

WORKING PAPER 24

**PERCEPTIONS OF THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE: SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND
COMPARED**

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Poverty and Social Exclusion
Survey of Britain 

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PREFACE

This Working Paper arose from the *1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain* funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The *1999 PSE Survey of Britain* is the most comprehensive and scientifically rigorous survey of its kind ever undertaken. It provides unparalleled detail about deprivation and exclusion among the British population at the close of the twentieth century. It uses a particularly powerful scientific approach to measuring poverty which:

- incorporates the views of members of the public, rather than judgments by social scientists, about what are the necessities of life in modern Britain
- calculates the levels of deprivation that constitutes poverty using scientific methods rather than arbitrary decisions.

The *1999 PSE Survey of Britain* is also the first national study to attempt to measure social exclusion, and to introduce a methodology for poverty and social exclusion which is internationally comparable. Three data sets were used:

- The *1998-9 General Household Survey* (GHS) provided data on the socio-economic circumstances of the respondents, including their incomes
- The *June 1999 ONS Omnibus Survey* included questions designed to establish from a sample of the general population what items and activities they consider to be necessities.
- A follow-up survey of a sub-sample of respondents to the 1998-9 GHS were interviewed in late 1999 to establish how many lacked items identified as necessities, and also to collect other information on poverty and social exclusion.

Further details about the *1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain* are available at: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/pse/>

INTRODUCTION

This short report is the first of a series of reports on a new national survey of poverty and social exclusion. The survey is the responsibility of a research team from four universities – York, Bristol, Loughborough and Herriot-Watt – and the Office of National Statistics (ONS), financed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Our early aim was to establish from a nationally representative sample what are perceived to be the necessities of life, so that different measures of poverty and social exclusion could be developed. At this first stage, questions about perceptions of the necessities of life were added to the annual Omnibus survey carried out by ONS. This was in June 1999. The Omnibus survey is designed by the ONS to provide information for different sponsors, including government departments (ONS, 1999).

Data from the more substantial second stage of the research have not yet been analysed. Following the Omnibus survey in June a separate and more elaborate survey was carried out. A sub-sample was drawn from the main sample interviewed for the General Household Survey in 1998-99, and people were interviewed later in 1999. The Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) Survey of Britain is a nationally representative survey of poverty. It is designed to repeat, but also extend, two national surveys of “Breadline Britain” carried out in 1983 and 1990.

The questions added to the 1999 Omnibus survey were intended to establish what changes have taken, and are taking, place in public perceptions of what are “necessities” as a basis for further inquiries about standards of living and poverty. New questions were also added – to clarify

doubts that had been raised after the earlier surveys in 1983 and 1990 and check some of the less robust conclusions (based on smaller sample numbers) that had been reached in that work.

The 1983 Breadline Britain survey provided the precedent for the research begun in June 1999. It was the first survey in Britain to capture what 'standard of living' is considered unacceptable by society (Mack and Lansley, 1985). Its central brief was:

to try to discover whether there is a public consensus on what is an unacceptable standard of living for Britain ... 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. This minimum may cover not only the basic essentials for survival (such as food) but also access, or otherwise, to participating in society and being able to play a social role.

The survey established: "for the first time ever, that a majority of people see the necessities of life in Britain in the 1980's as covering a wide range of goods and activities, and that people judge a minimum standard of living on socially established criteria and not just the criteria of survival or subsistence." The 1983 approach adopted a definition of poverty as a standard of living unacceptable to the majority of the population. The validity of this approach rests on an assumption - that is empirically verifiable - that there are not wide variations in the definition of necessities among different groups of society. The 1983 Breadline Britain survey and the subsequent 1990 survey (Gordon and Pantazis, 1997) confirmed this assumption. Despite changes during the 1990s would this still be true for the turn of the new century? We were eager to compare perceptions in Scotland with those in England.

