

“If Beatrice Webb was alive today and wanted to develop an index of poverty in the UK what factors would be included, how would they be measured, and how would they be weighted? Also how would you use such an index to promote the issue of poverty in the public and political consciousness?”

If the twentieth century has taught us anything, it is that there are few constants in modern life. For every invention, discovery, and idea of the nineteenth century, the following century brought us thousands more. Rapid change and continuous innovation continues to shape the current century. Amidst these developments, however there remains one major constant - poverty. Descriptions of slums, mills and workhouses conjure up an image of another world, one we have left behind as we continue our march of progress to a better way of life, but antiquated terms such as the “destitute” and the “impoverished” have a frightening relevance in the UK today. Whilst the workhouses and slums might now have been confined to the history books, there is a real, living poverty in the UK which confronts us. Poverty represents a blot on the social and political landscape of “modern” times.

It is easy to imagine that if Beatrice Webb were alive today she would find it disappointing and yet somehow unsurprising that poverty still exists in Britain. Disappointing because although over a century has passed since individuals began to campaign for the eradication of poverty, poverty still exists. Unsurprising because the causes of poverty are woven deeply into the fabric of our social and economic structures. As the Webbs and their contemporaries highlighted, the idea that poverty is caused by weakness of character or individual moral failing is inaccurate. In *The Prevention of Destitution* the Webbs attacked popular conceptions of the poor which painted those in poverty as corrupt and flawed individuals. The false image of the poor criticised by the Webbs bears a striking resemblance to current caricatures of the “poor man” as a work-shy, undeserving idler belonging to some form of under-class. While there may always be cases which point to personal character being linked to poverty, it is largely a myth to claim that the poor bring poverty upon themselves. Poverty is the result of problems within the political and economic system and therefore we must turn to these systems to find the solutions.

The solutions will not be easy to find. Even the nature of the problem is difficult to define. Over the last hundred years or so there have been several attempts to survey the extent of poverty both at a regional and a national level. From Charles Booth’s survey of working life in London, to the work of the Blair administration’s Social Exclusion Unit; from Seebohm Rowntree’s York studies to the Field Review, there have been numerous attempts to examine poverty and its causes. When approaching poverty in the twenty-first century we must first begin with some difficult questions. Is there one “type” of poverty or can we discuss many “poverties”? Does poverty start and end with economic circumstances? How should we measure “poverty of opportunity” or “cultural poverty”?

The poverty indicators currently used go some way to provide a clear picture of the extent of its existence in the UK. The English Indices of Deprivation used by the Department for Communities and Local Government are organised into seven domains: income, employment, health and disability, education and training, barriers to housing and services, living environment, and crime.

This approach to poverty, however, does not account for a variation in the “type” of poverty experienced by individuals or families. Nor does it encourage appreciation of the fact that poverty is not necessarily just about material deprivation. The lack of cultural stimulation or the lack of a sense of involvement also represents a form of poverty, even if the consequences of this deprivation are less serious (and less immediate) than economic deprivation. Therefore, if Beatrice Webb were to conduct an enquiry into UK poverty, she might examine a wider range of indicators.

It might be useful to organise these indicators into the following groupings: primary indicators relating to basic needs, indicators of social and economic barriers, and indicators linked to social inclusion. Obviously when analysing data relating to poverty it is difficult to draw any accurate conclusions relating to the causes of poverty. For example, if a person is living on a low income and they lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, is it their existing poverty which has led to their educational underachievement or is it their lack of academic skills which has contributed to their poverty? To attempt to understand patterns of poverty it might be necessary to measure the poverty indicators over two generations. This would also reveal any fluctuations in factors such as income.

Firstly, we could look at primary indicators which can be considered as being an individual’s basic needs. What does a family or individual need to live sufficiently? These would include income, housing and health services. In terms of income, a survey would consider disposable income and would need to establish the nature of this income (wage, pension, benefit etc.), the security of this income (regularity of payments, fluctuations, conditions on receipt of income) and how income is spent (proportion on food, rent, bills and personal items). Questions related to housing would include housing needs (homelessness, fixed location, overcrowding), terms of residency (home ownership, mortgage, private sector rent, social housing), condition of housing (property type, central heating, sanitation facilities) and surrounding environment (facilities, neighbouring properties). Health would look at access to healthcare (NHS doctors, dentists), birth and mortality rates (low birth weight babies, premature infant/adult death), health conditions and mental illness. An additional indicator relating to nutrition might also be considered. Rowntree’s studies of poverty in York placed a great emphasis on adult diet and this would be a useful indicator in measuring poverty in the UK today. Therefore, data relating to adult and infant calorie intake, malnutrition and balance within diets would also be considered.

Secondly, we might look at factors which act as social and economic barriers. This means issues which might prolong poverty and limit opportunities. What might prevent individuals and families from being lifted out of poverty? Education, employment experience and access to services would fall into this category. Educational yardsticks could be academic qualifications (school education, post compulsory education, literacy, numeracy and computing skills) and professional qualifications (vocational qualifications). Employment would include a measure of whether an individual has access to work experience and to pathways into professions (careers guidance, work placements/internships, someone to provide job references). Attention would also be directed towards the access to services which allow individuals to take advantage of opportunities (car ownership, childcare provision, holding a bank account). Several key questions need to be asked. Does low

educational achievement lead to unemployment, and consequently to poverty? Or, does poverty lead to low educational achievement? If a young person's family members do not work in a profession such as teaching or medicine is it more or less likely that the young person themselves will be excluded from these professions? Does a young person whose parents/guardians own and drive a car stand a better chance of being a car owner themselves in the future?

