

**3.6 Social Stratification**

**3.6.4 Poverty as a social issue**

• *Different interpretations of poverty as a social issue*

**Revision resources:**  
 AQA Collins Textbook: Pages 300-308  
 Revision Guide: Page 104-105  
 Seneca: AQA GCSE Sociology – 5 Social stratification – 5.2 Poverty as a social issue  
 YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XHDHcw4F3A>



**Key points relating to Poverty, Wealth and Income: (you may want to use these points in your introductions):**

- In Britain, there are **vast inequalities** in the distribution of both wealth and income (Roberts, 2001)
- Income is linked to **life chances**, life expectancy and access to education, housing and health services.
- Income is distributed unevenly between households in the UK. One way of redistributing this is through taxes (such as income and council tax) and benefits (such as state pensions and income support). After taxes and benefits, the average income of the richest fifth of UK households was four times greater than that of the poorest fifth.

**Defining poverty:** Poverty is a controversial issue and there is no single agreed way of defining it. However, the question of how we define poverty is important. This is because the definition will influence how poverty is measured, the number of people said to be in poverty and how we tackle this.

**Absolute Poverty:** When their income is insufficient to obtain the minimum, they need to survive. People in absolute poverty cannot afford or access basic necessities, like food, water, shelter.

**Relative Poverty:** when people cannot afford to meet the general standard of living of most other people in their society – Their income will be a lot less than the average.

Characteristic	% of population	Correlation coefficient (Pearson's $r$ ) (net disposable household income)
1. Has not had a week's holiday away from home in last 12 months	54	0.19
2. Adults Only. Has not had a relative or friend to the home for a meal or snack in the last 4 weeks	33	0.05
3. Adults Only. Has not been out in the last 4 weeks to a relative or friend for a meal or snack	45	0.05
4. Children Only (under 15). Has not had a friend to play or tea in the last 4 weeks	36	0.06
5. Children Only. Did not have party on last birthday	57	0.07
6. Has not had an afternoon or evening out for entertainment in the last two weeks	47	0.11
7. Does not have fresh meat (including meals out) as many as 4 days a week	19	0.18
8. Has gone through one or more days in the past fortnight without a cooked meal	7	0.07
9. Has not had a cooked breakfast most days of the week	67	0.06
10. Household does not have a refrigerator	45	0.24
11. Household does not usually have a Sunday joint (3 in 4 times)	26	0.17
12. WC sink or washbasin and cold-water tap; fixed bath or shower; and gas or electric cooker	21	0.17

Source: Townsend, cit. Table 6.3, page 250

**Groups at risk of poverty:**

Ethnicity and Poverty

- People in the UK households headed by someone from a **minority ethnic group** (particularly Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage) are at risk of living in low-income households.
- Minority ethnic groups, for example, are generally disadvantaged in terms of **unemployment**, pay and the quality of their jobs.
- Explanations for this include **racism**, and discrimination in the labour market.

Gender and Poverty

**Women are more at risk of poverty than men.** There are several reasons for this.

- Women have longer life expectancies than men but are less likely to have an occupational pension.
- Women are more likely than men to head lone-parent families with low incomes.
- The **gender pay gap**: many female-dominated jobs (for example, in sales and customer service) are relatively poorly paid.
- Women are more likely than men to work in part-time employment.

Child Poverty

- Children are particularly vulnerable to poverty if they live in a family with four or more children, or where the head of household is a **lone parent**, from a minority ethnic group or workless.
- Poverty has a negative impact on children's life chances including their life expectancy, health, housing, educational attainments and job prospects.

**Measuring Poverty:**

Peter Townsend's 'Relative deprivation Index'

- **Peter Townsend (1979)** aimed to discover how many people were living in poverty in the UK.
- He developed a Deprivation Index to measure relative deprivation.
- His index listed 12 items such as 'Household does not usually have a Sunday joint (3 in 4 times).'
- Townsend found that almost 23% of the UK population were in poverty. This proportion was much higher than that based on the state standard of poverty (at 6.1 percent) and the relative income standard of poverty (at nine per cent).

