

‘Problem’ populations, ‘problem’ places



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Introduction

Some commentators argue that social justice as an idea and an ideal is interwoven with issues of inequality, poverty and social exclusion. It is a comparatively straightforward task in the era of World Wide Web access (though by no means everywhere or for everyone) to locate sources of information illustrating the extent of poverty and inequality, though much of the latter, particularly in relation to the ownership and distribution of wealth, or undocumented labour or unpaid care, remains considerably under-researched or 'hidden'. While we may seek to take some comfort from assumptions that discussions of poverty and inequality should start from questions of social justice, this contrasts with long-standing ideas that the poor are a 'problem', at times a 'dangerous' population. Such populations are also often associated with particular places; for instance, with ghettos, deprived estates and slums. Hence the title of this course, "Problem" populations, "problem" places'.

It is important to understand that how poverty and inequality are perceived and how poor people are labelled say much about the policies that are likely to be developed in response. Viewing poor and disadvantaged groups as a 'vulnerable' section of society requiring social welfare and other forms of state support stands in sharp contrast to those representations of the poor as an 'undeserving' group, and to arguments that there is an 'underclass' of impoverished and 'disorderly' people, cut-off from the rest of society. In practice, as you will see as the discussion unfolds, such distinctions are rarely as clear-cut as this terminology implies. Furthermore, notions of disadvantaged or excluded groups as a 'problem population' do not arise in a vacuum but mirror the wider social relations of inequality. They carry with them particular associations of social class, 'race' and gender and ideas about how social life should be organised. Poverty is often viewed as a deficiency in the way that poor people conduct their family and personal lives, in their attitudes to work, and so on. Through such arguments poverty comes to be understood not as an outcome of the society in which we live, a product of state failure or of an inadequate welfare state, but as a consequence of 'negative' or 'dysfunctional' attitudes, behaviours and ways of life that necessitate control. People living in poverty may be those who are viewed as not having developed their capabilities. This raises key questions on social justice/injustice, in particular that which relates to the intersections between social welfare and crime control strategies.

While images of the feckless poor have been with us for a long time, since the 1980s there has been a marked shift in political attitudes towards poverty both in the UK and more widely. These tend to represent poverty, disadvantage and exclusion in terms of poor people contributing to their own precarious socio-economic situation. Examining some of the different forms that approaches to poverty take in different parts of the world allows us to draw out the important commonalities between them.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of level 2 study in [Social Sciences](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the complex and different ways in which questions of social justice and inequality come to be seen in terms of the deficient behaviour of different populations
- Understand how certain groups of people and places come to be identified as 'problematic' and how social welfare and crime concerns intersect in the management of these populations
- demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of some of the enduring legacies of the past, both in terms of the language that is often mobilised to represent disadvantaged people and people living in poverty, and also the continuing presentation of certain groups as 'problems' to be managed.

1 Aims of the course

The aims of this course are to:

- Explore some of the many complex and different ways in which questions of social justice and of inequality come to be seen in terms of the deficient behaviour of different problem populations. In particular, it explores how particular groups of people and particular places come to be identified as 'problem populations' and how social welfare and crime concerns intersect in the management of these populations.
- Highlight some of the enduring legacies of the past, both in terms of the language that is often mobilised to represent disadvantaged and poor people, and also the continuing presentation of certain groups as 'problems' to be managed. While highlighting some of these historical legacies, this course also draws attention to the 'newer' ways in which the notion of problem populations is being mobilised.

As you work through the course, you are encouraged to reflect on some of the possible historical antecedents that might influence contemporary manifestations of such ways of thinking, as well as on how ideas of problem populations come to be associated with particular social groups and geographical places. You might also wish to reflect on why it is that the idea of problem populations is rarely, if ever, associated with rich and powerful groups.

This course is structured around a series of case studies. Through a range of case studies from the USA, France and Britain it explores some manifestations of the representation of poor people as problem populations in different national contexts in the early twenty-first century. Before proceeding to explore these it is important to consider the role of a case study in work such as this. Case studies offer what we might term 'windows' on particular events which allow wider themes and processes to be revealed. In concentrating light on an issue, case studies allow us to make comparisons and enable bigger claims to be made. In this course, a case study approach is used to illuminate ideas of problem populations and problem places. Case studies are valuable tools to help us make sense of a particular issue, but we must also be sensitive to their limitations. The choice of case studies reflects the particular values and perspectives of the person making the selection. We need to be alert to the subject matter of the study, reflecting on what is the focus, which voices are being heard (or are missing), and from what perspective claims are being made. The case studies in this course involve selected extracts, comments from eyewitnesses, media sources, politicians, political commentators and social scientists; they also include photographs and other images. As you work with these you need to pay attention to what is being claimed – and what might be missing from the arguments advanced. We shall return to these issues during the course.

2 New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina: 'shaming America'?

2.1 The shaming of America

I begin our story with a case study relating to one of the most momentous episodes of environmental catastrophe in the early 2000s, Hurricane Katrina. On 29 August 2005, Katrina, a category 5 hurricane with 290 kph winds, hit the Gulf of Mexico coast of the southern USA, bearing down on the state of Louisiana and in particular on its main city, New Orleans ([Figure 1](#)). With much of 'the Big Easy', as the city is popularly known in the USA, below sea level, New Orleans was protected from the sea, a surrounding lake and the Mississippi River by a ring of natural and human-made barriers called levees. However, Katrina was the long-awaited and feared 'Big One', a powerful storm with the potential to overwhelm the levees.



Figure 1 The path of Hurricane Katrina, 25 August to 30 August 2005

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When the storm struck, a number of critically important levees gave way and, in scenes that were soon to be broadcast around the world, more than 80 per cent of New Orleans was inundated with several feet of toxic floodwater ([Figure 2](#)). The majority of the population of 1.3 million in the greater New Orleans area had already been evacuated in what was the largest forced migration in recent US history, but those remaining, primarily in areas home to predominantly black and working-class people and with large numbers of elderly people and children, were quickly engulfed by the floodwater. At the time of writing (2008), at least 1000 people are known to have died, while the final death figure may never be known. The estimated costs of damage range from US\$100bn to US\$200bn (Gotham, 2007, p. 81).

