The problem of the poor

Who were the poor and why did poverty increase?

Key terms:
- **Vagabond**: A person who wanders from place to place without a home
- **Poor Relief**: Financial help
- **Alms**: Charity
- **Itinerants**: People who had moved from their home parish looking for work
Who were the poor?

- Anyone who couldn't work led to poverty
- Poverty led to starvation & illness
- Illness led to desperation - begging

Elizabethan society was concerned for the poor, in 1570 a survey was undertaken in Norwich. The mayor wanted to know how many itinerants were in Norwich, he was looking for anyone who is receiving or who in the future might need poor relief.

Main findings:
- 40% of the poor counted were under 16
- Families headed by women were very poor. If women had to work they were paid less than men
- 80% of a families income was spend on bread
- 2/3’s were women and ¼ of them were 60+
- Most of these women had been abandoned by their husbands or were widowed

As we go through this information, consider the **LONG TERM** and **SHORT TERM** causes of poverty
Why did poverty increase?

- **Population growth:** Long term
  Population grew by more than 1 million in Elizabeth’s time, in towns and cities (urban) this growth was much faster. London became the fastest growing city in England with 150,000 people by 1603.

- **Food:** Short term
  Food was grown in the countryside and brought to the towns and cities to sell. As the demand for food went up, so did the price.

- **Bad Harvests leads to inflation:** Short term
  Bad harvests in the 1550’s, 60’s and 70’s added to this population rise meant there wasn’t enough food to go around, bread and grain became the staple diet of most people.

- **Low wages leads to inflation:** Long term
  Wages didn’t rise as fast as prices, more people needing work meant labour was cheaper. Many landowners and employers cut their wages to reduce costs.

- **Land:** Long term
  As the population grew, so did the demand for land meaning landowners could charge higher rents, entry fees (new tenancies) also went up.

Using this information – Create a graphical mind map of these reasons
Sheep farming & enclosure

Many farmers began to look for more profitable ways to earn their living by switching to different methods of agriculture.

• **Enclosure:**
  Enclose common land with hedges and put sheep on the land, this saved money as they didn’t have to pay wages. Wool was of course very valuable in Tudor times for the wool / cloth trade!
  It also meant that less crops were being grown adding to the problems

What happened to these labourers?

• After the landlords put their rents up, many farmers had to move to the towns and cities looking for work as well further rising rural unemployment
• Crops were grown to feed the sheep when the masses were starving!
The countryside:

- Better techniques were being developed and spread through the printing press. Better animal control led to better breeding so this led to further enclosure. A mix of arable and animal farming became common.
- Enclosure continued and more and more ‘common land’ was enclosed leading to even more anger from the poor.

So... all of this together

- Rising food prices
- Population growth
- Lack of food
- Inflation
- Increasing vagrants
- High taxes
- Low wages
- Enclosure
- Bad harvests
- Lack of land

= Massive poverty
Attitudes and policies towards the poor

Poor relief was available paid for by a local tax, JP’s organised the poor relief.
For many Elizabethans, helping the less fortunate was a Christian duty. The impotent and elderly were treated with sympathy and charity.

Can you think of anything that Henry VIII might have done that makes this charity harder?

Why was the government worried about poverty?
They felt that poverty would lead to disorder and rebellion! Everyone had a place in society, Vagabonds didn’t! They had no master, no employer, belonged nowhere, so living outside of the law as well wasn’t really a problem for them – eg. stealing & other crimes etc.

It wasn’t that simple though...
Poor shacks

The government were right to worry as the poor built shacks, tightly packed, outside the city walls.

As they were out of reach of the cities laws, crime and disorder were rife! All towns faced similar problems!
Quick context cracker...

What happened earlier in the course that has made this economic recession and problems worse?

Clue 1: 1563

Clue 2: Philip II

Clue 3: Netherlands

Clue 4: English Merchants

**TRADE EMBARGO:**
Only lasted 1 year because of the damage it was causing in England with inflation
The “undeserving poor” were treated very harshly. Vagrants faced severe punishment if they were caught, such as whipping or imprisonment. If a vagrant was consistently caught, they could even be killed. Able bodied poor increased during the trade embargo of 1563, but the trade also suffered in 68-73 and 86-88.
Angler – used a long stick to steal clothes from washing lines

Counterfeit crank – pretended to have a fit by swallowing soap and foaming at the mouth

Clapper dudgeon – put arsenic on their skin to make it bleed and wrapped bandages around their arms and legs

Doxy – carried a bag where she hid things she stole, often knitted while begging and wore a needle in her hat

Idle Poor
Government action!

The Government realised that unemployment was a massive problem so they began developing ways to help the poor.

- Vagrants were whipped and sent away from a town / parish if they hadn't been born there
- Local officers collected poor rates weekly and gave the money to the impotent poor
- There was clearly a change of attitudes to the poor as Parliament and Elizabeth passed laws to deal with the problem, mostly due to the fear of trouble and rebellion.
- 1563: Statute of Artificers
  To ensure poor relief was collected. Anyone who refused to pay the poor rates could be imprisoned and officials who failed to collect it could be fined up to £20
Most people believed that everyone should work hard to look after themselves and their families. They believed that beggars set a bad example. The Puritans felt very strongly about the importance of hard work. They believed that idleness was a sin because it displeased God, and that it was the Devil who made people idle, and so anyone who refused to work should be severely punished. Some of Elizabeth’s Privy Councillors, Members of Parliament and JPs were Puritans.