**Butler and Watt: explaining increases in poverty and inequality**

When poverty grows among some groups while other people become richer, this results in greater inequality. Butler and Watt (2007) identify several factors that explain the increase in poverty and inequality. These include:

- An increase in the proportion of workless households
- An increase in the pay gap between low skilled and high skilled workers
- Changes in taxation, such as reductions in the rate of income tax, which benefit the better off
- Demographic changes that result in an increase in groups with low incomes such as pensioners and lone-parent families.

## 12 marker support:

In the 12 marker, you are likely going to be asked about how far sociologists agree on the causes of poverty as a social issue. So your 12 mark question could look something like:

Discuss how far sociologists agree that being born into a low income family is the main cause of poverty in British society today.

It is likely that the question will mention a particular cause of poverty and your job will be to describe, with examples, who does and doesn't agree that this is the main cause of poverty.

## Explanations for Poverty and Sociological viewpoints:

### Culture of Poverty

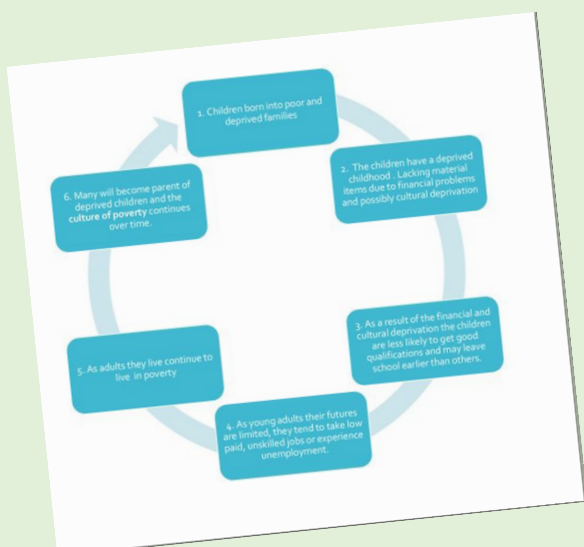
- People from the poorest section of society are **socialised** within a **sub-culture of poverty**. They develop a way of life and a set of values to cope with their situation. For instance, they live for the moment (immediate gratification) and see no point in planning ahead.
- Individuals in poverty developed a way of life and a set of values to cope with their position, including the following beliefs/attitudes:
  - People can do little to change their situation so they as well accept it.
  - Live for today and do not worry what tomorrow may bring.
  - There is no point saving up or planning for the future.
- Through socialisation within families, these values were passed on from parents to their children. In this way, poverty persisted over time between generations. The policy to remove poverty consists of education and training children to compensate for their home values.
- However these values discourage them from staying on at school or saving money for the future and, in this way, **escaping poverty**.
- This explanation of poverty focuses on individuals and it can be criticised because it doesn't actually look at the causes of poverty, only how people react to it. It also can be said that it blames people for their situation and ignores things like unemployment levels.

### Cycle of deprivation

- Poverty involves both material and cultural deprivation. It persists from one generation to the next, **locking families into a cycle of deprivation**. Sociologists who believe in the 'cultural of poverty' support this explanation.
- Material deprivation involves having insufficient money to be able to afford goods and services. As a result, people may not have a balanced diet. Poverty may lead to ill health during childhood. Housing may also be inadequate and in some cases, families may live in temporary accommodation.
- Cultural deprivation means that children's backgrounds do not provide with the resources to perform well at school. They have less parental encouragement and a poorer educational experience than children break out of the cycle of deprivation.
- According to this explanation, the policy to remove poverty involves employing social workers and using local authority provision to help children to break out of the cycle of deprivation.

**LINK (AO2):** The cycle of deprivation explains how people continue to be in poverty from one generation to the next and this is down to both persistent material deprivation but also cultural deprivation meaning opportunities of children in these families are limited, this is also true of the 'culture of poverty'.