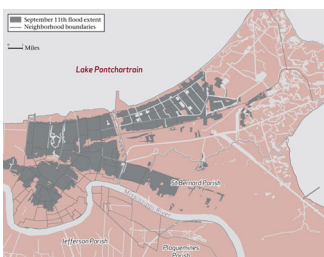


Figure 2 Map showing extent of flooding in New Orleans, 11 September 2005

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Katrina's impact on New Orleans was one of the most televised disasters in recent history, generating twenty-four-hour news coverage around the world and considerable political debate. The response to the disaster by the US Federal Government in Washington DC and organisations such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was criticised for being insufficiently quick and effective. In the ensuing controversies in the aftermath of Katrina, however, the government was not the only target of critics. Hurricane Katrina was widely perceived as the largest 'natural' disaster to occur in continental USA. However, for many observers this was no natural disaster but an unprecedented social disaster. Highlighting reports of looting, rape, murder and street violence, some conservative commentators claimed that social organisation broke down into some kind of 'anarchy'. These accounts were often repeated uncritically on the television, accompanied by sensationalised and selective film coverage. Such stories and images, together with political indifference and initial government failure to respond to the disaster, amounted to what *The Economist* termed 'The shaming of America' (*The Economist*, 10 September 2005, p. 11).



Figure 3 Flood waters in New Orleans, 30 August 2005

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2.2 Welfare and law enforcement

The conservative focus on, and allegations of, widespread crime and social disorder were contradicted by other eyewitness accounts. In the extract that follows, two white paramedics from San Francisco talk about their experiences in trying to escape from the flooding in New Orleans across a bridge connecting the mainly black New Orleans City to the largely white suburbs of Jefferson Parish.

Extract 1

As we entered the center of the city, we finally encountered the National Guard. The guard members told us we wouldn't be allowed into the Superdome [a sports arena], as the city's primary shelter had descended into a humanitarian and health hellhole. They further told us that the city's only other shelter – the convention center – was also descending into chaos and squalor, and that the police weren't allowing anyone else in.

Quite naturally, we asked, 'If we can't go to the only two shelters in the city, what was our alternative?' The guards told us that this was our problem – and no, they didn't have extra water to give to us. This would be the start of our numerous encounters with callous and hostile 'law enforcement.'

We walked to the police command center at Harrah's on Canal Street and were told the same thing – that we were on our own ... We held a mass meeting to decide a course of action. We agreed to camp outside the police command post. We would be plainly visible to the media and constitute a highly visible embarrassment to city officials. The police told us that we couldn't stay. Regardless, we began to settle in and set up camp.

In short order, the police commander came across the street to address our group. He told us he had a solution: we should walk to the Pontchartrain Expressway and cross the greater New Orleans Bridge to the south side of the Mississippi, where the police had buses lined up to take us out of the city.

The crowd cheered and began to move. We called everyone back and explained to the commander that there had been lots of misinformation ... The commander turned to the crowd and stated emphatically, 'I swear to you that the buses are there.'

We organized ourselves, and the 200 of us set off for the bridge with great excitement and hope. As we marched past the convention center, many locals saw our determined and optimistic group ...

Families immediately grabbed their few belongings, and quickly, our numbers doubled and then doubled again. Babies in strollers now joined us, as did people using crutches, elderly clasping walkers and other people in wheel-chairs. We marched the two to three miles to the freeway and up the steep incline to the bridge. ...

As we approached the bridge, armed sheriffs formed a line across the foot of the bridge. Before we were close enough to speak, they began firing their weapons over our heads. This sent the crowd fleeing in various directions.

As the crowd scattered and dissipated, a few of us inched forward and managed to engage some of the sheriffs in conversation. ... The sheriffs informed us that there were no buses waiting. The commander had lied to us to get us to move.

We questioned why we couldn't cross the bridge anyway, especially as there was little traffic on the six-lane highway. They responded that the West Bank was not going to become New Orleans, and there would be no Superdomes in their city. These were code words for: if you are poor and Black, you are not crossing the Mississippi River, and you are not getting out of New Orleans.

...

All day long, we saw other families, individuals and groups make the same trip up the incline in an attempt to cross the bridge, only to be turned away – some chased away with gunfire, others simply told no, others verbally berated and humiliated. Thousands of New Orleaners were prevented and prohibited from self-evacuating the city on foot.

Bradshaw and Slonsky, 2005, pp. 4, 5

What emerges from this account is the sharp collision in the aftermath of the hurricane between the rapidly increasing welfare needs of an already largely impoverished population and the predominant concerns of the police and other government agencies with crime prevention and controlling the population affected by flooding (Figure 4). The sense of injustice felt by people fleeing the floods, with few personal belongings and in urgent need of food, fresh water and shelter, was compounded by the response of the police which was primarily concerned with preventing this largely black, working-class and poor population from entering the more affluent and 'whiter' suburbs around New Orleans. However, it would be mistaken to suggest that crime was not a real issue, even though we need to be aware of the sensationalised reportage of much of it. The floods did give rise to looting and to other criminal behaviour, but one might reflect that some forms of these could be interpreted as desperate attempts to find food, water and shelter in appalling conditions. In some respects, the aftermath of Katrina and the story offered here provide yet another example of how poverty, 'disorderly' behaviour and criminal activity come to be seen as closely interlinked. There are other important issues highlighted in this account. One of these is the failure of the state to provide for the afflicted sections of the New Orleans population. Another is the organised response from the people themselves. Contrary to representations of poor people as 'passive' and 'idle', many of those most adversely affected by Katrina were not prepared, or were unable, to sit out the disaster until the government chose to respond. Instead, they mobilised collectively to find safety and protest against the injustices they suffered.

