

History: Unit 2  
Lesson 25 of 30

# **Why did poverty and vagabondage increase in Elizabethan England?**



# Why was poverty a problem in Elizabethan England?

In the 16th century, poverty was a serious problem. During Elizabeth's reign, the number of unemployed people increased substantially for various reasons.

The increase in unemployment led to an increase in the amount of people known as **vagabonds** wandering the countryside and towns in search for work and the amount of people on the streets begging. Elizabeth's government and ordinary people were concerned about the problem of poverty in Elizabethan England for various reasons.

One reason why many people were concerned about the problem of poverty in Elizabethan England was a fear that people who faced considerable hardship and poverty, would turn to a life of crime as a way to provide for themselves. There was also a fear that **vagabonds**, in moving around the country in search of work, would unknowingly spread disease between towns and cities. Elizabeth's government were also concerned about the threat that **vagabonds** posed to the social order. They feared that large groups of the poor would rally together start a rebellion against the government.



# Causes of Poverty: Population increase and rising prices

## Background

During the 16th century, the population of the country increased rapidly. Between 1550 and 1600 the population grew by around 43%. Urban centres such as towns and cities grew especially fast, with London's population growing from 80,000 to 150,000 between 1550 and 1603.

## Impact on poverty

Population increase put pressure on resources such as food. This led to **inflation**, which meant that the prices of basic foodstuffs increased. Food prices were increased further due to **bad harvests**, a series of which took place in the 1590s. There was also greater competition for jobs in the towns and countryside. As there was a greater number of people in search of work than there were jobs available, unemployment was common. This also meant that employers could keep wages low to keep their costs down. Landowners were able to charge much higher rents for land where people lived or farmed, meaning many people struggled to afford to keep their land.



# Cause of poverty: Enclosure

## Background

Prior to Elizabeth's reign, there was a **common land** system in place. **Common land** was large areas of land that were open to individual farmers to farm their land, graze animals and grow crops. However, during Elizabeth's reign **enclosure** began to reduce the amount of **common land** that was available for public use. **Enclosure** was the process where these areas of **common land** were divided up and shared out amongst villagers into individual fields. **Enclosure** allowed these areas of land to be turned over for more profitable uses such as sheep farming, it also allowed crops to be grown in more efficient ways made it easier for farmers to control their livestock.

## Impact on poverty

The process of **enclosure** had far reaching consequences for poverty. For many of the poor in Elizabethan society, the **common land** was essential to survival, allowing them to graze their animals and grow crops. Due to **enclosure**, this essential source of food was removed. Enclosure also meant that smaller farmers were forced off their land by larger landowners. These landowners could charge higher prices for their land and as a result, many farm labourers could not afford to continue renting their land, which was a source of income.



# Cause of poverty: Sheep farming

## Background

During Elizabeth's reign, the export of **woollen cloth** became a very profitable enterprise. Many wealthy landowners turned to sheep farming as demand for it increased. Sheep farmers required large amounts of land upon which their sheep could graze.

## Impact on poverty

**Common land** that had previously been used by individuals to grow their crops or graze their animals was increasingly turned over to sheep farms. This meant that ordinary people had less land upon which they could grow crops that they used to feed themselves. Sheep farming also led to a rise in unemployment as sheep farming required less labour (less people) to do the job, compared to growing crops.



# Comprehension questions

1. How did population increase lead to poverty in Elizabethan England?
2. How did **enclosure** lead to poverty in Elizabethan England?
3. How did sheep-farming lead to poverty in Elizabethan England?
4. How were the causes of poverty related to one another? I.e. how did some make others worse?
5. **Challenge question:** Explain why poverty was a problem in Elizabethan England.

*One reason why poverty was a problem in Elizabethan England was...*

*This was a problem because...*

*For example...*



# Extension activity

6. Explain the most important cause of poverty in Elizabethan England. Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<p><i>The most important cause of poverty in Elizabethan England was...</i></p> <p><i>This was the most important cause of poverty in Elizabethan England because...</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Crime</li><li>- Vagabonds</li><li>- Enclosure</li><li>- Unemployment</li><li>- Sheep-farming</li><li>- Inflation</li><li>- Population increase</li></ul>



# Glossary

**Vagabonds** - In Elizabethan England, a vagrant was someone who went from place to place in search of employment.

**Inflation** - The increase in prices.

**Bad harvests** - When crops did not grow as well or in as much quantity as was expected.

**Common land** - Areas of land that were open to public use for the growth of crops and the grazing of animals.

**Enclosure** - A process where large areas of common land were turned over the private use.

**Woollen cloth** - Fabric that was manufactured from wool.

