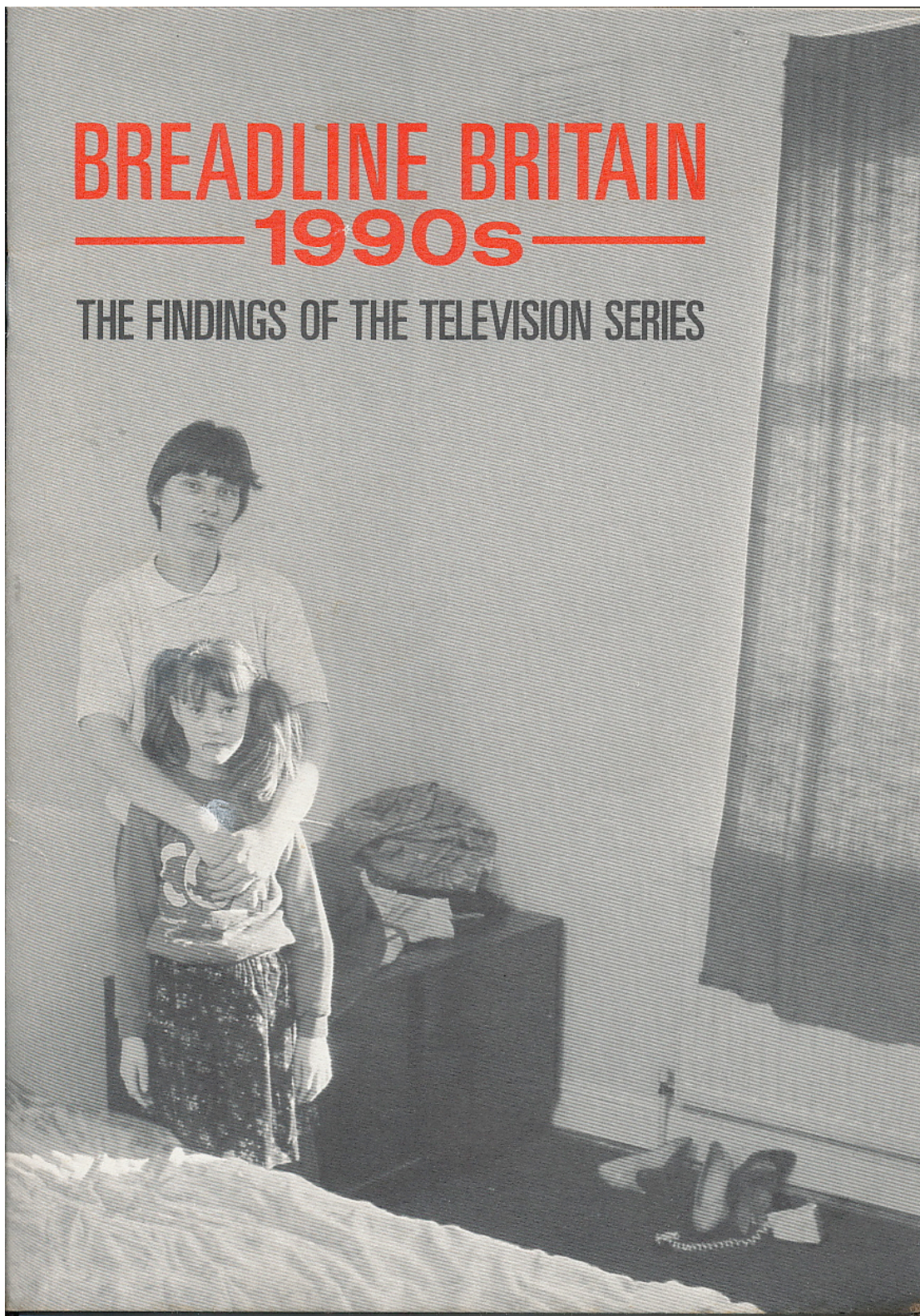


BREADLINE BRITAIN — 1990s —

THE FINDINGS OF THE TELEVISION SERIES



Breadline Britain

---1990s---

The six programmes of **Breadline Britain 1990s**, transmitted in April and May 1991, look at poverty in Britain through the lives of eight people and families in Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Teeside and London. The series commissioned MORI to investigate people's views on what constitutes an unacceptably low living standard in Britain in 1990, how many fall below this standard, and how standards vary. The research updates and develops the pioneering work carried out by for LWT's Breadline Britain, first transmitted in 1983.

