

**How poor is too poor?
Defining poverty**

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Defining poverty

Because I'm on sup. ben. my kids don't get what other kids get. It's just as simple as that. They just don't. They miss out on a lot of things. I consider I'm poor and if you look at other people, working people, you're at the bottom. [A single parent living on supplementary benefit]

The poor in Britain may be much better off than in the past, but they remain excluded from the way of life that most people take for granted. In comparison with the standard of living of others around them, it seems to the poor that they and their children miss out. Mary is a single parent with a 5-year-old son:

Now he is at school, and tells me about other children's bikes, and the toys they take, and holidays, and days out with parents, and it breaks my heart for there is nothing for him; if he has food and clothes he can have nothing else.

Mary feels that her situation is not just unsatisfactory but unjust. However, while the feelings of the poor are important, they do not provide an adequate answer to the question: how poor is too poor? Perhaps this single parent is simply being unreasonable in wanting toys, or even more so holidays, for her child.

This chapter examines the problem of determining how poor is too poor. How do we decide whether children today should be entitled to toys and holidays; or whether food and

clothes are enough; or even what sorts of food and what quality of clothes? On what terms are such decisions made?

There have been many approaches over the years to tackling these questions. This chapter will develop a new approach to the concept of poverty based on the views of society generally. Before we examine this idea, however, we look back at earlier attempts to define poverty, for the approach of this study is based on the lessons learnt.

The search for an 'absolute' poverty line

Throughout this century there have been proponents of the idea that it is possible to draw up an absolute minimum standard of living on the basis of what is required for physical health or fitness. It is this kind of concept that lies behind the view that there is no real poverty in Britain today. Although this view would have few adherents in academic circles, it is none the less highly influential, being a popular notion and more specifically carrying weight among the present Conservative party leadership. For example, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and one of the leading figures on the 'New Right', has argued:

An absolute standard means one defined by reference to the actual needs of the poor and not by reference to the expenditure of those who are not poor. A family is poor if it cannot afford to eat. (Joseph and Sumption, 1979, pp. 27-8)

While the political right is on its own in tending to view 'poverty' exclusively in these 'absolute' terms, others, too, have found the concept of 'absolute' poverty useful. For example, Tony Crosland argued in *The Future of Socialism*:

Primary poverty has been largely eliminated; the Beveridge revolution has been carried through. . . . It is true that considerable areas of social distress, not mainly due to primary poverty and of a character not always

foreseen by pre-war socialists, still remain. But that is a new and different question. (Crosland, 1964, p. 59)

The concept of 'absolute' or 'primary' poverty was developed during the last century. Though it is now associated with attempts to limit the needs of the poor, at the time it was seen as a way of drawing attention to the plight of the poor. Seebohm Rowntree, in his classic study of poverty in York in 1899, defined 'primary poverty' as an income 'insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency'. He ruled out spending on 'the maintenance of mental, moral or social sides of human nature'. Spending on food, clothing and shelter was all that he allowed:

A family living upon the scale allowed for must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus. They must never go into the country unless they walk. They must never purchase a halfpenny newspaper or spend a penny to buy a ticket for a popular concert. They must write no letters to absent children, for they cannot afford to pay the postage. They must never contribute anything to their church or chapel, or give any help to a neighbour which costs them money. They cannot save nor can they join a sick club or trade union, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have no pocket money for dolls, marbles or sweets. The father must smoke no tobacco and drink no beer. The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or her children, the character of the family wardrobe as for the family diet being governed by the regulation 'nothing must be bought but that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of physical health and what is bought must be of the plainest and most economical description'. (Rowntree, 1922, p. 167)

Rowntree's aim in adopting such a stringent definition was to demolish the view that poverty was due to fecklessness and

not to low wages. He felt he had established his case when he found that 15 per cent of the working-class population of York were, in 1899, living in 'primary poverty'. However, his findings in themselves posed contradictions and problems. Clearly the 15 per cent in 'primary poverty' were surviving. They may have been hungry, they may have faced ill-health, they may even have suffered a relatively high death rate, but none of these concepts provides a clear-cut line on which to base an absolute minimum living standard. Throughout the nineteenth century, some did die directly from poverty through starvation, but in general the results were less dramatic. Friedrich Engels, writing about a harsher period some fifty years earlier, describes the effect of poverty on those at the bottom of the pile:

To what extent want and suffering prevail among the unemployed during such a crisis, I need not describe. The poor rates are insufficient, vastly insufficient; the philanthropy of the rich is a raindrop in the ocean, lost in the moment of falling; beggary can support but few among the crowds. If the small dealers did not sell to the working people on credit at such times as long as possible – paying themselves liberally afterwards, it must be confessed – and if the working people did not help each other, every crisis would remove a multitude of surplus through death by starvation. Since, however, the most depressed period is brief, lasting, at worst, but one, two, or two and a half years, most of them emerge from it with their lives after dire privations. But indirectly by disease, etc., every crisis finds a multitude of victims. (Engels, 1969, p. 121)

This poses an intractable problem for Rowntree's concept of 'primary' poverty. There is no doubt that poor health stems from low living standards and that this makes a person susceptible to dying from disease, but others too die from disease. The susceptibility to disease and the level of life expectancy that are acceptable depend not on some absolute criterion but on the standards and expectations of the day. If

this is true of Rowntree's aim of the 'maintenance of physical health' in relation to the simple question of survival, it is even more so of his aim of 'physical efficiency'. Concepts such as 'good' health' and 'fitness' are nebulous. Although Rowntree followed closely the contemporary developments in dietetic science, his nutrition levels remain not the absolute scientific statement he presumed but a level determined by the assumptions and judgements of the day. Professor A. H. Halsey summarised the unsolvable problem of the search for an absolute poverty line for the *Breadline Britain* series:

There are some people who would want to make poverty entirely objective by seeking a measure of it outside people's heads and outside people's expectations and outside society's norms. And they sometimes think that death might do the trick for them. But it is not like that. Because of course the expectation that people have of how long they will live will always depend upon their expectations of others. It will depend on a socially created idea of life and death. And so even the use of mortality statistics is itself an essentially relative approach to poverty.

