**'The Rise of Mass Poverty'? Breadline Britain and Poverty and Social Exclusion (1983-2012) evidence revisited**

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**Social Research Indicators**

## Abstract

Mack and Lansley's consensual deprivation method determines poverty rates based on the proportions unable to afford possessions or activities that are deemed to be necessities by at least 50 per cent of survey respondents. Using the method, Breadline Britain/Poverty and Social Exclusion studies found that Britain's poverty rate increased steadily from 14 per cent (in 1983) to 30 per cent (in 2012), despite noticeable stability in what the surveys' respondents regarded as necessities. This article contends that the poverty rise was fuelled by changes over time to the list of potential necessities put to respondents. An analysis of only potential necessities voted on in all available surveys (1983, 1999 and 2012) and newly invented items, using Mack and Lansley's preferred poverty measure, found the poverty rate fell by more than half between 1983 and 2012; similarly, when various other measures were used, the 1983 result was nearly always the worst. In showing how different methodological choices produce different results, the findings point to the need for further debate about possible refinements to the consensual deprivation method. Our suggestions include standardising the procedure for developing lists of potential necessities so that findings from different times and places are more comparable.

## Introduction

Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley pioneered the consensual deprivation method for researching poverty, in which survey respondents vote on what items they regard as necessities and the poverty rate is the proportion of people who lack a certain number of those 'necessities'. In developing the method, Mack and Lansley (1985) were influenced by both Townsend's (1979) landmark poverty study and Piachaud's (1981) critique of it. Townsend's (1979) 'deprivation index', which he used to determine who was in poverty, was an aggregation of 'deprivation indicators' such as lacking a cooked breakfast; Piachaud (1981) suggested people might go without a cooked breakfast through choice. Incorporating both a concern for whether people really want the possessions and activities used as deprivation indicators and a desire to include the general public's attitudes towards material need in poverty research, Mack and Lansley (1985: 45) defined poverty as "an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities". Their consensual deprivation research begins with focus groups helping the researchers to generate a list of 'items' (meaning possessions or activities) that might be regarded as necessities. An item is deemed to be a 'socially perceived necessity' if at least 50 per cent of survey respondents include it among those they "think are necessary" and which all "in Britain today…should be able to afford and which they should not have to do without", as opposed to it being one "which may be desirable, but [is] not necessary" (Mack and Lansley, 1985: 294). Survey respondents are usually asked if they have each of the items, suffer an enforced lack of them (via a "don't have and can't afford" response option), or go without them through choice (a "don't have

and don't want" option) (see Mack and Lansley, 1985: 297). The deprivation index is the number of items individuals or households indicate they want but cannot afford; the poverty rate is the percentage who have a deprivation index score of at least a certain number (usually three).

Mack and Lansley's first two studies, in 1983 (Mack and Lansley, 1985) and 1990 (see Gordon and Pantazis, 1997) featured in two 'Breadline Britain' (BB) London Weekend Television series', shown on Independent Television (ITV) in 1983 and 1991. Two further studies, in 1999 and 2012, formed part of the major Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) research programme, which was based at the University of Bristol and involved academics from various UK universities (see Bramley and Bailey, 2018). Questions on whether people want but cannot afford possessions and activities now feature in large-sample UK surveys (the Family Resources Survey and the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study) and European Union surveys (see Guio et al., 2017), while recent consensual deprivation studies have taken place in the wider world, in countries such as Benin (Pomati and Nandy, 2020) and Brazil (De Oliveira et al., 2021). A common theme in explanations of the method's widespread usage is that its grounding in public attitudes and experience means its poverty findings carry a "unique political legitimacy and moral imperative" (Bailey and Bramley, 2018: 1).