This booklet reports the findings.

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Breadline Britain in the 1990s, to be published in September by Harper Collins, will contain detailed analysis of the survey findings which it has not been possible to include in the TV series or this booklet.

Introduction

"It's terrible at times because you can't buy things that you want for the missus and your children. You can't say, "Well, let's go out and we'll buy so and so a toy or something, or go away on holiday.

"You've no chance. Unless you're lucky and someone leaves you something in their will, which is fairly unlikely in my case. You really are on the breadline all the time."

Richard, unemployed for six years, Manchester

Officially, poverty does not exist in Britain. The government does not define a "poverty line". It argues that an objective definition is impossible, that any attempt to count the poor is doomed because it will depend on the subjective judgments of experts about what it is to be poor.

The **Breadline Britain** surveys try to overcome this criticism, first by turning to the views of society as a whole and second, by asking them to talk about things which no-one should have to go without, rather than about "poverty" as such. MORI, on our behalf, asked a national sample of people to consider a range of items, from video recorders to indoor toilets, and to say of each item if it was necessary, something no-one should have to go without, and which everyone should be able to afford. We use the word "necessities" to refer to those items which more than half our sample classed as necessities.

These are not the kind of necessities which early investigators of poverty would have recognized: the phone did not even exist and to begin with it was a luxury, only the rich could afford. But today we have different, higher standards. It's true that some people, 43 per cent of our sample, think that a phone, however desirable, is not necessary; many may think it is self-evident nonsense to suggest otherwise. Theirs is a wholly legitimate view, but those who hold it should bear in mind that it is a minority view. The majority, 56 per cent **do** deem it a necessity. (In fact 88 per cent have one and 62 per cent say **they** couldn't do without it.)

Once interviewees had identified the items they deemed necessary. MORI asked them whether they had the items, and, if not, whether they did not want them, or whether they lacked them because they could not afford them. People who choose to go without things that others regard as necessities are not obviously poor as a result. Nor is it obvious that someone is poor simply because they are forced to go without a single necessity – although those who are have a quality of life which already falls below the standard approved by most people in Britain.

Using additional information from interviewees about their income, health, housing and so on, and a series of statistical tests, we have established that there is a clear division in the population between what might be called the haves – who may not even lack one or two of the necessities – and the have-nots, who not only lack necessities but a great deal else besides. We use the words "poor"

and “poverty” to describe the circumstances of the have-nots, but none of what follows depends on that usage.

Of course, poverty isn’t what it used to be. It doesn’t kill quite so often as it used to – although the poorer you are, the greater your chances of dying earlier – but it still hurts: today’s poor not only go without things that most people believe no one today should have to go without; they are also cut off from normal social activity; trapped in the worst housing, if they have homes at all; and, increasingly, they find themselves with less or no support from the social security system.

The MORI survey for **Breadline Britain 1990s** is a modified repeat of pioneering research carried out for London Weekend Television’s series **Breadline Britain**, first transmitted in 1983. The work has been widely quoted, not least in evidence to parliament’s all-party Social Services committee. And its techniques, building from a consensual definition of deprivation, have since been used by other researchers both here and abroad. Repeating the original survey in Britain means that for the first time we can now also look at how standards change in a society, as well as what they are.

And briefly, what we find is that most people think that everyone should be entitled to share in improved living standards as the country gets richer. It is this, together with increased inequalities in income and living standards, which has increased the number in poverty over the last decade.

Although the government continues to refuse to talk about “poverty”, John Major, in one of his earliest speeches as prime minister, said he wanted “a country that is prepared and willing to make the changes necessary to provide a better quality of life for all our citizens.”

The **Breadline Britain 1990s** survey provides him with direct evidence on how far millions of Britons have to go to achieve what is today regarded as a minimal quality of life.