To argue that even mortality is relative is not to deny the importance of the fact that there are still in the world today many people who die of starvation, for whom poverty is an immediate cause of death. A. K. Sen has powerfully argued that for this reason there remains an important role for the concept of 'absolute' poverty:

While it can hardly be denied that malnutrition captures only one aspect of our idea of poverty, it is an important aspect, and one that is particularly important for many developing countries. It seems clear that malnutrition must have a central place in the conception of poverty. (Sen, 1982, p. 14)

Sen's detailed studies of famine and starvation in the world today have led him to conclude:

There is an irreducible core of absolute deprivation in

our idea of poverty which translates reports of starvation, malnutrition and visible hardship into a diagnosis of poverty without having to ascertain first the relative picture. The approach of relative deprivation supplements rather than competes with this concern with absolute dispossession. (Sen, 1978).

Although it is possible to draw up a minimum food level below which people die of starvation, and although such a concept still has widespread applicability in parts of the world, nevertheless even in many of the poorest of the Third World countries there would generally be a life expectancy greater than that of simply staving off immediate death. Living standards may be unquestionably low and life expectancy well below that of the industrialised world (and at times below that of earlier generations); even so, much of the deprivation suffered is not, strictly speaking, 'absolute' poverty.

Neither does this emphasis on the relativity of mortality deny the importance of improvements in life expectancy during this century. The poor of today – like everyone else – are likely to live considerably longer than their counterparts a hundred years ago. That of itself is of considerable significance. We can say that the poor of the nineteenth century were worse off than the poor of today, but this does not necessarily mean that the poor of the nineteenth century endured some kind of 'primary' or 'real' poverty with a living standard below an 'absolute' minimum required for health. If the standards of living of the poor of the nineteenth century are to be judged in terms of the effect on their health and life expectancy, then these judgements have to be based on the standards prevalent at that time and not on some 'absolute' criterion or on the standards of today. By the standards of the nineteenth century, the poor of the day may well be judged to have been unacceptably deprived. But that is a different judgement from that entailed in claiming that they lived in 'absolute' poverty.

This means that, while the search for a universally applicable 'absolute' poverty line above that of staving off star-

vation is in vain, there may still be poverty lines that can be drawn on the basis of life expectancy, or some kind of concept of good health. These 'poverty lines' would be specific to each society and to each generation. A poverty line for the 1980s would have to be drawn by today's standards.

The use of relative health standards to define poverty

For health standards to be of any possible use in defining a poverty line, it must first be established, as a precondition, that the poor in the 1980s still suffer from worse health than others.

Pamela and her 9-month-old baby live in a tiny, one-roomed attic flat in inner London:

The rain starts falling in from the window; it's going to fall in before long because the sides are falling off. And the beasties start coming up through the floorboard; slugs, beetles, the lot. They start from behind the cooker at first and they start working their way in here. Beasties go all over the bed, the cot and all over the floor. I've been bitten more than once and Emma often gets bitten by them. They go in my food and everything and I can't eat the food at all; I have to throw everything away.

The danger of disease and infection from lack of hygiene is ever present. The health of both Pamela and her baby has suffered, but it is the baby who is most at risk. While these conditions are among the worst, it remains the case that the poor generally, and their children in particular, face greater risk of ill-health and, as a consequence, of death than others.

In 1980 the most comprehensive postwar government inquiry into the health of the nation, headed by Sir Douglas Black, completed its work. (The government severely restricted the circulation of this report but a comprehensive account can be found in Townsend and Davidson, 1982.) Looking at the mortality rates of the different social classes in

terms of occupational groupings, the Black Report found that, at all stages of life, those in households where the head is an unskilled manual worker are disadvantaged compared to others. Men and women in unskilled households have a two-and-a-half times greater chance of dying before reaching retirement age than their professional counterparts. The peak of disadvantage is in infancy: the mortality rate for those born into unskilled families is some three-and-a-half times that of those born to professional families. Being poor in Britain today *is* still a matter of life and death.

What is more, the Black Report found that this gap between the chances of the poor and others dying has not changed since the turn of the century. Indeed, more recent evidence suggests that the gap may now be widening. For example, an all-party parliamentary report, drawn up by the House of Commons Social Services Committee and published in July 1984, showed that between 1978 and 1982 the class gap in perinatal deaths had widened (House of Commons, 1984).

Health and poverty remain deeply interlinked. It is not just that the poor are likely to have worse health than others, but also that ill-health is itself a *cause* of poverty. And, in turn, as those suffering from ill-health become poorer so the risks to their health become greater.

Mavis is blind, partially deaf and diabetic. Once, many years back before she lost her sight, she worked. Then, she coped. But now, at the age of 59, she has no chance of any work and depends on supplementary benefit. As a result of her consequent low living standards, her health is at risk; indeed, at times, even her life. She often runs out of money and ends up relying on whatever food happens to be around. She describes here the problems she faced one morning:

I got some rice crispies somewhere in there and I had some sugar. I put some sugar on the rice crispies which is really supposed to be taboo, but it carries you through. The DHSS have got my life in their hands. And what can you do about it? You take insulin, and go into insulin reaction because you haven't got any

food, or go without your insulin. What happens then? I think the diabetic specialists could tell you all about that.

The reasons why the poor run greater risks of death and ill-health than others are complex and varied. The problems that Mavis faces, for example, are specific to her disabilities. In general terms, however, it is possible to identify a person's standard of living in areas such as housing, diet and heating as important in determining health and life expectancy. This was a principal theme of the Black Report and has been unquestionably established in many other studies (see, for a recent example, Townsend, Simpson and Tibbs, 1984).

It is because of this link between living standards and health that there remains a widespread feeling that health could provide the basis for a 'relative' poverty line, even if it cannot provide the basis for an 'absolute' poverty line. The maintenance of life itself is, after all, the most basic and fundamental requirement of a standard of living. However, without questioning the importance of good health and a long life expectancy, there remain many basic problems in using these criteria to establish a poverty line.

