

# Poor Britain

Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley

## Chapter 3: To Live or to Exist

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# 3

## To Live or to Exist?

### The survey's findings on today's necessities

A standard of living surely should give you the benefit of making a choice of whether you have a piece of beef or a small chop. A piece of beef would last you two or three days where a chop would last you one. Surely living standards should be able to give you the choice of being able to buy a small joint? [A disabled woman, living on supplementary benefit]

The *Breadline Britain* survey set out to discover, for the first time ever, what standard of living is considered unacceptable by society as a whole. The first task was to establish whether there is, in fact, a public consensus on what minimum standard people living in Britain in the 1980s should be entitled to.

In the last chapter, we argued that poverty can be seen in terms of an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities. People's perceptions of necessities will vary from generation to generation and from society to society. As such, poverty is relative. However, this approach makes no prior judgement about whether necessities should be confined to what are sometimes classed as subsistence items (food, clothing and heating) or whether they reflect the wide range of social activities that make up a person's standard of living. Nor does it make any prior judgement about the quality of life that constitutes this minimum. It seeks instead to find out what people themselves think.

### The survey's design

The central brief given to MORI, the survey specialists com-

missioned by London Weekend Television to design and conduct the *Breadline Britain* survey, was as follows:

The survey's first, and most important, aim is to try to discover whether there is a public consensus on what is an unacceptable standard of living for Britain in 1983 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 design was carried out in two stages. The first, qualitative, stage tapped the views of groups of different types of people across Britain: people broadly representative of the poor themselves (the low-paid, the unemployed and the elderly) and of middle-income earners. The aim was to ensure that the survey was based firmly on the reality of the lives of the poor and was generally in tune with the perceptions of a broader range of people. This was complemented by discussions with academic specialists and by an examination, with the help of the Social Science Research Council's data archive, of other surveys in the field. Trial versions of the questionnaire were tested in pilot runs.

Several questions arose in the course of the survey's design. The first was the identification of a range of goods and activities that were indicative of a minimum standard of living. Clearly, it was not possible to produce a comprehensive list of the purchases that might constitute part of this minimum standard. The items chosen had, on the one hand, to distinguish between the poor and others and, on the other hand, to be of some significance to many people. A final list of thirty-five items was chosen (see Table 3.1 below). It covers a cross-section of a household's social and personal life, including food, heating, household durables, clothing, housing

conditions, transport and leisure and social activities. The items representing each of these areas do not include things like salt, which almost everyone has, or things such as pocket calculators, which few people would miss.

Having decided what items to include, the question arose of whether or not to specify a quality for these items. For example, having decided to include possession of carpets, should we specify that they should not be 'threadbare' or that they should 'be in adequate condition'? In the end, we decided that these kinds of judgements were too subjective and, moreover, depended on one's own standard of living. We therefore confined the items to simple possession described in concrete and measurable terms. In this way, a minimum level could be identified because what became important was whether or not people could afford these goods, even if what they could afford was only the very cheapest. It did mean, however, that the comparisons that could be made between the poor and others were limited.

The next issue was to decide whether it was going to be possible to identify just one set of minima. People might, for example, feel that the needs of a single young person are very different from those of an elderly person or from those of a couple with children. Our preliminary soundings suggested that the main differences would lie between the elderly and others and so in the trial run we asked people to distinguish between the elderly and others with reference to each of the items. However, it appeared that, with the exception of a telephone, which people felt was particularly important for the elderly, people's views of what was important at this minimal level differed little between different groups. There did seem to be a standard of living to which people felt everyone was entitled. In a larger survey it would have been interesting to explore the extent to which certain groups are felt to be entitled to more than this universal minimum, but for the purposes of this study it was decided to search for a minimum that applied to all adults with, in addition, a number of items relating specifically to families (see questions 9 and 10 in the questionnaire, Appendix B, pp. 294-5).

Finally, the question had to be phrased in such a way that it was clear that what was being asked for was the identification of a *minimum* standard of living. People's views on different aspects of one's standard of living would be expected to cover a complete range from essential to unimportant, with many shades in between. It may well be an interesting exercise to tap this range but, for the purposes of this study, it was decided to have a simple binary distinction between items that were 'necessities' and those that might be 'desirable' but were not necessary. It was important that people understood that some people would manage without these 'necessities', some even from choice, but that what they were being asked to identify were things that people should not have to do without. Different versions of questions designed to tap this concept were tried during the pilot; the final version, using a shuffle board and cards, states:

On these cards are a number of different items which relate to our standard of living. Please would you indicate by placing in the appropriate box the living standards you feel all adults should have in Britain today. This box is for items which you think are necessary, and which all adults should be able to afford and which they should not have to do without; this box is for items which may be desirable, but are not necessary.

In addition, to find out how strongly people felt about the importance of what they had classified as necessities, we asked:

If the Government proposed to increase income tax by one penny (1p) in the pound to enable everyone to afford the items you have said are necessities, on balance would you support or oppose this policy?

In these ways the survey aimed to identify the necessities that everyone should be entitled to. The next stage was to find

out who went without each of these items, and why. The survey asked people to distinguish, for each item, those they had and could not do without; those they had and could do without; those they did not have but did not want; and those they did not have and could not afford (question 15 of the questionnaire, Appendix B, p. 297). The picture of people's actual living standards is examined in Chapters 4 and 5. This chapter looks only at the extent to which possession of goods affects people's attitudes to the definition of necessities.

These two sides to the survey - identifying the necessities and identifying those who went without them - formed its core. To analyse these data, a range of standard background variables were included: age, sex, social class, employment status, trade union membership, housing tenure, education level, marital status, health and party political leanings. Efforts were also made to identify the net disposable income of the household to which the respondent belonged (see questions 27-32 of the questionnaire, Appendix B, pp. 304-6; for details of the income measure used, see Appendix C, pp. 308-9).

### **The public's perception of necessities**

The survey established, for the first time ever, that a majority of people see the necessities of life in Britain in the 1980s 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.

Table 3.1 lists the thirty-five items that were tested, ranked by the proportion of respondents identifying each item as a 'necessity'. This ranking shows that there is a considerable degree of social consensus. Over nine in ten people are agreed about the importance of the following basic living conditions in the home:

- heating,
- an indoor toilet (not shared),
- a damp-free home,
- a bath (not shared), and

- beds for everyone.

Table 3.1 *The public's perception of necessities*

<i>Standard-of living items in rank order</i>	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>	<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order</i>	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>
1. Heating to warm living areas of the home if it's cold	97	19. A hobby or leisure activity	64
2. Indoor toilet (not shared with another household)	96	20. Two hot meals a day (for adults)	64
3. Damp-free home	96	21. Meat or fish every other day	63
4. Bath (not shared with another household)	94	22. Presents for friends or family once a year	63
5. Beds for everyone in the household	94	23. A holiday away from home for one week a year, not with relatives	63
6. Public transport for one's needs	88	24. Leisure equipment for children e.g. sports equipment or a bicycle <sup>a</sup>	57
7. A warm water-proof coat	87	25. A garden	55
8. Three meals a day for children <sup>a</sup>	82	26. A television	51
9. Self-contained accommodation	79	27. A 'best outfit' for special occasions	48
10. Two pairs of all-weather shoes	78	28. A telephone	43
11. Enough bedrooms for every child over 10 of different sex to have his/her own <sup>a</sup>	77	29. An outing for children once a week <sup>a</sup>	40
12. Refrigerator	77	30. A dressing gown	38
13. Toys for children <sup>a</sup>	71	31. Children's friends round for tea/a snack once a fortnight <sup>a</sup>	37
14. Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms	70	32. A night out once a fortnight (adults)	36
15. Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas	69	33. Friends/family round for a meal once a month	32
16. A roast meat joint or its equivalent once a week	67	34. A car	22
17. A washing machine	67	35. A packet of cigarettes every other day	14
18. New, not second-hand, clothes	64		
Average of all 35 items = 64.1			

<sup>a</sup>For families with children only.