Yet the method has faced substantial criticism (Ashton, 1984; Halleröd et al., 1997; Van Den Bosch, 2000; McKay, 2004). This article is part critique and part empirical study. It focuses on the BB/PSE series' headline finding – that the poverty rate more than doubled between

1983 and 2012 (Lansley and Mack, 2015; Bailey and Bramley, 2018). Its main argument is that this finding came about because of variations across years in lists of potential necessities. We suggest that, to enable meaningful comparison across time, changes to the list of potential necessities should only be precipitated by either an observed change in a society's attitudes towards a potential necessity or the emergence of a newly invented one.

The article is structured as follows. The section after this critically examines published BB/PSE findings; our focus on already-published findings at this stage allows all four BB/PSE studies [1983, 1990, 1999 and 2012] to be discussed. The section starts by suggesting it is paradoxical that the BB/PSE poverty rate soared ahead of the conventional relative UK poverty rate between 1990 and 2012, given that public necessity voting was noticeably stable during that period. It then argues that this paradox can be explained by an expansion in the overall number of items put to respondents, and a tendency for items with low deprivation scores to be withdrawn while items that went on to deliver high deprivation scores were introduced. The next section of the article includes findings from an analysis of raw data from all currently available BB/PSE datasets (1983, 1999 and 2012). It starts by using insights from that analysis in arguing for the use of certain methods to derive a deprivation index. Four methods are chosen for the main analysis presented here: Mack and Lansley's Deprivation Index (DI), Halleröd's (1994) influential amendment of it – the Proportional Deprivation Index (PDI), and two new methods favoured by the authors. Similarly, several ways of converting these deprivation scores into headline findings are explained and employed in the main analysis. In that analysis, one set of tests includes only items voted on in all three studies, along with any newly invented items; for comparison,

another set of tests includes *all* available items. After the findings are presented, a discussion/conclusion draws upon the article's main points in making suggestions about how the consensual deprivation method might be refined for use in future empirical projects.

## Explaining the BB/PSE studies' 'rise of mass poverty'

The four BB/PSE studies offer a unique opportunity to monitor changes over several decades to the extent that a society's perceived needs are being met. To allow readers to access key information on the four BB/PSE studies, Table 1 collates all years' findings. In 'Breadline Britain: the rise of mass poverty', Lansley and Mack (2015: 54) reported that the country's poverty rate, measured consistently across studies as wanting but being unable to afford three or more socially perceived necessities, rose from 14 per cent in 1983, to 20 (1990), 24 (1999) and 30 per cent in 2012. Lansley and Mack attributed its rise to growing inequality. They posed the question "why, with the country twice as rich as it was thirty years ago, have poverty rates doubled?" (Lansley and Mack, 2015: x) and went on to conclude that "levels of deprivation and poverty are, ultimately, down to decisions on the way the economic cake is divided, and how the fruits of economic growth are shared" (p. xviii; see also Gordon et al., [2013: 17] and Mack and Lansley's [1997: xxi] assertion of the same view when referring to 1983 and 1990 BB findings). In the rest of this section of the article, we contend that the driving force behind the growth in poverty was *not* rising inequality, and that it was in fact changes to the list of potential necessities put to survey respondents.

TABLE 1 HERE

If, as Mack and Lansley have claimed, inequality accounts for rising poverty, BB/PSE poverty rates would have followed a similar path to income inequality and relative poverty statistics. However, as Fig. 1 shows, while between 1983 and 1990 the three indicators increased together, between 1990 and 2012 the BB/PSE rate increased by 50 per cent while income inequality was the same in 1990 as in 2012 and relative poverty was slightly lower in 2012. The discrepancy between BB/PSE and income inequality-based indicators cannot be explained by wealth inequality increasing, as it too appears to have been stable. While wealth distribution data is patchier (see Alveredo et al., 2016), available (Inland Revenue) evidence produced Gini coefficients of 0.64 in 1986 and 1991 (see Rowlingson, 2011: 26), as did Wealth and Assets Survey data in 2010-12 (see Crawford et al., 2016: 43).