**Criticisms (AO3):** critics argue that while this explanation may describe how poverty persists between generations, it fails to explain **why some groups fall into poverty in the first place**.



## Murray and the New Right

Murray (1984) examined US Governments social policies since the late 1960's that aimed to reduce poverty. He focused on the impact of these policies on the behaviour of members of the underclass.

In his view, the policies actually produced poverty and encouraged more people to become dependent on welfare benefits.

For example, they led to an increase in unmarried young people to have no interest in finding jobs and become welfare dependent.

Murray associated the underclass with poor African-American and Hispanic people. He argues that the underclass is growing and poses a threat to society's wellbeing because it's members are responsible for increases in crime rates and are a burden to tax-payers.



### The underclass in the UK

Murray (1996) argued that the UK's underclass is growing rapidly. He focused on the behaviour of the undeserving poor and examined three measures of the underclass:

- Rising crime rates
- An increase in the number of 'illegitimate' births;
- Drop out from the labour force among working-age men

He argued that welfare reform encouraged crime, single parenthood and unemployment and took away the incentive to work.

**LINK (AO2):** Murray believes the cause of poverty is that people become dependent on welfare benefits (which are a lower source of income than a job would bring you but is a stable income).

### Criticisms (AO3) -

- Critics reject the idea that an underclass with different attitudes actually exists.
- The term is used to 'blame the victims' for their misfortunes.
- The underclass are used as a scapegoat for the problems in society.
- When explaining poverty, sociologists should focus on the structure of society and the 'overclass' – the rich and powerful groups in society.



## Functionalist: Davis and Moore

Davis and Moore say that poverty performs positive functions for some groups in society; Eg it helps ensure that dirty and dangerous work gets done cheaply because people need the work. People need jobs in order to meet their basic needs and this ensures that all jobs do get done as people want to avoid poverty and so someone will end up having to do these jobs.

Other functionalist accounts focus on the positive functions of poverty for some groups in industrial society. Poverty creates jobs for groups who deal with the poor such as the police, social workers, probation officers and charity workers.

**LINK (AO2):** Poverty is necessary in society in order that all of the tasks deemed as 'menial' by society are fulfilled and it continues to function well.

**Criticisms (AO3) -** Critics argue that functionalism tries to defend the existence of poverty rather than explaining it.

## Marxist

Poverty is the inevitable outcome of the class-based divisions in capitalist society. Capitalism generates extreme wealth for the bourgeoisie and poverty within the proletariat.

Capitalist society is based on inequalities of wealth between classes and a small group makes a profit out of the rest of the people. It is therefore inevitable that some people will be poor under capitalism. Poverty serves the bourgeoisie interests as they can hire and fire workers as needed. The fear of poverty and unemployment can be used to discipline the workers, keeping wages down and profits up.

**LINK (AO2):** Poverty is caused by capitalist society and the ability of the Bourgeoisie to hire and fire workers and have ultimate power of the proletariat who cannot risk being in poverty. They can also pay them low wages.

**Criticisms (AO3):** Critics argue however, that societies have undergone such social change still have poverty, inequality and differences in the distribution of income and wealth.



## Feminist

Women (particularly lone mothers and older widows) face a greater risk of poverty than men. The two groups with the highest risk and the longest duration of poverty are lone mother and older women living alone. Possible reasons include the gender pay gap and inequality in the division of caring responsibilities. Women are also likely to outlive their parents.

Feminists argue that female poverty may be hidden in some couple households. For example, women may be poor when their male partners are relatively well off. Women may also experience poverty more intensely than their partners – Mothers often go without food, clothing and warmth to protect their other family members, particularly their children from the full impacts of low income.

**LINK (AO2):** Causes of poverty are predominately low income and women are more likely to experience this.

**Criticisms (AO3):** Critics argue that Feminists ignore the significance of social class factors when considering women's increased risk of poverty.