The right of everyone, regardless of income, to exactly these sorts of basic minima was a key objective of postwar housing policy until the recent sharp cutbacks in public sector housing investment.

The survey also found a considerable degree of consensus about the importance of a wide range of other goods and activities. More than two-thirds of the respondents classed the following items as necessities:

- enough money for public transport,
- a warm water-proof coat,
- three meals a day for children,
- self-contained accommodation,
- two pairs of all-weather shoes,
- a bedroom for every child over 10 of different sex,
- a refrigerator,
- toys for children,
- carpets,
- celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas,
- a roast joint or its equivalent once a week, and
- a washing machine.

This widespread consensus on what are necessities clearly reflects the standards of today and not those of the past. In Rowntree's study of poverty in York in 1899, for a family to be classed as poor 'they must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus'. In Britain in the 1980s, nearly nine in ten people think that such spending is not only justified but a necessity for living today.

The importance of viewing minimum standards in terms of contemporary living conditions is highlighted most forcefully by the impact of labour-saving household goods. A large majority of people think that a refrigerator and a washing machine are necessities - items that were unknown to the Victorians and even twenty years ago would have been seen as a luxury. In part, this reflects shifting standards and expectations; but it also reflects the fact that, in a practical sense, items that become customary also become necessary



because other aspects of life are planned and built on the very fact that these items are customary. For example, many single elderly people have commented to us that, whereas once they could manage without a fridge, it is now so difficult to buy perishable food in small quantities that they find they need one. Professor David Donnison, ex-chairman of the now defunct Supplementary Benefits Commission, has elaborated this argument:

The poor too often find they have to use the most expensive forms of heating and cooking (for that's all that their all-electric flats provide); they really need a refrigerator because shops are distant and their flats no longer have a ventilated larder; ... life is difficult without a washing machine and clothes drier because there's no launderette nearby and no private open space where they can hang out the laundry - and so on. (Donnison, 1981, p. 184).

While these trends are of great importance, the survey also shows that people do not judge necessities, directly or indirectly, simply on the criterion of subsistence. It is not just that a new range of goods have become critical to coping; people also classed as necessities items that solely add to the quality of life. Included in the items that over two-thirds of people class as necessities are goods that add to one's comfort (such as carpets) and those that add to one's enjoyment (celebrations or a roast joint).

The rejection of an 'absolute' or 'subsistence-based' approach to determining necessities is seen more clearly in the items that over half of the respondents, but under two-thirds, viewed as necessities:

- new, not second-hand, clothes,
- a hobby or leisure activity,
- two hot meals a day (for adults),
- meat or fish every other day,
- presents for friends or family once a year,
- a holiday away from home for one week a year,

- leisure equipment for children
- a garden, and
- a television

All these items are primarily to do with the quality of life, with enjoyment and with joining in social activities. While these items do not have such overwhelming support as those related to coping with the more basic aspects of day-to-day living, they are nevertheless supported by a majority of people. This has been taken as the cut-off point to distinguish between items that are necessities and those that are not. While there is inevitably an element of arbitrariness at the margins for any cut-off point, a straight majority seems as fair an interpretation of a consensual view as any.

There is more disagreement about what specific 'quality of life' items are of importance than there is over, say, what constitutes basic housing conditions, but a large majority of people regard one or other of these items as necessities. There is virtually no disagreement that there should be more to life than just existing.

This finding may seem obvious, if only because it is a view that the vast majority of readers will share. It is nevertheless of considerable significance. There has long been a strand of opinion that has tried to define the needs of the poor simply in terms of subsistence items, a view reflected today by Sir Keith Joseph when he states that 'a family is poor if it cannot afford to eat' (see Chapter 2). While no doubt virtually everyone would agree that those who cannot afford to eat are poor, the *Breadline Britain* survey shows that the corollary - that only those who cannot afford to eat are poor - is widely disputed. The great majority of people think that everyone is entitled not just to eat but to eat at a certain quality (meat or fish every other day), with regularity (two hot meals a day), and in accordance with traditional customs (a roast joint once a week). The majority also think that people are entitled to clothing not only for protection (a warm water-proof coat or two pairs of all-weather shoes) but also for dignity (new, not second-hand, clothes). While Adam Smith accepted this two hundred years

ago, there has nevertheless been a persistent failure to recognise the importance of such socially determined necessities. For example, in a vitriolic attack on the proposition that poverty in the 1980s means shopping for clothes in second-hand shops, Auberon Waugh writes in the *The Spectator*:

But what on earth are second-hand shops for - Hooray Henrys and Henriettas to rig themselves out in fancy dress? In fact the clothes at Oxfam are generally better made and sometimes more fashionable than anything to be found in any but the most expensive new clothes shops. It would never occur to me to buy a new coat when so many dead men's overcoats are available at a tenth of the price for twice the quality. Once again one is tempted to ask what the 'breadliners' are blubbing on about. (Waugh, 1983)

In most people's eyes, it is Mr Waugh who is 'blubbing' He is, of course, entitled to the view that new clothes are not necessary, but he is in a minority. To those who have the luxury of popping into the Oxfam shop to buy an overcoat, there may well be a pride in getting good value for money. For those dependent for most of their clothes on other people's cast-offs, the situation can look very different. Anne's husband Roy is unemployed and they and their three children, Michelle, Leslie and Tony, rely on second-hand clothes:

It's very expensive to go normal shopping these days. I'm not so worried about myself so much, or even Roy, but it would be nice to buy the kids some new clothes now and again. If only we could, but who can afford it? I know Michelle would like to be in the fashion, but I think she understands that we can't afford to buy new clothes for her.

To go without the necessities of life is not just to suffer hunger or to risk ill-health or even death but also to be demeaned and degraded. J. K. Galbraith describes the situation

of those who are poverty-stricken as lacking what is required for decency:

They cannot wholly escape, therefore, the judgement of the larger community that they are indecent. They are degraded for, in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable. (Galbraith, 1970, p. 259)

In summary, the survey's findings give strong backing to a 'relative' view of deprivation. This view has been most forcefully advocated over recent years by Professor Peter Townsend. Although certain aspects of his approach have been criticised in Chapter 2, the survey does establish the relevance of the concept of 'relative poverty'. It is of interest that the recently established survey of 'British Social Attitudes' found, when explicitly asking about 'poverty', that the level of assent to the *relative* definition of poverty is now 'remarkably high' (Bosanquet, 1984, p. 94). The *Breadline Britain* findings clearly show that people make their judgements about the necessities for living on the basis of today's standards and not by some historical yardstick. Their definition of necessity goes wider than subsistence.