Table 1 Proportions deeming items to be necessary

	1990 %	1983 %	Change % +/-
A damp free home	98	96	+2
An inside toilet (not shared with another household)	97	96	+1
Heating to warm living areas of the home if it is cold	97	97	0
Beds for everyone in the household	95	94	+1
Bath, not shared with another household	95	94	+1
² A decent state of decoration in the home	92	-	-
Fridge	92	77	+15
Warm waterproof coat	91	87	+4
¹ Three meals a day for children	90	82	+8
⁴ Two meals a day (for adults)	90	64	+26
² Insurance	88	-	-
² Fresh fruit	88	-	-
¹ Toys for children eg dolls or models	84	71	+13
¹ Separate bedrooms for every child over 10 of different sexes	82	77	+5
Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms in the home	78	70	+8
³ Meat or fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	77	63	+14
Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas	74	69	+5
Two pairs of all weather shoes	74	78	-4
Washing machine	73	67	+6
Presents for friends of family once a year	69	63	+6
^{1,2} Out of school activities, eg sports, orchestra, Scouts	69	-	-
² Regular savings of £10 a month for 'rainy days' or retirement	68	-	-
Hobby or leisure activity	67	64	+3

New, not secondhand clothes	65	64	+1
³ A roast joint of its vegetarian equivalent once a week	64	67	-3
¹ Leisure equipment for children eg sports equipment or bicycle	61	57	+4
A television	58	51	+7
Telephone	56	43	+13
An annual week's holiday away, not with relatives	54	63	-9
A "best outfit" for special occasions	54	48	+6
¹ An outing for children once a week	53	40	+13
¹ Children's friends round for tea/snack fortnightly	52	37	+15
A dressing gown	42	38	+4
A night out fortnightly	42	36	+6
² Fares to visit friends in other parts of the country 4 times a year	39	-	-
^{1,2} Special lessons such as music, dance or sport	39	-	-
Friends/family for a meal monthly	37	32	+5
A car	26	22	+4
Pack of cigarettes every other day	18	14	+4
² Restaurant meal monthly	17	-	-
² Holidays abroad annually	17	-	-
² A video	13	-	-
² A home computer	5	-	-
² A dishwasher	4	-	-

The descriptions of items have been abbreviated

¹For families with children

²Not included in the 1983 survey

³Vegetarian option added in 1990

⁴Tow hot meals in the 1983 survey

Breadline Britain in the 1990s

“We had two [pensioners] in recently who had come to Wood Street when they were children and receiving help. Much to their sadness, and I think a bit to their embarrassment, there they were, 60 years later, having to come back again for help.”

Charity worker, Manchester

To find out whether some people in Britain today have living standards unacceptably to society, **Breadline Britain 1990s** commissioned MORI to conduct a major survey. Interviewees were first asked to class items – by “the living standards you feel all adults should have in Britain today” – into those “which you think are necessary, and which all adults should be able to afford, and which they should not have to do without” or on the other hand, those “which may be desirable, but are not necessary”. The process was repeated for items which relate only to families with children.

More than three-quarters of the interviewees thought that 16 of items were necessities; another 7 items were classed as necessities by more than two in three respondents. Altogether, more than half of the interviewees classed 32 of the total 44 items as necessities (Table 1)

This shows wide agreement in society on what a minimum standard should be. Most of the items considered essential by a majority of people would not have appeared in the subsistence standards of the past.

“No way can anybody live now the way we used to live. I don’t care who they are.”

Julie, 77, Birmingham

The list also illustrates vividly how standards change as general living conditions improve, even within a relatively brief period. In particular, four of the items which now qualify as necessities failed to reach 50 per cent acceptance in the 1983 survey: a phone, a best outfit, outings for children, and children’s friends for tea.

For various reasons, the response to some of the items offered for judgment cannot be compared directly with the response in 1983: the description of some items was re-worded and other items were added to take account of changing tastes. Most of the items where a direct comparison is possible show a small increase in the proportion of people regarding them as necessities: these higher expectations reflect the upward trend in living standards. Six have increased their score by more than 10 per cent. The public implicitly accepts that everyone, including the poor, is entitled to a living standard which reflects the standard of the times they live in, not those of the past. **People are saying that the poor should not be excluded from the rise in national prosperity during the eighties.**

Table 2 Proportion of households lacking each of the items

	1990 %	1983 %	Change % +/-
A damp free home	2	7	-5
An inside toilet (not shared with another household)	*	2	-2
Heating to warm living areas of the home if it is cold	3	5	-2
Beds for everyone in the household	1	1	0
Bath, not shared with another household	*	2	-2
² A decent state of decoration in the home	15	-	-
Fridge	1	2	-1
Warm waterproof coat	4	7	-3
¹ Three meals a day for children	*	2	-2
⁴ Two meals a day (for adults)	1	3	-2
² Insurance	10	-	-
² Fresh fruit	6	-	-
¹ Toys for children eg dolls or models	2	2	0
¹ Separate bedrooms for every child over 10 of different sexes	7	3	+4
Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms in the home	2	2	0
³ Meat or fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	4	8	-4
Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas	4	4	0
Two pairs of all weather shoes	5	9	-4
Washing machine	4	6	-2
Presents for friends of family once a year	5	5	0
^{1,2} Out of school activities, eg sports, orchestra, Scouts	10	-	-
² Regular savings of £10 a month for 'rainy days' or retirement	30	-	-
Hobby or leisure activity	7	7	0