Even the most measurable of health criteria – the mortality rate – does not provide a cut-off point between the poor and the rest. The poor are more likely to die than the well-off, but so are those on middle incomes. Going from social class I to social class V there is a gradual and continuous deterioration in life expectancy. If there was something like an absolute minimum standard that could be identified on the grounds of health, one would expect at some point between the poorest and the richest a sharp deterioration in life expectancy. That does not happen. It is not possible therefore to identify a mortality rate that indicates where a poverty line should be drawn. What is or is not an acceptable mortality rate remains a matter of judgement.

Using a concept of 'good health' is even more problematic, as has been seen in relation to Rowntree's search for a standard of health sufficient for 'physical efficiency'. Some people can be identified as fit and in good health, others as unfit and

in poor health; but there will also be many other people in between. Sir Douglas Black summarises the problem this creates:

The difficulties in using health to set a minimum standard are quite insurmountable because of the nature of the case. It is not as if there was one thing called good health and another thing called bad health. What you actually have is a whole range from people who are desperately ill, right up to people who are running marathon races and so on. There is every grade in between those two, so you could not really select a cut-off point and say 'above that there is good health and below that there is bad health'.

Even if it were possible to identify such a thing as 'good health', the problems in relating this to living standards remain great. For example, bad housing, poor diet and lack of heating affect a person's health, but it is difficult to be more precise. In housing, while dampness is generally perceived to be unhealthy, the extent to which this is, on its own, important remains debatable. Often it is the cumulative effect of many disadvantages that is important. So far as it is possible to be more precise, it is still difficult to identify a minimum level. For example, although there is little doubt that overcrowding favours the spread of infection, this cannot readily be translated into a measure of the minimum number of square metres a person needs to occupy.

Finally, even if such minima can be identified on health grounds, they may bear little relationship to people's actual spending patterns and lifestyles. This is to imply not that people's choices are wrong but that they are based on considerations and influences apart from those of health.

Even Rowntree found, when trying to draw up a poverty line based on the sole criterion of 'physical health', that it was impossible to exclude the influence of society's norms and customs. Having identified a set of dietary minima in terms of calories and proteins, Rowntree had the problem of translating these into actual food purchases. He found, of

course, that people's actual food purchases were based not simply on what they needed for health and survival but also on what he called 'national customs'. Rowntree felt that he had to make concessions to this:

Even the poorest try to get a certain amount of meat; and though undoubtedly health can be maintained without it, we cannot, in selecting a dietary, ignore the fact that meat-eating is an almost universal custom. So is the drinking of tea and coffee, and though these do not actually supply any nutriment, a certain amount must be included in the dietary. (Rowntree, 1937, p. 78)

In doing this, Rowntree undermines the whole concept of setting a poverty line based on the criterion of health. Once tea and coffee have been allowed, why not toys and new clothes, or the many other items and activities that are consumed or desired because of wider social expectations and norms?

Tricia is a single parent with two school-aged children. At Christmas, she gave her son a bicycle worth around £30. This was his only present of the year and to afford this Tricia had saved all year, putting aside a small sum each week. To do this, she cuts back on food for herself: she usually misses breakfast; at lunchtime she just has a cup of coffee; in the evenings, she has a small meal with the children, something like eggs on toast or beans on toast. Recently, her health has been bad:

Just these last few months, I keep having these dizzy spells and I get a lot of colds. I wouldn't say I feel fit at all. I mean a lot of people go mad at me, and say that I should at least have a dinner and a tea. They say it's not good for you. But I have got used to living the way I am, because you are only limited to what you can buy, and what you can spend, and you get into that way of life, and it's hard to get out of it.

Tricia chooses to make personal sacrifices, even to the detriment of her own health, so that her children do not miss out. If calculations on life expectancy guided people's decisions, then clearly Tricia would choose to eat properly and would anyway not give her child a bicycle, with the risks it brings of road accidents. But people simply do not behave in this way. For a wide variety of reasons, people choose to spend their money on goods and activities totally unconnected with health or even at a cost to it. It may well be that Tricia's friends are right to chide her for not eating properly, but judgements about that cannot be made in isolation from the other social customs and expectations that determine other aspects of one's standard of living.

Even taking a relative view of health or, more specifically, life expectancy does not enable a minimum standard of living to be identified. The question of how poor is too poor needs to be answered in broader terms. This will lead us right back to the way the poor themselves have been seen to judge their situation – in comparison with the living standards of others.

Viewing necessities as socially determined

There has been a long tradition that has tried to define poverty narrowly in terms of health, aiming either for a universal standard or for a standard relative to a particular moment in time. There has been an equally long tradition that has seen a person's needs as being culturally and socially, as well as physically, determined. It is a view that recognises that there is more to life than just existing. Two hundred years ago the economist Adam Smith wrote:

By necessities, I understand not only commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life but whatever the custom of the country renders it indigent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is strictly speaking not a necessity of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no

linen. But in the present time . . . a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful state of poverty. (Smith, 1812, p. 693)

This theme was adopted and first used for a more practical purpose by Charles Booth in his pioneering surveys of poverty in London from the late 1880s to the turn of the century. He defined the very poor as those whose means were insufficient 'according to the normal standards of life in this country' (Booth, 1888).

Even Seebohm Rowntree, the man who had developed the idea of 'primary' poverty, had, by the time of his second survey of York in 1936, incorporated into his definition of poverty some needs that were not related in any way to the maintenance of physical health. His 1936 definition allowed for items such as a radio, books, newspapers, beer, tobacco, presents and holidays. Although the amounts allowed were small – and largely arbitrary – Rowntree had conceded the importance of a wide range of aspects of a person's standard of living – from consumer durables to leisure activities and social participation.

The essentially relative nature of poverty is immediately obvious when viewing people's standards of living in these broader terms. Purchases of consumer durables are specific to each generation, or even each decade, and activities involving social participation have no meaning outside the society in which people live. This has long been recognised; Karl Marx wrote in 1849:

Our needs and enjoyments spring from society; we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects of their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature. (Marx, 1946, p. 269)

To view necessities as socially determined is explicitly to view poverty as relative. For this reason this concept is often

called 'relative poverty'. In practice, there has been a great deal of confusion about the concepts of 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty. In part this stems from a recognition that the living standards of the poor have risen considerably during this century and that it is important not simply to dismiss this. It also stems, however, from a failure to come to terms with the fact that, above starvation level, an 'absolute' definition of poverty cannot be sustained; that, for example, Rowntree's definition of 'primary' poverty was in fact a rather narrow definition of 'relative' poverty at the turn of the century.

