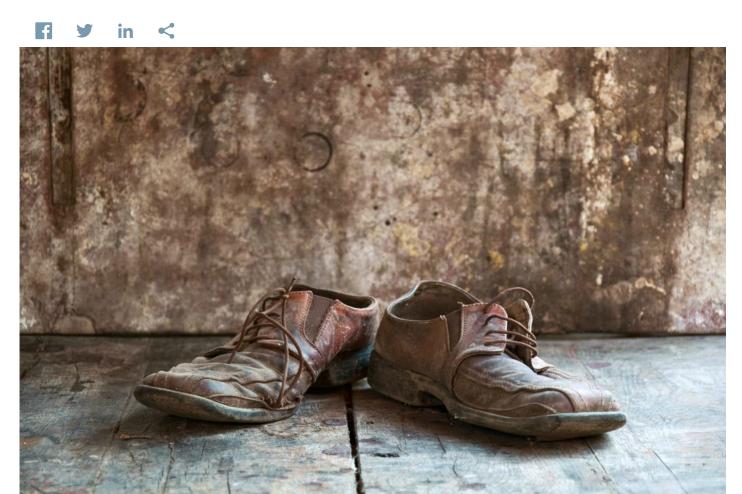# Improving Lives: Understanding What It Means To Be Poor

University of Birmingham

Social scientists in UK universities have produced a series of seminal studies that have improved our understanding of the nature and impact of poverty. The findings have transformed the way that government and charities provide help for the less well-off.

The link between deprivation and ill health has been known for many years, prompting the Victorians to introduce clean water systems and sanitation. But thanks to the work of Thomas McKeown at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s we are now much more aware of all the influences of social conditions on health.

McKeown looked at the number of deaths in England and Wales caused by different diseases from the 19th century until the early 1970s. His statistics revealed a huge impact of factors such as nutrition, water supply, sanitation, food hygiene, smoking, diet and exercise on the health of less well-off communities. The study has led the government to take far more seriously these factors in its efforts to improve the health of people.

> *During the 1970s Richard Morris Titmuss at the London School of Economics and Political Science meanwhile found that poverty, not family circumstances, were behind the behavioural problems*

and learning difficulties in children from one-parent families.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Peter Townsend at the University of Essex, revealed the full reality of social inequalities among different communities. Townsend identified the key groups living in poverty, including: the unemployed, low paid workers, disabled people and the long-term sick, large families, one-parent families, families with children with disabilities, older workers and the elderly. He also showed that the deprived do not only have poorer housing and diets than the better off, but also face more limited lives at work and within the family.

In the 1990s Michael Noble at the University of Oxford produced new official statistics that can more accurately identify those living in disadvantaged communities. The National Index of Multiple Deprivation covers several 'domains' of deprivation: income, employment, health, education, housing and access to services. The Index is used to allocate more than £2 billion of Government spending every year in the UK.

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