Finally, the survey's finding that there is a widespread social consensus about what constitute the necessities of life is in itself important. For all the differences in people's styles of living, the concept of 'socially established' necessities does in practice have meaning.

### **The homogeneity of views throughout society**

Although by definition, all the necessities are seen as such by the majority of people, for every item there is some disagreement. When all the necessities are considered together, the majority of people will find that among the items there are one or two that they themselves do not regard as a necessity.

This, in itself, is of no particular significance and is indeed implicit in the approach. What is important is that most people will agree with the classification of a large majority of the items. In other words, the list is generally indicative of the kind of minimum standard of living envisaged by the large majority of people.

However, if differences between individuals fell into patterns among groups in society then the variations would be of greater significance. It may be that certain minority groups in society hold distinctly different views on what is important. There is, in particular, plenty of evidence that styles of living are not uniform throughout society but differ between men and women, between social classes and between ethnic groups. If these differences affected the basic levels of living underlying the concept of a minimum, then it would not be particularly meaningful to talk about a universal minimum.

The survey's sample size was not large enough for any distinction to be made between different ethnic groups. The survey did, however, collect data on sex and social class. The survey found that men and women shared very similar perceptions of necessities. Social class, as is standard in surveys, was defined in relation to occupational groups, although we accept that social class is, in fact, more complex than the classification of occupational group. In this context, social class AB are those in professional and managerial occupations, social class C1 are other non-manual workers, social class C2 are skilled manual workers, social class D are semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and social class E are social security recipients.

Table 3.2 shows the relationship between social class and the perception of necessities. Given that, in general, people's attitudes are strongly influenced by the social class to which they belong, the survey's findings show a remarkable degree of agreement about the necessities for living in Britain in the 1980s. Only three of the twenty-six items classed as necessities by the majority of people are not also classed as a necessity by every social class: a television is seen as a necessity by those in social classes C2, D and E, but not by those in social classes AB

Table 3.2 *Social class and the perception of necessities*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Social class</i>				
	<i>AB</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>
	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>				
Heating	96	99	99	95	95
Indoor toilet	98	95	97	95	95
Damp-free home	96	95	97	98	94
Bath	96	93	95	92	93
Beds for everyone	94	98	94	92	91
Public transport	88	91	91	87	85
Warm water-proof coat	95	88	86	84	84
Three meals a day for children	89	80	83	78	81
Self-contained accommodation	78	76	82	78	80
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	85	77	73	78	80
Sufficient bedrooms for children	74	76	81	69	81
Refrigerator	77	78	76	83	73
Toys for children	81	72	72	64	70
Carpets	59	60	75	77	77
Celebrations on special occasions	67	68	69	72	67
Roast joint once a week	61	61	69	74	68
Washing machine	60	62	72	75	64
New, not second-hand, clothes	53	64	60	79	64
Hobby or leisure activity	71	69	60	56	63
Two hot meals a day (adults)	46	65	69	69	65
Meat/fish every other day	64	61	69	61	60
Presents once a year	66	64	59	62	64
Holiday	74	63	61	63	57
Leisure equipment for children	64	55	52	55	59
Garden	41	56	59	61	53
Television	38	37	53	64	61
Best outfit	47	42	47	52	53
Telephone	46	49	34	45	45
Outing for children once a week	35	38	40	41	45
Dressing gown	36	37	35	33	49
Children's friends round once a fortnight	46	36	33	34	38
Night out once a fortnight	28	33	34	41	45
Friends/family round once a month	38	31	30	27	34
Car	22	24	28	23	11
Packet of cigarettes	12	7	14	18	19
Average of all items	63.5	62.9	64.2	65.0	64.7

and C1; two hot meals a day for adults are seen as a necessity by a majority of those in all the social classes except AB; and a garden is also seen as a necessity by all but the ABs. Further, there is only one item classed as a necessity by certain of the social classes but not by the majority of society as a whole: namely a 'best outfit' for special occasions, which is classed as a necessity by social classes D and E but not by social classes AB, C1 and C2.

The rank order of the necessities is very similar for all the different groups. The top five necessities are the same for all social classes, and the items that form the top ten necessities for the population as a whole are within the top twelve for each of the social class groups.

There are, however, some differences. In general, the middle classes put less emphasis on household items than the working classes. For example, carpets were thought to be a necessity by 59 per cent of social class AB and 60 per cent of social class C1, but by 75 per cent of social class C2 and 77 per cent of both social classes D and E. There are two possible explanations for these differences.

First, it could be that those who take for granted a range of goods place less importance on their possession than those who have had to struggle and save, or even have to go without. The influence of possession of a good on its classification as a necessity will be examined below (pp. 65-8).

The second area of explanation relates more directly to the question of cultural homogeneity. It could be that such differences reflect different lifestyles or at least different aspirations; those who desire parquet flooring and rugs may be less inclined to regard the carpets in their rooms as necessities. The differences between the different social classes suggest that this may, to some extent, be the case. In the case of food, for example, those from professional and managerial backgrounds place less emphasis than others on what have traditionally been regarded as part of the working man's diet: two hot meals a day and a roast on a Sunday. It seems unlikely that professional and managerial workers attach less importance to good food - all the other evidence suggests quite the reverse - and there is no

reason to presume that they would place less importance on good food as part of a minimum. What seems more likely is that styles of living among professional and managerial groups are less likely to conform to traditional patterns.

That differences in lifestyles have some bearing on perceptions of necessities is further suggested by the items primarily concerned with enjoyment or relaxation, where the differences between the occupational groups are greatest. People from professional and managerial backgrounds (social class AB) tend to put more emphasis on leisure pursuits of a more individualistic, or even 'educational' nature. For adults, a hobby or leisure activity and a holiday are both regarded as necessities by a somewhat higher proportion of people in social class AB than in any of the other social classes; the same is true for toys and leisure equipment for children. Holidays show the most marked differences, with three-quarters of professional and managerial workers counting this as a necessity but only 57 per cent of social security recipients (social class E). By contrast, those from social class AB put less emphasis on what could be seen to be a more social form of leisure activity: a night out once a fortnight, which traditionally for many people would be the trip to the pub or club - this is seen as a necessity by only 28 per cent of social class AB compared to 45 per cent of social class E.

Out of all the thirty-five items, the greatest difference comes, however, in attitudes towards the television: this is regarded as a necessity by only 38 per cent of those in social class AB and 37 per cent in social class C1, but by 64 per cent of those in social class D and 61 per cent of those in social class E. For the poor, the television provides a cheap and ever-available form of entertainment, a distraction from the pressing problems at hand. Pamela, an unmarried mother, struggles on supplementary benefit to bring up her 9-month-old child in a decaying and decrepit attic flat:

I watch TV from first thing in the morning till last thing at night, till the television goes off. I sit and watch it all day. That's all I've got: to watch television. I can't afford to do other things at all. The only thing I can do is sit and watch



television. I can't go anywhere, I can't go out and enjoy myself or nothing. I should be able to take my daughter out somewhere. I would take her to the zoo and things like that. Places she's never been, or seen, and half the places I haven't seen in London myself. Things that I can't afford to do.