The upshot has been that a body of opinion has persisted that places emphasis only on 'absolute' poverty. The fact that the poor in Britain today are better off than the poor of the past, and than the poor of other countries today, is seen to devalue their problems. Dr Rhodes Boyson, as Minister for Social Security, gave his view of 'relative' poverty to the House of Commons in a debate on the rich and the poor called by the opposition:

Those on the poverty line in the United States earn more than 50 times the average income of someone in India. That is what relative poverty is all about. . . . Apparently, the more people earn, the more they believe poverty exists, presumably so that they can be pleased about the fact that it is not themselves who are poor. (*Hansard*, 28 June 1984)

Others, in contrast, have argued that the facts of starvation in the poorest countries of the world and the intense deprivations suffered by the poor of the past are not relevant to the problems of the poor of the industrialised world today. Tony Crosland, for example, argued not just for the importance of a concept of 'primary' poverty but also that:

Poverty is not, after all, an absolute, but a social or cultural concept. . . . This demands a relative, subjective view of poverty, since the unhappiness and injustice it creates, even when ill-health and malnutrition are

avoided, lies in the enforced deprivation not of luxuries indeed, but of small comforts which others have and are seen to have, and which in the light of prevailing cultural standards are really 'conventional necessities'. (Crosland, 1964, p. 89)

During the 1960s this view became widely accepted, as a result – at least in part – of the work of Professor Peter Townsend. For the last thirty years, Townsend has argued that poverty can only be viewed in terms of the concept of 'relative deprivation'. In his studies of poverty he has refined this concept, culminating in his 1969 survey of living standards. In his report of this comprehensive and influential study, Townsend defined poverty as follows:

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

Although something like this definition of poverty would now be widely accepted, there remains immense room for debate about what exactly it means.

Can poverty be measured objectively?

Townsend's definition of poverty begs many questions: lack of which living conditions and amenities constitutes poverty? what types of diet are we talking about? lack of participation in which activities distinguishes the poor from the non-poor? Behind these questions lies a more fundamental question: on what basis should such decisions be made? The definition in itself provides little guidance. Are activities that are 'customary' those carried out by, say, 51 per cent of the population or 90 per cent? Are those that are customary the same as those that are 'widely encouraged or approved'?

Townsend contends – and it is hotly disputed – that such questions can be answered ‘objectively’ – independently of the value judgements not only of individuals but more significantly of society collectively. The ultimate aim of his study, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, was no less than ‘the objectification of the measurement of poverty’ (1979, p. 60).

Townsend had set himself a Herculean task. He was out of line with wider opinion, which argued that the interpretation of relative poverty required value judgements. For example, the influential American poverty researcher, Mollie Orshansky, states that:

Poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder. Poverty is a value judgement; it is not something one can verify or demonstrate, except by inference or suggestion, even with a measure of error. To say who is poor is to use all sorts of value judgements. (Orshansky, 1969, p. 37)

For Townsend, such an approach is ‘scarcely reassuring’. While he acknowledges the difficulties in eliminating all values from social research, his aim is to develop a methodology that would put the measurement of poverty on to a ‘scientific footing’:

In the final analysis, a definition of poverty may have to rest on value judgements. But this does not mean that a definition cannot be objective and that it cannot be distinguished from social or individual opinion. (Townsend, 1979, p. 38)

In Townsend’s view, an examination of socio-economic conditions – in particular, the distribution of resources between individuals and the differences in their styles of living – will in itself enable those who are in poverty to be identified. In this approach there are no questions to be answered either by the researcher or, more importantly, by society at large about what people ‘should’ have or what they ‘should’ be entitled to. It is only a matter of examining real

social conditions. To make this work, Townsend needed to refine his definition of poverty; the notion of 'customary' is vague and the idea of a living style that is 'widely encouraged or approved' appears, moreover, to entail some kind of collective value judgement. So Townsend goes on to state that people can be said to be in poverty when 'their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities' (Townsend, 1979, p. 31). This provides the conceptual basis for the whole of Townsend's study.

Even at this stage, however, Townsend's definition, far from bringing agreement on the basis on which poverty can be measured scientifically, has been fundamentally criticised. It has been argued, most forcefully by Piachaud (1981a), that implicit in such an approach is a view that society should be uniform:

As patterns of living become more diverse, it becomes steadily harder and less useful to think in terms of 'ordinary membership of society,' ... The reason for tackling poverty is not to create uniformity, but to push back the constraints and increase choice and freedom. (Piachaud, 1981a)

To explore these criticisms, it is necessary to look briefly at how Townsend translated his general theoretical definition into a practical measure of poverty. It is in making this transition that the problems of establishing a scientifically 'objective' measure of poverty are highlighted most sharply.

The Townsend poverty study

Townsend's study, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979), is based on a major survey that he carried out in 1968-9. This is one of the most ambitious and far-reaching surveys of poverty attempted in Britain and ranks alongside the

pioneering work of Booth and Rowntree. Questioning a sample of 2,000 households throughout Britain, he aimed to discover whether,

as resources for any individual or family diminish, there is a point at which there occurs a sudden withdrawal from participation in the customs and activities sanctioned by the culture. The point at which withdrawal 'escalates' disproportionately to falling resources could be defined as the poverty line. (Townsend, 1979, p. 57)

To do this, Townsend collected, first, a comprehensive range of data on each individual's resources. He included not just cash incomes (earned and unearned) but also capital assets, the values of employment benefits in kind, the value of public social services in kind (such as subsidies to housing) and the value of private income in kind (such as gifts). This attempt to build a more comprehensive definition of income and resources is a particularly important element of the Townsend survey.

Second, Townsend collected information on 'styles of living'. This, too, represents an important development. Townsend replaced the rather narrow concept of 'consumption', which had dominated previous poverty surveys, with an approach that encompassed all aspects of a person's life. This was done by selecting sixty indicators from all the common activities in society: diet, clothing, fuel and light, home amenities, housing, the immediate environment of the home, general conditions and welfare benefits at work, family support, recreation, education, health and social relations. From this, he compiled a 'deprivation index' based on twelve of the items (see Table 2.1).