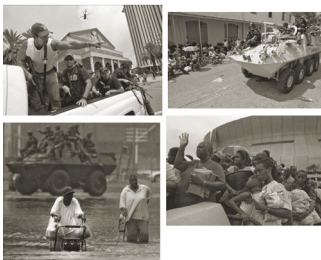


Figure 4 Images of armed police on patrol in New Orleans contrast sharply with other images showing victims of the floods struggling to cope with the devastation wrought by Katrina

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In terms of evidence, Bradshaw and Slonsky (2005) offer an important eyewitness report highlighting some of the growing social tensions in New Orleans following Katrina. This kind of report not only provides alternative sources of evidence to that available in the mainstream media, it also provides rich insights from which we can develop greater understanding of the impacts of disasters such as hurricanes on different groups of people. Such eyewitness accounts offer some sense of the immediacy of the disaster, as well as how this impacted on the personal lives of those concerned, in ways that official government reports and statistics are often unable to deliver. They also show that there are different, often contradictory, stories and interpretations of events in the aftermath of the flooding. Through these we can begin to get some idea of the political controversies that Katrina sparked. These conflicting accounts were also played out on the web-based alternative media and in television documentaries. One such television documentary was *When the Levees Broke*. Produced in 2006 by the African American political film director

Spike Lee, this documentary focused on the experiences of poor black people in New Orleans. Television footage and films of the kind produced by Lee show us not only the availability of other forms of evidence of the impacts of the Katrina disaster but also how such accounts are contested. *When the Levees Broke* generated controversy for its damning portrayal of the Bush Government and its attack on sensationalised and selective stories about crime during the aftermath of the disaster.

The disaster has also generated critical commentary from social science researchers on key aspects of contemporary US society that some would prefer to remain hidden from view. These include the gross social inequalities that are to be found across urban America, as well as the failures of government policy before, during and after Katrina to meet the most basic requirements of many millions of American citizens (see SSRC, 2007). It touched a raw nerve around questions of 'race' and class, inequalities between rich and poor, the role of government, and global climate change. In the words of *New York Times* journalist David Brooks, hurricanes such as Katrina 'wash away the surface of society, the settled way things have been done. They expose the underlying power structures, the injustices, the patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities' (September 2005, quoted in Strolovitch et al., 2005, p. 1). In these respects, the disaster illustrates wider issues of social inequality, discrimination, marginalisation and poverty. Katrina provided an opportunity for long-standing US-wide political controversies to be re-energised, and within days of the disaster different interpretations of its underlying causes, who or what was to blame, and what was required to rebuild New Orleans were resounding in the media and in political debates (Peck, 2006).

2.3 The impact of Katrina on New Orleans

Activity 1

Below are four extracts from different commentators reflecting on the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans.

- In what ways do they offer contrasting interpretations of the events?
- What are the key competing themes that emerge from these quotations?
- How might these understandings shape potential government responses?

Extract 2

Katrina didn't turn innocent citizens into desperate criminals. This week's looters (not those who took small supplies of food and water for sustenance, but those who have trashed, burned, and shot their way through the city since Monday) are the same depraved individuals who have pushed New Orleans' murder rate to several multiples above the national average in normal times. ... Today may not be the best day to get into New Orleans' intractable crime problem, but it's necessary, since it explains how this week's communications and policing vacuum so quickly created a perfect storm for the vicious lawlessness that has broken out. ...

...

... Now no civil authorities can re-assert order in New Orleans. The city must be forcefully demilitarized, even as innocent victims literally starve.

Gelinas, 2005

Extract 3

The chaos after Hurricane Katrina did not cause a civilizational collapse; it simply exposed and magnified one that had already occurred ... A strange admixture of upper-class decadence and underclass pathology, New Orleans has long been a stew of disorder and dysfunction, convincing many New Orleans residents, years before Hurricane Katrina, to evacuate what they regarded as an increasingly unlivable city ... The squalor and crime in the Superdome represented nothing more than the squalor and crime transferred from New Orleans' legendary hellish housing complexes [and the] countless images of stranded women, children and the elderly were explained far more by the absence of fathers than the tardiness of FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency].

Neumayr, 2005, pp. 48, 50

Extract 4

In the confusion and suffering of Katrina ... most white politicians and media pundits have chosen to see only the demons of their prejudices. The city's complex history and social geography have been reduced to a cartoon of a vast slum inhabited by an alternately criminal or helpless underclass, whose salvation is the kindness of strangers in other, whiter cities. Inconvenient realities ... have not been allowed to interfere with the belief, embraced by New Democrats as well as old Republicans, that black urban culture is inherently pathological.

Davis, 2006a

Extract 5

It is difficult, so soon on the heels of such an unnecessarily deadly disaster, to be discompassionate, but it is important in the heat of the moment to put social science to work as a counterweight to official attempts to relegate Katrina to the historical dustbin of inevitable 'natural' disasters....

... [T]he supposed 'naturalness' of disasters here becomes an ideological camouflage for the social (and therefore preventable) dimensions of such disasters, covering for quite specific social interests. Vulnerability, in turn, is highly differentiated; some people are much more vulnerable than others. Put bluntly, in many climates rich people tend to take the higher ground leaving to the poor and working class land more vulnerable to flooding and environmental pestilence. ... In New Orleans ... topographic gradients doubled as class and race gradients, and as the Katrina evacuation so tragically demonstrated, the better off had cars to get out. ... [T]heir

immediate families likely had resources to support their evacuation, and the wealthier also had the insurance policies for rebuilding. ...

...

... The race and class dimensions of who escaped and who was victimized by this decidedly unnatural disaster not only could have been predicted, and was, but it follows a long history of like experiences. ... In New Orleans there are already murmurings of Katrina as 'Hurricane Bush'. It is not only in the so-called Third World, we can now see, that one's chances of surviving a disaster are more than anything dependent on one's race, ethnicity and social class.

Smith, 2006

There is a shared emphasis across each of the extracts above that Katrina was a 'social' as opposed to a 'natural' disaster. But there are sharply differing perspectives on offer between the first and second quotations, on the one hand, and the third and fourth ones on the other, as to what this might mean and how it is to be interpreted. There is no appeal to any shared 'evidence' to adjudicate over this. Gelinas and Neumayr reflect conservative 'blame-the-victim' stereotypes of the social problems that characterise US cities today (Macek, 2006). In addition, there is an implicit anti-urbanism here which reproduces long-held views of cities as places of deprivation and depravity, of social disorganisation and criminality. There is also a view, most notable perhaps in the Neumayr reference to public housing ('New Orleans' legendary hellish housing complexes'), that state policy and what passes as state welfare in the USA has contributed to 'the problem'. This is captured most notably by the reference to an 'underclass', a concept which, as developed and utilised in the US context, is frequently used as shorthand for poor urban blacks and black pathology (Young, 2007).