FIG. 1 HERE

The BB/PSE poverty rate would be expected to accelerate away from the conventional relative poverty and inequality rates if socially perceived need had surged ahead of rising prosperity. However, Lansley and Mack (2015: 55) insisted "It is not that the public's minimum has been rising faster than general prosperity", just that "it has been rising broadly in line". In fact, evidence strongly suggests that growth in socially perceived necessities between 1983 and 2012 did not even keep pace with the 88 per cent (ONS, 2020: 3) increase in UK real disposable income (see also Dunn [2021] on adult necessity

votes in all surveys, and Main and Bradshaw's [2014] comparison of child necessity votes in 1999 and 2012). Thus, while BB/PSE respondents did not imply they supported an 'absolute' definition of poverty, nor were they, as Lansley and Mack (2015: 23) claimed, "committed relativists". Rather, the public implied a *partly* relative understanding of need and poverty: while perceived needs increased as society changed, they increased at a much slower rate than general prosperity. The stability in socially perceived necessity voting is shown by the fact that, across all BB/PSE surveys, and including both adult and children's necessity votes, only 16 times out of a possible 125 did a survey's vote change an item's necessity/non-necessity status from what had been established by the previous survey. Most (10) of those 16 changes saw an item become a non-necessity. Moreover, while on 19 occasions an item voted a non-necessity in 2012 had earlier been voted a necessity, only twice was a 2012 'necessity' earlier voted a non-necessity - a telephone (in 1983) and children's access to a 'computer and internet for homework' (in 1999); the latter's 2012 vote of 66 per cent is the sole occasion that an item not publicly available in 1960s Britain was voted a necessity in a BB/PSE survey.

Given the paucity of both new technologies and items crossing the 50 per cent line to become necessities, one plausible explanation for the dramatic rise in poverty is that, over time, surveys included more and more potential necessities. Excluding children's items (because a new, expanded children's study was introduced in 1999), the number of necessities voted on increased steadily, from 29 (1983) to 36 (1990) and 54 (1999), although it fell back to 46 in 2012; this fall means that another explanation for poverty's growth between 1999 and 2012 is required.

Importantly, given the stability in votes, it seems likely that respondents would have assigned items introduced after 1983 the same necessity/non-necessity status if they had featured in earlier surveys. Yet Lansley and Mack (2015) did not discuss this possibility. When they stated that "new items and activities were added to reflect new and changing priorities", they gave the introduction of "fresh fruit and vegetables" as their example, attributing its presence in 1990 but not 1983 to the public's "changing [emphasis] on maintaining good health" (Lansley and Mack, 2015: 17). Its 1990 necessity vote was 88 per cent, and no BB/PSE item that ever received a vote of 78 per cent or more was ever voted a non-necessity. The highest vote change from one survey to the next was a 35-point increase from 1999 to 2012 for adults' internet access, which reflected its dramatically increased popularity: the proportion reporting they 'do not have and do not want' internet access had decreased from 56 (1999) to just nine per cent (2012). Our view is that such a dramatic shift justifies the item being added to the list of potential necessities put to survey respondents. Given that no such dramatic change is claimed to have occurred between 1983 and 1990 in Britons' attitude towards fresh fruit and vegetables (although the period saw a revival of government led public health initiatives [DHSS, 1987]), it is reasonable to suggest (though impossible to prove) that fresh fruit and vegetables would have almost certainly been voted a necessity in 1983. This argument can be applied to all items in Table 1 that made their debut appearance in surveys after 1983. Indeed, some items were added that cannot be said to represent 'new and changing priorities' at all; examples include a 'table and chairs' and 'curtains / window blinds', which both first appeared in 2012.