Finally, a survey might consider factors relating to inclusivity. This includes factors which might exclude individuals from taking a full part in society. Having a good quality of life goes beyond living sufficiently: it involves feeling part, and being able to be part of wider society. Often those living in poverty experience barriers which prevent them from participating in this sense. Indicators of this type of poverty might include the lack of computer/internet access, lack of technology (white electronic goods, telephones, a television), a lack of disposable income to spend on personal goods and leisure activities, or being unable to afford to keep a pet. Whilst these factors might be considered luxuries, it is surely the case that any form of deprivation should be described as a barrier which prevents full participation in social life. This is, therefore, a form of cultural poverty. Particularly in the modern age, the lack of a television or computer not only limits opportunities but also puts an individual at a disadvantage by denying them access to services, learning and entertainment.

These factors are obviously interrelated. But it is clear that the primary needs of an individual (income, housing and health) ought to be given more weight in any measure of poverty. The lack of one of these factors can often cause barriers (educational and employment) and lead to social exclusion. Take the example of a child living in an overcrowded house. A lack of space may impact upon sleep or hygiene, which in turn might have an impact upon schoolwork or homework. This might lead to the child being unable to fulfil their educational potential which might lead to a lack of future employment. Of course this is not always the case, but it is easy to see how the failure to meet the basic needs of an individual can set in motion a chain of problems which might limit opportunities in other areas.

A factor which must be considered when exploring these indicators is choice. Surely part of living a "good life" means having the ability to choose? An essential part of being human involves having the right to make decisions for one's self. Having the ability to make choices and be master of your own life is psychologically vital as it empowers the individual. Therefore, being denied this right can often make an individual feel vulnerable, worthless and socially disenfranchised. Often those in poverty are denied choice. Whereas one person might choose between two career paths, another does not have the luxury of choosing but merely has to settle for the job which puts bread on the table. Whereas one family might agonise over which area to live in, another settles merely for bricks and mortar, hardly deserving of being called a home. Whereas the dilemma for one person might be which of the latest songs to download, for another person the choice is whether to spend that money on the download at all, or on a pint of milk. Patently the latter in each case is no choice at all.

Now here is the most difficult task. How to place the spotlight on poverty? How to put poverty at the top of the political agenda? The problem lies with the fact that public and political opinion is guided largely by a group of individuals who have hardly experienced disadvantage let alone true hardship. It is always galling to hear

“the haves” telling “the have-nots” how to live their lives and listen to them arguing that underprivileged are architects of their own misery. Worse still is the way in which the “haves” encourage the condemnation of those in poverty by painting them as a monstrous scourge, almost an entirely different species, quite separate from the “hard-working” majority. Nobody chooses poverty. Nobody deserves to live in poverty. What is more, nobody dreams of actually being in employment but living poverty.

In order to tackle the issue of poverty, it is first necessary to counter the trend towards a resurrection of the nineteenth-century politics of individualism. Support provided to those in poverty ought not to be conditional in the sense that society will only help those who are willing to help themselves. The individual alone can do little to improve their situation without there being some significant change to social and economic structures.

The poverty index described could be used in two ways: it would draw attention to the flaws in current perceptions of poverty and it would highlight the specific areas in which the current support mechanisms are failing.

A survey into the nature, level and security of incomes would undoubtedly reveal that many of those living in poverty are not “scroungers” and in fact they make every effort to work to earn a living. Poverty is not confined to the jobless - many working families live in poverty and struggle to maintain homes and feed children. Clearly individual drive or motivation to work is not the problem. The failure lies in the wage system. How can it be fair that an individual who works still does not have enough to live on? The solution is obvious: the minimum wage should be substituted for a decent living wage.

An examination of housing provision would also expel the ridiculous assumption that those on lower incomes are given housing “freebies”. Such ideas are merely borne out of ignorance. Many families have housing needs that are unmet. Many individuals have no fixed residence. Often individuals live without basic facilities such as showers and heating. Only by understanding the nature of current housing provision can the public and politicians begin to accommodate the need for affordable and good quality housing. A survey of housing would allow central and local government to work with housing associations, charities and the construction industry to focus their attention on the most pressing needs of individuals.

Assessment of education and employment would also help counter the many generalisations made about the motivations and aspirations of those living in poverty. It would demonstrate that the reasons many are on low incomes have little to do with a lack of education or a lack of employment-based skills. Also, it might reveal that where educational achievement is lower than expected, this is caused by a lack of financial resources or the lack of an adequate learning environment at home. Surely the problem is not a lack of personal motivation? It is the responsibility of the education system and employers to nurture an individual. Giving a person an opportunity of learning a new skill or developing existing ones can often make all the difference. Poverty is often the result of a failure to recognise and tend to the needs and talents of an individual.

Essay Competition entry: Celia Goodburn

If Beatrice Webb were alive today she would find that although the nature of poverty may have changed over the last century, it is perhaps just as prevalent. It is a shameful fact that whilst one sector of our society has experienced greater prosperity and opportunity than ever before, another group continues to experience a hardship which parallels a Victorian era we claim to have left behind. In years to come the question to ask should not be “How can we measure, and promote the issue of poverty?”, but rather “What have we done to help bring an end to poverty?”.