

Elizabeth I: The problem of the poor



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

Impotent Poor Deserving of help

Able Bodied / Idle Poor Undeserving of help

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**.

↑ Key features of the poor →

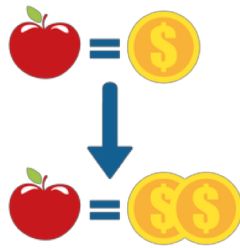
Main findings:

- 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 family's income was spend on bread
- 2/3's were women and 1/4 of them were 60+
- Most of these women had been abandoned by their husbands or were widowed

Reasons for Poverty increasing:



Low Wages



Low wages leads to inflation:

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



Population growth:

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.



Land:

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



Bad Harvests leads to inflation:

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



Food:

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.



Enclosure:

Enclose common land with hedges and put sheep on the land, this saved money as the land owners 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

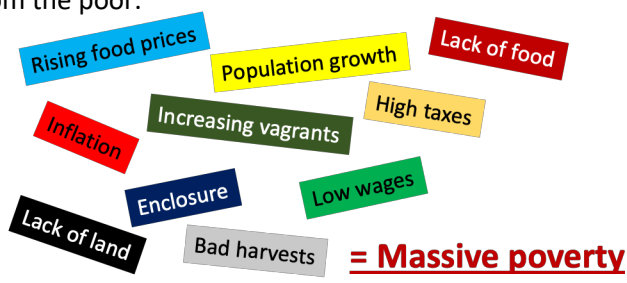
After the landlords put their rents up, many farmers had to move to the towns and cities looking for work as well further rising rural unemployment Crops were grown to feed the sheep when the masses were starving!

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.



= Massive poverty

Elizabethan Attitudes to 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.

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.



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!

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. **Idle** poor increased during the trade embargo of 1563, but the trade also suffered in 68-73 and 86-88.

Examples of Idle poor:

- 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

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



Government Action:

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

Critical changes in attitudes under Elizabeth

1572 Vagabonds 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

EXAM: Describe 2 features of: Elizabethan attitudes to the poor
Describe 2 features of: Government action relating to the poor

Explain why: **Poverty increased in Elizabethan England**