

Why the Poor Are Blamed for Being Poor

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This essay draws on the testimony of one remarkable woman and the data collected in UK Poverty 2025, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is about what we choose to believe about poverty, and why we choose to believe it.

Part I: The Story Behind the Statistics

Bea was a child in the 1960s, growing up in a one-parent extended family in the North East of England. She was on free school meals — a status that was unusual enough to carry a stigma in those days, though she was too small and too absorbed in digging holes in the sand to notice. She was skinny then, and she is skinny now. The caravan in the holiday park near Amble was the annual treat. They were not starvation poor. They were simply poor: the kind of poor that means more chips and eggs than most other people probably had, and not a lot else.

She did not know she was poor in any way that was supposed to matter. She was, she says, a very naive child. That innocence is itself a form of grace — and it is denied to children who grow up today knowing exactly where they stand.

Forty years of teaching in further and higher education followed. Portfolio careers, as they called them — multiple part-time contracts, no single employer with any reciprocal responsibility for her welfare, no pension, no security, just the work itself and the daily exchange of hours for money. She did as she was told. She got on her bike. Good old Norman Tebbit.

Now Bea is seventy years old, and she is poor again. She lives on the state pension and pension credit. She seeks work because her brain still works well and because she has self-respect. Her resentments are specific and acute: the unforeseen bill that arrives and leaves her without coffee money; the friend she cannot meet because the money is not there; the friend whose kindness she is grateful for and worried about in equal measure. And she resents being treated, by people who were once her students, as a burden on the state.

She is not a statistic. She is a person. But the statistics tell us who she shares a condition with — and that is where we need to begin.

Part II: The Shape of Poverty in Britain Today

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's *UK Poverty 2025* report — the most comprehensive annual account of deprivation in this country — opens with numbers that should stop us in our tracks.

More than one in five people in the United Kingdom — **21% of the population, 14.3 million people** — are living in poverty. Of these, 8.1 million are working-age adults, 4.3 million are children, and 1.9 million are pensioners. In 2022/23, the most recent official data, three in every ten children in this country were living in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).

Poverty is not equally distributed. It falls hardest on those already most vulnerable:

- **4.5 million children** in the UK are in poverty — a rate of 30%, compared with 21% for the population as a whole.
- **56% of people in Bangladeshi households** and **49% in Pakistani households** were living in poverty between 2020/21 and 2022/23, with child poverty rates in those households reaching 67% and 61% respectively (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).
- **44% of children in lone-parent families** are in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).
- **30% of disabled people** are in poverty — ten percentage points higher than the rate for non-disabled people. Among disabled people with a long-term limiting mental health condition, the rate is **50%** (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).
- **54% of working-age adults in workless households** are in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).

These figures are from before the worst of the cost of living crisis fully registered. The JRF's own cost of living tracker found that in October 2024, **69% of the lowest-income households** — 4.1 million families — had gone without essentials in the previous six months. Over half (**52%**) had skipped or cut back on meals. Four in ten (**39%**) had gone hungry because they could not afford enough food. Nearly half (**44%**) were in arrears with their household bills. More than one in ten had sold their belongings to generate income (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).

Poverty has also deepened. In 2022/23, the average person in poverty had an income **28% below the poverty line** — up from 23% in the mid-1990s. The poorest families, those in very deep poverty, had incomes **57% below the poverty line**, a gap that has widened by almost two-thirds over 25 years. The number of people experiencing destitution — unable to meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean, and fed — has more than doubled since 2017, to around **3.8 million people in 2022**, including approximately one million children (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023).

And crucially — a point almost never mentioned in the tabloid press — **the majority of poor adults are in work**. Nearly two-thirds of working-age adults in poverty (around 5.3 million people) live in households where someone is in employment. Of all working-age adults in poverty, **69% are in working households** (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). The old trope of the workshy claimant who lies in bed while others Labour is, in the cold light of the data, a fantasy.