Townsend went on to identify a poverty line – and hence the numbers in poverty – by a statistical exercise relating household incomes (adjusted for household size) to the degree to which households lacked the items listed in this deprivation index. This method is discussed in greater technical detail in Chapter 6. Whatever the technical merits of the exercise, the basic assumption is that lack of these

Table 2.1 *Townsend's deprivation index*

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>% of population going without</i>	<i>Correlation coefficient (Pearson) (net disposable income last year)</i>
1 Has not had a week's holiday away from home in last twelve months.	53.6	0.1892 (S = 0.001)
2 Adults only. Has not had a relative or friend to the home for a meal or snack in in the last 4 weeks.	33.4	0.0493 (S = 0.001)
3 Adults only. Has not been out in the last 4 weeks to a relative or friend for a meal or snack.	45.1	0.0515 (S = 0.001)
4 Children only (under 15). Has not had a friend to play or to tea in the last 4 weeks.	36.3	0.0643 (S = 0.020)
5 Children only. Did not have party on last birthday.	56.6	0.0660 (S = 0.016)
6 Has not had an afternoon or evening out for entertainment in the last two weeks.	47.0	0.1088 (S = 0.001)
7 Does not have fresh meat (including meals out) as many as four days a week.	19.3	0.1821 (S = 0.001)
8 Has gone through one or more days in the past fortnight without a cooked meal.	7.0	0.0684 (S = 0.001)
9 Has not had a cooked breakfast most days of the week.	67.3	0.0559 (S = 0.001)
10 Household does not have a refrigerator.	45.1	0.2419 (S = 0.001)
11 Household does not usually have a Sunday joint (3 in 4 times).	25.9	0.1734 (S = 0.001)
12 Household does not have sole use of four amenities indoors (flush WC; sink or washbasin and cold-water tap; fixed bath or shower; and gas or electric cooker).	21.4	0.1671 (S = 0.001)

Source: Townsend (1979), p. 250.

twelve items provides a measure of poverty. It is this assumption that Piachaud (1981a) and others (for example: Wedderburn, 1981; Sen, 1982; and Hemming, 1984) are disputing.

Consider, first, the situation of those who lack items from this 'deprivation index'. Piachaud argues that Townsend has left out a vital factor – choice:

To choose not to go on holiday or eat meat is one thing: it may interest sociologists, but is of no interest to those concerned with poverty. To have little or no opportunity to take a holiday or buy meat is entirely different. (Piachaud, 1981a)

The alternative view is that a person who has never had a holiday, for example, may not miss it and so may feel that they 'choose' to go without, but nevertheless 'objectively' they remain deprived. In other words, the concept of 'choice' is, on this interpretation, misplaced, because an individual's perception of whether or not they are exercising choice will itself depend on the extent to which they are deprived. The *Breadline Britain* survey was designed to throw light on the extent to which an individual's perception of choice is determined by their income level and this debate will be discussed in greater detail later (see Chapter 4). It is worth noting here, however, that the high proportion of the population lacking certain of these items – for example the two-thirds of the population not having a cooked breakfast most days of the week (see Table 2.1) – suggests that, at least for some people for some of the items, the lack is based on a choice that has not been determined by income.

The second criticism of Townsend's deprivation index is more fundamental: why should the lack of *these* items – even if it was limited to those who do not possess them through lack of choice – be taken as a measure of poverty? Townsend puts forward one principle for the selection of an item: namely, that only a minority of the population should lack it. However, as Townsend notes, this principle has not been kept to in practice: three items are lacked by over 50 per cent of the population. The principle itself is in keeping with

Townsend's concept of poverty as exclusion from 'ordinary' styles of living. That said, it is still not clear why these twelve items have been chosen. They are all negatively correlated with income (see Table 2.1) – in other words, the poor are significantly less likely to have them than others. But there are other items from the sixty included in the survey that the poor are less likely to be able to do or possess than others and that a majority of the population have: for example, the purchase of new clothes. Why is it, then, that not having a cooked breakfast, an activity that most people do not partake in, is included in the deprivation index but not being able to buy new clothes, which by contrast only 10 per cent of the population are forced into, is not taken as a measure of poverty? To many it may seem that not being able to buy new clothes is a better indication of deprivation than not having a cooked breakfast.

Townsend argues that he compiled other indices with other combinations of items and the results produced were similar. The people who lack any particular range of items are likely also to lack other specific ranges of items. The fact that the specific items selected for the deprivation index are arbitrary or random could, then, be seen to be unimportant.

A major problem still remains: why are *any* of these items so important that to go without is to be deprived? On what basis can it be said that the items are indicators of poverty? For Townsend it is sufficient that the items represent common activities, widely practised. That said, however, what does lack of these items really measure?

Clearly, a high score on Townsend's deprivation index gives some indication of the numbers and types of people who are not participating in 'ordinary living patterns'. This in itself does not necessarily imply 'poverty'; to a greater or lesser extent, all those in the bottom half are not fully participating in society. Indeed, Townsend recognises this problem. He equates this lack of participation in ordinary living patterns with poverty only when there is 'a level of deprivation disproportionate to resources'.

As such, it is central to Townsend's identification of poverty that there is an income 'threshold' below which people

disproportionately withdraw from participation in these 'ordinary living patterns'. The question of whether there is such a 'threshold' will be considered in Chapter 6. It is worth noting here, however, that even if such a threshold exists it seems conceptually an unsatisfactory way of defining poverty. If there was no threshold and instead what was observed was a steady decline in people's living standards as they become poorer, then it may still be the case that the people at the bottom end are in poverty. Indeed, the living standards of the people at the bottom end under these circumstances might be little different from those of the poor if an income threshold did exist. The existence or otherwise of a threshold has little to do with the standard of living of the poor but is dependent on the distribution of resources and living standards throughout society. This is not to challenge the concept of an income threshold – and in Chapter 6 its use will be explored – but to argue that such a threshold does not provide a *prima facie* measure of poverty.