The idea that poor people are responsible for their own situation is reflected in US government policy which, since the 1980s in particular, has dismantled public welfare programmes and reduced expenditure on the kinds of public services that were so badly needed following Katrina. The language and sentiments that pervade the quotations from Gelinas and Neumayr focus on the behaviour and deficits of the poor in New Orleans, which are seen as symptomatic of a wider 'malaise' across US society. By contrast, Davis and Smith locate Katrina within the wider social fabric of US society: they point to the ways in which inequalities come to shape the landscape of cities such as New Orleans – in particular, the racial and class segregation that characterises the districts in which different groups of people live. This unequal social geography, characteristic of many of the world's cities today, contributes to the marked differences in the experiences of socio-economic security and insecurity on the part of different groups of the population (Cochrane and Talbot, 2008a). Here, the US government is accused of abandoning the poor of New Orleans at a time of critical need, a claim that chimes with other criticisms of the Bush Administration for failing to address the sense of vulnerability and injustice felt by many poor people across urban America:

The Katrina disaster revealed the stark politics that surround 'security' in post 9/11 United States. A dark irony emerges here. On the one hand, a large proportion of Bush's rhetoric since 9/11 has emphasised the fragile exposure of US urbanites to purported 'terrorist' risks. ... On the other hand, US cities' preparedness for much more devastating and likely impacts of

catastrophic 'natural' events such as Katrina have actually been undermined because of fiscal cuts and the construction of the vast 'homeland security' and anti-terror drive which tends to ignore or downplay such risks.

(Graham, 2006)

The concern to control the New Orleans poor is evidenced by the activities of the police and by the militarisation of the city in the days that followed the hurricane. For critics, the real crime of Katrina, however, was the failure of the state to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of the most vulnerable, protect from harm, and provide for the environmental security of those parts of the city and populations threatened by flooding (which had been forecast for many years previously). The idea of social harm was introduced. By using this notion to reflect on the claims above that Katrina was no 'natural' disaster, we can develop our understanding of the ways in which the unequal social geography of New Orleans, the failure to offer adequate protection from storms and hurricanes, and the activities of the various law enforcement agencies all contributed to the vulnerability and insecurity experienced by many of the city's poorest groups. This is a much broader appreciation of the 'crimes' of Katrina than those often portrayed and helps us to further comprehend the complex interrelationship between crime, social harm and welfare.

3 Worlds apart? The problem of problem places

3.1 The idea of problematic places

Katrina offers us a rich case study through which we have begun to explore some of the concerns surrounding problem places or populations. In reflecting on the controversies that emerged in the aftermath of Katrina, we can see that for some commentators it was a 'problem place' long before the hurricane struck in 2005. The idea that different places can be seen as problematic is a recurring theme that emerges in the context of ongoing debates around poverty and inequality, and the relationship between social justice and criminal justice across the world. In particular, urban spaces have often been viewed as sites of problem populations.

Activity 2

In the extract below, French sociologist Loïc Wacquant offers us some ways of understanding the idea of problem places.

- What do you feel are the main themes that are raised by this commentary?
- How might we reflect on the different sources of attention that these localities receive and to which he refers?

Extract 6

Ghetto in the United States, *banlieue* in France, *quartieri periferici* (or *degradati*) in Italy, *problemområde* in Sweden, *favela* in Brazil, *villa miseria* in Argentina, *rancho* in Venezuela: the societies of North America, Western Europe, and South America all have at their disposal in their topographic lexicon a special term for designating those stigmatized neighbourhoods situated at the very bottom of the hierarchical system of places that compose the metropolis. It is in these districts draped in a sulfurous aura, where social problems gather and fester, that the urban outcasts of the turn of the century reside, which earns them the disproportionate and disproportionately negative attention of the media, politicians, and state managers. They are known, to outsider and insiders alike, as the 'lawless zones', the 'problem estates', the 'no-go' areas or the 'wild districts' of the city, territories of deprivation and dereliction to be feared, fled from, and shunned because they are – or such is their reputation ... – hotbeds of violence, vice and social dissolution.

Wacquant, 2008, p. 1

It is immediately striking that each different national context has a vocabulary carrying a pejorative rhetoric which produces and sustains the notion of problem places. The social and the geographical come together in notions such as 'the problem estate' to describe particular places – and also their populations – as being characterised by social problems and as locales of crime and disorder. These localities are often symbolic, representing all that is problematic about urban life and society more broadly. They become catchwords for a diverse assortment of social ills and work to identify these social ills as belonging to particular places and their inhabitants. In other words, while Wacquant himself identifies ghettos and other problem areas as part of a wider system of social stratification and inequality that characterises the urban world today, this is not a prevailing view. Disadvantaged locales are more generally understood as the *sources* of urban (and wider) social problems. This is reflected across a range of urban social policies and regeneration programmes that speak of 'poor people and poor places' and carry ideas about what they *should be like*. In other words, a sharp distinction is drawn in the language identified by Wacquant between 'normal' and 'deviant' ways of living. It is the culture that exists in poor places, rather than the wider social organisation, which is constructed as being the obstacle to the successful eradication of poverty, crime and other social problems. This recourse to cultural explanations of poverty is encapsulated in the terms 'culture of poverty' (Lewis, 1966) and 'cycle of deprivation' (Joseph, 1972). Through these terms, two worlds are created: the world of 'mainstream' or 'normal' society ('us') on the one hand, and the world of the needy, the deviant and the criminal ('them') on the other. This binary division informs and permeates understandings of social exclusion and inclusion, an issue to which we shall return in [Section 4 of this course](#). [Wacquant highlights the kind of language used by politicians, policymakers and the media to describe problem places, and it is important that we be aware of the sources of such language, why it is being used, by whom and for what purpose. It is equally important to note that alternative images and accounts, generated by the residents of places so labelled, are often neglected.](#)

Following the discussion around some of the controversies surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the main concern of this section is to explore some of the other ways in which populations in need or in danger come to be seen as a problem for wider society. Here the emphasis is on how they come to be seen as a problem associated with *particular places*. In other words, the focus is on how *types of people* inhabiting *types of places* come to be problematised. There are many different ways in which these problematisation processes have emerged historically – from the fears of politicians and of the rich of the slum dwellers and crime-ridden 'rookeries' of nineteenth-century London, the closes and wynds of Glasgow, the 'little Irelands' of Manchester and other British cities, through to the concerns of politicians with 'problem estates' in the 1980s and 1990s. As noted previously, the creation of particular places as problems, places of danger and crime, and places in and of need is common to different countries. But across these different national contexts, they take on particular meanings and understandings. To illustrate this point, the next two subsections focus on two such places: the suburban housing estates of urban France (the '*banlieue*'); and the council estate in parts of the UK.