DEVELOPING THE QUESTIONS ABOUT NECESSITIES

We will summarise some of the problems relevant to this first stage of research. Before being able to report the views people expressed about particular necessities we had to choose the operational questions to put to them. First, we were obliged to decide how wide-ranging the questions, and therefore the meaning, of the concept of “necessities” should be. There had to be a limit to the list of questions it was possible to ask. Second, we had to decide how the overall meaning of necessities was to be divided into its sub-components or elements, that is, into groups of questions and specific questions. Both decisions are of course open to protracted debate and verification.

There is a long history of scientific investigation upon which we have drawn in taking these decisions, going a lot further back than the 1983 and 1990 forerunner studies already described.

Needs are not self-evident. They have to be fulfilled consciously and unconsciously in accordance with purposes concerned with maintaining and improving human life. It is not just social organisation, or individual biology and physiology, or a combination of all three, that determine needs but the style of life to which, by their behaviour and feelings, individual members of society are obliged to conform.

There is no unitary and clear-cut national ‘style of living’. Rather, there are a series of overlapping and merging community, ethnic, organisational and regional styles. There are not only particular things and actions but types of consumption and customs which govern human behaviour and attitudes. Certain practices gradually become accepted. Even when a group performs particular rituals of religious observance or engages in particular leisure-time activity, it shares other customs with many different groups in society. “What do need to be distinguished are the customs practised by a majority of the national population, and those practised by different minorities and sub-groups” (Townsend, 1979, p. 249).

The procedure is of course complex. Many component items, including those specific to age groups, peers and generations, and to large units, such as regional communities and ethnic groups, have to be identified and examined and the elements common to, or approved by, the majority of the population distinguished.

Ideally, the aim would be “to cover all activities and events in order to establish standard or majority norms, conventions and customs, so that non-participation, or marginal participation, in those norms, conventions and customs could be identified.” (Townsend and Gordon, 1993, pp. 57-58). But this would involve a huge exercise in definition, investigation and measurement on a national scale. Instead, it is possible on the basis of a lot of previous work to rule out uncommon or rare goods and activities. This “indirect” authority allowed us to reduce the number and sub-categorisation of interview questions.

Secondly we were able to draw on “direct” authority for the final selection of questions. In developing our plans for the new survey the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University undertook a series of discussions with 13 groups of people in different circumstances. A major object was to negotiate "agreed lists of items, activities and facilities which all adults in Britain should be able to have and should not have to go without" (Bradshaw et al, 1998, p. 44). This led the research team to add and amend some questions asked in 1983 and 1990.

For example, among new questions of a primarily "material" kind was "fresh fruit or fresh vegetables every day," "appropriate clothes to wear for job interviews" and "mattresses and bedding for everyone in the household."

New questions of a primarily "social" kind were added. They included "access to a garden or park," "visiting friends and/or family once a week," and "going to the pub once a fortnight." In the words of the report "contact with friends and family was

emphasised throughout all the discussions of necessities as being vital to survival" (Ibid, p. 47).

The revised and additional questions were also piloted in a regular omnibus survey carried out by MORI (Ibid, see Chapter 9). It was as a result of both preliminary exercises that we arrived at the list of questions to be put in interviews – the answers to which are reported here.

RANKING MATERIAL AND SOCIAL NECESSITIES IN SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND

Our 1999 PSE survey developed and extended the methodology of the 1983 and 1990 studies dealing with indicators of a substantial list of necessities – prompted partly by intervening research into social conditions, consumer behaviour and household interaction. In 1999 respondents were asked substantially more questions about material goods and social activities (77 compared with 44 in 1990 and 35 1983). The additional questions are to do mainly with social activities (which were selectively few in number in the first two surveys) and with goods and activities particularly relevant to children.

Table 1 ranks the percentage of respondents identifying different items as “necessary” in 1999, comparing English and Scottish respondents. Over 90% of the population in each case perceive “beds for everyone”, “heating”, a “damp free home”, “visits to the hospital”, and “medicines” as items which adults should have in Britain. By contrast, less than 10% of the population sees a “dishwasher”, a “mobile phone”, “internet access” and a “satellite television” as necessary.

In the previous Breadline Britain surveys, items attracting 50% or more support from the population, a “democratic” majority, were considered as socially perceived necessities for the purposes of further analysis.

