RELATIVE DEPRIVATION replaced notions of absolute poverty as the most important factor to be taken into account in understanding the objective and subjective consequences of inequality. Its prominence in inequality research has strengthened because measures of absolute poverty are unable to adequately describe the experiences and consequences of economic inequality among countries with differing living standards, or within countries that, despite increasing levels of prosperity for the population as a whole, still experience deprivation for those at the lower end of the wealth distribution. In the second circumstance the term has become closely linked with the social policy concept of social exclusion. Whereas absolute poverty relates primarily to material deprivation and subsistence, relative deprivation better takes account of multiple deprivations and how factors other than material subsistence, notably psychosocial factors and discrimination, combine to produce experiences of poverty.

The term was first employed by S. Stouffer et al. and given later comprehensive treatment in relation to social justice by W. Runciman. Stouffer identified a psychosocial component of relative deprivation, believing it to emerge when members of a society compared themselves unfavorably with others (real or imagined) in similar situations. Early in its development, this form of comparison with one's reference group was thought to be an important engine of political change, especially by J. Urry; however, later analyses have tended to highlight the negative or pathological aspects of this comparison for the individual and wider society.

R. Layard has suggested that happiness has declined as wealthy societies have become richer, linked in no small part to consumer economies encouraging aspirant comparison. Relative deprivation also produces problems for societal cohesion and can be linked to increases in crime and related to the “epidemiological transition” of wealthy societies whereby population mortality rates are no longer linked to per capita economic growth but to levels of inequality within a given society, according to author R.G. Wilkinson.

The growth of materialism and inequality are crucial to understanding rising crime rates in affluent societies. Although the psychosocial mechanisms (or individual motivations)
are inferred (and make intuitive sense), they are not explored scientifically. In linking health inequalities to economic inequality, some researchers do, however, provide a testable model.

In affluent societies the preeminent trends in population mortality and morbidity are related to the so-called diseases of affluence that affect individuals in an inverse relationship to their place on the socioeconomic ladder.

These nations have high measures of absolute living standards, such as central heating, televisions, refrigerators, telephones, and other consumer goods, and access to nutritious diets. There is evidence to suggest that feelings of subordinate social status initiate physiological pathways related to stress that are detrimental to individual health even when access to material components of subsistence is controlled, as noted by M. Marmot and Wilkinson.

An operational problem with the concept of relative deprivation is that all societies with inequality will have those who exist at a level below average and, by this definition, they are described as poor. It also requires a concept of need that constantly changes to reflect the dynamism of a particular society and a change in what is seen as an average lifestyle.

As societies acquire wealth and become technologically advanced, these standards are less likely to be reached by those on low incomes. For example, the growth in car ownership and public policies aimed at supporting car use (such as investment in roads over public transport) can impact those without access to cars, as amenities such as shops and leisure destinations located in out-of-town developments and roads become more hazardous to pedestrians. It is in this regard that a concept of social inclusion can be useful in identifying the ability to take part in activity deemed normal for that society as a crucial component of a definition of deprivation.

The government of the United Kingdom adopted a relative income standard of poverty after P. Townsend's work on the persistence of poverty in that country. This has been set at 50 percent or less of the national average income. However, Townsend himself has highlighted difficulties with this definition, claiming it is an arbitrary line and that economic inequality can be mediated by factors such as the nature of a country's
welfare system and the individual's lifestyle that is associated with material shortage but is not the same as the shortage itself.

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See Also:

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