New, not secondhand clothes	4	6	-2
³ A roast joint of its vegetarian equivalent once a week	6	7	-1
¹ Leisure equipment for children eg sports equipment or bicycle	6	6	0
A television	1	*	+1
Telephone	7	11	-4
An annual week's holiday away, not with relatives	20	21	-1
A "best outfit" for special occasions	8	10	-2
¹ An outing for children once a week	14	9	+5
¹ Children's friends round for tea/snack fortnightly	8	5	+3
A dressing gown	2	3	-1
A night out fortnightly	14	17	-3
² Fares to visit friends in other parts of the country 4 times a year	19	-	-
^{1,2} Special lessons such as music, dance or sport	20	-	-
Friends/family for a meal monthly	10	11	-1
A car	18	22	-4
Pack of cigarettes every other day	5	6	-1
² Restaurant meal monthly	22	-	-
² Holidays abroad annually	32	-	-
² A video	10	-	-
² A home computer	16	-	-
² A dishwasher	18	-	-

The descriptions of items have been abbreviated

* Less than 9.5%

¹For families with children

²Not included in the 1983 survey

³Vegetarian option added in 1990

⁴Tow hot meals in the 1983 survey

"I eat a lot of beans because they are high in protein. I can only afford one meal a day: can't really afford meat, cheese, fish, stuff I would like. And if I have the bread, I'll have bread with it, but most of the time I don't have bread.

"I would like more than one meal a day, but I can't do it, so I make do. So sometimes I get up a little bit late so I don't have to have my breakfast.

"I get hungry quite often, and my stomach starts to rumble, and I get nervous."

John, 23, unemployed, Stockton-on-Tees

Two items show a statistically significant loss of support (although neither has, yet, dropped below 50 per cent): an annual holiday, and two pairs of shoes.

Table 1 shows the proportions regarding each item in the 1990 list as a necessity, with equivalent figures for 1983.

To gauge the strength of feeling with which people hold their views, we asked people if they would be willing to pay an extra 1p in the £ income tax to enable **everyone** to afford the items they class as necessities. Three out of four people, 75 per cent, said they would, and 18 per cent would not. These are almost exactly the same proportions as in 1983 (74 and 20 per cent). We also asked about an extra 5p in the £. In 1983 25 per cent of the population said they would be willing to pay that much, but 59 per cent would not. Now the interviewees are evenly divided – 44 per cent would and 44 per cent would not.

"He doesn't like sharing, he's backward on his talking and he's hyperactive. I think if he had more people, like children to play with, he could get rid of all that energy he's got. But he just can't"

Alison, 21, in bed-and-breakfast, London on her 2 ½ year-old son.

Part of the increased support for higher taxation is probably due to the fact that in 1983 the basic rate of income tax was 30p in the £, compared with 25p in 1990. Nevertheless, the response is clear: people believe, more strongly than in 1983, in the necessity of the items they have listed and are willing to back a minimum standard for all at their own expense. In practice a simple tax rise would make little sense: many of the worst off would end up paying more extra tax than they would gain in other ways. Leaving that aside, however, what remains is **a strong indication of popular support for government intervention designed to improve the living standards of the worst-off.**

"The children, mainly, don't get enough to eat; things they need when they need them, like the shoes and the clothes. I just wish we could do the things we want without having to worry where the money is coming from."

Maureen, housewife in a low-wage family, Liverpool.

The millions who go without

The findings reported so far tell us about the standard of living that people think is right for the 1990s. The **Breadline Britain 1990s** survey also investigated the living standards of the interviewees themselves: which items from the list they have; which they choose to do without; and which they would like but can't afford. The proportion of people who report that they lack items because they can't afford them is shown in Table 2.