3.2 Urban unrest: the case of the French urban periphery

'France had a rebellion of its underclass', argued American social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein (2005). He was referring to the 'unrest' or 'riots' which began on Thursday 28 October 2005 in Clichy-sous-Bois, a large public housing estate, or *banlieue*, on the outskirts of Paris, and then spread to a number of other areas across urban France. The riots were sparked by the accidental deaths of two young boys fleeing the police. The boys were subsequently referred to by the then Interior Minister (and later French President) Nicolas Sarkozy as 'delinquent scum' (quoted in Ossman and Terrio, 2006, p. 6). Nearly 300 neighbourhoods across France were affected by the ensuing unrest; within the space of three weeks, around 10,000 vehicles had been destroyed and almost £200m damage done to property. Sarkozy's response was to declare a state of emergency and demand a series of severe penal sanctions against those involved in the unrest. Such a response was symptomatic of deep-seated antipathy towards, and growing fear of, the criminality and disorder associated with places such as Clichy-sous-Bois experienced by some sections of French society. But his subsequent order in November that all 'foreigners' found guilty of rioting were to be deported, whether they were in France legally or not, not only fuelled further resentment but also highlighted many of the underlying tensions in French society.

The term *banlieue* does not translate easily into English. *Banlieues* are generally suburban districts around the major French cities, but they do not equate with suburbs as the term is generally used in the UK. As French Marxist philosopher Etienne Balibar notes:

There are *banlieues* and *banlieues*, often geographically very close to one another but separated by a social abyss and a permanent antagonism ...: some are rich, even very rich ...; others are symbols of poverty, the decline of public services, the relegation of ethnic minorities and poor whites, unemployment and stigmatization ... In many respects, even if the riots extended to other urban areas (especially outside Paris), it was this clash *within the banlieue*, between the two worlds it contains, that was characteristic.... *the banlieue ... is a frontier, a border-area and a frontline.*

(Balibar, 2007, p. 48)

The worlds that Balibar highlights are shaped by patterns of migration, France's colonial past and present, and its class structure. According to one commentator, a line is increasingly drawn in French society 'between the Français-de-souche (white-Catholic-French) and those of color, primarily "new" immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa' (Orlando, 2003, p. 395), many of whom are Muslim, impoverished and live in *banlieue* neighbourhoods. Large-scale development of the *banlieue* began in the 1960s, resettling both working-class populations moving from inner-city areas and migrants arriving from various French colonies. The construction of what were often high-rise, public-sector housing estates accompanied the relocation of manufacturing industries and the expansion of new industrial areas in the suburbs. As in the UK, such estates reflected political and policymaking concerns to provide better housing predominantly for the white working-class population but in the process also created new patterns of social segregation.



Figure 5 Wreckage of two cars in a market in Clichy-sous-Bois, Paris, following riots in October 2005; and youths rioting in Clichy-sous-Bois, 28 and 29 October 2005

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By the 1990s, the *banlieue* had become a byword for a range of social ills: industrial decline; rising poverty; urban decay; high unemployment; declining public services; and a rapidly deteriorating physical environment. Increasingly used to house black and Arab populations, the French mainstream media and political elites also associated them with poverty, criminality and social decay. They were a world removed from ‘traditional’ (i.e. white Catholic) French society, a world in which social tensions between disaffected youth and the police regularly spilled over into unrest. For some commentators, as well as for many residents in the *banlieue*, the unrest in late 2005 was a rebellion against police harassment, poverty and the racism of French society. For Wallerstein (2005) it also reflects the growing social polarisation accompanying the steady urbanisation of the world's population. Ossman and Terrio (2006) also draw out the wider global processes that are at work here, commenting:

If the French riots of 2005 so dominated international news, it is not simply due to Americans' desire to punish the French for their position on Iraq, or plays of one upmanship on the part of the British. It is that they are an occasion to explore a reconceptualization of the spaces of danger, culture, territory, and sovereignty that is taking place. Since the 1980s car burnings, supermarket lootings, and destruction of police stations in projects outside Paris, Lyon, and Strasbourg have been discussed not only as a time bomb ticking in the suburbs, but as an *intifada* [uprising] of the suburbs perpetrated by ghetto hoodlums. ... [I]t is only too apparent that the backdrop for such discussions of the events in France was an image of a vague, transnational suburban zone that each national government is engaged with containing and controlling on its own territory.

(Ossman and Terrio, 2006, p. 14)

Here, the global echoes of unrest in France can be seen in the ways that it brings together issues around war, migration, security and injustice (see also Cochrane and Talbot, 2008b). In the early twenty-first century, such issues take on a renewed vigour amidst the rising levels of inequality and the growing tensions between the global rich and poor, not only played out in developing countries but also in the centres of global capitalism, such as in the UK, France and the USA. And the use of the term ‘*intifada*’, while pointing to specific Palestinian revolts against Israeli occupation, also speaks to the increasing perception in the Judeo-Christian West of the ‘threat’ posed by Islam.

Our brief journey around the events in France in late 2005 suggests many issues about the identification of disadvantaged groups as problem populations. From the example of the *banlieue* we can also see that, over time, particular places come to accommodate

populations, such as working-class slum-dwellers or other marginalised populations such as immigrants, which are seen as being vulnerable and in need in some way. This is the reconceptualisation of problem people and problem places to which Ossman and Terrio (2006) refer in their reflection on continuity and change in the construction of particular locales as dangerous places of social decay and violence.