Part III: The Lived Experience of Poverty

The statistics are necessary. But they are also insufficient. They do not convey what it actually feels like to be poor in Britain today.

There is the humiliation of food banks — of crossing a threshold you never expected to cross and swallowing your pride to collect a parcel. There is the pre-pay electricity meter, which charges you more for energy precisely because you are poor, and which runs out on Saturday night when the top-up shop is closed. There is the bedroom you cannot keep warm, the clothes your child grows out of before you can replace them, the school trip you cannot afford, the birthday party your child is not invited to because you cannot afford the return gift.

Bea describes a particular species of injustice: the bill that arrives without warning and makes the difference between a coffee with a friend and a week of anxiety. She sought work, as anyone with self-respect does — and was then placed in the position of having to perform incapacity to receive the support she was entitled to. She describes "pleading fake incapacity" when she had no money, which is one of the more precise descriptions of what the benefits system does to a person's dignity.

There is a specific cruelty here. The system that is meant to support people in need has been

designed — and the word "designed" is deliberate — to require recipients to perform deservingness. To demonstrate that they are not shirking. That they would rather be in work. That they have earned the right to eat. The constant surveillance, the mandatory appointments, the threat of sanctions, the case reviews that treat every claim as presumptively fraudulent: all of this is not accidental. It is the point.

And there is the way others look at you. The neighbour who implies that your disability might be exaggerated. The acquaintance who asks, ever so sweetly, whether you have considered freelancing. The stranger on the internet who is absolutely certain that your poverty is your own fault.

This is the part that Bea's account makes so clear, and that the statistics cannot capture: poverty is not only a material condition. It is a social position. It is the place you are assigned in a hierarchy of respect and suspicion, and the assignment is not neutral.

Part IV: The Manufactured Hatred

Why does this hatred exist?

This is the question at the heart of this essay, and it requires an honest answer. The hatred of the poor is not natural. It is not inevitable. It is not the ancient wisdom of peoples, passed down through generations. It is manufactured, sustained, and deployed — and understanding this is essential to opposing it.

The ideological framework that allows people to hate the poor has a history, and that history is not ancient. It begins, in its modern form, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and its architects include Norman Tebbit and Margaret Thatcher.

Thatcher's governments did not merely cut welfare spending. They undertook a more fundamental project: the reframing of poverty itself. Tebbit's famous message to the unemployed — "get on your bike" — was not simply a remark about employment. It was a moral claim about the nature of work, the meaning of independence, and the character of those who received state support. Work was framed as liberation; welfare as a form of corruption. Poverty was recharacterised as a moral condition rather than a material one. If you were poor, you had failed. If you had not failed, you would not be poor.

This reframing served very concrete material interests. It justified the dismantling of the post-war settlement. It delegitimised the welfare state by characterising its recipients as suspect. It fractured solidarity within the working class — pitting the employed against the unemployed, the secure against the precarious, those on housing benefit against those who owned their homes. It created a pool of desperate labour for a flexible labour market. And it did all of this while the architects of that desperation walked away with fortunes.

The remarkable thing is not that this ideology was created. It is that it has survived. Almost fifty years after Tebbit's speech, and thirty-five years after the introduction of Universal Credit's forerunner, the evidence against the "workshy" narrative is overwhelming. Most poor adults are in work. The jobs available are often part-time, zero-hours, or paying poverty wages. The benefits system is not an alternative to work — for most people, it is a supplement to wages that do not pay enough to live on.

And yet the belief persists. This requires explanation.

Part V: The Psychology of Blaming the Poor

Social psychology offers several explanations for why people cling to beliefs about the poor that the evidence flatly contradicts.

The most powerful is the **just-world hypothesis**, developed by Melvin Lerner and others (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). This is the finding that people have a strong psychological need to believe that the world is fundamentally just — that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. When confronted with evidence that innocent people suffer hardship through no fault of their own, most people will work harder to discredit or devalue the victim than they will to change their beliefs about the system that produced the hardship. It is, psychologically, easier to believe that 14.3 million people are all somehow responsible for their own misfortune than to accept that a sophisticated system of class power has arranged matters so that they should be poor.