By the same token, it is reasonable to suggest that items removed from studies after 1983 would have been likely to have received the same necessity/non-necessity outcome if they had been retained. However, as Table 2 shows, newly introduced potential necessities had a much bigger overall impact on deprivation scores than either the withdrawal of other potential necessities or items changing status from being a non-necessity to a necessity. For greater transparency, and to enable the inclusion of 1990 findings, figures in Table 2 are derived from the previously published rounded percentages presented (above) in Table 1. To avoid the distortionary effect of the 1999 hike in child necessities, Table 2 includes only adult necessities (this is unproblematic, as child and adult poverty rates were virtually identical in 2012 – see Lansley and Mack, 2015: 53). The average (mean) percentage deprivation score of adult necessities in their last survey before being withdrawn is 2.8 per cent, while newly introduced items contributed a mean of 9.5 per cent in their debut survey (if children's necessities are included, these figures are 2.9 and 7.5 respectively). Lansley and Mack (2015: 260) explained that items were sometimes dropped because "ownership had become almost universal" (their example was an "indoor toilet"), and that this "enabled room for other items to be introduced". Removing items that almost everyone has is a common, defensible practice in deprivation studies which do not use the 'consensual' method (see, for example, Cribb et al., 2012: 100), as the information gleaned from including such items is inevitably limited – and the practice is justifiable in consensual deprivation research too. However, Lansley and Mack (2015) did not comment on whether replacing withdrawn items with some that a higher proportion of people are unable to access inflated their headline poverty figures, and nor have PSE authors (see Gordon et al., 2000; Pantazis et al., 2006; Bramley and Bailey, 2018).

TABLE 2 HERE

In short, when Mack and Lansley's (2015) reported that poverty more than doubled from 1983 to 2012, they did not discuss the possible impact on their figures of either increased numbers of potential necessities being put to a vote, or items with relatively low deprivation scores being replaced by items that went on to have high deprivation scores. These effects can be nullified by including in analyses only the 13 items (10 adult and 3 child items) voted necessities in all years. Only one of the 13 (a television) had a higher deprivation percentage in either 1990 or 1999 than it had in 1983 (see Table 1). Thus, looked at this way, BB/PSE findings bring into question Lansley and Mack's claim that their poverty rates are driven by inequality, as inequality (and relative poverty, which is an inequality-based concept) rocketed from 1983 to 1990 before being stable thereafter. The research in the next section builds on these insights. Because it uses raw BB/PSE data, it can measure the proportion of respondents who lack a particular number of socially perceived necessities.

## An analysis of all available BB/PSE datasets (1983, 1999 and 2012)

### Methods

Fuller details of the BB/PSE series are available in its key outputs (see Mack and Lansley, 1985; Pantazis et al., 2006; Lansley and Mack, 2015; Bramley and Bailey, 2018) and in documentation available online ( www.data-archive.ac.uk ). The main changes across the BB/PSE studies came in 2012, when the number asked living standards questions increased to 12097 (it was 1534 in 1999, and 1174 in 1983), and Northern Ireland respondents were

added (though their responses were remarkably similar to the rest of the UK's - see Lansley and Mack, 2015: 25). The 1983 survey deliberately overrepresented poorer communities (see Mack and Lansley, 1985: 287-88), and the available dataset lacks a weighting variable. Here the survey's social class variable was recoded to produce a weight that enabled findings on unmet need to be representative of the wider society's living conditions (weight values are: Class I=1.4; Class II=1.2, Class III=1.0, Class IV=0.8, Class V=0.6) which also ensured the aggregated deprivation score for adults was, when rounded, identical to that produced by aggregating the relevant rounded percentages in Table 1. Conventional weights, to make findings nationally representative, were used for the 1999 ('wt5') and 2012 ('PSEweight') analysis, and all deprivation findings take account of household size.

In total, 19 adult items and four child items were voted on in all three surveys, with the newly invented 'computer and internet for homework' taking the total number of child items included in these 'ever present/new' analyses in 1999 and 2012 to five. To allow comparison with how Lansley and Mack (2015) analysed their data, 'all items' tests were carried out, which included items that did not feature in all available datasets. The four methods for deriving deprivation scores, along with the three methods of converting these deprivation scores into headline findings, are now explained (this discussion comes after our description of the BB/PSE datasets because it draws upon insights from tests that require those datasets).

