Poverty in Elizabethan England

You may be asked to explain:

* Attitudes to poverty and vagrancy at the beginning of the period
* Why the number of poor increased during the period
* Why this caused a threat to law and order
* Why the crucial distinction was made between deserving and undeserving poor
* How this led to more enlightened methods of treatment
* The Poor Law of 1601

# Early Attitudes

* Before the Reformation, it was considered to be a religious duty for all Christians to undertake the seven corporal works of mercy based on the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 25 vv. 32-46). Good Christians were meant to:
  + feed the hungry
  + give drink to the thirsty
  + welcome the stranger
  + clothe the naked
  + visit the sick
  + visit the prisoner
  + bury the dead
* After the Reformation (remember the Renaissance) and the establishment of the Church of England, many of the old values and moral expectations disappeared so it became necessary to regulate the relief of poverty by law.
* In particular people were less worried about going to Purgatory, and were not allowed to have prayers said for their souls after death. Because of this leaving large sums of money to help people after your death became unnecessary.

# Causes of Poverty

* During the 16th Century population rose dramatically and this, added to other economic pressures, meant that an increasing number of people were unable to support themselves.
* As the standard of living dropped, the problem of vagrancy (having no fixed place to live) worsened causing problems for the whole country
* There were several reasons for this increase in poverty.
  + During the reign of Elizabeth I, the population rose from three to four million people. This increase was primarily due to a rise in fertility and a falling death rate and meant, in simple terms, that the country's resources now had to be shared by a greater number of people.
  + Added to this was the problem of rising prices. In the last years of his reign, Henry VIII had debased the coinage which meant that the proportion of gold and silver in the coins was reduced. In 1560 Elizabeth's government took steps to remedy this by replacing all debased coins with new ones, thus restoring the country's currency to its proper levels. This move served to combat the problem of inflation in the early years of her reign.
  + The country was also hit by a number of poor harvests, particularly in the 1590s. This put pressure on the food supply.
  + In 1563, wages were further affected by a government move to curb inflation. The Statute of Artificers set upper wage limits for skilled workers such as butchers or carpenters but the unfortunate result was that, as prices rose, wages could not reflect these increases. Again, the standard of living dropped for many workers
  + As the wool trade became increasingly popular, units of land called enclosures were often dedicated to rearing sheep. As a result, many people who had lived and worked in the countryside their whole lives found themselves without any means of support and, in many cases, evicted from their homes. Large numbers headed for the towns in the hope of a better life.

# Deserving and Undeserving Poor

* Before the Elizabethan period most poor houses and almshouses were set up thanks to money left in will payments of rich people. However as the problem got worse it was clear that there was not enough money to continue this.
* Lord Burghley was very concerned that large numbers of homeless and unemployed were a threat to civil order. In 1563 a number of Acts were passed to deal with this threat. A clear distinction was drawn between the “deserving poor” and “undeserving poor”
* The deserving poor were made up of the elderly and the very young, the infirm, and families who occasionally found themselves in financial difficulties due to a change in circumstance. They were considered deserving of social support.
* The undeserving poor were people who often turned to crime to make a living such as highwaymen or pickpockets, migrant workers who roamed the country looking for work, and individuals who begged for a living. Often armed, they were considered a danger to society and were treated as such.
* Finally, a third category of poor was recognised: the deserving unemployed, physically able to earn a living but unable to find work

# Acts passed

* Elizabeth's government introduced a series of Acts (1563, 1572, 1576, 1597 and 1601) which acknowledged that the care of the poor was now the community's responsibility, and that each citizen had to play his part.
* Because of this, the Poor Laws were progressive for their time and lasted for many years.
* The 1563 Act reaffirmed the policy of whipping able-bodied beggars. Later Acts stated that vagabonds should be burned through the right ear and, if they persisted, could be imprisoned and even executed. The policies of ear-boring and execution remained in force until 1593
* The 1597 Act, responding to a hard economic crisis in the 1590s, required each town to provide a prison for these groups, paid for by local taxes. Beggars caught offending were punished and then returned to their native parish
* Several towns launched their own initiatives. Norwich launched a census in 1570 to assess the nature and extent of the problem
* The Poor Laws passed during the reign of Elizabeth I played a critical role in the country's welfare. They were an important change from private charity to welfare state, where the care and supervision of the poor was embodied in law and integral to the management of each town.
* Another sign of their success was that the disorder and disturbance which had been feared by Parliament failed to materialise. But problems remained.
* There is no doubt that the laws helped the destitute by guaranteeing a minimum level of subsistence, but those who were scraping a living did not qualify for help and continued to struggle.

# 1601 Elizabethan Poor Law

* Important changes were brought in the 1601 Law which effectively consolidated all the previous laws.
  + a compulsory poor rate to be levied on every [parish](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/parish.html)
  + the creation of 'Overseers' of relief (2 people elected every Easter to oversee the work of the parish – they had to work out the money required and set a poor rate for the parish, collect the rate, relieve the poor and supervise the parish poor house)
  + the 'setting the poor on work'
  + the collection of a poor relief rate from property owners
* Two main types of relief were available: Indoor and Outdoor
* Outdoor Relief:
  + the poor would be left in their own homes and would be given either a 'dole' of money on which to live or be given relief in kind - clothes and food for example. This was the norm
* Indoor Relief:
  + the poor would be taken into the local almshouse
  + the ill would be admitted to the hospital
  + orphans were taken into the orphanage
  + the idle poor would be taken into the poor-house or workhouse where they would be set to work
* One of the later complaints about the 1601 Act was that the basis of the law was that it rated land and buildings but not personal or movable wealth. Consequently it benefited the industrial and commercial groups in society who did not fall within the parameters of the legislation and so did not pay into the poor rates unless they also happened to own landed property.