To the middle classes, the television, though it firmly occupies a corner of all their homes, is often regarded with disdain. Such attitudes are of importance because they go hand in hand with a view among the better-off that the poor are poor because of fecklessness. S. Turner of Wolverhampton, for example, wrote to *The Sunday Times* refuting the report of the *Breadline Britain* survey that millions live in poverty:

Anyone who visits low-income families has experience of homes which are lacking in carpets, furniture, or decent clothing for children, but contain a large colour TV ... (*The Sunday Times*, 28 August 1983)

The survey suggests that such comments might strike a chord with the middle-class readership of *The Sunday Times* - but other groups in society view the matter very differently. Although such differences in attitudes towards necessities are relatively few, they are of importance because of the power that those in social class AB exercise over the poor. Historically, assessments of minimum needs have been made by the 'experts', by the professionals, indeed by those who have much to lose from any redistribution of resources in society. The more democratic approach taken by this survey invites the thought that the judgements being made by the professionals reflect their own interests rather than those of society generally.

Overall however, there is a high degree of homogeneity in perceptions of necessities. There are, of course, many forces in modern society that promote uniformity of aspiration and expectation. In particular, mass communications encourage a common view of desirable styles of living, both directly through advertising and indirectly through a widening of

people's knowledge of standards in society outside their own immediate experience. On the other hand, there is a strong academic tradition that has shown that people make their judgements about their position in society with reference not to society as a whole but to the particular social group of which they are members (see, in particular, Runciman, 1972). As far as people's judgements about minimum standards are concerned, the *Breadline Britain* survey suggests either that people take as their 'normative' reference group (that is, the group by which they set their standards) society as a whole and not their specific group; or that at this minimal level the differences between the social groups are so marginal that, even if people take as their reference point their own social group, the final judgements remain very similar.

Either way, the degree of homogeneity found between different groups in society adds weight to the concept of 'socially perceived necessities' and provides a set of nationally sanctioned standards that override class differences. It seems that it is indeed possible to identify a form of deprivation that has a meaning shared between both those who are likely to experience such deprivation (in the classification used here, those in social class E in particular) and others.

## **Necessities and norms of behaviour**

It is likely that these shared judgements stem, at least in part, from shared experiences. The mass of people in past generations may have lived in badly heated, uncarpeted homes, washing their clothes in the sink, but the vast majority of people today experience a pleasanter life. As a consequence, this has come to be seen as a right for all. It is in this sense that poverty is relative.

However, the relationship between the degree to which an experience or activity is widespread and the degree to which it is seen as a necessity is complex. Table 3.3 shows the proportion of the population possessing each of the items.

Table 3.3 *The relationship between the perception of necessities and the extent of possession of items*

<i>Standard-of living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>	<i>% of population having item<sup>a</sup></i>
Heating	97	92
Indoor toilet	96	98
Damp-free home	96	85
Bath	94	97
Beds for everyone	94	97
Public transport	88	87
Warm water-proof coat	87	88
Three meals a day for children <sup>b</sup>	82	90
Self-contained accommodation	79	93
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	78	84
Sufficient bedrooms for children <sup>b</sup>	77	76
Refrigerator	77	96
Toys for children <sup>b</sup>	71	92
Carpets	70	97
Celebrations on special occasions	69	93
Roast joint once a week	67	87
Washing machine	67	89
New, not second-hand, clothes	64	85
Hobby or leisure activity	64	77
Two hot meals a day (adults)	64	81
Meat/fish every other day	63	81
Presents once a year	63	90
Holiday	63	68
Leisure equipment for children <sup>b</sup>	57	79
Garden	55	88
Television	51	98
'Best outfit'	48	78
Telephone	43	82
Outing for children once a week <sup>b</sup>	40	58
Dressing gown	38	84
Children's friends round once a fortnight <sup>b</sup>	37	60
Night out once a fortnight	36	57
Friends/family round once a month	32	64
Car	22	61
Packet of cigarettes	14	39

<sup>a</sup>The responses have been weighted by numbers in household to give the % of the population.

<sup>b</sup>Families with children under 16 only.

For all the items classed as necessities by the majority of the population, possession is widespread: at least two-thirds of the population have them and for most items the proportion is over 80 per cent. In an affluent society like Britain, this is to be expected but it is not implicit in the approach. It is possible to imagine a society in which the majority of people do not have access to a standard of living that is generally judged to be a minimum. Indeed, many 'Third World' countries may fall into this category. Arguably, this ability to cope theoretically with very differing degrees of poverty is an advantage of this methodology over one that defines poverty with reference to the norm.

In the British context, however, necessities are not seen to be items to which only a minority of the population have access. The commonsense understanding of the word precludes even the possibility. There was no point in the survey testing whether people saw a trip to Europe once a year or a second car for the family as necessities because, although they may represent a standard of living to which most people aspire and that would not be given up willingly by those who do possess it, such items remain luxuries. Despite the fact that the survey included only items that the majority of people either possessed or could afford if they so chose and as such was not set up to test this point, the findings nevertheless indicate that widespread ownership is a prerequisite of an item being seen as a necessity. In general, the items that are not classed by a majority of the population as necessities are possessed by a smaller proportion of the population than are the items that are classed as necessities (see Table 3.3).

This comes as no surprise; it is the assumption on which most poverty studies have been based: namely, that those styles of living that are widespread are equivalent to those that are socially approved, encouraged or expected. What is of more interest, therefore, is that the relationship is not clear-cut. There are three items (a 'best outfit', a telephone and a dressing gown) regarded by the majority of the population as being merely desirable that are in fact possessed by a larger proportion of the population than are three items classed as necessities (sufficient

bedrooms for children, a hobby or leisure activity, and a holiday). Thus, although widespread ownership may be a prerequisite in the British context of an item being seen as a necessity, it is not the only factor of importance. Other judgements come into play.

People set their perceptions of necessities by the concept of a minimum not by the average; the concept of a minimum depends on what is average but it nevertheless remains separate. It is worth noting in passing that this means that it is possible to imagine a society in which there is a degree of inequality but virtually no poverty. While the standard of living of those at the bottom would remain below the average, it would not be so far below that it fell below the current expectations of decency. We hasten to add that this is not a description of Britain in the 1980s.

The fact that people's judgements about necessities are not exclusively dependent on shared experience is perhaps of more immediate significance when this consensual approach is compared with the definition of poverty by reference to a norm. In Britain, the concept of poverty as exclusion from ordinary living patterns has been advanced most vigorously by Townsend. In translating this from a theoretical plane to a practical measure, he identified twelve aspects of a person's standard of living to form a 'deprivation index'. It is from this deprivation index that he identifies a poverty line (see Chapter 2 for further details of the Townsend study).