The just-world hypothesis also has a social function for the relatively comfortable. If the poor are responsible for their poverty, then the non-poor are absolved of any responsibility for them — and, more than that, the non-poor can feel that their own position is earned. They worked hard. They made good choices. They are not like those people. The psychological dividend of this belief is substantial, and its cost is borne entirely by the poor.

There is also the role of **selective attention and media framing**. Decades of tabloid coverage of benefit claimants — the "workshy," the "scroungers," the fraudulent disabled — have constructed a fictional reality in which welfare fraud is widespread and casual. The reality is very different. Official estimates place the fraud rate for Universal Credit at around 2.3%, while administrative errors and underpayments account for losses that are roughly comparable (National Audit Office, 2023). The total value of underpaid benefits — money owed to people who are entitled to it but do not receive it — consistently exceeds the total value of fraudulent overpayments. The system fails the poor in both directions: it both denies them what they are owed and punishes them for being poor. But this reality does not produce headlines, and it does not comfort the comfortable.

The political utility of this framing explains its persistence. Class resentment directed downward — toward benefit claimants, migrants, the underclass — has repeatedly been deployed to割 the political energy of working and middle-class people who share more material interests with each other than with the wealthy. The tradition is old. What is new is the sophistication of the apparatus that sustains it.

Part VI: What the Evidence Actually Shows

The evidence is not ambiguous. Poverty in Britain is overwhelmingly structural in origin.

The decline of manufacturing employment and the growth of low-wage, insecure service sector work; the chronic underfunding of the social security system; the deliberate freezing of benefits below the rate of inflation; the housing crisis, in which private rents consume a disproportionate share of low incomes; the childcare trap, which makes quality part-time work financially unviable for many parents; discrimination in labour markets on the basis of race, gender, disability, and postcode — these are the causes of poverty, and they are all matters of policy choice (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025).

The data on in-work poverty makes this particularly stark. The poverty rate for part-time workers is **22%** — nearly triple the rate for full-time workers, which stands at **8%**. For part-time self-employed workers, the rate rises to **28%**. Workers in the administration and support activities sector face a poverty rate of **22%**, and in the accommodation and food services sector it is **23%** (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). These are not people who refused to work. These are people who worked, and are working, and whose wages do not cover what they need to live.

The poverty rate among children in families where the youngest child is aged under five stands at **36%** (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). These are not children whose parents chose idleness. These are children whose parents are in many cases working, caring, or both, and who are still not earning enough to keep them out of poverty.

The sharpest single statistic in the JRF report may be this: the basic rate of Universal Credit is **below the destitution threshold** (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). The benefit system designed to prevent poverty is set at a level that does not prevent poverty. This is not an oversight. It is a choice — a series of choices, made across multiple parliaments, by governments who knew what they were doing.

The psychological and health evidence compounds the material picture. People in poverty are **twice as likely** to suffer from depression or anxiety as those who are not poor (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). The stress of financial insecurity affects sleep, relationships, and the capacity for long-term planning. Children in poverty have lower educational attainment, worse health outcomes, and shorter life expectancy than their better-off peers — and these effects persist across generations, reproducing the conditions of their origin. The "cycle of deprivation" is not a metaphor. It is an empirical description of how poverty transmits itself through time.

What is the appropriate response to this evidence? The honest answer is that it requires a transformation in how we think about work, value, and solidarity — a transformation that several generations of political leaders have worked assiduously to prevent.

Part VII: The Moral Argument

There is a moral argument here that sits alongside the empirical one, and it deserves to be stated plainly.

