirds of UK adults now believe that children need a computer and internet access for homework. Again this is an illustration that as an item become more widespread, people's behaviours change and the item become embedded into how we, as a society, operate. There comes a moment when lack of the item means

²⁹ See PSE working paper: analysis series No. 5, Comparison of the necessities of life in Northern Ireland 2012 and 2002, Grace Kelly and Mike Tomlinson.

the person can no longer participate fully. Without a computer with internet access a child is severely disadvantaged at school and recognition of this lies behind the sharp rise in the proportions now seeing this as a necessity for children.

The public do indeed implicitly accept that what is necessary should be based on contemporary standards and embrace Townsend's maxim that 'new needs' arise as societies change.

On the other hand, some items and activities have fallen in popularity. This is in part because taste and customs have changed. The role of the 'roast joint' is a good example – once an important family meal on a Sunday it has become a less and less popular and the percentages seeing this as a necessity has sunk from 57% in 1983 to a mere 36% today (in 1990 "or vegetarian equivalent" was added to the question to reflect the rise in vegetarianism). And the support that remains for a roast joint comes from the older generation – 59% of those aged 65 or over think it is a necessity compared to just 23% of 16 to 24 year olds. Should this survey be repeated in a few years' time, a roast joint is unlikely to feature at all. Similarly, though less pronounced, trends can be seen for other items – being able to afford new, not second hand clothes and having two pairs of all-weather shoes. With the rise of charity shops with "high quality" second hand clothes, perhaps, there is less stigma about this and many people – especially younger people - prefer wearing trainers to shoes.

However, while changing tastes and customs have resulted in such revisions with some items growing and some falling in support, overall the items society thinks of as necessities have broadly followed wider movements in living standards. While this trend is sharpest for consumer goods across the thirty year period, it is also holds for other items. This rise is strongest between 1983 and 1990, where there were increases in the proportion of people who classed that item as a necessity for items as diverse as two meals a day for adults (64% in 1983 and 90% in 1990) and celebration on special occasions (69% in 1983, 74% in 1990). Many of these gains held, or increased a bit further, between 1990 and 1999 and some also held between 1999 and 2012 (two meals a day was supported by 91% in both 1999 and 2012 a celebration rose from 74% in 1990 to 83% in 1999 and stayed around that level in 2012 at 80%). But the 1999-2012 pattern is more varied – with declines as well as increases in the numbers of people classing items as necessities. There are a number of items for which there has been a downward trend since 1990 which are not obviously related to changing tastes and fashions:

- household insurance dropped from 92% in 1990 to 83% in 1999 and 69% in 2012
- enough money to keep your home in a decent state of decoration fell from 88% in 1990 to 80% in 1999 and 69% in 2012.

This suggests that there are other changes taking place in our attitudes to minimum standards which are having the effect of narrowing the range of items considered absolutely essential.

Indeed, the latest survey suggests that overall people are less generous than in 1999. In the more constrained economic conditions of 2012, the public seem to have adjusted their views of what constitutes a minimum living standard.

There are a number of factors at work here. Perhaps most important is what has been happening to real incomes. As shown in the 2013 HBAI series (published annually by the DWP), median real income stood at £427 a week in 2011/12 compared with £429 in 2001/2 (after adjusting for inflation). In effect living standards did little better than stagnate between 1999 and 2012.³⁰

Secondly, in part because of the sharp fall in living standards from 2010, but also because of the wider mood of austerity and economic pessimism, many households in 2012 not only were poorer and felt poorer than a few years before but did not expect their living standards to improve. This of itself may have lowered wider expectations as to what should constitute minimum standards.

Thirdly, the trend may also reflect the harsher political discourse on the poor and benefit claimants which has gained currency in particular under the current government. These harsher attitudes to the poor are reflected in other surveys.³¹

However, there is a core to what people regard as minimal which does not change over time – this is concentrated on housing, heating, food and, to a lesser extent, basic clothing. Items and activities which have had very high percentages seeing the items as a necessity in all previous surveys (heating and a damp free home for examples) continue to do so. But the latest survey finds that there are a few items which had had strong support in all past surveys which have now dropped back ; for example, a warm waterproof coat has gone down from 87% in 1999 (where it had been in 1983) to 79%. And there are a number of items that had risen between 1990 and 1999 to achieve high levels of support and which have now for the first time dropped back. A hobby or leisure activity had risen by 1999 to 79% support but has now fallen back to 70%, meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent had risen to 81% in 1999 and is now back at 76%.