To get an idea of what this means, we have bundled related items together and counted the people who lack one or more items from each bundle. Using our sample figures we estimate that in the population as a **whole**:

- ❖ **Roughly 10 million people in Britain today cannot afford adequate housing: for example, their home is unheated, damp or the older children have to share bedrooms.**
- ❖ **About 7 million people go without essential clothing – such as a warm waterproof coat – because of lack of money.**
- ❖ **There are approximately 2 ½ million children who are forced to go without one of the things they need, like three meals a day, toys, or out of school activities.**
- ❖ **Around 5 million people are not properly fed by today's standards – they don't have enough fresh fruit and veg, or two meals a day, for example.**
- ❖ **About 6 ½ million people can't afford one or more essential household goods, like a fridge, a phone, or carpets for living areas.**
- ❖ **At least one of the necessities which makes life worth living – hobbies, holidays, celebrations etc – are too expensive for about 21 million people.**
- ❖ **More than 31 million people – over half the population – live without minimal financial security: they say they cannot save £10 a month, or insure the contents of their homes, or both.**

Some people, who lack only one necessity and fall into only one of these groups, would not generally be called poor, although all have a standard of living which falls at least a little short of the socially acceptable minimum. They are all forced to go without something which the majority of the population says they should not have to go without.

But the research goes a step further, to identify and count the poor in Britain today. Other researchers have made their own estimates of the numbers in poverty (and their findings are remarkably consistent with ours). What makes the **Breadline Britain 1990s** survey unique is that the poor can be identified on the basis of standards approved by society.

The results show that some of the people who cannot afford one or two of these necessities are not on low incomes and do not seem to be deprived in other ways. However, a series of statistical tests shows that those who lack three or more are heavily concentrated among those with the lowest incomes and who are deprived in other ways.

On this basis, 11 million people in Britain today – one in five of the population – are poor. The total includes more than **3 million children.**

Upwards of 6 million people, one in 10, cannot afford five or more necessities, a level of deprivation that affects their whole way of life. And more than 3 ½ million lack seven, or in many cases many more, necessities: theirs are lives of intense poverty.

These are much higher than the equivalent figures for 1983. They present a stark alternative to images of universal gains in prosperity.

Identifying the poor

Breadline Britain 1990s found that the poor, those lacking three or more necessities, fall into five groups: the **unemployed; single parents;** families where someone is **infirm or disabled; pensioners;** and **low-paid workers.**

Among these, the two groups most at risk, as in 1983, are single parents and the unemployed. Two-thirds of single parents, and more than half of the unemployed, lack three or more necessities. The next two most vulnerable groups consist of households where someone is infirm or disabled and the retired. The research suggests that one reason pensioners may appear to be less at risk is that they are more likely to expect less out of life: they are happier to forgo necessities than the rest of the population. Pensioners who are single, particularly women, are more likely to be deprived.

Families where one or two people are in work are the least likely to end up poor. But there are many families with a single wage-earner where the income is too low to give children the start that society thinks they need.

Among those in work there are a few who have been unemployed during the previous year, nearly half of whom lack three or more necessities. Although recent unemployment leaves people at great risk of being poor, they account for a small proportion of the total in poverty. Of those who lack three or more necessities a third are in full-time work, twice as many as are unemployed and seeking work, and a fifth are retired. Of course some of the categories overlap: some people are single parents and employed, disabled and pensioners.

There is one group which the survey does not cover. Conventional techniques of survey research mean that the homeless without fixed addresses are excluded – just one more way in which poverty excludes its victims from society. No one knows how many people are involved; estimates have varied wildly. But there is visible evidence that the number has grown in the last decade. Among other things, that means that our survey underestimates the real growth in poverty over the period.

The consequences of poverty

“It’s hard to explain till you’ve been there. Sometimes you just feel like throwing in the can, you’ve just had enough”

Jimmy, disabled, Liverpool

The **Breadline Britain 1990s** survey tells us a great deal about the poor. They are two and a half times more likely to live in council houses than the population as a whole, a figure that seems likely to go on increasing while council houses are sold to tenants – inevitably to the tenants who can best afford it. This has important consequences for the distribution of wealth, as opposed to income, and particularly therefore for the children of the poor. It also means that council housing is increasingly provided only for the most deprived in the population.

In households lacking three or more necessities, 32 per cent report that they didn’t have enough money for food at some time during the previous year, and the proportion was even higher 37 per cent, in households with children under 16. For 47 per cent, and 53 per cent in households with children, lack of money left them feeling isolated in the previous year.