Poverty is not merely a disadvantage. It is a harm. It causes suffering that is real and measurable. It truncates lives. It kills slowly, and in some cases not so slowly. The question of whether someone "deserves" to be poor is not a question that a civilised society should need to ask — not because the answer doesn't matter, but because the framing itself is wrong. The appropriate question is not why people are poor. The appropriate question is why we are allowing poverty to persist when we have the resources and the knowledge to end it.

Bea, at seventy, is poor. She worked for forty years. She raised children. She contributed. She was not given the tools to provide for herself in later life — not through ill luck, but through a system that extracted her labour and gave back only what it was forced to give. And now she is treated as a burden.

That treatment is not the result of ignorance. It is the result of a choice — a choice to prefer a story in which poverty is the fault of the poor over a reality in which poverty is the inheritance of a political and economic system that has never been neutral. The anger directed at the poor is, in this sense, a form of misdirected rage — anger that should properly be aimed at the employers who pay poverty wages, the landlords who charge what the market will bear, the policymakers who have held benefits below the rate of need, and the media that has told comfortable lies about benefit fraud for forty years.

Bea says that resentment butters no parsnips. She is right. But the question this essay is really asking is different: why do some people — why do so many people — feel that the poor deserve their poverty? And the answer is that they have been taught to feel it, by people who had an interest in teaching them.

What would it mean to unlearn it? The evidence shows us: it would mean accepting that the labour of care and service has value. It would mean accepting that a society in which 4.3 million children are poor is not a functioning society but a failing one. It would mean accepting that the just-world hypothesis is a comforting lie, and that the world we actually live in is one in which poverty is political, and therefore can be ended by political action.

And it would mean asking, as Bea implicitly asks, what kind of country we want to be — and whether

we are prepared to do what is necessary to become it.

Resentment butters no parsnips. So we carry on. But we do not have to carry on alone, and we do not have to carry on in the dark.

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The original short essay by Bea Groves-McDaniel, 22/7/2026:

Why do some people HATE the poor?

I have been poor in my time. I grew up in a one-parent extended family when being a kid on free school meals was unusual. Luckily I did not know that it should also have been a topic of shame. I was, after all, a very naive child. Our poverty was not absolute. We could (I, my mum, my sister and my grandparents) go on holiday, even if it was only a caravan in a vast holiday park full of identical units up near Amble in Northumberland. I was a small, skeletally skinny child who liked digging holes in the sand. So for me, it was fine. But we were poor. Not 'starvation poor'. Just the kind of poor that meant there were more chips-and-egg on the menu than most other people probably had. I grew anyway. I got taller. I remained 'spelk' thin. As I am today. Life exigencies train the body, even when you don't actually know it.

But now, after forty years of doughty work as a teacher in FE/HE, I am poor once again. Why? Did I mismanage my life? Yeah, maybe I did. I had no idea what a private pension was. I wanted to teach, out on the chalk-dusted floor, with students who were like me. I did what I was told: '*get on yer bike and find a job*'. Good old Norman Tebbit... the man who fooled a whole generation into selling their souls for neoliberalism. Of course, I worked like an ass. I did as many hours as I could as a contractual worker (portfolio careers, they called them), not realising that NONE of the so-called socially concerned organisations I worked for all those years actually wanted to take reciprocal responsibility for my welfare. Irrespective of the amounts of work, income and innovation I created. They profited. I pocketed my hourly rate and thought myself lucky. What luck.

Today I'm seventy, and I live on the state pension and pension credit. I seek work, primarily because I still have self-respect, and though my body is far more frail than it was, my brain works better now than it did when I was small. But I resent living from pension day to pension day. I deeply resent having to plead fake incapacity when I literally have no money (because an unforeseen bill has

arrived) and I can't meet a friend for coffee as planned. I resent being treated by people who would, in earlier years, have been one of my students, as being a 'burden on the state'. I resent having to ask for financial help from friends (whom I love for their kindness but who I worry may think I'm profligate.

Resentment butters no parsnips. So I carry on.
