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**PERCEPTIONS OF THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE: WALES, ENGLAND AND
SCOTLAND 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 is a preliminary report in a series of reports on a new national survey of poverty and social exclusion. A similar report dealing only with a comparison between England and Scotland has been submitted to the Scottish Affairs Committee. The survey is the responsibility of a research team from four universities – York, Bristol, Loughborough and Heriot-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 WALES, 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 Welsh with English and Scottish respondents. It can be seen that there is consistency in the ranking, although caution must be expressed about the small numbers in the Scottish and especially Welsh sub-samples. Fortunately the results for Wales can be compared with a 1995 survey of Wales where over 1000 persons were interviewed.

Ninety per cent of the population in all three countries named a “damp free home” as a necessity and large majorities of the population also specified things like "heating to warm living areas," "beds and bedding for everyone," "a refrigerator," “visits to friends and family”, and “medicines prescribed by their doctor” 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 three 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). But this example of a necessity was picked out by a much higher proportion of Welsh respondents than of respondents in the other countries.

In Wales 50 per cent or more of the respondents named 35 items as necessary - the same as in England. Among these 33 were identical. More of the Welsh laid stress on "new, not second-hand, clothes" and "attending a place of worship." Fewer named "money to spend on self weekly" and

"presents for friends and/or family at least yearly" - although in both these cases the number approached 50 per cent.

There are of course certain variations. In Wales there is a tendency for fewer people than in England to list certain items as necessary. The instances of "two meals a day" and "fresh fruit and vegetables daily stand out, but the percentage rating of many items in the middle and end of the list is rather similar. And more of the Welsh than of the English and Scots respondents name carpets, a dressing gown and a newspaper, as well as attending a place of worship, and a roast joint or the vegetarian equivalent, among the necessities of life.

Table 1: Perception of necessities in England, Scotland and Wales (%)

Material goods and social customs and activities said to be necessary	England 1999 (n=1591)	Scotland 1999 (n=165)	Wales 1999 (n=99)	Wales 1995 (n=1007)
Heating to warm living areas	95	95	89	99
Damp free home	94	98	90	99
Visiting friends or family in hospital	94	94	83	-
Two meals a day	92	91	75	94
Medicines prescribed by doctor	92	92	79	-
Refrigerator	90	91	80	95
Fresh fruit and vegetables daily	87	85	76	90
A warm waterproof coat	86	92	81	93
Replace broken electrical goods	86	86	83	-
Visits to friends or family	86	82	84	-
Celebrations on special occasions	85	85	74	-
Money to keep home decorated	84	83	72	84
Visits to school e.g. sports day	84	78	67	-
Attending weddings, funerals	82	80	79	-
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent	81	80	76	-
Insurance of contents of dwelling	80	82	75	84
A hobby or leisure activity	80	77	77	73
Collect children from school	78	71	68	-
A washing machine	77	82	80	83
Telephone	72	69	69	64
Appropriate clothes for job interviews	71	69	66	-
Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms	70	70	77	-
Deep freezer/fridge freezer	70	69	63	-
Regular savings for rainy days	68	61	65	67
Friends or family round for a meal	66	62	60	-
Two pairs of all weather shoes	65	71	68	80

Money to spend on self weekly	62	53	49	-
Presents for friends/family yearly	59	50	46	55
A roast joint/vegetarian equivalent weekly	58	42	72	-
A holiday away from home	57	51	55	49
A television	56	59	60	68
Replace worn out furniture	56	53	51	-
A dictionary	55	55	58	-
An outfit for social occasions	52	54	53	-
New, not second hand, clothes	49	46	57	59
Attending place of worship	42	46	53	-
A evening out once a fortnight	41	35	43	-
Coach/train fares to visit friends/family	41	33	34	-
A car	40	27	42	43
A dressing gown	35	34	42	-
Having a daily newspaper	29	47	40	-
A meal in a restaurant/pub monthly	27	20	26	-
Microwave oven	24	23	28	-
Tumble dryer	21	20	27	-
Going to the pub once a fortnight	21	19	24	-
A video cassette recorder	20	15	23	23
Holidays abroad once a year	20	17	21	-
A home computer	12	9	15	13
CD player	12	12	18	-
A dishwasher	7	7	14	-
Mobile phone	7	7	10	-
Access to the internet	7	4	7	-
Satellite television	5	6	9	-

(Note: Don't Know/Not Sure/Unanswered coded as missing. Some of the question wordings in the 1995 Poor Wales Survey varied slightly from the wordings used in the 1999 Poverty & Social Exclusion Survey of Britain)

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