To highlight the difference between the consensual and norm-reference approach, it is worth comparing Townsend's deprivation index (Table 2.1) with the public's perceptions of necessities found in the *Breadline Britain* survey (Table 3.1). The exercise should be treated with some caution as the studies were conducted fifteen years apart. Moreover, there are two items in Townsend's index (3 and 9) that have no equivalents in the *Breadline Britain* survey and the precise wording of most of the items is not the same. Nevertheless, the comparison indicates some interesting differences. Of the ten items in Townsend's index that are loosely comparable with items in the *Breadline Britain* survey, three are not classified by the

population as a whole as necessities: namely, friends round for a meal once a month, children's friends round for a tea/snack once a fortnight, and a night out once a fortnight (items 2, 4 and 6 of the Townsend index). These items relate to people's ability to partake in a social role. A central criticism Townsend makes of earlier poverty studies is that such items are not included 'because of strong social values in favour of "privacy" and the opportunity to lead a "private life"' (1983, p. 69). That the majority of people do not perceive these items to be necessities no doubt also reflects these 'strong social values'. Indeed, this is the basis on which this study has been set up; as has been argued in Chapter 2, the concept of poverty should incorporate not sidestep such social values.

This is not to argue that these indicators of participation in social roles are unimportant. A person who cannot afford to go out once a fortnight may well be more socially isolated than those who go out regularly. But so, too, is the family with one car compared to the family with two cars. The wife may well be at home all day with young children and, if the public transport in the area is poor, she will be unable to play as full a social role as the mother with access to a car. These differences between people provide measures of the effects of inequality but they can, in our view, be classed as poverty only when they are of such a degree or type as to be considered unacceptable by society as a whole.

## **The influences on people's perceptions of necessities**

Just as the extent of ownership in society generally is not a particularly accurate guide to society's overall perception of necessities, neither is an individual's possession or otherwise of an item a particularly good guide to their perception of whether that item is a necessity. While there is a strong tendency for those who possess an item to be more likely to classify it as a necessity, possession on its own does not explain why some people classify an item as a necessity and some do not.

To investigate this further, the *Breadline Britain* survey asked

people about their attitudes towards their personal possession, or lack, of each item. People who had an item were asked whether they could or could not do without it; and people who did not have an item were asked whether it was because they did not want it or because they could not afford it. Table 3.4 shows the proportions of these four categories classifying each item as a necessity.

Table 3.4 *The personal possession of items and the perception of necessities*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Possession of items</i>			
	<i>Have/ could not do without</i>	<i>Have/ could do without</i>	<i>Don't have/ don't want</i>	<i>Don't have/ can't afford</i>
	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>			
Heating	98	80 <sup>c</sup>	(-) <sup>b</sup>	98
Indoor toilet	99	46 <sup>a</sup>	20 <sup>a</sup>	75 <sup>a</sup>
Damp-free home	98	89 <sup>a</sup>	(-) <sup>b</sup>	88 <sup>a</sup>
Bath	96	50 <sup>a</sup>	48 <sup>a</sup>	53 <sup>a</sup>
Beds for everyone	95	88 <sup>a</sup>	20 <sup>a</sup>	77 <sup>a</sup>
Public transport	96	78	70	70 <sup>a</sup>
Warm water-proof coat	93	58	49 <sup>a</sup>	73
Three meals a day for children	93	74	55 <sup>a</sup>	76 <sup>a</sup>
Self-contained accommodation	85	37	38 <sup>a</sup>	62 <sup>a</sup>
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	91	51	17 <sup>a</sup>	71
Sufficient bedrooms for children	87	42	60	68
Refrigerator	89	38	2 <sup>a</sup>	30 <sup>a</sup>
Toys for children	87	56	76	74 <sup>a</sup>
Carpets	83	40	(-) <sup>b</sup>	51 <sup>a</sup>
Celebrations on special occasions	83	50	13 <sup>a</sup>	46 <sup>a</sup>
Roast joint once a week	89	51	19	56
Washing machine	82	37	20 <sup>a</sup>	43
New, not second-hand, clothes	80	33	52	66
Hobby or leisure activity	82	52	32	45
Two hot meals a day (adults)	85	48	25	63 <sup>a</sup>
Meat/fish every other day	84	50	15	61
Presents once a year	80	38	19 <sup>a</sup>	53
Holiday	89	50	22	52
Leisure equipment for children	78	43	39	61
Garden	76	35	18	46 <sup>a</sup>
Television	78	23	8 <sup>a</sup>	(-) <sup>b</sup>

*Table continued*

Table 3.4 *Continued*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Possession of items</i>			
	<i>Have/</i>	<i>Have/</i>	<i>Don't</i>	<i>Don't</i>
	<i>could</i>	<i>could</i>	<i>have/</i>	<i>have/</i>
	<i>not do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>don't</i>	<i>can't</i>
	<i>without</i>	<i>without</i>	<i>want</i>	<i>afford</i>
	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>			
'Best outfit'	73	34	16	40
Telephone	65	21	7	22
Outing for children once a week	61	31	20	43
Dressing gown	72	23	8	32
Children's friends round once a fortnight	64	37	15	25
Night out once a fortnight	70	33	21	30
Friends/family round once a month	59	30	11	21
Car	39	15	8	14
Packet of cigarettes	56	16	3	6
Average of all items	81	45	26	53

<sup>a</sup>These figures are likely to be subject to errors of around 10% as they are based on less than 5% of the sample.

<sup>b</sup>No figures available as numbers in group are too small.

There are both differences and similarities between the groups that are of interest. Looking at all the groups, although some groups have much lower proportions of people classifying items as necessities, there is nevertheless roughly the same ranking of the items. This suggests that, whatever judgements people make about what they personally need, they are also influenced by a general set of moral judgements about anyone's basic rights and needs.

None the less, the influence of a person's judgements about their own personal situation is very significant. When people regard an aspect of their standard of living as being of importance to themselves, they also tend to identify this as being a right for others. Those respondents having an item and feeling that they are unable to do without it are very likely to classify it as a necessity for everyone; only one item (a car) is not classified by a majority of this group as being a necessity for everyone. That said, a significant minority of this group feel that, though they cannot do without the item themselves, it is



not a right for everyone. While this attitude may indicate a degree of selfishness, it is perfectly consistent with making a judgement on minimum rights for all. Such a minimum does not imply that all people should have the same or, indeed, that those who do have more will feel that they have no right to it. In general, however, people's perceptions of necessities for themselves and others are the same: for every item, this group (and it should be remembered that the 'group' for every item will to a greater or lesser extent consist of different respondents) is significantly more likely than any other group to classify it as a necessity.

Those who do not have an item but want it are the next most likely to classify that item as a necessity. The fact that they do not have an item does lessen the degree to which they think that the item is a necessity compared to those who possess the item; out of the thirty-five items, fourteen are not classified as necessities by a majority of this group. Interestingly, however, the items that this group classify as necessities mirror closely the population as a whole: only five of the twenty-six items classed as necessities by people in general are not also classified by this group as necessities.

At the other end of the scale, those who do not have an item because they do not want it are generally unlikely to regard it as a necessity for others: only five items (public transport, three meals a day for children, sufficient bedrooms for children, toys for children, and new, not second-hand, clothes) are seen by this group as being necessities. This result is hardly surprising. If individuals do not want an item they are unlikely to recognise the general social pressures that make others see it as a necessity.