'Method 1' is Mack and Lansley's, whereby one is added to a person's Deprivation Index (DI) for every item they 'do not have' and 'cannot afford' that received a necessity vote of 50 per

cent or more. In practice, the pair sometimes withdrew items from analyses for reasons other than whether they were necessities, such as whether they correlated with other necessity variables or with income poverty (for example, Mack and Lansley, 1985, excluded eight necessities from their poverty calculations). Consistent with a wish to unclog the process linking public attitudes to research outcomes, all relevant necessity variables are included in all tests presented here.

'Method 2' is Halleröd's (1994) Proportional Deprivation Index (PDI). It is the same as the DI, except it takes account of the proportion voting items as necessities and includes all items regardless of whether they reached 50 per cent. If, for example, 37 per cent of all survey respondents (or a sub-group of interest) voted an item a necessity, the percentage indicating they lack it due to being unable to afford it is multiplied by 0.37. Halleröd (1994: 1) observed that necessity votes had tended not to cluster near to zero and 100 per cent, so, in contrast to the 'consensus' implied by Mack and Lansley's method's name, the voting in fact exposed considerable "diversity of public opinion" (see also Van Den Bosch, 2000; McKay, 2004). Halleröd's PDI recognises this, and so it removes the implication that a gap between votes of 49 and 50 per cent is just as important as a gap between votes of one and 99 per cent.

Methods 3 and 4 stem from our own arguments regarding how best to measure deprivation with a given set of consensual deprivation survey results. In justifying them both, our starting point is the 1992 Swedish survey findings tabulated on page 11 of Halleröd's (1994) critique. Halleröd did not mention that the biggest PDI contributor (savings of 500 Krona per

month), which a massive 29.8 per cent wanted but could not afford, was considered a necessity by just 29.4 per cent of respondents. Nor did he note that of all items voted necessities by at least 50 per cent, the one with the slimmest majority – an annual week-long holiday (54.5 per cent) - contributed most to the PDI, as the proportion unable to afford it (15.1 per cent) was more than double that of any item with a higher necessity vote. BB/PSE datasets suggest these findings are indicative of a wider phenomenon. Including all 1983, 1999 and 2012 data, necessities with votes of 90 per cent or over have a mean 'want but cannot afford' percentage of just 2.9 (n=30), significantly below the 9.8 (n=27) for necessities with votes between 50 and 59 per cent ($P<0.001$). Thus, in the BB/PSE studies, while necessities with small majorities contribute a smaller proportion of overall deprivation scores when the PDI is used instead of the DI, those items with small majorities still contribute more than those with overwhelming majorities – an effect Halleröd might have intended his PDI to completely nullify. Moreover, the finding indicates that, if the DI is used, whether an item just scrapes a majority or, alternatively, it falls marginally short, can dramatically affect results and conclusions.

Available BB/PSE data indicates that necessities with relatively low votes tend to contribute hugely to unmet need totals because they rank lowly among consumers' priorities. The average (mean) percentage that wanted but could not afford items which under five per cent stated they do not have and do not want is 4.1 (n=79), significantly below the 10.7 (n=116) for items with a corresponding figure of at least five per cent ($P<0.001$). Furthermore, those who stated they could not afford an item tended to be those who did not consider it a necessity; for 32 of 35 items voted on in 1983 (the only BB/PSE survey that

elicited its deprivation information and necessity votes from the same respondents) the necessity vote percentage of those who lacked the item through being unable to afford it was lower than the corresponding percentage for all respondents; this finding cannot be attributed to low expectations among poorer respondents (see Halleröd, 2006 for a discussion of 'adaptive preferences'), as the mean number of necessities voted for by respondents lacking three or more adult necessities (16.6, n=154, which includes only cases with values on all necessities voted on) was not significantly different (at <0.1) from the corresponding figure for those lacking fewer than three (16.8, n=641).