For those items with majority support but where it is less universal, there is a more evidence of declining standards. For some items where the relative costs have declined (as they have for many consumer goods), support has risen. But the overall pattern across most of these items and activities is a decline in the proportions seeing the item as a necessity. Indeed, a number of former necessities have moved to being ‘non-necessities’.

Examples include:

- holidays : in all previous surveys , a ‘holiday away from home not staying with relatives’ has been seen as a necessity for adults and children, yet it is no longer seen

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions/series/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

³¹ See <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2010-press-releases/british-social-attitudes-26th-report--public-swing-away-from-%27tax-and-spend%27,-and-towards-the-right>

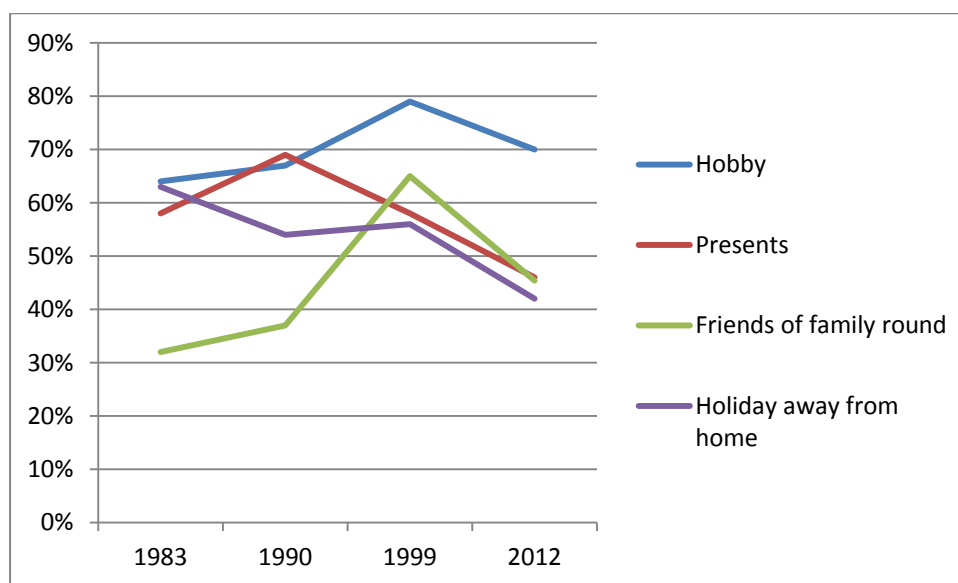
as a necessity for adults (a holiday for children is still seen as a necessity though support has dropped from 63% in 1999 to 53% in 2012).

- being able to spend a small amount of money on yourself has dropped from 61% in 1999 to 42% in 2012.

In particular, the 2012 survey finds declining minimum expectations of a social life. Being able to afford to give presents to family and friends once a year (such as on birthdays or at Christmas) was considered to be a necessity by a majority in all previous surveys but is now down to 46%. In 1999, nearly two thirds of the population believed that being able to have friends or family for a meal or a drink once a month was a necessity but this had dropped to under a half by 2012. Similarly, for children, being able to have their friends to visit for tea or a snack once a fortnight was seen as a necessity by the majority in 1999 but it now just falls short of the 50% approval mark. These trends reflect a decline in the proportions of people actually taking part in these activities since 1999 and a corresponding increase in the proportions who cannot afford to do so.

Trends in a number of key social and leisure activities over the last thirty years can be seen in Figure 4 and show that some of the gains in support seen since 1983 have evaporated.

Figure 4: Trends in support for leisure and social activities



Falls in support also occurred with clothing items for adults - a majority of people no longer considering having a 'best' outfit for special occasions or being able to afford to replace worn out clothes with new (not second hand) ones, to be necessities. Replacing worn out furniture is also no longer considered to be a necessity by a majority of people.

Another way of looking at these trends is to examine the 'mean score' for the 21 items common to all four years for each year³² – that is the sum of all the percentages for all 21

³² These figures for the 21 items common to all years and the 39 common to 1999 and 2012 have been calculated from <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/trends-attitudes-necessities-1983-2012>

items divided by 21. This rose from 62% in 1983 to 68% in 1990 and 73% in 1999 before falling to 65% in 2012.