Activity 3

Reflect on the case studies of New Orleans ([Section 2](#)) and the *banlieue* in this [section](#).

- How do wider social inequalities and social divisions shape the experiences of the populations in these localities?
- What would you identify as the shared themes that emerge in these case studies?

As in New Orleans, 'race' and class come together in the French urban periphery in particular ways. The marginalised populations in each are the product of migrations which, though reflecting different colonial pasts, share a present as the internally excluded in their respective national contexts. Both populations are seen as dangerous yet vulnerable due to high rates of unemployment, poor housing and entrenched economic insecurity. There are also common themes about the failures of state welfare and the social impacts of reductions in welfare spending. Issues of crime and disorder are also brought into focus: we can see how such issues came to be the dominant concerns of governments and local agencies. In both contexts, sections of the mainstream media and politicians mobilised pre-existing racist antipathies to reproduce stereotypes of the populations of both locales as criminal and disorderly. Against this, the marginalised populations of the French *banlieue* and New Orleans struggle to draw attention to issues of poverty, racism, the erosion of welfare, and police hostility – in other words, to a range of social harms and crimes of the state. The hurricane in New Orleans and oppressive policing in the *banlieue* were merely the sparks that reignited the fires of social injustice.

3.3 Bringing it all back home: the 'problem estate'

It would be mistaken to deduce from the discussion thus far that problem populations and problem places only occur elsewhere. The focus of this section is to consider how such understandings also emerge in the UK. Our case study here is formed around a specific type of place which in recent decades has increasingly come to be perceived as a 'problem' – the deprived council estate.

Activity 4

In *Estates: An Intimate History* (2007), Lynsey Hanley offers an autobiographical account of being raised in a suburban council estate in Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s. Read the following short extract from Hanley's story and think about the following questions:

- What do this tell us about how council estates might be perceived in the UK today?
- What, if any, criticisms would you make of her claims?

Extract 7

The Wood. I was born there, and lived there between the ages of eighteen months and eighteen years. Even though I have lived away from home for over a third of my life now, it continues to shape the way I think about the world outside it. ... [I]t's a lifelong state of mind.

...

It's not something you think about when you're growing up. *Wow, I'm really alienated. My school is suffering from its single-class intake.* ... It's more a sense you have. A sense that someone, who lives in a proper house, in a proper town, sat on the floor of an office one day with a box of fancy Lego bricks and laid out ... a way of housing as many people as possible in as small a space as could be got away with. And, in so doing, forgot that real people aren't inanimate yellow shapes with permanent smiles ... That real people might get lost in such a place.

I wonder if the stigma of coming from a council estate is ever turned to an advantage, and whether that inherent sense of inferiority ever becomes a source of pride. You believe yourself to be proud of having overcome the limitations of your environment – literally, of having escaped a kind of prison – and yet you know that in some ways you will never escape. That's because, to anybody who doesn't live on one (and to some who do), the term 'council estate' means hell on earth.

Council estates are nothing to be scared of, unless you are frightened of inequality. They are a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter. My heart sags every time it senses the approach of those flat, numbing boxes that prick the edges of every British town.

Hanley, 2007, pp. 4, 5



Figure 6 Council housing was much in demand in the 1950s and 1960s as suggested by this photograph of the postwar new town of Hemel Hempstead, published in the photographic news magazine *Picture Post* in 1954. Such images belie the later image of many council estates as 'problem' places

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Hanley provides a vivid description of what is often referred to as 'council estate living'. The gloomy image that is offered, however, is not out of step with the dominant representations of estates that circulate today. Elsewhere in her book we are invited to play word association with the term 'council estate', and Hanley provides some assistance by listing 'alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty stupidity, a kind of stir-craziness induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class' (2007, p. 7). But we could go much further than this by adding youth offending, teenage pregnancies, unemployment, welfare and benefit 'cultures', violence and disorder. Hanley's account fits well with wider mainstream media representations of estates which use these locales and their populations in crime dramas and documentary programmes built around CCTV footage. In addition, there are the representations carried in the print and electronic media that speak of neighbours and estates 'from hell', that tell us which are Britain's 'worst' estates and towns, and which generally make strong connections between council estates and some of the worst forms of youth offending. For example, in Scotland a close association is made between 'neds' (generally interpreted as non-educated delinquents) and council estates (Fergusson and Muncie, 2008). Council estates have also featured as convenient backdrops of social disorganisation in popular fiction and journalism, in travelogues, and as a source of political commentary and policy debate. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, for instance, it was the council estate which was marked out by the New Labour Government as one of the key locales of 'social exclusion' in British society.

3.4 Council estates: a symbol of failure?

From the earlier extract it is clear that Lynsey Hanley sees estates as a symbol of failure for everyone but particularly for those who live in them. Estate life forms a 'wall in the head' (Hanley, 2007, pp. 148–9), a particular state of mind producing a distinctive set of aspirations. These social psychological claims strongly parallel ideas that council estates generate their own subcultures that signal such places as different from others. This is also replicated by some journalists:

The truth is that council housing is a living tomb. You dare not give the house up because you might never get another, but staying is to be trapped in a ghetto of both place and mind. ... The people in them need to have better training and more incentives to work. And council estates need to be less cut off from the rest of the economy and society.

...

... It is not British civilisation that ails ... It is British council estates. ... We made them. Now we need to unmake them, doing whatever it takes.

(Hutton, 2007)

The context of Will Hutton's assertions was a debate sparked by a series of murders of teenagers in estates in South London in early 2007. In making the generalisation that council estates are ghettos, like Hanley he underestimates the degree of heterogeneity and internal social differentiation that exists *within* estates. Communities are very rarely

undifferentiated in the way that either Hanley or Hutton implies (Mooney and Neal, 2009) and the suggestion that there is something approaching a ghetto or estate mentality reproduces stigmatising stereotypes of particular social groups, including among them some of the most deprived sections of society.