In short, regardless of whether Mack and Lansley's measurement or Halleröd's refinement of it is applied, deprivation scores appear to be disproportionately boosted by people's inability to afford items which barely scraped a majority necessity vote, and which people do not tend to regard as particularly important to have. Deprivation measures should, we suggest, emphasise items that are widely considered to be necessities and which people consider important to have, so we have therefore chosen to employ two methods that address each of these issues. Method 3 addresses the issue of the size of items' majorities, and Method 4 addresses the importance respondents place on having the items. Method 3 classes items as necessities if at least 75 per cent vote for them. An 80 per cent line was suggested by Van Den Bosch (2000: 81) to address the problem of low majorities not justifying the term 'consensual'; here a slightly lower line is used to ensure enough necessities for a meaningful analysis. Method 4 retains the 50 per cent necessity vote qualification criterion, but it also requires a 'do not have and do not want' score below five

per cent. Indeed, it is questionable whether an item that a sizeable section of society does not want can be justifiably regarded as a society-wide necessity.

Here, when BB/PSE findings are presented, the term 'concentrated deprivation' is favoured over 'poverty', and several cut-off points are applied when demarcating concentrated deprivation. This is because Lansley and Mack's (2015) poverty measure is arbitrary. While Lansley and Mack (2015: ix) described their measure as "the minimum living standard set by society as a whole", it was set by them, not the public. Their justification for measuring poverty as being unable to afford "three or more necessities" is that it was the point "at which the level of deprivation reached has an all-pervasive impact on people's lives" (Lansley and Mack, 2015: 50). In supporting this claim, they referred to three bar graphs on the previous page each illustrating a far stronger association between their DI and each of three other variables (poor health, feeling poor 'all the time', and multiple financial problems) for a DI score of 'three or more' than for scores of zero, one and two. Yet this sudden, dramatic effect disappears if scores of three or more are not collapsed into one category. For example, the proportion 'feeling poor all the time' increases from 0.7 per cent (for DI=0), to 2.8 (DI=1), 3.5 (DI=2), and then jumps to 24.2 (for DI>2), but it only increases to 6.8 (for DI=3) and 10.8 (DI=4). Thus, while the proportion 'feeling poor all the time' *quadruples* as the DI increases from zero to one (a dramatic increase that chimes with Bedük's [2018] finding, from a deprivation study which did not use the consensual method, about the distinctive character of the category suffering zero deprivations), it *less than doubles* as the DI moves from two to three. Therefore, Lansley and Mack's claim about their poverty line's meaningfulness is not substantiated, just as Townsend's (1979) oft-supposed

poverty 'threshold' has never been substantiated either (see Hirsch et al., 2020: 71-72). As Halleröd (1994: 5) had already observed, setting a poverty line at a DI score of "two, four or five" is as defensible as setting it at three, and it could "be set at a score of one if necessities really are considered to be necessary". With these considerations in mind, several arbitrary cut-off points are used here; doing so also enables the presentation of more detailed results. An 'average deprivation' measure (which estimates the mean number of deprivations per person across the whole population) is included in the light of Halleröd's point about 'a score of one'. Thus, the measure is similar to Bárcena-Martin et al.'s (2014) 'average level of deprivation', which is the average percentage of all necessities people lack, except that it is also suited to making comparisons where lists of deprivation indicators are not the same length. A further (very different) 'average deprivation' measure is deployed, this time measuring the average proportion suffering deprivation *per necessity*. It allows comparison across surveys of the typical proportion lacking an item regarded as a necessity; Dunn (2021) deployed a mean measure, but here the median is used to remove outlier effects.

## Results

Results for Average Deprivation are presented in Table 3, and those for Concentrated Deprivation are in Table 4. To avoid possible confusions brought about by the heavy expansion of child items in 1999, and to enable meaningful comparison of 'Ever present/new' and 'All items' approaches, some results exclude children.

