



The poverties

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

A protestor in London raises awareness about fuel poverty.

Many of us have been irritated by the splintering of the notion of poverty in recent years. Food poverty, fuel poverty, water poverty, digital poverty, transport poverty, period poverty: surely they are all just poverty we have cried! With 'poverty' defined as a relative lack of income, is there any merit in looking at different poverties?

Food poverty

In the case of food poverty, it is difficult to see any reason not to attribute it entirely to a lack of income, except perhaps the possibility of food deserts, where there is no easy access to cheap food outlets. The justification for the notion of food poverty rests almost entirely on the basis that the idea of hungry children resonates more than 'living on less than 60 per cent of the median income'.

Fuel poverty

There is a much stronger case for differentiating fuel poverty from income poverty. The conventional measure of fuel poverty used to be households spending more than 10 per cent of their income on fuel. In an analysis of the Expenditure and Food

Survey¹ only 29 per cent of those in income poverty were in fuel poverty, and two per cent of those in fuel poverty were not in income poverty. The late Professor Sir John Hills in his government review of fuel poverty² pointed out that we should also take into account the thermal efficiency of the housing that people live in, and recommended a measure based on low income and high costs. He proposed that a household was in fuel poverty if the cost of fuel required was above the median level, leaving the household with a residual income below the poverty line after spending the required amount to keep warm. The latest proposal from the previous government³ was to broaden the measure to capture all low-income households living in homes with inherently inefficient energy use. So, the focus of fuel poverty is becoming much less on income and more on inefficient energy use.

Water poverty

There is no official definition of water poverty or consensus on how it should be measured. By convention, households have been defined as water poor if they spend more than 3 per cent of their income on water bills. Water regulator Ofwat recognises the limitations of this definition but acknowledges its usefulness in identifying trends and patterns in water affordability. The Consumer Council for Water⁴ and Ofwat also use an additional measure: the percentage of households spending more than 5 per cent of their income on water bills. This is calculated by dividing the household water bill by the net household income after housing costs but before water payments.



UK charity Period Poverty has so far donated more than 500,000 pads to homeless charities in the UK.

Of course, the 3 per cent and 5 per cent thresholds are conventions without any particular scientific merit, though 3 per cent was endorsed by the United Nations in 2013 and has some support from the Minimum Income Standard estimate for water.⁵ One obvious criticism of these thresholds is that they take no account of consumption. A household may not be spending more than 3 per cent or 5 per cent because they are trying to reduce their bills (if on a water meter), and may be risking their health and well-being as a result. Alternatively, a household may be in water poverty unnecessarily because they are behaving wastefully. It might be possible to combine an estimate of whether people are consuming what they need using both a share of total expenditure and an estimate of an amount needed for healthy living. This amount would need to vary by household size and type and, possibly, by water region to take account of price differences. The constraint in the case of water is that only half of households have a meter. Recent research⁶ for the Consumer Council for Water found that water poverty was slightly higher for non-metered customers and larger families, but that there was a rather limited overlap with income poverty. Although 73 per cent of those in water poverty were in income poverty, only 69 per cent of those in income poverty were in water poverty at the 3 per cent threshold. The figures at the 5 per cent threshold were 92 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

Period poverty

As for the other poverties, I can see no reason why period poverty is not just income poverty – though there is, of course, a gender justice issue, too.

Digital poverty

Digital poverty has some age, skills, and geographic (rural) dimensions but the Good Things Foundation⁷ found that affordability was not the most important reason for people not using the internet. If internet-use is driven by income, it probably goes beyond the poverty threshold. The 2019 UK Consumer Digital Index from Lloyds Bank showed that 11.9 million people (22 per cent of the population) do

not have the digital skills needed for everyday life in the UK. By 2030, it is predicted that 4.5 million people (8 per cent of the population) will remain digitally disengaged. Disabled people are 35 per cent less likely to have essential digital skills for life.

Transport poverty

Transport poverty is about availability as well as affordability. It is certainly partly to do with geography and age group (certain groups have free passes) but no doubt has an income poverty dimension, too.⁸

Jonathan Bradshaw is emeritus professor of social policy at the University of York

Footnotes

1. J Bradshaw, 'Who is fuel poor?', *Poverty*, 131, 2008, pp9–11
2. J Hills, Getting the measure of fuel poverty: Final Report of the Fuel poverty Review, CASE report 72, 2012, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/51237/1/_libfile_REPOSITORY_Content_CASE_CASEreports_CASEreport72.pdf
3. *Consultation on the fuel poverty strategy for England*, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2019, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819606/fuel-poverty-strategy-england-consultation.pdf
4. C Snell and J Bradshaw, *Water Affordability in England and Wales: A report prepared for CCWater*, Consumer Council for Water, 2009
5. *NEA Discussion Paper: Water Poverty: A Common Measurement*, National Energy Action, 2019 www.nea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Water-poverty-a-common-measurement-PRINT-VERSION.pdf
6. J R Bradshaw and A Keung, *Water poverty in England and Wales*, Water Consumer Council, 2021, ccwater.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1-Jonathan-Bradshaw.pdf
7. *'It's too expensive' personas*, Good Things Foundation, 2021, goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/personas_its_too_expensive.pdf
8. J R Bradshaw, E Kempson and C Mullen, *Access to Essential Services for Low-income people*, European Commission, 2020, bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/geography/pfrc/ESP/ESP_UK_access_essential_services.pdf

An older couple browse the internet. A lack of digital skills and access can have a huge negative impact on a person's life.

