**POVERTIES**

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Many of us have been irritated by the disaggregation of the notion of poverty in recent years. Food poverty, fuel poverty, water poverty, digital poverty, transport poverty, period poverty – surely they are all just poverty we have cried – just a relative lack of income.

In the case of **food poverty**, it is difficult to see any reason why it should not be attributed entirely to a lack of income, except perhaps the possibility of food deserts – people living in places without easy access to cheap food outlets. The justification for the notion of food poverty rests almost entirely on the basis that the idea of hungry children resonates more than ‘living on equivalent income less than 60% of the median’.

But in the case of **fuel poverty** there is a much stronger case for differentiating it from income poverty. The conventional measure of fuel poverty used to be households spending more than 10% of their income on fuel. (There is a separate argument to be had about whether it is gross or net income and whether income should or should not be equivalised). I found in an analysis of the Expenditure and Food Survey[[1]](#footnote-1) that only 29% of those in come poverty were in fuel poverty and 2% of those in fuel poverty were not in income poverty. Then the late Professor Sir John Hills in his government review of fuel poverty[[2]](#footnote-2) pointed out that we should also take into account the thermal efficiency of the housing that people lived in and recommended a measure based on low income and high costs. He proposed that fuel poverty existed if the household required fuel costs that are above the median level; and were they to spend that amount they would be left with a residual income below the poverty line. The latest proposal from the previous government[[3]](#footnote-3) was to broaden the measure to capture all low-income households living in homes with inherently inefficient energy use. So, the focus of fuel poverty is becoming much less on income and more on inefficient energy use.

There is no official definition of **water poverty**, or how it should be measured. By convention households have been defined as water poor if they spend more than three per cent of their income on water bills. OFWAT discusses the limitations of this definition but acknowledges its usefulness in identifying trends and patterns in water affordability. The Consumer Council for Water[[4]](#footnote-4) and OFWAT also use an additional measure - the percentage of households spending more than five per cent of their income on water bills. The numerator is the household water bill and the denominator is calculated as net household income after housing costs but before water payments. (There is again an argument to be had about whether income is equivalised or not).

Of course, the 3% and 5% thresholds are conventions without any particular scientific merit, though 3% was endorsed by the UN in 2013 and has some support from the Minimum Income Standard estimate for water.[[5]](#footnote-5) One obvious criticism of these thresholds is that they take no account of consumption. A household may not be spending more than 3% or 5% because they are trying to reduce their bills (if on a water meter) and may be risking their health and well-being as a result. Alternatively, a poor or non-poor household may be in water poverty unnecessarily because they are behaving wastefully. It might be possible to combine an estimate of consumption adequacy using both a share of total expenditure and an estimate of an amount needed to be spent for healthy living. This amount would of course need to vary by household size and type and, possibly, water region, to take account of price differences. The constraint in the case of water is that only half of households are metered. Recent research[[6]](#footnote-6) for CCW using the 2018/19 Family Resources Survey found that water poverty was slightly higher for non-metered customers and larger families but that there was a rather limited overlap with income poverty – although 73% of those in water poverty were in income poverty only 69%of those in income poverty were in water poverty at the 3% threshold. The figures at the 5% threshold were 92% and 37%.

As for the other poverties, I can see no reason why **period poverty** is not just income poverty – though there is of course a gender justice issue here. **Digital poverty** has some age, skills, and geographic (rural) dimensions but The Good Things Foundation[[7]](#footnote-7) found that affordability was not the most important reason for people not using the internet. If it is driven by income it probably goes beyond the poverty threshold. The annual UK Consumer Digital Index (CDI) from Lloyds Bank in 2019 shows that 11.9m people (22% of the population) do not have the digital skills needed for everyday life in the UK. By 2030, it is predicted that 4.5m people (8% of the population) will remain digitally disengaged. People with a disability are 35% less likely to have essential digital skills for life. **Transport poverty** is about availability as well as affordability. It is certainly partly to do with geography and age group (passes) but no doubt has an income poverty dimension.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. Bradshaw, J. (2008). “Who is fuel poor?”, Poverty 131, Autumn, pp. 9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hills, J. (2012). Getting the measure of fuel poverty: Final Report of the Fuel poverty Review.http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/51237/1/\_\_libfile\_REPOSITORY\_Content\_CASE\_CASEreports\_CASEreport72.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/819606/fuel-poverty-strategy-england-consultation.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Snell, C. and Bradshaw, J. (2009) Water Affordability in England and Wales: A report prepared for CCWater http://www.ccwater.org.uk/server.php?show=nav.444 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. NEA Discussion Paper (2019). Water Poverty: A Common Measurement. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bradshaw, J. R. & Keung, A., (2021) WATER POVERTY IN ENGLAND AND WALES, Water Consumer Council, 12 p. **https://www.ccwater.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1.-Jonathan-Bradshaw.pdf** [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/personas\_its\_too\_expensive.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bradshaw, J. R., Kempson, E. & Mullen, C., (2020) Access to Essential Services for Low-income people, European Commission. 31 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)