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Feature · History of social protection

From England's 1834 Poor Law to today **It took England 114 years to move from relief worse than work to a universal safety net**

Drawing on archival sources and official statistics, this note reviews the principle of “less eligibility” set by England's Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and its consequences, the data on crime by older people in Japan and the policy response, and, briefly, the pension income of older people in rural China. The common question is how rules designed to deter idleness affect people who cannot work.

Less eligibility	Poor Law ends	Japan · share aged 65+ of offenders	China · minimum resident basic pension	Resident pension, average
1834	1948	21.4%	¥163	¥276
Poor Law Amendment Act	National Assistance Act; NHS starts	2024 · 3.9% in 1995	Per month · 2026	Per month · estimated from 2025 spending

Rural dibao, average standard
¥594.9
Per person per month · end-May 2025

01

Key findings

England's 1834 Poor Law rested on deterrence. Relief had to leave recipients worse off than the poorest independent labourer, and able-bodied paupers could in principle be relieved only inside the workhouse. The Royal Commission's own report recorded that gaol diets were generally more generous than workhouse diets.

The punitive design fell on those unable to work. The Andover scandal of 1845 exposed hunger and embezzlement; by the late nineteenth century workhouses held mainly the old,

the sick and orphans. The National Assistance Act of 1948 ended the Poor Law, 114 years after 1834.

In Japan, people aged 65 and over rose from 3.9% of those cleared for Penal Code offences in 1995 to 21.4% in 2024. Japan's response links criminal justice with welfare: support on release, diversion at the entry point, the Recidivism Prevention Act and the 2025 reform of custodial sentences.

China's national minimum resident basic pension is ¥163 a month (2026); the 2025 average, estimated from fund spending, is about ¥276, below average minimum-living-guarantee standards. The issue for rural older people is not idleness but low income despite working into old age.

02

1834: less eligibility

Before 1834, parishes paid allowances directly to the poor, and spending kept rising. The Royal Commission concluded that allowances weakened the incentive to work and proposed the principle of less eligibility, which the Amendment Act adopted. The report (p. 228) also recorded that the workhouse diet usually exceeded that of a labourer's cottage and that the gaol diet was generally more generous than the workhouse's. Oliver Twist, published in 1838, satirised the point.

Item	Rule
Principle	Relief must leave recipients worse off than the poorest independent labourer
Form of relief	Able-bodied paupers relieved in principle only in the workhouse
Workhouse rules	Separation of sexes and of parents and children, uniforms, strict routine, no alcohol or tobacco

03

1845: the Andover scandal

Inmates of the Andover workhouse in Hampshire were set to crush animal bones for fertiliser. In 1845 Thomas Wakley MP told Parliament that they were so hungry that they fought over the marrow and gristle left on the bones. Inquiries found that the master and matron had withheld rations and extra provisions ordered for the sick. The affair led to a reorganisation of Poor Law administration.

Date	Event
Aug 1845	Reported by The Times; question in Parliament
Nov 1845	Commissioners ban bone-crushing in workhouses
Mar 1846	Commons select committee appointed
1847	Poor Law Commission replaced by a Poor Law Board answerable to Parliament

04

Who lived in workhouses, and the end in 1948

Less eligibility targeted the able-bodied who would not work, yet by the late nineteenth century workhouses held fewer able-bodied adults and mainly the old, the sick and orphans. The Beveridge Report of 1942 proposed universal insurance against want, sickness and old age; section 1 of the National Assistance Act of 1948 declared that the existing poor law should cease to have effect, and the NHS began on 5 July 1948.

> It took 114 years, from 1834 to 1948, to move from relief worse than work to a floor that no one falls below.

05

“No support for the idle” and the safety net

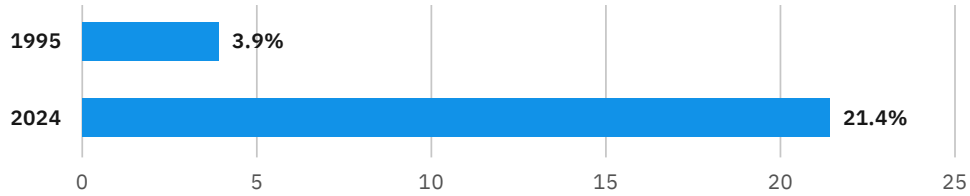
“Not supporting the idle” is a common phrase on the Chinese internet. Official statements share part of the concern: an article in Qiushi in 2021 warned against the trap of welfarism that breeds idleness, while stressing a floor for people in hardship. The difference lies in who is covered: work incentives make sense for those able to work, but older, sick and disabled people are not “idle”. England's experience shows that rules designed only to deter idleness tend to hit first those least able to work.

06

Japan: crime by older people

According to the Ministry of Justice White Paper on Crime, 41,070 of the 191,826 people cleared for Penal Code offences in 2024 were aged 65 or over, 21.4%. Theft dominates: about nine in ten older women were cleared for theft, about eight in ten of it shoplifting. Surveys and reports find that more than half of older shoplifters live alone and most are in financial difficulty with few social ties; some inmates have said prison provides a home, meals and medical care.