To some extent you would not necessarily expect this mean score across this thirty year period to reflect changes in living standards as the items were first tested in 1983 and some of these will have become less central to our lives as customs change and equally some which are now prioritised are not in this original list. The fact that the scores rose between 1983 and 1999 suggests that, even so, the rising living standards during this period did result in more generous attitudes and expectations. As living standards have remained fairly flat since 1999 we might have expected the 2012 scores to be similar to those in 1999. The fact they have dropped in 2012 suggests that people may have become less generous since 1999 as a result of other pressures than just changes in taste or custom. However, looking at the larger number of common items (39) between 1999 and 2012, there is a more modest fall, from 60% to 57% - closer to what might be expected - so we need to be cautious in our conclusions as to what can be drawn from these mean scores.

Conclusion

Overall, the 2012 survey, like all the previous surveys, found very strong support for the concept of a minimum standard of living and there are strongly shared views across all groups in society as to what this standard should contain. This remains a central and important finding of this study, as it was of the previous studies. While there may currently be much discussion on the role of welfare and a culture of blaming the poor for their circumstances, these findings show that we as a society continue to back a minimum below which people should not fall with widespread agreement about what this covers.

There is a core to what people see as essential to a minimum standard that remains consistent across the years. But minimum standards also clearly reflect the society in which we live and change over time. A process of revision, deletion, substitution and addition takes place with some items being replaced by others as tastes and fashions change and perceptions of which items are necessities evolve.

Overall there seems to have been a rise in expectations during the eighties and the minimum standard set rose with rising living standards. These improvements in what was seen as minimum standards largely held during the 1990s but it does seem that for a range of items and activities there has been a decline in the percentages classing them as necessities during this century. The 2012 survey suggests that the public have lowered their expectations of what should constitute a minimum standard compared to 1999.

We have suggested a number of possible explanations for these trends and in particular:

- Harder economic times
- Near-stagnant living standards since 2000
- A toughening of attitudes to the poor
- Inter-generational differences
- A more individualistic society
- Changing customs and priorities

The 2012 minimum standard reflects the harder economic times of the past few years. In particular, this has affected people's attitudes to social and leisure activities. With more people being forced to cut back on these activities, levels of support have dropped. It is, however, interesting to note that while levels of participation in some of the activities no longer seen as a necessity (for example a holiday for one week a year for adults) have dropped, those who cannot take part are still a minority. In this respect, this 'consensual' approach differs from Townsend's deprivation approach: for Townsend that fact that something was the norm was sufficient for it to be seen as a necessity, in the 'consensual' approach even if something is the norm, people still might not judge it to be a necessity. In times when many people are cutting back on such activities, this seems to have had an influence on people's views.

As such this can be seen as a strength of this approach to setting standards. By reflecting the fall in people's expectations and the drop in many people's own living standards, the minimum standard set remains relevant and realistic.

The evidence from the PSE UK 2012 living standards survey³³ on who falls below this minimum standard is covered in the PSE first report, *The Impoverishment of the UK*,³⁴ and will be the subject of future PSE working papers. What is clear is that despite some lowering of expectations and generosity in the harsher economic and political climate of today, the public still select a minimum living standard that remains well above that enjoyed by millions of adults and children in the UK today.³⁵ Early analysis of the living standards survey suggests that around a quarter suffer unacceptably low living standards and that the number of people falling below the minimum standards of the day has doubled since 1983.³⁶

The public goes for a liveable relative minimum living standard which we fail as a society to meet for a substantial minority of people. This standard – set by the public that lives it – carries political weight when considering actions to help alleviate poverty.

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³³ The 'living standards' survey was carried out between March and December 2012 by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) in Britain and by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in Northern Ireland and covered 5,193 households (4,205 in Britain and 988 in Northern Ireland) in which 12,097 people were living (9,786 in Britain and 2,311 in Northern Ireland).

³⁴ The PSE UK first results on living standards are reported in [*The impoverishment of the UK*](#).

³⁵ See PSE Facts and Findings 1: 'Falling below minimum standards': <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/1-falling-below-minimum-standards>

³⁶ See PSE Facts and Findings 2: 'Going backwards 1983 – 2012': <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/2-going-backwards-1983-2012>

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