social iSsUES

POVERTY & THE FEAR OF CRIME

AQA GCSE SOCIOLOGY

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# wealth, income & poverty

### wealth & income

* Wealth refers to the ownership of assets that are valued at a particular point in time. Marketable assets include houses and land that can be sold in order to make money. Wealth also includes shares and savings.
* Income refers to the flow of resources which individuals households receive over a specific period of time. People may receive income in cash (e.g. wages, welfare benefits and pensions) or in kind (e.g. company car and petrol allowances)

### the distribution of wealth & income

Wealth is distributed unequally in the UK. For example, in 2001, the wealthiest 1% owned 33% of marketable wealth whilst the least wealthy 50% owned just 3% of this wealth.

Income is also distributed unequally in the UK. For example, in 2007, the poorest 10% of people received 3% of total income while the top 10% received 40% of total income.

Wealth and income influence life chances. For example, people on high incomes have the choice between NHS and private healthcare, state and private education or between renting and buying a property. Most people on low incomes do not have these choices.

### poverty

Poverty can be defined as:

* **Absolute poverty** when people’s income is so low that they cannot obtain the minimum needed to survive
* **Relative poverty** which is when people’s income is well below average so they are poor compared with others in their society. They cannot afford to have the general standard of living that most other people in their society enjoy

Poverty can also be defined in terms of exclusion from everyday activities and customs. This is about people who experience poverty from the activities and living patterns that most people take for granted.

### measuring poverty

There are different ways of measuring poverty:

* **Low incomes** – this is the main official UK government way of measuring poverty
* **Lack of** items that the majority of the population see as **necessities**
* **Subjective measures** – in which people judge themselves to be living in poverty

### groups at risk of poverty

Research suggests that the proportion of people in poverty is higher among:

* Single parent households
* Single pensioners
* Families with a child under 11
* Households without paid workers
* People who left school aged 16 or under
* Children and young people

Poverty is linked to ethnicity, gender and age.

People living in households headed by someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage are at risk of living in low-income households. Possible reasons for this could include racism and discrimination in the labour market. Members of some minority ethnic groups are less likely to take up the welfare state assistance to which they are entitled. Members of some minority ethnic groups are also more likely to experience unemployment and are more likely to live in low income households.

Women face a greater risk of poverty than men. Possible reasons could include the fact that women earn less than men, on average, because they are more likely to work in low paid jobs and to work part-time. In general, women live longer than men so there are a larger number of older female pensioners living alone. Women are less likely than men to have an income from an occupational pension. Women are also more likely than men to head single-parent families which often have to live on low incomes.

Children and pensioners are more at risk of poverty than other age groups. Possible reasons for this include living on a low income such as state retirement pension and not claiming the benefits to which they are entitled to.

This is all captured in the idea of the life cycle of poverty. The life cycle of poverty shows that people may move in and out of poverty at different points during their lives. For example, an individual may live below the poverty line during childhood. As a young adult, they can earn money and move out of poverty. If they have children, the added expense may mean they move back into poverty. When their children leave home, they may escape poverty. During old age, they no longer get a wage so they may move back into poverty. So, children and pensioners are more at risk of poverty.

#### keywords

* **Absolute poverty**: people experience absolute poverty when their income is insufficient to obtain the minimum needed to survive
* **Life cycle of poverty**: movement into and out of poverty at different stages during the course of a person’s life
* **Poverty line**: a government-approved line that divides people who are living below a set income level (living below the poverty line) from those who are living above it. In Britain, there is no official poverty line
* **Relative poverty**: people experience relative poverty when they cannot afford to meet the general standard of living of most other people in their society

# different sociological explanations of poverty

Some approaches focus on individuals and groups while others focus on structural factors.

### individual explanations of poverty

Individual explanations highlight the behavior/lifestyles of individuals and groups who experience poverty. They suggest that the poor are responsible in some way for their own situation:

* **Culture of poverty**
  + In this account, people from the poorest sections of society are socialized within a subculture of poverty. They develop a way of life and a set of values to cope with their position. For example, they live for the moment and see no point in planning ahead. However, these values prevent them from taking up educational opportunities or saving for the future, and in this way, escaping poverty
* **Cycle of deprivation**
  + In this view, poverty involves both material and cultural deprivation. It persists from generation to generation, locking families into a cycle of deprivation
* **Welfare dependency and the underclass**
  + In the 1980s and ‘90s, New Right approaches identified the emergence in Britain of an underclass - a group of undeserving poor whose attitudes and values are different from those of mainstream society. This group remains in poverty because they are encouraged by welfare

The idea of social exclusion can be used to criticize individual explanations of poverty. Socially excluded people are shut out from participating in society’s socioeconomic, political and cultural life by factors beyond their control. The idea of social exclusion stresses society’s role in excluding some people from full participation.

### structural explanations of poverty

Structural approaches look at the way society is structured economically, socially and politically to create poverty and perpetuate it over time:

MARXIST APPROACH  
This view states that poverty is the inevitable result of the class-based inequalities that are built into capitalist society. Capitalism is an economic system that generates extreme wealth for the bourgeoisie/ruling class while producing poverty among sections of the proletariat

UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE INADEQUACIES OF THE WELFARE STATE  
Unemployment is seen as a key issue in understanding the causes of poverty. During economic recessions, unemployment levels rise and, as a result, the number of people experiencing poverty also increases. Another view is that welfare state benefits are too low. In this view, the solution to the problem of poverty is to give more money to the people in poverty by increasing the value of pensions and welfare benefits.