People going without necessities can take limited advantage of credit to ease their circumstances – inevitably bills go unpaid: 22 per cent had been seriously behind with the rent, 16 per cent with the gas bill, 21 per cent with electricity.

“When I was working life was difficult, but I could just about manage. Now you just exist... not even from hand to mouth, it’s from hand to bill. And it is very hard.”

Yvonne, separated with three children, Birmingham

More than a third of households lacking three or more necessities admitted that they failed to make or keep up their poll tax payments: although non-payment and arrears are no means confined to the very poorest, the admitted non-payment rate among households which lack none of the necessities was a mere 6 per cent.

Altogether, 56 per cent of poor households had been seriously behind with one or more bills, compared with 10 per cent of households which lack none of the necessities.

It is not surprising, then that 42 per cent of this group felt depressed by their lack of money in the month before the survey; that 18 per cent had worried about being a failure; and that 29 per cent lacked hope for the future.

And although the poor are no more (or less) likely to be burgled, mugged or assaulted than the better off, they are almost three times as likely as those who lack none of the necessities to say that they feel unsafe in their neighbourhood.

Whatever other people say about them, people in this group are likely to **feel** poor: 32 per cent feel they are “genuinely poor” all the time, compared with 1

per cent of those who lack none of the necessities; and another 44 per cent sometimes feel poor (compared to 16 per cent): a total of 76 per cent.

“I don’t think I can take much more of this. It’s really getting me down.”
Alison, 21, single parent, London

Public attitudes to the poor

There are many theories about why people are poor in an affluent society. The popular view (Table 3) is that “there is much injustice in our society”, an answer given by 40 per cent of our interviewees (compared with 32 per cent who gave that answer in 1983 and 16 per cent in 1976). Roughly 10 per cent put it down to bad luck, while 20 per cent blame modern progress. “Laziness or lack of willpower” is the favoured explanation of 20 per cent (compared with 22 per cent in 1983 and 43 per cent in 1976). The more that interviewees lack necessities, the more they are likely to blame injustice and the less to blame laziness.

The government’s role in helping the poor comes in for increasing criticism too: 70 per cent now think it is doing too little to help those who lack necessities (in 1983 the figure was 57 per cent) and only 5 per cent (6 per cent in 1983) too much. On page 7 we reported figures indicating people’s willingness to pay additional taxes to enable everyone to afford the items classed as necessities. A 5p increase in income tax at the last budget – restoring the 1983 rate, but still 3p below the rate in 1979 – would have allowed the government to put together a substantial anti-poverty package. Pensions and disability benefit could each be increased by 22.5 per cent, child benefit increased to £10, and benefits restored for people under 25.

Table 3 Why People are poor

Why in your opinion are there people who live in need? Here are four opinions – which is closest to yours?	1976 (UK)	1983 (GB)	1990 (GB)
Because they have been unlucky	10	13	10
Because of their laziness and lack of willpower	43	22	19
Because there is much injustice in our society	16	32	40
It’s an inevitable part of modern progress	17	25	19
None of these	4	5	3
Don’t know	10	3	8

Source: EC (1976), Breadline Britain (1983), Breadline Britain 1990s (1990)

Such a package would fall far short of eliminating poverty: we estimate that of the 11 million found to be in poverty, 40 per cent would be lifted out altogether and its severity would be reduced for the remaining 6.5 million – slightly better

than things were in 1983. Other government measures would help too: improved training, more jobs for the disabled, and better child care provision would all help people get off benefits and into work; a minimum wage of two-thirds average earnings phased in to reduce undesirable side effects, could lift most of the low-paid out of poverty.

Whether all the poor can be lifted above the minimum standard laid down by the **Breadline Britain 1990s** survey depends ultimately on the generosity of society as a whole and the willingness of government to act on it.

“To be poor, it’s... it’s not very nice. It’s a thing that we’ve all got to come to, old age, so why can’t we have just a little bit of comfort in our old age?”

Julie, 77, Birmingham

Technical Note

MORI interviewed a quota sample of 1319 adults aged 16+, face-to-face in their homes between 14 and 25 July 1990. Additional fieldwork among households living in particularly deprived areas was carried out between 25 November and 9 December 1990, with 512 quota interviews conducted face-to-face in home. Quotas were based on sex, age and working status. Aggregated data was weighted by age, household type, tenure and ACORN housing type to be representative of the population of Great Britain.

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