

Historians still don't agree on the exact cause of the Salem witch trials. Several theories have been put forward explaining the motive behind the accusations:

Economic Causes

- In Salem, some families were very rich, while others were poor. This disparity led to jealousy among some of the people. Several families were engaged in property disputes.
- Some of the accused were rich. If convicted, they would lose their land and property, which could then be bought by others. Suggesting that a person was a witch was one way of obtaining that person's property.
- Some of the accused were poor. They were outsiders, and wealthier townspeople looked down on them. Accusing these people of being witches was one way of eliminating them from the village.

Political Causes

- In the recent past, there had been several disputes over who should govern the Massachusetts Colony. The colonists had also endured some violent conflicts with American Indians. These events created political turmoil and instability.
- People were upset, and they blamed their problems on a lack of effective leadership. The leaders, in turn, were eager to see others take the blame for social problems.
- Accusing people of witchcraft made the accused responsible for social and political problems. The supposed witches could be blamed for whatever was wrong with society. Leaders did not have to take responsibility for mistakes or try to make changes.

Intellectual Causes

- People knew little about science in those days. They were afraid of things they didn't understand.
- People didn't know about the causes of disease. If a person became sick, they believed it might be because of a curse.
- Witchcraft was one way of explaining the unknown.

Psychological Causes

- Most of the accusers were young women and girls. At that time, girls were supposed to be quiet and obedient. They had little power in society. Accusing others of witchcraft may have made them feel powerful.
- Some girls and women may have been under pressure to make up stories about witchcraft. Powerful people who had something to gain from seeing certain people in the town convicted of witchcraft may have pressured these women into testifying.
- Mass hysteria may have also played a role. Mass hysteria happens when large numbers of people respond to real or imagined threats in an emotional and unreasonable way. They become frightened, angry, and even violent. During times of mass hysteria, people may engage in mob violence, hunting down, shaming, and sometimes even killing those they believe are responsible for their troubles.
- The power of suggestion can contribute to mass hysteria. When one person claims to see, hear, or feel something, others may believe it to be true and swear they hear, see, hear, or feel something, others may believe it to be true and swear they hear, see, or feel the same thing without knowing why. For instance, if you see your friends scratch themselves or yawn, you may start scratching or yawning too, even if you aren't itchy or tired. This is one example of what psychologists call the power of suggestion.