# the impact of crime

### FEAR OF CRIME

**Fear or worry about crime** refers to the fear of being a victim of crime as opposed to the actual probability of being a victim of crime. It is one way that crime affects everyone to some degree, regardless of whether they have been victims of crime. Sometimes, the level of anxiety about crime (such as credit card fraud) is not in proportion to the actual risk of becoming a victim.

The core aspect of fear of crime is the range of emotions that is provoked in citizens by the possibility of victimization. While standard measures of worry about crime regularly show between 30% and 50% of the population of England and Wales express some kind of worry about falling victim, probing reveals that few individuals actually worry for their own safety on an everyday basis. One thus can distinguish between fear (an emotion, a feeling of alarm or dread caused by an awareness or expectation of danger) and some more broader anxiety. However it should be noted that some people may be more willing to admit to their worries and vulnerabilities than others.

Public perceptions of the risk of crime are no doubt also strongly shaped by mass media coverage. Individuals pick up from media circulating images of the criminal event - the perpetrators, victims, motive, and representations of consequential, uncontrollable, and sensational crimes. The notion of 'stimulus similarity' may be key: if the reader of a newspaper identifies with the described victim, or feels that their own neighbourhood bears resemblance to the one described, then the image of risk may be taken up, personalised and translated into personal safety concerns

### defining crime and deviance

* **A crime is an illegal act** that is punishable by law. If a person commits a crime and is detected, they could be arrested, charged and prosecuted. If found guilty, they will receive a sentence such as a community order, fine or imprisonment. Some illegal acts are not necessarily seen as deviant. For example, parking cars on double yellow lines or using a mobile phone whilst driving, even though these activities are against the law.

### the impact of crime on victims

There are three different types of research in relation to the impact of crime on victims:

* **Measurement research**
  + Examines the type and number of people who are victims of crime. For example, the BCS provides statistical information on the victims of crime, such as their age, gender and ethnicity. Measurement research indicates, for instance, that males are more likely to be victims of crime than females and younger people are more likely to be victims than older people.
* **Studies of the impact of crime**
  + Show that crime can impact on victims:
    - *Physically*
    - *Financially*
    - *Socially*
    - *Psychologically*
* **Studies of the role of victims in the criminal justice process**
  + Look at victims’ roles in reporting crime, providing evidence and acting as witnesses in court

### impact of crime on society

**Crime can impact on local communities by generating fear of violence, burglary and car crime**. It can lead people to worry about antisocial behavior in their own community and to feel unsafe walking alone after dark. Crime is seen as causing **damaging tensions within communities.** For example, it can lead people to believe that community ties are breaking down or that community life is being destroyed.

Antisocial behavior such as vandalizing bus shelters can have a negative impact on a community because it may lead some adults to label **all** local teenagers as a source of trouble. Crime and deviance could affect communities by causing tension between some adults and some teenagers (for instance those who wear hoodies) and also by generating fear of young people among some adults.

If some people feel that there is tension and conflict in the local community, they may think that community ties are breaking down because of antisocial behavior. This impact could be seen as a problem because it is divisive and it damages social cohesion.

### youth crime as a social problem

Crime and deviance generate media coverage and public debate. One view is that media reporting increases public anxieties about law and order. When such behavior is associated with teenagers, it can create anxiety and fear of young people among members of the public.

Youth crime generates public debate and is seen as a serious social problem because of its negative or harmful consequences. For example, fear of teenage crime results in community ties breaking down or community life being damaged. Vandalism and graffiti have financial costs. Teenage knife crime is costly in terms of the loss of young lives and the devastating impact of this on the families of victims.

Some researches argue that young offenders are cast as society’s number one ‘folk devil’. This describes a group (such as mods and rockers) that is seen as a threat to society’s values. The media’s portrayal of young people as folk devils can lead to moral panic or public outcry about their behavior. Trivial acts of vandalism are seen as typical of all young people and as a threat to law and order. Young people become scapegoats who are blamed for society’s problems.

Governments have designed various policies to control youth crime and antisocial behavior. These include fining parents for their children’s misbehavior, curfews and ASBOs. However, critics argue that ASBOs have not been entirely successful as a policy to reduce antisocial behavior because they can be a status symbol/badge of honour among the young.

#### keywords

* **Antisocial behavior**: behavior that causes harassment, distress or alarm to other people
* **Corporate crime**: crimes committed by employees on behalf of the company or organization they work for. Examples in clued the manufacture and sale of unsafe products
* **Folk devil**: a group that is defined as a threat to society’s values
* **Moral panic**: a media-fuelled overreaction to social groups (such as hoodies). This process involves the media exaggerating the extent and significance of a social problem. A particular group is cast as a folk devil and becomes defined as a threat to society’s values
* **Media amplification**: blowing things out of proportion by over-reporting in the media
* **Scapegoat:** an individual or group (such as economic migrants) that is blamed entirely for something that is not their fault.