The basic problem stems, in our view, from the distinction Townsend draws between an 'objective' and a 'socially perceived' measure of need:

A fundamental distinction has to be made between actual and perceived need, and therefore between actual and socially perceived poverty – or more strictly, between objective and conventionally acknowledged poverty. (Townsend, 1979, p. 46)

In aiming to exclude value judgements from the assessment of 'need', Townsend inevitably comes up with indicators of 'need' that are difficult to interpret. The items in his 'deprivation index' have *not* been chosen because they fit in with a generally accepted view of need. The result of taking a concept of 'need' that is outside people's feelings and experiences is that the consequent 'deprivation' suffered from these unmet 'needs' is outside people's comprehension.

In short, observation of facts about the distribution of resources and the distribution of standards of living tells us a great deal about inequality and about the social structure

of society, and as such is extremely important. But it tells us nothing about poverty. This, in essence, is at the heart of Piachaud's criticisms of Townsend's work:

The term, 'poverty', carries with it an implication and a moral imperative that something should be done about it. The definition by an individual, or by society collectively, of what level represents 'poverty', will always be a value-judgment. Social scientists have no business trying to preempt such judgements with 'scientific' prescriptions. (Piachaud, 1981a)

A new approach to poverty

While generally accepting this statement about the nature of poverty, it is worth clarifying what we understand to be implied. We are not arguing that poverty is, in the words of Orshansky, merely 'in the eye of the beholder', that it is purely a subjective phenomenon. Nor are we arguing against pursuing a rigorous interpretation, putting aside as far as is possible our own personal value judgements. Instead we are arguing for a measure of poverty based on the social perception of needs. A. K. Sen, while arguing for the use of a concept of 'absolute' poverty, has also argued that there is an important role for a relative view of poverty. He has lucidly distinguished between the different ways in which the role of morals can be accommodated in poverty measurement:

There is a difference between saying the exercise *is itself* a prescriptive one and saying that the exercise must *take note* of the prescriptions made by members of the community. . . . For the person studying and measuring poverty, the conventions of society are matters of fact (what *are* the contemporary standards?), and not issues of morality or of subjective search (what *should be* the contemporary standards? what *should be* my values? how do I *feel* about all this?). (Sen, 1982, p. 17)

By examining society's 'prescriptions', it is possible to move towards a definition of poverty that is not merely subjective. Townsend, in contrasting the 'social perception' of need with 'actual' need, has, in our view, obscured the search for an 'objective' measure of poverty. Indeed, it seems to us that there is no such thing as an 'objective' as opposed to a 'socially perceived' measure: items become 'necessities' only when they are *socially* perceived to be so. The term 'need' has, therefore, no meaning outside that of the perceptions of people. Again, this is an argument lucidly advanced by Sen:

The choice of '*conditions* of deprivation' can not be independent of '*feelings* of deprivation'. Material objects cannot be evaluated in this context without reference to how people view them, and even if '*feelings*' are not brought in explicitly, they must have an implicit role in the selection of 'attributes'. Townsend has rightly emphasized the importance of 'the endeavour to define the style of living which is generally shared or approved in each 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. (Sen, 1982, p. 16)

These social perceptions of need are themselves determined by social conditions, in particular by the distribution of resources and of living standards, but also by other factors such as the distribution of power. To put the emphasis on the 'meaning' attributed to social conditions is not to deny that these meanings are themselves socially constructed (this is argued theoretically by, among others, Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The reason why the possession of certain goods and participation in certain activities are seen as 'necessities' is, of course, a legitimate subject for study (and is pursued in Chapter 3). However, the fact that society's perceptions can be questioned and analysed does not, in our view, undermine an approach to poverty based on these perceptions. For, to reiterate, these perceptions determine the importance and significance that can be attached to the various aspects of our living standards.

The social perception of need both stems from the judgements of individuals collectively and, in turn, affects each individual's perception. Individuals sharing the social perception will feel deprived when they lack the items defined by society generally as 'necessities'. While most people will, by definition, share the judgements of society collectively, it is possible that someone who is relatively well-off may feel deprived or that someone who is poor may not feel deprived. These individual feelings are of interest but do not determine whether the person is 'too poor'. Using the concept of the 'social perception' of need, it is possible to step outside the individual's feelings to the judgement of society collectively. This becomes important when poverty is related to policy.

To argue for the importance of the social perception of need is not, however, to argue that the only poverty that can be recognised is 'conventionally acknowledged poverty'. Indeed, there seems to be no reason to assume that these two concepts are the same. There is evidence that the word 'poverty' conjures up different meanings for different people (see, for example, Townsend, 1979, and EEC, 1977), whereas the concept of 'necessities' is by no means so embedded in semantic confusions and political connotations. It seems perfectly possible that there will be people who see 'poverty' as simply about starvation but who take a broader view about what constitutes necessities in society today.

This study defines 'poverty' in terms of an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities. This should be contrasted with Townsend's approach and returns to an earlier, though still dominant, tradition. In Townsend's study, poverty is defined with reference to exclusion from the 'norm', or to the 'customary', or to 'ordinary' living patterns. Reference to a minimum, rather than the norm, is implicit in the definition of poverty as lack of necessities. It is what Townsend classes as 'minimum rights for the many' rather than 'distributional justice for all'. It is argued that the concept of a minimum separates the poor from the rest of society and labels them second-class citizens. For the poor, a 'minimum' living standard is good enough but the rest of us expect far more and may indeed feel we are entitled to far more.

This question of 'distributional justice' is extremely important, but it is a question about the degree of inequality that should be tolerated in society and not a question about poverty. Tackling poverty does have implications for the degree of inequality in society, as is seen in Chapter 6, but, in principle, the motivation for doing something about poverty can be quite separate from that of doing something about inequality. Two people may share the same view about the generosity of benefits for the poor but hold contrasting views about the extent to which the rich should be 'entitled' to personal gain. It is likely that those who are most eager to tackle poverty will also favour a narrowing of inequality. It is also possible, however, that some people may regard the greater equality implicit in tackling poverty as an unfortunate side-effect.

Although the concept of poverty is distinct from that of 'unacceptable inequality', it is worth noting that it would be possible to attempt to answer the broader question of 'how poor is too poor' in terms of the extent of inequality in society. This would require turning from a *description* of the distribution of resources to judgements about the *fairness* of this distribution. Many people would argue that extreme inequality is morally unacceptable. We have not attempted to pursue this in this study – to ask, for example, whether people feel that everyone should be entitled to a decent home if the rich can afford two or more. Though we think such an approach would be legitimate and valuable, it was outside our scope.