Share aged 65+ of people cleared for Penal Code offences



Source: Ministry of Justice, White Paper on Crime 2025.

07

Japan: linking justice and welfare

Measure	Since	Content
Support on release	2009	Prefectural centres arrange housing, public assistance and care before release
Diversion at entry	At prosecution	Older or disabled suspects not prosecuted or given suspended sentences are linked to welfare
Recidivism Prevention Act	2016	Housing, work and welfare in a national plan
Unified custodial sentence	Jun 2025	Prison work no longer compulsory for all; rehabilitation tailored to each inmate

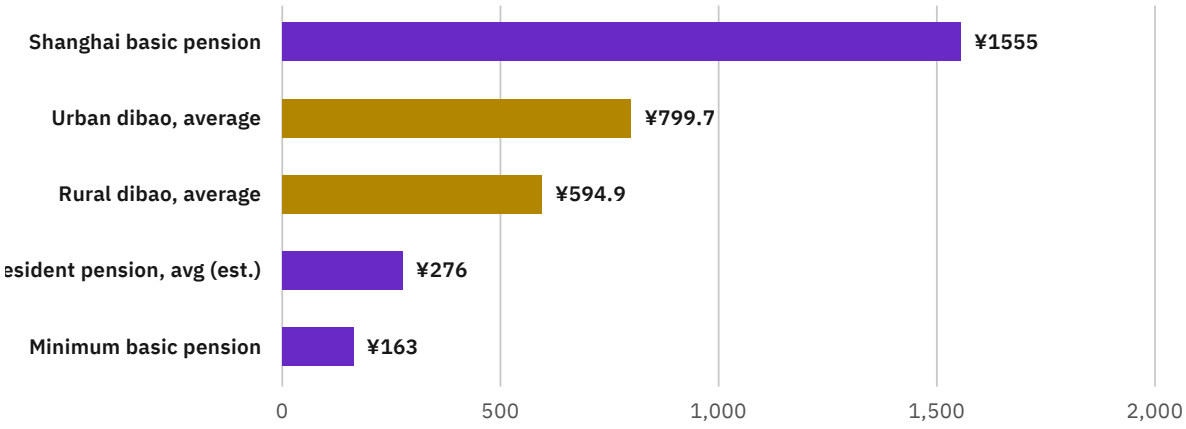
The measures treat crime by older people as a gap in social protection, not only as a policing problem.

08

Rural China: beyond the average

At end-2025 China had 323.4 million people aged 60 and over, 23% of the population. The resident pension scheme paid 188.2 million people; fund spending of ¥622.3bn implies about ¥276 a month each. The average is lifted by high-standard regions such as Shanghai (basic pension ¥1555 in 2025), while many central and western provinces sit near the national minimum. Most members choose the lowest contribution grade, so individual accounts are small. Studies using CHARLS find that older rural residents do not markedly reduce work after receiving the pension. Minimum-living-guarantee eligibility is assessed by household, which often excludes older people with adult children.

Monthly amounts (yuan)



Shanghai: 2025 basic pension; dibao: national average standards, end-May 2025; resident pension average: 2025 fund spending ÷ recipients ÷ 12; minimum: 2026.

09

Risks and limitations

Representativeness Workhouse conditions varied widely by place and period; Andover was among the worst cases.	**Cross-country comparison** Systems, periods and statistical definitions differ; no ranking is implied.	**Estimates** The resident pension average is estimated from total spending, which includes other items, and may differ from benefits paid.
Personal accounts	**Data updates**	

Statements that prison life is “more secure” come from individual interviews and are not representative.	Pension and dibao standards and crime statistics are revised annually; the latest official releases prevail.	

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Method and sources

England: Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws (1834, p. 228); Andover Union, Extracts from the Report of the Select Committee (1847); National Assistance Act 1948 (legislation.gov.uk); Victorian Web; workhouses.org.uk.

China, official statement: “Firmly Promoting Common Prosperity”, Qiushi no. 20, 2021.

Japan: Ministry of Justice, White Paper on Crime 2025; MHLW community-settlement support programme; Recidivism Prevention Act; Penal Code amendment (unified custodial sentence).

Rural China: 2026 government work report; MOHRSS 2025 statistical bulletin; Shanghai Human Resources Bureau; Ministry of Civil Affairs press conference, July 2025; 2025 national bulletin on ageing; CHARLS studies.

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This note is an analysis based on historical sources and public statistics for a general audience. It does not address any individual's circumstances and is not advice.

Data as of 2026-10-26 · 1834 年英国济贫法皇家委员会报告；1847 年安多弗特别委员会报告摘录；1948 年国民救助法；法务省《令和 7 年版犯罪白書》；人社部 2025 年度统计公报；民政部

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