Council estates did not always carry the social stigma that is attached to them now. In the 1920s and 1930s and for a considerable time after the Second World War they met the acute housing needs of millions of people across the UK. It is important therefore that we historicise the idea of the 'problem estate'. To help with this, let us consider briefly some important research conducted by sociologist Seán Damer in Glasgow in the 1970s and 1980s. Damer's concerns lay with the history of a particular council estate in the Govan district of Glasgow. Constructed between 1934 and 1935 as one of the city's many 'rehousing' estates (or 'schemes'), the Moorepark scheme accommodated some of the families displaced through slum-clearance programmes. By the 1970s, the estate had come to achieve local and Glasgow-wide notoriety as an alleged locale of violence, drunkenness and assorted other social problems, and it was increasingly referred to by what became its better-known label, 'Wine Alley' (Damer, 1989).



Figure 7 Moorepark housing scheme, Glasgow, early 1970s. This was typical of Glasgow's 1930s' 'slum-clearance' estates

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The label 'Wine Alley' says much about the negative reputation attached to Moorepark. On the basis of interviews with tenants, housing and council officials, and police officers among others, and using detailed examination of archival records and reports produced by Glasgow Corporation and relevant Scottish Office departments from the 1930s, Damer was able to demonstrate how ideas of a 'problem family', 'problem tenant' and 'problem estate' first developed in the 1930s and not only came to apply to the residents of Moorepark but (especially in the post-1945 era) became more widespread as ways of representing particular sections of the council housing population.

Damer's detailed research sought to locate the factors that would explain why this reputation had developed, and his work is important not least for the ways in which it illuminates the historical evolution of the ideas of problem people and problem places. Through this research he reminds us that contemporary negative representations are not recent developments but in significant ways are contemporary manifestations of historical processes. However, we need to be alert to some of the potential problems that can emerge in using historical evidence to develop the kinds of argument with which we are concerned in this course. It is important to avoid interpreting the rationales and meanings of policies from the past from the perspective of contemporary debates and arguments. One of the ways in which Damer avoids such a pitfall is by considering how the discourses of problem tenants and places came to be reinvented in the 1960s and 1970s (see also Johnstone and Mooney, 2007).

There is the further problem of what might be termed 'hindsight', the tendency to see past events as the unfolding of one story whereas there may be competing and conflicting stories. And we may only be able to generate partial understandings from the available historical evidence base. Not only is incomplete evidence open to different interpretations, but evidence can be selectively used depending on the larger story that the author wishes to convey or the argument being advanced. In attempting to frame historical evidence in terms of contemporary concerns and arguments, we need to allow for the possibility of other stories, meanings and understandings. However, properly located in the context of wider social and political developments at the time in question, historical evidence is invaluable in helping us understand some of the enduring legacies of the past that pervade images and representations of 'problem' people and places today.

In relation to the themes of this course, historical research helps us to uncover the continuities between the perceptions of problem places in Victorian Britain, notably the slums and rookeries of the late nineteenth-century city, the emergence of 'problem estates' in the post-1945 period, and more contemporary terms such as 'sink' estates, 'hard-to-let' estates, 'inner-city' and *banlieue*. While the historical circumstances which produced these neighbourhoods, and the terms generated to signify them, are different, there is a striking similarity in the purpose of the latter. These terms separate out the inhabitants of these 'problem' places from the 'mainstream' or 'normal' society – and ritually degrade, humiliate and blame them for their poverty and deprivation in the process. We also need to be alert to the international appeal and spread of the idea of problem places. Ideas and representations of problem places are not confined to European and North American contexts: they are also manifested in the '*favelas*', '*barrios*' and 'ghettos' that characterise many 'Third World' cities (Davis, 2006b; Neuwirth, 2006).

Given that such segregation and stigmatisation are central components of so many societies across the world, we may conclude that the idea of populations of problem places as somehow marginal to society is a myth. This 'myth of marginality' (Perlman, 1976) both presents people living in poverty as hopeless, deficient and disorganised masses surplus to society, and obscures the complex interrelations between different forms of economic activity. Stigmatisation of the kind highlighted in the work of Damer and others devalues the experiences, perspectives and voices of people who live in places regarded as problematic. People who live in *banlieue* estates, slums, shanty towns and disadvantaged council estates are still people, struggling to build their lives and to survive. In such localities a myriad of resourceful coping and 'getting-by' personal, household and community strategies emerge in an effort to 'keep going'. Thus, people develop their skills and capabilities in struggling to make ends meet in a context where the economic resources available to them are deficient. Coping strategies represent but one dimension, albeit an important one, of the ways in which poor people struggle to make better lives. Other strategies that demonstrate the presence of capacities are political struggles – be they for better resources, welfare support or community facilities – and resistance against stigmatisation and negative labelling. As Pinkney and Saraga (2009) highlight in relation to campaigns to defend community services in the early twentieth century, and as others have explored in previous time periods (Lavalette and Mooney, 2000; Fox-Piven and Cloward, 1977), disadvantaged people have a long tradition of collective organisation and mobilisation to 'get heard' (Burnett, 2006).

4 Review: misrecognition, disrespect and the politics of fear

A recurring theme in discussions of poverty is the distinction between ‘the poor’ and ‘the non-poor’. Echoing nineteenth-century ideas of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, or 1930s notions of ‘problem estates’, such distinctions continue to permeate representations of poor populations today and also often figure prominently in policy.

Binary classifications such as those highlighted in [Table 1](#) have long underpinned the ways in which poor and disadvantaged populations are seen as distinctive from ‘the rest of society’. In this way we can talk of the poor being ‘Other’. ‘Othering’ (Lister, 2004, pp. 100–101; Young, 2007, pp. 5–7) refers to the categorisations of the poor and other populations – for example, some migrant groups (though not others) and single parents – as variously undeserving and deficient. Othering works to present such groups as distinct, different from ‘normal society’; it underpins how the non-poor, and many politicians, policymakers and sections of the mainstream media, think and talk about, and act towards, poor people. In this way, ‘the underclass’, for instance, is constructed as a distinct and generally homogeneous group, even if no robust evidence has been produced that an underclass actually exists. One particular link that we can draw between the poor areas of New Orleans, *banlieues* and council estates is that they are generally portrayed as homogeneous localities inhabited by deficient people. The case studies highlight the importance of particular imaginations of places and people; problems are defined, diagnosed and policies developed and targeted at them to ‘cure’ them.