What is perhaps remarkable is that perceptions in the two countries are so similar. In England a majority of the population picked out 35 of the 54 items (applying to adults) as necessary. In Scotland the total was 34 – and all of these fell within the English list. In only one case, “a roast joint or the vegetarian equivalent weekly,” was there a difference among the items reaching the 50 per cent threshold, falling short in Scotland (42 per cent) compared with England (58 per cent).

It can be seen that there is a remarkable similarity in the “votes” for many necessities. The percentages perceiving items as necessary varies between Scotland and England by less than 5 per cent for 25 of the 34 discussed. And below the 50 per cent threshold the correspondence of perception in the two countries continues.

There are nonetheless certain variations. There is a tendency for more people in Scotland than in England to name certain material possessions as necessities. Examples in Table 1 are a damp-free home, a warm waterproof coat, a washing machine, two pairs of all-weather shoes, and a television.

Similarly, there is a tendency in Scotland for fewer people than in England to name social customs and activities as necessities. Examples are visits to friends or family, visits to school e.g. sports days, a hobby or leisure activity, friends or family around for a meal, presents for family/friends yearly, a holiday away from home, an evening out once a fortnight, coach or train fares to visit family or friends and a meal in a restaurant or pub at least once a month.

While fewer Scots than English name a car as a necessity, more Scots than English name a daily newspaper as a necessity.

Table 1: Perception of necessities by country (%)

| Unranked items and activities | England 1999 n=1591 | Scotland 1999 n=165 |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Beds and bedding for everyone | 96 | 97 |
| Heating to warm living areas | 95 | 95 |
| Damp free home | 94 | 98 |
| Visiting friends or family in hospital | 94 | 94 |
| Two meals a day | 92 | 91 |
| Medicines prescribed by doctor | 92 | 92 |
| Refrigerator | 90 | 91 |
| Fresh fruit and vegetables daily | 87 | 85 |
| A warm waterproof coat | 86 | 92 |
| Replace broken electrical goods | 86 | 86 |
| Visits to friends or family | 86 | 82 |
| Celebrations on special occasions | 85 | 85 |
| Money to keep home decorated | 84 | 83 |
| Visits to school e.g. sports day | 84 | 78 |
| Attending weddings, funerals | 82 | 80 |
| Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent | 81 | 80 |
| Insurance of contents of dwelling | 80 | 82 |
| A hobby or leisure activity | 80 | 77 |
| Collect children from school | 78 | 71 |
| A washing machine | 77 | 82 |
| Telephone | 72 | 69 |
| Appropriate clothes for job interviews | 71 | 69 |
| Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms | 70 | 70 |
| Deep freezer/fridge freezer | 70 | 69 |
| Regular savings for rainy days | 68 | 61 |
| Friends or family round for a meal | 66 | 62 |
| Two pairs of all weather shoes | 65 | 71 |
| Money to spend on self weekly | 62 | 53 |
| Presents for friends/family yearly | 59 | 50 |
| A roast joint/vegetarian equivalent weekly | 58 | 42 |
| A holiday away from home | 57 | 51 |
| A television | 56 | 59 |
| Replace worn out furniture | 56 | 53 |
| A dictionary | 55 | 55 |
| An outfit for social occasions | 52 | 54 |
| New, not second hand, clothes | 49 | 46 |
| Attending place of worship | 42 | 46 |
| A evening out once a fortnight | 41 | 35 |
| Coach/train fares to visit friends/family | 41 | 33 |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----|----|
| A car | 40 | 27 |
| A dressing gown | 35 | 34 |
| Having a daily newspaper | 29 | 47 |
| A meal in a restaurant/pub monthly | 27 | 20 |
| Microwave oven | 24 | 23 |
| Tumble dryer | 21 | 20 |
| Going to the pub once a fortnight | 21 | 19 |
| A video cassette recorder | 20 | 15 |
| Holidays abroad once a year | 20 | 17 |
| A home computer | 12 | 9 |
| CD player | 12 | 12 |
| A dishwasher | 7 | 7 |
| Mobile phone | 7 | 7 |
| Access to the internet | 7 | 4 |
| Satellite television | 5 | 6 |

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