The final group is, perhaps, of most interest: those who have an item but feel they can manage without it. First, their attitudes show the most divergence. There are many items where this group is fairly evenly split: for fourteen of the thirty-five items the proportions classifying it as a necessity are within the 40-60 per cent range. This in itself makes their judgements difficult to interpret. To some extent, people appear to be making some kind of moral judgement about the things one

should not have to go without even if one could. On the other hand, there appears to be some kind of practical judgement going on: if you can manage without something (or at least think you can, for, of course, none of this group actually manage without) then you cannot really need it. On balance, it is this latter view that seems to win the day: more items are not classed as necessities than are.

This means that, in general, the judgements of those who have an item but feel they could manage without are sharply distinguished from those who have an item but feel they could not manage without: on average they are half as likely to classify items as necessities. As a large majority of people have all the items, this in turn means that this distinction between feeling one could or could not do without an item is critical in determining the items that, on average, across society as a whole, are classed as necessities. The more people who feel that they personally could manage without an item, the more likely it is that that item will not be classed by a majority of the population as a necessity.

There are a number of factors that might influence these perceptions. The first and most obvious possibility is that, although most people possess these items in today's society, their experiences in the past will have been very different. What the influence of these different past experiences might be is not, however, so obvious. It could be that managing without in the past leads to a perception that others can manage without today. On the other hand, experience of the difficulties entailed in managing without could lead to an appreciation of the benefits of this newly acquired way of living that leads to it being seen as a right; those who have never had to go without may not realise the deprivations involved.

The survey did not ask respondents whether there was a time in the past when they lacked these items. However, some indication of whether past experiences are a salient factor is given by looking at whether people's perceptions vary greatly by age. The elderly will have been brought up in an era when many of the items now classed as necessities were not widely available.

The relationship with age is given in Table 3.5. In general, the differences between the age groups are relatively small. All the items chosen as necessities by a majority of the sample are also considered necessities by a majority of those aged 65 or more. Further, older respondents are noticeably more likely than younger respondents to identify a number of items as necessities that were not around for much of their lives (notably the television, classed as a necessity by 63 per cent of the over 65s but only 46 per cent of 15-24 year olds) or were by no means so widespread (for example, a holiday away from home for one week a year, classed as a necessity by 68 per cent of the elderly compared to 51 per cent of the youngest age group).

Table 3.5 *Age and the perception of necessities*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Age groups</i>					
	<i>15-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65+</i>
	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>					
Heating	98	98	97	98	95	96
Indoor toilet	96	96	99	96	98	93
Damp-free home	96	97	97	97	98	91
Bath	94	94	98	93	96	90
Beds for everyone	93	98	94	95	96	86
Public transport	91	89	87	87	88	89
Warm water-proof coat	78	92	86	91	90	85
Three meals a day for children	82	87	84	80	82	76
Self-contained accommodation	67	76	81	84	88	79
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	65	79	74	78	90	82
Sufficient bedrooms for children	67	78	82	71	83	77
Refrigerator	75	78	84	78	74	73
Toys for children	74	78	69	71	72	64
Carpets	81	70	72	58	72	70
Celebrations on special occasions	75	78	64	65	60	67
Roast joint once a week	57	64	66	75	67	74

*Table continued*

Table 3.5 *Continued*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Age groups</i>					<i>65 +</i>
	<i>15-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	
Washing machine	59	74	76	66	69	58
New, not second-hand, clothes	66	59	59	65	70	67
Hobby or leisure activity	62	61	66	65	67	61
Two hot meals a day (adults)	74	65	64	63	62	58
Meat/fish every other day	56	61	70	68	65	59
Presents once a year	63	57	61	64	67	65
Holiday	51	60	64	69	67	68
Leisure equipment for children	64	55	60	52	58	51
Garden	47	65	59	53	55	49
Television	46	49	44	49	54	63
'Best outfit'	53	46	40	53	45	52
Telephone	32	35	41	41	47	60
Outing for children once a week	46	36	38	36	49	36
Dressing gown	15	35	34	40	48	53
Children's friends round once a fortnight	34	35	42	34	45	32
Night out once a fortnight	51	40	32	28	37	32
Friends/family round once a month	32	22	26	36	37	39
Car	28	20	26	29	20	13
Packet of cigarettes	12	16	13	18	10	13
Average of all items	62	64	64	64	66	64

Indeed, the differences between the age groups demonstrate the importance of present rather than past experience. For example, younger people attach more importance to a night out than others, whereas the elderly attach greater importance to a telephone, a television and a dressing gown -all differences that reflect the known fact that the young are more likely to go out to enjoy themselves while the elderly are more likely to be home-bound.

The importance of a person's immediate circumstances in determining their view of necessities is confirmed by looking at how family and household circumstances affect these

perceptions (Table 3.6). Again, there is considerable homogeneity between the different groups. Where there are differences they tend to reflect what could be regarded as different degrees of 'need' or different lifestyles. So, for example, a washing machine, a garden and two hot meals a day are more likely to be seen as necessities by those with children than others. Similarly, households with children are more likely to see the items specifically for children as essential than are those who do not have the responsibility of children: for example, 78 per cent of single-parent families and 76 per cent of other families see toys for children as a necessity compared with only 65 per cent of pensioners, 65 per cent of single people and 66 per cent of other households without children.

Table 3.6 *Household type and the perception of necessities*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Household type</i>					
	<i>Pensioners</i>	<i>Non-pensioners</i>		<i>Households without children</i>		
		<i>All groups</i>	<i>Families with children<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>All</i>	<i>Single People</i>
			<i>Single parent</i>	<i>All others</i>		
		<i>% classing item as necessity</i>				
Heating	96	95	98	97	93	
Indoor toilet	95	99	97	94	93	
Damp-free home	92	98	97	96	92	
Bath	92	96	96	91	94	
Beds for everyone	89	95	95	94	96	
Public transport	88	91	89	88	77	
Warm water-proof coat	86	92	87	87	85	
Three meals a day for children <sup>b</sup>	76	86	87	76	79	
Self-contained accommodation	79	83	76	84	78	
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	83	77	74	84	63	
Sufficient bedrooms for children <sup>b</sup>	79	86	76	75	80	

*Table Continued*

Table 3.6 *Continued*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>Pensioners All groups</i>	<i>Household type Non-pensioners</i>		<i>Households without children</i>	
		<i>Families with children<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>All</i>	<i>Single People</i>
		<i>Single parent</i>	<i>All others</i>		
		<i>% classing item as necessity</i>			
Refrigerator	73	67	81	76	70
Toys for children <sup>b</sup>	65	78	76	66	65
Carpets	72	71	71	69	70
Celebrations on special occasions	66	70	72	64	63
Roast joint once a week	72	67	67	67	48
Washing machine	55	71	71	69	50
New, not second-hand, clothes	66	68	59	70	75
Hobby or leisure activity	65	77	59	70	54
Two hot meals a day (adults)	56	76	68	60	58
Meat/fish every other day	60	63	64	65	56
Presents once a year	67	57	60	66	64
Holiday	65	60	61	67	60
Leisure equipment for children <sup>b</sup>	51	63	60	53	48
Garden	41	57	60	55	42
Television	60	62	45	54	59
'Best outfit'	49	50	47	46	60
Telephone	54	42	38	46	37
Outing for children once a week <sup>b</sup>	38	55	39	40	38
Dressing gown	57	43	29	42	46
Children's friends round once a fortnight <sup>b</sup>	35	37	35	40	42
Night out once a fortnight	33	52	36	35	45
Friends/family round once a month	40	36	27	34	36
Car	12	9	26	25	18
Packet of cigarettes	16	14	13	13	24
Average of all items	63.5	67.2	63.9	64.5	61.7

<sup>a</sup>Children over 16 at home are counted as children.

