

Rich and poor in society.

What you need to know:

- Religious beliefs and teachings concerning individual wealth and poverty.
 - The causes of wealth and poverty.
 - The possible effects of inheritance, work, indolence, gambling, homelessness and unemployment.
 - Attitudes towards rich and poor in society.
 - Issues concerning the minimum wage and 'fat cat' salaries.
 - Responsibilities of the state, the community and families in caring for the poor.
 - Issues concerning the National Lottery.
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The wealthy:

A UN report in 1996 claimed that the top 358 wealthiest people have wealth equal to the combined income of 2.3 billion poor people. That is 40% of the world's population. It is said that the top three richest people in the world have assets greater than the combined gross national product (GNP) of the least developed countries with their 600 million people.

People might become rich because of the following reasons:

Inherited money or property: when a relative or friend dies the heir to the estate receive their property and money.

Earned income: some people receive enormous salaries.

Struck it rich: Some people have become millionaires due to a win on the lottery. Or someone like Bill Gates who created Microsoft.

'Fat cats':

Many companies pay their top executives very large salaries. These are known as 'fat cat' salaries and often then include large bonuses as a reward for doing well. A survey of 77 companies in the UK, carried out by *The Guardian* in 1999 revealed that the average annual pay for top executives was nearly £1 million. In addition many of these people received windfalls from share options.

Some Christians believe that it is God's wish that they become rich (Deuteronomy 8: 18) then some of the money can be used to help others. Others believe that people can become greedy. The Apostle Paul said that 'the love of money is the root of all evil' (1 Timothy 6: 10). Jesus taught that loving God is the most important thing and he also told a rich young man to give up all of his wealth to follow him. Jesus warned that you couldn't serve both God and money.

Poverty:

Poverty is not just about a shortage of money but it is also about having a poor lifestyle. This includes how people are treated and how they regard themselves but at the heart of the problem is the failure to obtain a large enough income.

Some people struggle to obtain the basic necessities for life - food, shelter and clothing. The concise Oxford English dictionary defines poverty as 'not having the minimum income level to get the necessities of life'. This is **absolute poverty**. There are over 1 billion people in the world who have no access to clean water or an adequate house. Over 500 million people go to bed hungry each night and a similar number of children have no access to school or an education.

In Britain, very few people live in conditions like this but there are those who cannot afford to have electricity, a cooker, a telephone and a TV. They live in **relative poverty** when compared to other people in Britain. Statistics show that in the 1990's thirteen to fifteen million people (over 20% of the total population) were living in low-income families.

Government help:

The Beveridge report led to the foundation of the Welfare state in 1945. The idea was to look after everybody 'from the cradle to the grave'. Support given by the government is designed to give everyone a minimum income and includes:

- Pensions for the elderly.
- Job seekers allowance.
- Housing benefits.
- Disability living allowance.
- Sickness, invalid and incapacity benefit.
- Free school meals.
- Child benefits.

Some believe that the poor should be required to do unpaid community work in order to obtain their state benefits. They argue that:

- It would give them a sense of dignity and self worth.
- It helps them make a contribution to society.
- It discourages people from being lazy and gives them an opportunity to help themselves.

Others argue that this would not be realistic because:

- Many poor already have a low paid job.
- Some are unable to work due to being a full time carer.
- They cannot afford transport or cannot get a suitable job.

Minimum wage:

The national minimum wage was introduced to protect people from employers paying them very low wages. Those not included are workers under the age of 18, apprentices, the self - employed, au pairs and nannies. The minimum wage is a lesser amount if you are aged between 18 and 21, than if you are over 21.

Many businesses opposed the minimum wage. They feared that it would cost jobs, as companies would not be able to pay their employees the minimum wage and still make a profit.

Unemployment:

Unemployment is major cause of poverty. Without a wage many families have to live on state benefits.

Indolence is considered one cause of unemployment. Some people are lazy, show no effort and do not want to work. Without the support of the Welfare state, they would be forced to work or go hungry. Some people are not employed because of health problems or lack educational qualifications or the necessary skills. People over 50 who lose their jobs find it very difficult to find employment. Recent trends include more part - time, insecure, low - paid employment.

Homelessness:

There is a real shortage of affordable homes in this country. House prices are out of reach for many people. Even the cost of renting local authority or housing association housing is not cheap. The result is that thousands are without a home. Voluntary agencies like Crisis, Shelter and the Salvation Army help to provide hostel accommodation.

- 400,000 people are homeless in the UK.
- Thousands live in bed - and - breakfast accommodation, on the streets, or in hostels or squats.
- Nearly half a million households live in overcrowded homes.
- Nearly 3 million households live in poor housing conditions.

The elderly:

Old age pensioners are a section of society who often live on a small income. The State Retirement Pension remains the main source of income for many but this is being seen more and more inadequate. The Government is encouraging employees to contribute to private schemes as people now live much longer. With a smaller proportion of the total population working, it is becoming more difficult to provide enough money to fund state pensions at a level that would ensure that the elderly are not poor.

So who should care for the elderly? Thousands are powerless to break out of the poverty trap without help.

- Families - poverty tends to run in families. Many get into debt by borrowing money, for example, on credit cards.
- Community help - councils, charities and religious organisations give a great deal of help to those in need in the local area. Sometimes poverty

affects the whole community, for example, as the result of the closure of the main source of employment.

- Government help - the welfare system gives assistance to those suffering from poverty and the government has the power to develop national strategies to deal with the major problems like inner city, child and rural poverty.

The UK has:

- 200,000 registered charities.
- 200,000 non - charitable voluntary organisations.
- 7000 new charities registered each year.
- Half of the population taking part in some sort of voluntary work.
- Given over 4 billion hours to charity work.

Christians believe they should use their money wisely, as they are accountable to God. The early Christians 'would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money to all, according to their needs' (Acts 2: 45). Jesus taught that riches in heaven are more important than riches on the earth. Many charities, such as Christian Aid, Tear Fund and CAFOD are organised by Christians.

The National Lottery:

The national lottery was set up to:

- Give people the opportunity to win cash prizes of varying sizes.
- To support good causes.

The first draw was in November 1994. In 1997 it was extended to include a mid week draw. Some people do not approve of lotteries because it appeals to greed and it encourages people to start gambling.

The lottery has paid over £13 billion to good causes. Money has been given under one of the five headings:

- The arts.
- National heritage.
- Charities.
- Sport.
- Projects to mark the millennium.