Our aim was more restricted: to measure 'poverty'. This too requires value judgements – but these judgements are about *minima*, about people's *needs*. Although these judgements will reflect society's prevalent norms, they are about everyone's *entitlement*, not about the distribution of resources in society.

There are dangers, for the poor, in the concept of poverty or in any categorisation that separates poor from non-poor. Indeed, some policies specifically directed at the relief of poverty have done as much, and more, harm than good. The concept of a minimum is not immune from these dangers,

but, in our view, these dangers are far outweighed by the potential advantages for the poor of policies based on minimum standards.

In seeing poverty in terms of 'minimum rights for all', we are in agreement with the Council of Europe, which in 1975 adopted the following definition:

Persons beset by poverty: individuals or families whose resources are so small as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life of the Member State in which they live. (EEC, 1981)

This adds an important dimension to the definition of poverty based on 'the enforced lack of socially perceived necessities': namely, that poverty affects a person's *way of life*. There are many aspects to our 'way of life' and some people may fall below an acceptable minimum in some aspects but not in others. Deprivation among the poor surfaces in different ways according to particular circumstances. In addition, there are different degrees of deprivation: for some people, the deprivations they face will be relatively marginal; for others, it will affect their whole way of life. In this study, we shall term the enforced lack of any particular necessity as a *deprivation*. These deprivations will only be termed *poverty* when they affect a person's way of life (see Chapter 6).

This is not to imply that there is necessarily going to be a sharp division between those in poverty and others. Indeed, it is likely that there is a continuum of living standards from the poor to the rich, which will make any cut-off point somewhat arbitrary. That said, it is useful, with reference in particular to public policy, to try to distinguish those who can be said, to a greater or lesser degree, to fall below the minimum standards of society from the people who can afford to maintain these standards.

The aim of identifying 'minimum standards' has dominated studies of poverty. Our procedure is, however, distinct. Past studies of poverty – from Rowntree onwards – have in the main attempted to identify 'minimum standards' by a combination of an 'expert' analysis of 'needs' and an

examination of actual expenditure patterns. So, for example, people's minimum nutritional requirements are 'identified' by 'experts'; these are translated into minimum 'costs'; which are then converted into a minimum 'income' by reference to the proportion of people's income actually spent on food. These approaches have many problems, of which two, in our view, are critical. First, 'experts' are being asked to define a level for which their 'expertise' does not particularly qualify them. For example, a nutritionist can identify minimum levels of calories and vitamins, but this is not the same as a minimum level of food, which is influenced not only by 'scientific' assessments, but also by customs, traditions and, more generally, a sense of what is right and proper. The second problem concerns the use of people's *actual* expenditure patterns. While measures of poverty must take into account people's actual behaviour rather than just idealise what it should be, using current spending patterns to identify a minimum level is fundamentally unsatisfactory: people's actual expenditure may reflect financial circumstances rather than need.

This study takes a completely different approach. It aims to identify a minimum acceptable way of life not by reference to the views of 'experts', nor by reference to observed patterns of expenditure or observed living standards, but by reference to *the views of society as a whole*. This is, in essence, a *consensual* approach to defining minimum standards.

This is not the first time that an approach based on 'public opinion' has been adopted. Indeed, Rowntree included elements of this in identifying clothing needs. More recently, the EEC has commissioned studies based on this approach in an attempt to identify a minimum acceptable way of life. In two separate studies, one carried out in 1976 by Helene Riffault (EEC, 1977) and the other in 1979 by Professor Bernard van Praag (van Praag *et al.*, 1980; van Praag *et al.*, 1981; summarised in EEC, 1981), the EEC has tried to establish for the different member countries what level of *income* is needed to attain these minimum standards. The 1976 study asked: 'In your opinion, what is the real

minimum income on which a family of four persons – a man, woman and two children between 10–15 years – in this area can make ends meet?'; and the 1979 study: 'What do you consider as the absolute minimum income for a household such as yours – an income below which you won't be able to make ends meet?'

Though these EEC studies are important for their emphasis on the views of people themselves rather than experts, the attempt to establish a minimum standard through the concept of a minimum income causes problems. First, the questions require not only value judgements but also a *factual* knowledge of conditions in society. A person may have in mind a certain standard of living but, because they lack the experience of living at that standard, wrongly estimate the income needed. The second major problem stems from the relationship between income level and standard of living. As many studies have shown (for example, Townsend, 1979; Fiegehen, Lansley and Smith, 1977), there can be considerable variations in the standards of living of people on the same income level. This is discussed further in Chapter 4; the point in this context is that different individuals may have in mind the same minimum standard of living but, because of different responsibilities, estimate different minimum income levels. For example, parents who have to spend £10 a week on child care are likely to say that their net income to make ends meet is £10 more than others who have relatives who look after the children. Such costs are likely to be important factors in people's judgement about what is a minimum net income.

Such factors are, of course, also important in practice in determining the variations in the income people need to maintain a minimum standard of living. It may be that a simple 'minimum income' line that will ensure a 'minimum acceptable way of life' cannot be identified. This question is of considerable importance because the state's approach to poverty is dominated by the maintenance of minimum income levels. However, in our view it is a question that can be answered only after having first established minimum standards of living.

This study proceeds, therefore, by attempting to identify a minimum standard of living *directly*. We asked a representative sample of people to judge the *necessities* for living in Britain in the 1980s. To our knowledge, this approach is original. It should be stressed, at this point, that an important component of any definition of poverty is that the deprivations suffered spring from lack of resources. We accept the need, in principle, to distinguish between, say, those who are vegetarians and those who cannot afford to eat meat. Only those who face what we have termed 'an *enforced* lack of necessities' are classed as living in poverty (see Chapter 4).

