**Poverty, as a problem affecting the society**

**Poverty**, the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Poverty is said to exist when people lack the means to satisfy their basic needs. In this [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context), the identification of poor people first requires a determination of what [constitutes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutes) basic needs. These may be defined as narrowly as “those necessary for survival” or as broadly as “those reflecting the prevailing [standard of living](https://www.britannica.com/topic/standard-of-living) in the community.” The first [criterion](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criterion) would cover only those people near the borderline of starvation or death from exposure; the second would extend to people whose nutrition, housing, and clothing, though adequate to preserve life, do not measure up to those of the population as a whole. The problem of definition is further [compounded](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounded) by the noneconomic [connotations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/connotations) that the word poverty has acquired. Poverty has been associated, for example, with poor health, low levels of [education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/education) or skills, an inability or an unwillingness to work, high rates of disruptive or disorderly behaviour, and improvidence. While these attributes have often been found to exist with poverty, their inclusion in a definition of poverty would tend to obscure the relation between them and the inability to provide for one’s basic needs. Whatever definition one uses, authorities and laypersons alike commonly assume that the effects of poverty are harmful to both individuals and society.

Although poverty is a phenomenon as old as [human](https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-being) history, its significance has changed over time. Under traditional (i.e., nonindustrialized) modes of economic production, widespread poverty had been accepted as inevitable. The total output of goods and services, even if equally distributed, would still have been insufficient to give the entire [population](https://www.britannica.com/science/population-biology-and-anthropology) a comfortable standard of living by prevailing standards. With the economic productivity that resulted from [industrialization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/industrialization), however, this ceased to be the case—especially in the world’s most [industrialized countries](https://www.britannica.com/topic/industrialization), where national outputs were sufficient to raise the entire population to a comfortable level if the necessary redistribution could be arranged without adversely affecting output.

Several types of poverty may be distinguished depending on such factors as time or duration (long- or short-term or cyclical) and distribution (widespread, concentrated, individual).

## Cyclical Poverty

Cyclical poverty refers to poverty that may be widespread throughout a population, but the occurrence itself is of limited duration. In nonindustrial societies (present and past), this sort of inability to provide for one’s basic needs rests mainly upon temporary food shortages caused by natural phenomena or poor agricultural planning. Prices would rise because of scarcities of food, which brought widespread, [albeit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/albeit) temporary, misery.

In industrialized societies the chief cyclical cause of poverty is fluctuations in the [business cycle](https://www.britannica.com/topic/business-cycle), with mass unemployment during periods of [depression](https://www.britannica.com/topic/depression-economics) or serious [recession](https://www.britannica.com/topic/recession). Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the industrialized nations of the world experienced business panics and recessions that temporarily enlarged the numbers of the poor. The United States’ experience in the [Great Depression](https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression) of the 1930s, though unique in some of its features, exemplifies this kind of poverty. And until the Great Depression, poverty resulting from business fluctuations was accepted as an inevitable consequence of a natural process of market [regulation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/regulation). [Relief](https://www.britannica.com/topic/relief-welfare) was granted to the [unemployed](https://www.britannica.com/topic/unemployment) to tide them over until the business cycle again entered an upswing. The experiences of the Great Depression inspired a generation of economists such as [John Maynard Keynes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Maynard-Keynes), who sought solutions to the problems caused by extreme swings in the business cycle. Since the Great Depression, governments in nearly all advanced industrial societies have adopted economic policies that attempt to limit the ill effects of economic fluctuation. In this sense, governments play an active [role](https://www.britannica.com/topic/role) in poverty alleviation by increasing spending as a means of stimulating the economy. Part of this spending comes in the form of direct assistance to the unemployed, either through [unemployment compensation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/unemployment-insurance), welfare, and other subsidies or by employment on public-works projects. Although business depressions affect all segments of society, the impact is most severe on people of the lowest socioeconomic strata because they have fewer marginal resources than those of a higher strata.

## Collective Poverty

In contrast to cyclical poverty, which is temporary, widespread or “[collective](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collective)” poverty involves a relatively permanent insufficiency of means to secure basic needs—a condition that may be so general as to describe the average level of life in a society or that may be concentrated in relatively large groups in an otherwise prosperous society. Both generalized and concentrated collective poverty may be transmitted from generation to generation, parents passing their poverty on to their children.

Collective poverty is relatively general and lasting in parts of Asia, the [Middle East](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East), most of Africa, and parts of [South America](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-America) and [Central America](https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-America). Life for the bulk of the population in these regions is at a minimal level. Nutritional deficiencies cause [disease](https://www.britannica.com/science/disease) seldom seen by doctors in the highly developed countries. Low [life expectancy](https://www.britannica.com/science/life-expectancy), high levels of infant mortality, and poor health characterize life in these societies.

Collective poverty is usually related to economic underdevelopment. The total resources of many [developing nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/developing-nation) in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America would be insufficient to support the population adequately even if they were equally divided among all of the citizens. Proposed remedies are twofold: (1) expansion of the [gross national product](https://www.britannica.com/topic/gross-national-product) (GNP) through improved agriculture or industrialization, or both, and (2) population limitation. Thus far, both population control and induced economic development in many countries have proved difficult, controversial, and at times inconclusive or disappointing in their results.

An increase of the GNP does not necessarily lead to an improved standard of living for the population at large, for a number of reasons. The most important reason is that, in many developing countries, the population grows even faster than the economy does, with no net reduction in poverty as a result. This increased population growth stems primarily from lowered [infant mortality rates](https://www.britannica.com/science/infant-mortality-rate) made possible by improved sanitary and disease-control measures. Unless such lowered rates eventually result in women bearing fewer children, the result is a sharp acceleration in population growth. To reduce birth rates, some developing countries have undertaken nationally administered family-planning programs, with varying results. Many developing nations are also characterized by a long-standing system of unequal [distribution of wealth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/distribution-of-wealth-and-income)—a system likely to continue despite marked increases in the GNP. Some authorities have observed the tendency for a large portion of any increase to be siphoned off by persons who are already wealthy, while others claim that increases in GNP will always trickle down to the part of the population living at the subsistence level.

## Concentrated Collective Poverty

In many industrialized, relatively [affluent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affluent) countries, particular [demographic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demographic) groups are [vulnerable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulnerable) to long-term poverty. In [city](https://www.britannica.com/topic/city) [ghettos](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ghetto), in regions bypassed or abandoned by industry, and in areas where agriculture or industry is inefficient and cannot compete profitably, there are found victims of concentrated collective poverty. These people, like those afflicted with generalized poverty, have higher mortality rates, poor health, low educational levels, and so forth when compared with the more affluent segments of society. Their chief economic traits are unemployment and underemployment, unskilled occupations, and job instability. Efforts at amelioration focus on ways to bring the deprived groups into the mainstream of economic life by attracting new industry, promoting small business, introducing improved agricultural methods, and raising the level of skills of the employable members of the society.

## Case Poverty

Similar to collective poverty in relative permanence but different from it in terms of distribution, case poverty refers to the inability of an individual or [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) to secure basic needs even in social surroundings of general prosperity. This inability is generally related to the lack of some basic attribute that would permit the individual to maintain himself or herself. Such persons may, for example, be blind, physically or emotionally [disabled](https://www.britannica.com/science/disability), or chronically ill. Physical and mental handicaps are usually regarded sympathetically, as being beyond the control of the people who suffer from them. Efforts to [ameliorate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ameliorate) poverty due to physical causes focus on education, sheltered employment, and, if needed, economic maintenance.

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