<sup>b</sup>Families with children only.

Other differences also reflect the effect of individual social circumstances on the importance placed on various activities. For example, single parents place greater emphasis on outings for their children: 55 per cent see this as a necessity compared to 39 per cent of other families with children and around the same proportion of all the other groups. This is probably indicative of the social isolation of many single-parent families - a fact that is also reflected in other ways. For example, 52 per cent of single parents see a night out once a fortnight as a necessity compared to around 36 per cent of other families.

In summary, people's views on what is a necessity do to some extent reflect their own personal circumstances. What is important is not so much whether they do or do not possess a particular item but more the extent to which that item is central to their particular lifestyle. Overall, however, although people's lifestyles differ, the impact these differences have on their perceptions of necessities are small. What people regard as important to themselves influences what they regard as necessities, but it is not the overriding determinant. People are, after all, being asked to answer a different and more general question.

### **The role of moral judgements**

A person's judgement about what is a necessity, while based in part on what is important to them personally, remains a judgement about what everyone in society today should be entitled to. Consider the example of mobility. Most would agree that the ownership of a car enhances the quality of life: it provides a freedom of movement that is not otherwise accessible. Even if some would also argue that the car is environmentally damaging, for the individual at least it is desirable. However, the car remains only that: even among the people who feel that they personally could not manage without a car, only 39 per cent feel that it is a necessity for living in Britain today. Public transport, by contrast, is felt to be a right: even among those who could personally manage without public

transport, 78 per cent think everyone should be able to afford public transport if they want (see Table 3.4).

These judgements are, in essence, moral. They are about rights. This is explicit in the question asked: respondents were asked to identify aspects of our way of life that everyone '*should* be able to afford and *should* not have to go without' (our emphasis).

To see how strongly people felt about these 'rights', the *Breadline Britain* survey asked if people would support increasing income tax by 1p in the pound to enable everyone to afford the items they described as necessities. Though this question moves into the political sphere, in that it is a question about practical policies, its aim was to measure not just people's commitment to tackling poverty, but their commitment to the necessities they had identified. Respondents had just identified items that they felt everyone should have, 'rights' to which everyone was entitled, but without also accepting the converse - a 'duty' to assist - their commitment to these 'rights' could be seen to be thin.

The survey's findings suggest that people do take these 'rights' seriously. When asked whether they would support or oppose an increase in income tax of 1p:

74 per cent supported the increase,  
23 per cent opposed it, and  
4 per cent didn't know.

This reinforces the view that the minimum standard of living identified in the survey represents a strong moral statement about the kind of standard of living that no one should fall below. This standard of living is one to which, in principle, all adults are entitled regardless of the particular reasons why they might not attain it. Other studies have suggested that there is more public sympathy for the old and the disabled than for the unemployed or, to a lesser extent, the low-paid (see Chapter 7). This may mean that, when practical policies are examined (see Chapter 9), there is less support for policies that would help some groups rather than others. Our findings, however



establish an entitlement, in principle, for people from all backgrounds. There is only one condition: that their lack of this minimum standard of living stems from lack of resources. This question is examined in Chapter 4.

These moral views are, of course, influenced by many factors. Most obviously, there is a complex relationship between people's moral and political judgements. People's views about what kind of society they would like reflect moral judgements that can either cut across political boundaries or be primarily determined by these boundaries. So how do people's moral judgements about necessities relate to their political outlook?

The survey collected data on respondents' underlying political affiliations. During the last few years, people's voting habits have fluctuated considerably; so, to gain an insight into people's political outlook, respondents were asked which party they identified with rather than their current voting intention (see Appendix B, question 26, p. 303). Though polls of voting intention at that time indicated that Alliance support was particularly high and Labour's particularly low, this is not reflected in people's underlying attitudes. The survey found that 30 per cent of the respondents were Conservatives, 29 per cent Labour and 16 per cent Alliance, figures that are consistent with other research.

The influence of people's political outlook on their perception of necessities was found to be small (see Table 3.7). In general, people name the same items as necessities and put them in a similar order of priority, whatever their political inclination. The main difference is that Conservative supporters are somewhat less likely than others to name the quality of life items as universal rights. Overall, however, the differences are statistically insignificant.

Moreover, Conservative supporters show strong commitment to the necessities they name. Table 3.8 shows that 79 per cent of Conservatives would support a policy of raising taxes by 1p in the pound to help others have the items they had identified as necessities, a slightly higher degree of support than that found among the Labour and Alliance groups. This is

Table 3.7 *Political views and the perception of necessities*

<i>Standard-of-living items in rank order for sample as a whole</i>	<i>People identifying with</i>		
	<i>Con.</i>	<i>Lab.</i>	<i>Lib/SDP</i>
	<i>% classing item as necessity</i>		
Heating	97	98	98
Indoor toilet	98	96	97
Damp-free home	96	96	98
Bath	95	94	97
Beds for everyone	94	94	96
Public transport	88	91	85
Warm water-proof coat	90	84	82
Three meals a day for children	86	80	89
Self-contained accommodation	80	81	85
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	81	77	81
Sufficient bedrooms for children	77	80	78
Refrigerator	76	80	82
Toys for children	68	73	74
Carpets	67	74	73
Celebrations on special occasions	69	70	70
Roast joint once a week	65	69	71
Washing machine	61	72	73
New, not second-hand, clothes	61	69	67
Hobby or leisure activity	67	63	67
Two hot meals a day (adults)	59	70	69
Meat/fish every other day	64	58	78
Presents once a year	65	58	67
Holiday	66	64	67
Leisure equipment for children	57	56	59
Garden	49	59	59
Television	44	58	55
'Best outfit'	46	59	47
Telephone	42	42	46
Outing for children once a week	36	47	39
Dressing gown	41	38	40
Children's friends round once a fortnight	37	38	41
Night out once a fortnight	32	44	34
Friends/family round once a month	30	36	35
Car	26	19	19
Packet of cigarettes	10	15	15
Average of all items	63.4	65.8	66.7

Table 3.8 *Political views and commitment to the necessities*

*If the Government proposed to increase income tax by one penny (1p) in the pound to enable everyone to afford the items you have said are necessities, on balance would you support or oppose this policy?'*

	<i>People identifying with:</i>			
	<i>All</i>	<i>Con.</i>	<i>Lab.</i>	<i>Lib/SDP</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Support	74	79	73	77
Oppose	23	16	21	19
Don't know	4	5	6	3

particularly significant since Conservatives are generally less likely to support policies involving higher taxation. It suggests that the views of Conservative voters on this issue are at odds with the strand of thinking at present dominating the Conservative party, which emphasises an 'absolute' rather than a 'relative' view of need (see, for example, the House of Commons debate on 'The Rich and the Poor', 28 June 1984 - *Hansard*, Vol. 62, No. 181, HMSO). Although this strand of thinking accepts that the state has a responsibility to ensure a minimum level of living for everyone, the level itself is judged on the basis of a narrow interpretation of need. This is in keeping with a strong faith in the fairness of the market system - people's material entitlements should be determined in the main by the free market and not by the state. Interventions in the free market are seen as largely unnecessary and even damaging (see, for example, Joseph and Sumption, 1979; Boyson, 1971). This attitude is also in line with a primary emphasis on individual achievement: people should be given the opportunity to 'earn' a decent living but their 'rights' are more limited.