TABLES 3 and 4 HERE

Across tables 3 and 4 a pattern is discernible: the 'Ever present/new' tests show deprivation tends to be highest in 1983, with the few exceptions all occurring when Method 3 is applied; for 'All items' tests, deprivation tends to be highest in 2012, with exceptions taking place mainly when Method 4 is applied. These exceptions are perhaps traceable to the 2012 findings' characteristics. The number of adult necessities with votes of 75 per cent or more in 2012 is double the 1983 figure (hence the Method 3 exceptions). The number with 'do not have, do not want' percentages of at least five is particularly high among items with high deprivation rates in 2012 (hence the Method 4 exceptions); the three highest 2012 deprivation scores are all for items that (unlike any that featured in the 1983 survey) people usually keep in reserve for the future rather than utilise at present (savings, repairs to electrical goods, and a private/occupational pension), which is perhaps why so many respondents indicated they did not want them. Nevertheless, most results show deprivation to be higher in 2012 than in 1999; across both results tables, 26 of the 40 'Ever present/new' figures and 15 of the 20 'All items' figures are higher in the later year. This pattern reflects 'per necessity' deprivation being much higher in 2012 than 1999.

As Table 4 shows, the choice of cut-off points for Concentrated Deprivation (>1, >2 or >3 items) clearly affects the percentages found to be suffering hardship. However, it has a noticeably limited impact on the ups and downs of these percentages over time. For example, all Method 1 and 2 results show the same direction of changes in scores over the three surveys for both 'All items' and 'Ever present/new' tests, regardless of which cut-off

point is used. Our 'All items' analysis is similar (though not identical, see above) to Lansley and Mack's (2015), so it is unsurprising that the proportions of adults lacking more than two necessities using 'Method 1' (their preferred poverty measure) are all within two percentage points of Lansley and Mack's (2015) headline poverty rates. In contrast to the steady growth of poverty/concentrated deprivation found for 'All items' using their preferred measure, the corresponding 'Ever present/new' figures represent a 57 per cent drop between 1983 and 2012 (with children included it is a 54 per cent drop). Figs. 2a and 2b illustrate all the adult findings produced using Lansley and Mack's (2015) preferred poverty measure; in these two figures, methods with stricter qualification criteria for necessities deliver lower levels of deprivation.

FIGS. 2a and 2b HERE

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article has looked critically at Mack and Lansley's consensual deprivation research method and the series of British/UK empirical studies the pair initiated in 1983. An analysis here which nullified the effects of changes over time to lists of potential necessities, and which deployed several measures of 'average' and 'concentrated' deprivation, found that deprivation was nearly always highest in 1983 – not, as concluded elsewhere, in 2012. This contrasts with the conventional relative income-based poverty rate, which was substantially higher in 2012 than it was in 1983 (see Fig. 1); given the stability of necessity voting in BB/PSE studies, this finding appears to reflect the ability of an increase in real national

income per head to reduce poverty if poverty is measured by the consensual deprivation method and its *inability* to do so when it is measured by the relative income method.

This article pointed to consensual poverty rates being influenced by researchers' decisions about what items to include on lists of potential necessities and where to place their poverty line. The rest of this section discusses what might be done to amend the method in the light of the issues raised here. The article's discussion defending methods 3 and 4 for producing a deprivation score pointed to the usefulness of gauging the relative importance respondents place on the various 'necessity' items. Mack and Lansley ensured their deprivation measure included only items people 'want'. However, the *enforced* lack of socially perceived necessities it is said to observe is arguably better understood as diverse individuals and households exercising (albeit constrained) choice, by obtaining the items that matter most to them, in preference to other items which, while 'wanted', rank lower among their consumer priorities. That their deprivations are usually not describable as 'enforced' is brought home by McKay's (2004: 214) finding that 99.8 per cent of PSE 1999 respondents who were deprived of more than one socially perceived necessity had at least one non-necessity. Moreover, strikingly low proportions lack some items that are widely regarded as non-necessities. For example, in 2012 only 0.4 per cent wanted but could not afford more than one of the following three items, which each had a middling necessity vote - a Television (voted a necessity by 51 per cent), internet access for adults (41 per cent) and a mobile phone (40 per cent). It is possible to augment Mack and Lansley's empirical method with a way of ensuring items that influence deprivation scores are not only 'wanted' by respondents, but also are among those they consider important to have. The