The critical role of lack of resources to the concept of poverty also has wider implications, because it determines which aspects of our way of life should be included in a minimum standard of living aimed at measuring poverty. We decided that only those aspects of life facilitated by access to money should be tested in the *Breadline Britain* survey. The method adopted was to select a range of items indicative of various aspects of our way of living and to ask people whether these items were necessities. The survey concentrated on individual or personal aspects of behaviour, which were seen not only in terms of personal 'consumption' but also, following Townsend, in terms of *social* activities. The areas covered were food, heating, clothing, consumer durables, entertainment, leisure activities, holidays, and social occasions and activities. Two services that are provided at least in part by the public sector were also included: housing and public transport. Most housing is provided through the market, but even where it is provided through public services it is paid for directly. While the use of public transport is affected by the degree of subsidy, it remains a service that is primarily paid for.

Other public services were excluded – most significantly, health care and education. Such services are an important influence on each individual's quality of life, but they are not in the main paid for. Of course, the divisions are not clear-cut: a few do pay directly for health care and education and for the rest who use the public services there are often hidden costs. But in general, where such services are facilitated by

access to money, it is on the margins or indirectly. Nor did it seem appropriate to include conditions at work. While we recognise that poor working conditions are concentrated among the low-paid, it is not an aspect of life that could readily be improved by higher pay. Similarly, various environmental factors, such as safety on the streets, were excluded, although again these aspects of life are generally worse for the poor than for others.

We accept that each individual's quality of life is affected by a whole range of public services, from sports centres to health care, from an emptied dustbin to education. However, the criticism, made among others by Cyril Shaw (in the letters pages of *The Sunday Times*, 28 August 1983), that the survey ignores 'Galbraith's strictures on public poverty [sic] in the midst of private affluence' is misplaced. As Galbraith himself recognised, while public squalor diminishes the lives of everyone in a community, poverty affects the individual and stems from that individual's lack of resources:

People are poverty-stricken when their income, even if adequate for survival, falls markedly behind that of the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency. (Galbraith, 1970, p. 259)

It is precisely this that the *Breadline Britain* survey examined.

Defining poverty in terms of a consensual view of need

In summary, this study tackles the questions 'how poor is too poor?' by identifying the minimum acceptable way of life for Britain in the 1980s. Those who have no choice but to fall below this minimum level can be said to be 'in poverty'. This concept is developed in terms of those who have an enforced lack of *socially perceived* necessities. This means that the 'necessities' of life are identified by public opinion and not by, on the one hand, the views of experts or, on the other hand, the norms of behaviour *per se*.

We have not investigated how far our definition of 'poverty' coincides with the popular definition; nor do we consider it crucial that it should do so. Critics are free to argue with our view that we are measuring 'poverty', but that would be a diversion from the central point, which is that we have established, we believe, an acceptable measurement of a minimum standard of living that everyone is entitled to enjoy. In our view, it is reasonable to equate this with the measurement of poverty. But it would not alter the implications of our findings if the people we refer to throughout as 'in poverty' were simply described as 'falling below a society-approved minimum'.

In establishing this minimum standard, we have aimed to exclude our own personal value judgements by taking the consensual judgement of society at large about people's needs. We hope to have moved towards what Sen describes as 'an objective diagnosis of conditions' based on 'an objective understanding of "feelings"' (1982, p. 16), although some judgement is still required in interpreting the data (see Chapter 6).

There has been a tendency in discussions on poverty to imply that the research methodology one uses has strong implications for the standard of poverty one adopts. This is not necessarily the case. Rowntree adopted a very basic standard of poverty but he used three different methodologies to estimate its extent: he used the expert approach in relation to food; the public opinion approach in relation to clothing; and the actual expenditure approach in relation to housing. In adopting the 'public opinion' approach, we make no prior judgement about the level at which a minimum standard of living should be drawn.

It is worth noting in this context that the level of poverty identified using this method may fluctuate for reasons that have little to do with the poor's actual standards of living. It is possible, for example, to envisage circumstances where the number of people with a low standard of living increases but poverty as measured by this consensual definition decreases because the public's reaction to the spread of hardship is to be less generous in their view of minimum entitlements.

Generally, views that are deeply held do not fluctuate rapidly, and it seems likely that this applies to people's views on necessities (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, even the possibility that people's perceptions of necessities may fluctuate rapidly draws attention to the importance of viewing the 'public opinion' approach to poverty alongside other information. In particular, absolute and relative changes in the distribution of income and living standards are an important backdrop for any measure of poverty.

Some people will make a fundamental criticism of this 'consensual' approach: namely, that it confuses the search for a definition of poverty by failing to take on board what Townsend describes as 'the indoctrinated quality of our social perceptions' (Townsend, 1981). As such, it risks merely reflecting the dominant interests in society, interests whose advantages are built at the expense of the poor. While accepting that this is a risk, our view is that this approach removes the concept of poverty from the arbitrary exercise of judgement by 'experts', politicians and governments, where up to now it has remained firmly entrenched, and opens it up to a more democratic representation of interests.

It has been argued in this chapter that although it is, of course, true that a collective view of what constitutes necessities is socially conditioned, this is in fact a key advantage of this approach. For the concept of poverty is trying to tap exactly the question of what it is that we as a society have come to accept as necessities – the aspects of our way of life that are so important that when people are forced to go without they are regarded as deprived and feel deprived. The very fact that people are culturally conditioned makes them the best judge of what it is that people have been culturally conditioned to expect as a minimum entitlement. Professor A. H. Halsey summed up this advantage for the *Breadline Britain* series:

The definition of what it is to be poor is something which comes out of the relations between people. If you take a country like ours which is a democratic country, what in effect you're doing in this kind of approach is

to say let's vote all together on what we think constitutes poverty. If you get some kind of social consensus about that definition, then that actually fits the reality of what people experience.

It is a definition based in the reality of the commonplace and as such has meaning for both the poor and others. In doing this, it throws light on two of the main purposes of studying poverty. First, it helps towards an understanding of what it is like to be poor in Britain today. To the extent that the poor share the same aspirations as others (and this is examined in the next chapter), then this consensual definition has real meaning to the poor themselves. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this approach makes some contribution to the question of tackling poverty. In establishing a minimum standard of living on the basis of what is to most people unacceptable, it establishes a politically credible level. The people who fall below this minimum level are in most people's opinion entitled to more. In a democratic society like Britain, this is an important criterion on which to base policies to help the poor.