Table 1: Constructing worlds apart: ‘us’ and ‘them’

‘Us’	‘Them’
Society at large	The underclass
Employment	The workless
Independence/self-help	Dependency
Stable family	Single mothers
Law-abiding	The criminal
Orderly	Disorderly
Natives	Immigrants
Victims	Criminals
Respectable	Disreputable
Included	Excluded

Source: adapted from Young, 2007, p. 22

Such processes both reflect and reproduce the kinds of discrimination and social injustices that blame people living in poverty for their own situation and for society's problems. People living in poverty may be demonised but they are also feared; feared for who they are – or who they are thought to be – and resented for representing a state of existence into which others fear to fall. History also reminds us that the fear of sudden

descent into cataclysmic long-term poverty, with its inevitable terminus in the dreaded workhouse, was the nightmare of the British working class until the Second World War and the subsequent development of the welfare state.

As we have seen, poor and other disadvantaged populations tend to experience not only a lack of material resources but also a lack of respect. This returns us to important questions of social (in)justice. We need to consider how people are recognised and valued.

Activity 5

Taking into account recognition and respect, in what ways do the representations of disadvantaged populations and places, as considered in the case studies in this course, reflect issues of 'non-recognition' and 'disrespect'? How might these be reflected in policy outcomes?

'Non-recognition' and 'disrespect', which involve being rendered either invisible or routinely maligned and stigmatised in everyday vocabularies and through policy-making, is the lived experience of disadvantaged groups. This social devaluation is an important dimension of social injustice and it compounds inequalities of material resources. It infringes human and citizenship rights, denying voice and agency to those who are treated in this manner. In some ways, as we have seen in all our examples, the problem of problem populations can be that they have 'too much' voice and agency, especially when they are resisting, rebelling, and struggling for social justice – but of the 'wrong sort'! But non-recognition and disrespect work in other ways too, shaping social and crime control policies. Viewing the problems experienced by poor people as the problems of poor people leads to a focus on their lifestyles and behaviours. Ideas of social inclusion and exclusion, therefore, reflect the translation of material disadvantages and need into cultural processes. In turn, the redistributive dimensions of social justice argued for by Fraser (1995) and others (e.g. Levitas, 2005; Lister, 2004) are rejected as viable policy options. Misrecognition and disrespect provide what we might see as a 'triple whammy' – stigmatising the poor, pathologising welfare and material need, and obscuring the inequalities of wealth and income.

This course has explored some of the many ways in which poor and disadvantaged groups come to be regarded as problem populations afflicted by assorted deficiencies. It has highlighted how these processes can be understood as part of a generalised war, not on poverty, inequality or injustice, but on poor people themselves (Gans, 1995). In each of the case studies that featured in this course, the different populations can be seen as vulnerable to environmental disasters, reductions in (or the absence of) welfare, state hostility and apathy, and to the denial of voice, agency and respect. At the same time, they are also often seen as an actual or potential threat to society. The coming together of particular class-based and assumed racial characteristics with an assortment of ascribed cultural and social deficiencies enables such populations to be represented as being both in need and ever more disorderly and threatening – an enemy 'within'. In this way, problem populations come to be target populations, whose ways of living and whose cultures that enable survival are under attack.

While poor and problem populations are often constructed as marginal or surplus to society, they play a central role in the dominant debates about poverty and inequality that circulate in the world today. As Perlman (1976) and Stallybrass and White (1986) have forcefully argued, that which is marginal is usually symbolically central. Problems

of social injustice and the unequal social relations of poverty, wealth and inequality become pitched as the cultural deficiencies of the poor, necessitating intervention in efforts to 'develop' cultures and personal lives and behaviour. Here, we can see also the collisions between welfare and crime control: how what are 'crimes' of acute, unmet welfare needs come to be portrayed as behaviours and cultures requiring control and management.

This brings us back to the central idea of this course: social justice. We can see that economic disadvantages and cultural disrespect are interrelated in important ways. Poor people are resented, scapegoated, stereotyped, 'viewed through a social lens which renders most of their existence invisible while focusing on every blemish and dysfunction of their existence' (Young, 2007, p. 75). By contrast, the behaviour, lifestyles and cultures of the rich and powerful have received comparatively little attention. Rarely are these social groups seen as a problem population. Nor are the rapidly spreading gated communities and enclaves that many rich people inhabit seen as problem places. What this implies is that the lens of our investigation and analysis should not approach poverty in isolation from wealth, nor the poor in isolation from the rich, but should see them both as part of a wider social whole characterised by pervasive and entrenched social inequalities.

5 Further reading

For further discussion and explanations of events in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, G. Squires and C. Hartman's (eds) *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster* (2006, Routledge) brings together a series of social sciences essays and commentaries around different dimensions of the disaster. There are many books and studies detailing the evolution of council estates in Britain and focusing on the many problems facing some of the residents who live in them. Tony Parker's *People of Providence: A Housing Estate and Some of Its Inhabitants* (1983, Hutchinson) is widely recognised as a pioneering study of life in a council estate. Providing extracts from detailed interviews with residents, it highlights the diverse lives and ordinary and extraordinary stories which characterise life in these neighbourhoods. David Kynaston's *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* (2007, Bloomsbury) offers a rich and accessible historical overview of a key period in post-war Britain, including accounts of life in some of the new council estates being built during this time. In *Social Exclusion* (2005, Open University Press), David Byrne examines the origins of terms such as 'underclass' and 'exclusion' and considers some of the ways in which these are replicated in social and geographical divisions in contemporary British society. For representations of social disorganisation and council estates in works of fiction, see Livi Michael's *Under a Thin Moon* (1994, Minerva) and Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996, Headline Review). If this course has been of interest you may like to study DD208 with The Open University. Why not watch the video below to learn more about the content of the course.

Video content is not available in this format.



[DD208: Problems, populations, problem places](#)

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying sociology. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

Take the next step



If you enjoyed this course, why not explore the subject further with our paid-for short course, *Media, politics and society*?

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