issue has already been addressed in deprivation research which does not use the consensual method: Guio and Pomati (2017) found that an annual holiday is the deprivation indicator Europeans are most likely to choose to go without when they are faced with tougher financial constraints. When the consensual method is employed, respondents could be given cards containing items' names (as BB/PSE respondents were) and asked to arrange them in order (or as near to an exact order as they feel is appropriate / possible) of those they think are the most important for them (or their household) to have. This would enable us to find out how many of respondents' top, say, 15 or 20 prioritised necessities they lack. Focusing on items people regard as important reduces the risk of categorising those who can afford non-necessities as 'deprived'. Moreover, it overcomes the long-lamented imperfection that the perceived importance of some items, such as a dressing gown, varies considerably between individuals and socio-demographic groups (see Halleröd et al., 1997: 215; see also Ilmakunnas and Mäkinen, 2021).

Another longstanding criticism of the method is that, despite it lacking a meaningful poverty threshold and despite the term 'consensual' implying that public attitudes are valued, survey respondents are not asked to help determine the poverty line's position (Ashton, 1984). Respondents could be asked a question such as: 'In your view, what is the least number of items (starting from the bottom of the stack of necessities you arranged in importance) that someone in this country with similar living arrangements to you, and who placed the cards in the same order as you did, would have to go without for you to say they are living in poverty?'. Respondents to this question would be asked to look at only socially perceived necessities they ranked in, say, the top 12 or 15 in terms of importance. The

median response would determine the poverty line's position, and separate poverty lines for socio-demographic categories or household types might also be determined this way.

This article highlighted some difficulties in comparing findings gathered in different studies. Such difficulties would be even greater where lists of potential necessities are far more dissimilar than those in the four BB/PSE studies. In such circumstances, perhaps it is most appropriate to apply Method 2 (Halleröd's PDI) to deprivation scores and then find the necessities' median PDI, because doing this neither overlooks the size of each item's necessity vote nor requires lists of potential necessities to be of similar length. The BB/PSE series' use of lists of different lengths in different years carried the possible implication that those lists represented an *exhaustive* account of people's material needs - as their deprivations were *aggregated* by BB/PSE researchers; conversely, if their DI had been based on *average* deprivation 'per necessity', this would arguably imply their lists were merely *indicative* of people's material needs. Yet Walker's (1987: 218) view that the first BB survey's items were "not intended to provide an exhaustive list of every item or activity which people might believe to be essential in order to escape poverty" has gone unchallenged. Indeed, it is questionable whether such lists of potential necessities can be completely exhaustive. In studies which do attempt to be exhaustive or, at least, attempt to cover all key areas of material need, comparability might be improved by experts developing a standard list of potential necessities. Some flexibility in question content could be retained via local focus groups amending the lists before they are put in surveys. For example, 'burglar bars' might be added in South Africa, as this item was, uniquely, voted a necessity there in 2006 (see Wright and Noble, 2013). Focus group findings could potentially influence

possible future amendments to the standard list. Given the inevitable translation and semantic difficulties surrounding the word 'poverty', the word is arguably best avoided by comparative consensual deprivation researchers. Conversely, because the guidance given to BB/PSE respondents about what is meant by a 'necessity' was more detailed, using translated versions of this guidance would arguably aid comparability.

Mack and Lansley's consensual deprivation method of measuring poverty continues to be widely applauded and widely adopted. Nevertheless, this article's use of several measures that produced some widely differing results suggests that there remains scope for debate about how the method might more fully and accurately reflect people's experiences and attitudes, and how it might produce findings that are more easily compared across different times and places.

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