In the sixteenth century, most people believed that everyone had a fixed place in society. Everyone was expected to obey their social superiors. As long as this happened, the wealth and power of the upper classes were protected. Large numbers of discontented beggars wandering around the countryside threatened the social order. They did not seem to know their place, and were not obeying their superiors. If this continued, tens of thousands of poor people might rebel and overthrow the ruling classes. This had nearly happened 200 years earlier, in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.

Many people thought that there were huge numbers of vagabonds travelling around the country. Exaggerated writings by people like Thomas Harman helped to stir up a lot of unnecessary panic. Historians today think that there were nowhere near as many beggars as people at the time thought.

There were many outbreaks of plague and other infectious diseases in the sixteenth century. Many people died at an early age, but no one understood why. Most people believed that wandering groups of vagabonds spread deadly diseases.

Rich and powerful people were not only expected to control the lower classes; they also had a duty to help local people who had fallen on hard times. Many landowners took this seriously. They gave gifts of money and food to the poor. This was called Poor Relief. The monasteries helped them to care for the poor until Henry VIII closed them down. By Elizabeth’s reign, many landowners could not cope with the growing numbers of poor people. They simply could not afford to help them all.

Beggars often turned to crime. Some of them robbed people in the streets and broke into their houses. There was no police force to catch criminals. The Justices of the Peace (JPs) were responsible for enforcing law and order in local areas. They wanted to do a good job for the Queen. They thought the beggars were a serious threat to their authority.

Sixteenth-century governments were always worried about the danger of rebellions. They did not have a permanent army to deal with them. Rising numbers of poor people made the threat of rebellion even greater. Powerful people who opposed Elizabeth, such as discontented nobles or Mary, Queen of Scots, might try to win the support of the poor for a rebellion against Elizabeth’s government.

It is not easy to know what the poor themselves thought about poverty. They would certainly have seen beggars being whipped in the streets. Some poor people probably felt sorry for them and might have blamed rich people for being too greedy and cruel. Others would have been frightened by the beggars. The beggars might steal the few possessions they had. Perhaps they thought that beggars were giving all poor people a bad name. But this is largely guesswork – and guesswork is not good history.
The Acts!

1572 Vagrants Act

Aim: To deter vagrancy...
Features:
- Vagrants were to be whipped and hole drilled through each ear
- Vagrants were also to be imprisoned if arrested for a 2nd time,
- Vagrants were killed if arrested a 3rd time!
- Established the national poor rate, sheltering the impotent poor
- JPs were to keep a register of the poor
- Towns and cities were given the responsibility to find work for the able bodied poor

1576 Poor Relief Act

Aim: To distinguish between able bodied and impotent poor and help able bodied poor find work
Features:
- JP’s provided the able bodied poor with wool and raw materials to enable them to work by making things to sell
- Those who refused were sent to a special prison known as the house of correction

Remember the importance of distinguishing between the ‘deserving poor’ and the ‘idle poor’
Impact of Elizabethan poor laws

- Many things changed for the better, but poverty continued to be a problem.
- Conflict with Spain and the Netherlands hit trade badly
- As more and more people came to towns and cities, vagrancy grew as did trouble

- **Most important change – the recognition of unemployment as a genuine problem**

- Providing the poor with raw materials to make things to sell became the law, this gave the poor some independence and dignity
- Ipswich had established a school for the poor children and a hospital for those who were sick.
- In some London parishes special help was provided for abandoned babies, the old and the sick

**Exam Q:**

Describe two features of the Elizabeth system of poor relief

Or

Describe two features of the Elizabeth system of poor relief that were new
Summary diagram

Revision exercise:

Explain how each of the above led to the next problem

Can you add any further factors / examples to make it a bigger causation diagram?
Graphs to give you some facts

- **Cloth exports from London in the sixteenth century.** London was the country's biggest port.

- **The population of England and Wales, 1500–1600.**

- **Quality of harvest**
  - Graph showing the quality of the harvests in England between 1500 and 1600. You saw part of this graph on page 28, showing the bad harvests before Elizabeth became Queen. Here we are using it to see the harvests during Elizabeth's reign. Remember that your course ends in 1588 so do not mention later events in your exam.

- **Prices and wages in England, 1500–1600.**
Summary

- Poverty and vagabondage were seen as growing problems in Elizabethan England.
- The Elizabethans generally divided the poor into categories: the ‘idle’ and ‘deserving’, or ‘impotent’.
- Population growth was one of the main reasons for the increase in poverty.
- Enclosure, disruptions to trade and inflation also led to the increase in poverty.
- Attitudes to the poor changed as unemployment became recognised as a genuine issue.
- Elizabeth I’s government passed parliamentary laws to tackle poverty and vagabondage.
- One change was that local officials were to provide raw materials, such as wool, for the unemployed so that they could make things to sell.
- Vagabonds faced harsh punishments, although few local authorities actually applied them.
- There were local initiatives to help the poor as well, especially in towns like Ipswich.

Checkpoint

**Strengthen**

**S1** Give two reasons why poverty increased in Elizabethan times.

**S2** Explain why vagabondage increased in Elizabethan times.

**S3** Describe one positive change in how Elizabethans treated the poor.

**S4** Identify one Elizabethan Poor Law and say what it did to help the poor.

**Challenge**

**C1** Explain the importance of the following when discussing the increase in Elizabethan poverty: enclosure; disruption to trade; population growth.

**C2** Can you identify one key turning point in the treatment of the poor and explain why it was so important?

**C3** Can you identify and explain a reason why some treatments of the poor did not change under Elizabeth’s reign?

Make sure you understand the definitions of important terms used in this section, such as ‘vagabondage’ and ‘poverty’, before answering these questions.