

One of the central points of Dickens's "Oliver Twist": attack on social abuses was the new Poor Law, introduced in 1834 as an attempt to discourage pauperism. It was a harsh system, based on the idea that poverty was a crime. Its guiding rule was that poor relief should be granted only to able-bodied poor and their dependents in well-regulated workhouses under conditions inferior to those of the humblest laborers outside. Families were often split up, or sent to workhouses; there were rigid dietary prescriptions – Dickens's "three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays" was an exaggeration, but it had quite an effect on the English reading public when Oliver asked for "more." The extremely severe winter of 1837-1838, the high price of corn, trade depression, and unemployment made the Poor Law even more unpopular than it had been before.