The present Conservative government is thus out of line not only with the public's perception of needs but also with that of Conservative voters. There has, of course, been a strong tradition in the Conservative party that has taken a more generous view of the needs of the poor (see, for a contemporary example, Gilmour, 1983). The views exhibited by

Conservatives in this survey could be seen to be more in line with this tradition.

Overall, the most striking finding is the high degree of consensus among people of all political persuasions about a minimum standard for the poor. There may well be considerable disagreement about means (see Chapters 7 and 9), but at least people concur about ends. In other words, there is a moral consensus about people's entitlements.

### **A culturally specific view of poverty**

The homogeneity of views shown by people both from very different personal circumstances and also holding very different political ideologies suggests that judgements are being made on the basis of a cohesive view of the kind of society we ought to live in. There is, it seems, a general cultural ethos about what is sufficient and proper.

Interestingly, selected items from the *Breadline Britain* questionnaire have been used in a recent survey in Denmark, which provides some opportunity for cultural comparisons (see Table 3.9). While the evidence is, it should be stressed, limited, it does suggest that general cultural attitudes are important and that, although the classification of necessities is influenced by the extent of ownership, it is not directly dependent upon it.

Consider the roast joint. In Britain this is part of traditional custom: the family lunch on a Sunday is the one time in the week when, even if money is short, every effort will be made to serve a 'decent' meal. In Denmark while a large majority of the Danes will in fact eat a roast joint once a week (75 per cent), it is not vested with the same status: only 50 per cent of Danes regard this as a necessity compared to 67 per cent of the British. What is regarded as a mark of minimum respectability appears to be influenced not just by the extent of practice but also by such factors as tradition.

People's views about what constitutes a 'decent' living gradually change as general living standards change. For example, 92 per cent of the Danish sample had a telephone

Table 3.9 *The Danish view of necessities*

<i>Selected standard-of living items ranked by % of British sample classifying each item as necessary</i>	<i>% of Danish sample<sup>a</sup> ranking item as necessary</i>	<i>% of Danish sample having item<sup>b</sup></i>
Heating	97	98
Indoor toilet	94	96
Damp-free home	90	88
Bath	89	93
Warm water-proof coat	89	93
Three meals a day for children	91	(-) <sup>c</sup>
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	64	82
Sufficient bedrooms for children	66	(-) <sup>c</sup>
Refrigerator	94	98
Roast joint once a week	50	75
Meat/fish every other day	69	90
Holiday	47	58
Leisure equipment for children	67	(-) <sup>c</sup>
Television	55	93
Telephone	71	92
Friends/family round once a month	26	48
Car	35	69

<sup>a</sup>Quota sample of 938 persons, surveyed 19-30 November 1983.

<sup>b</sup>These figures are not strictly comparable with those for Britain in Table 3.3 as they give simply the percentage of the sample; and have not been adjusted by household size to show the percentage of the population.

<sup>c</sup>The percentage of families with children, rather than the sample, having an item cannot be calculated from the information available.

*Source:* AIM, Copenhagen.

compared to around 80 per cent of the British sample, and interestingly the Danes are strikingly more likely to see this as a necessity than the British (71 per cent compared to 47 per cent). Both the Danish survey and *Breadline Britain* itself suggest that, when a large majority of people (say, 85 per cent or more) have a good or activity, it is very likely to be seen as a necessity.

The establishment of this general cultural ethos is, of course, extremely complex and its examination is beyond the scope of this study. It will vary from country to country, although the evidence of this study suggests that, in Britain at least, it does not vary greatly from community to community.

What is regarded as a necessity in one country will not necessarily be regarded as such in another. This means that someone who is poor in one country may well not be considered poor in another. It also means that when two countries (say, A and B) are being compared it is possible that there will be *less* poverty in country A than in country B in terms of a common standard, but *more* poverty in country A than in B in terms of the internal standards of each country. There is nothing contradictory in this and it does not undermine the reality of the deprivations experienced by the poor in country A. There is no one correct answer to the question of which country has the greatest degree of poverty. In some circumstances, it is appropriate to make comparisons on the basis of a common standard; in others, on the basis of the respective standards of each country.

As far as the experiences and feelings of people in Britain are concerned, it is the cultural standards of this country that are important. And, as far as policies to tackle poverty within Britain are concerned, it is measures based on these internal standards that are important. It is of little relevance to an unemployed family in Birmingham that they are better off than an agricultural worker in India.

Although this study is concerned exclusively with poverty in Britain, it is worth mentioning in passing that the standards set by this survey for people in Britain do not preclude or prejudice the setting of other standards on which to base international comparisons or even policy. People in Britain may well accept that there are fundamental rights that any citizen anywhere should be entitled to. If this was the case, however, it would be a different kind of judgement from those exercised in drawing up minimum standards for Britain. Saying that no one should die of starvation, for example, is a political and ethical judgement based not on personal experience but exclusively on concepts of morality. It has been argued that moral judgements are involved in drawing up minimum living standards in Britain, but they are based on people's day-to-day experiences and reflect those. It is this that gives strength to this approach to poverty.

### **A minimum standard of living for Britain in the 1980s**

In establishing a minimum standard of living, it is not possible to come up with a detailed description of every single aspect of life that should be included. Instead, a range of items has to be selected that is indicative of these minimum standards. This means that some ambiguity inevitably surrounds the minimum standards described. In addition, the items in the *Breadline Britain* survey were open to some interpretation as regards quality and cheapness. The items are nevertheless sufficiently representative and sufficiently precise to give a general picture of a minimum standard of living for Britain in the 1980s.

The survey found widespread agreement between all groups in society about the items that are classified as necessities. The homogeneity of views is striking. People from all walks of life, from across the generations, from widely varying family circumstances, and with fundamentally opposed political beliefs, share the same view of the kind of society Britain should be in terms of the minimum standards of living to which all citizens should be entitled. Their views are based, it seems, on a general cultural ethos of what is decent and proper. This suggests that these views are deeply held. They are unlikely to fluctuate rapidly or to be affected by the kinds of changes in political climate that influence the public's views on policies (see Chapters 7 and 9). This is an advantage when using the measure of poverty developed here to determine and assess policy.

Perhaps most importantly, the survey's findings show that people see the necessities for living in Britain today not in terms of subsistence, nor in terms of some historical yardstick - but in terms of a *relative* view of needs based on the standards of today. The minimum standard of living established reflects people's feelings about what is so essential that to go without would be a deprivation. It is also based on a judgement about people's rights. Virtually everyone thinks that everyone in Britain today should be entitled to a life that is more than just a struggle for existence. The next chapter shows whether the poor in Britain today can choose to live or are forced just to exist.

