

# The background to *The Full Monty*: Social deprivation in Sheffield

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Britain's most commercially successful film, *The Full Monty*, has raised the international profile of Sheffield and South Yorkshire. Plans are now under way for *The Full Monty 2*, based on the cold calculation that a sequel usually makes at least 40 percent of the original film's gross profits.

Local politicians have pronounced it the pinnacle of a new "Sheffield chic" that compliments the fatuous "Cool Britannia" rhetoric of the Blair Labour Party government. A *Full Monty* tour has been organised which takes in all the locations where the film was shot. The single mention of the social misery produced by steel, engineering and mining closures that is the basis of the film's story line is offset by pronouncements hailing Sheffield as a dynamic new investment location, well on its way to resolving its social problems.

The opposite is the case. Simon Beaufoy, *The Full Monty*'s screenwriter, has chastised Labour leader Tony Blair for using the film's title as a sound bite in his speeches. He explained, "The film is a comedy but has a serious message about the state of unemployed men in Britain. He's completely misjudged what it is about."

The recent opening of a Sheffield Airport, together with plans for a UK Sports Institute, a Cultural Industries Quarter containing the country's biggest independent cinema outside London, and the construction of the National Centre of Pop will not halt the growth of social inequality. Short-term contracts and low wages will be the lot of employees at these new enterprises. Jobs presently on offer pay £3.50 an hour on average. Many of the city's café bars in the fashionable Devonshire Quarter are less than two minutes walk from the city's burgeoning red light district.

*The Full Monty* week won this European Union designated South Yorkshire as one of the continent's most deprived regions. The area was ranked alongside Sicily and parts of Eastern Germany.

The unprecedented nature of the social destruction in South Yorkshire is alluded to in the opening scenes of the film. It shows a somewhat dated Sheffield City Council promotional film, *City on the Move*, which is counterposed to contemporary scenes of industrial and urban decline. When the promo was made, however, no one would have seen any irony in its title. Sheffield in the early 1970s was still the premier industrial city in Britain, with rates of pay that would put today's average income to shame and unemployment levels beneath the UK average.

The region's perimeters were adorned with signs commissioned by the now defunct South Yorkshire County Council that proclaimed, "You are now entering the Socialist Republic Of South Yorkshire." The area had long been a bastion of the Labour Party and elected the first local Labour administration in 1926. The social infrastructure, leisure facilities and community services were among the best in the country, while bus transport anywhere in the region cost a maximum of 2 pence for pensioners and those under 16 years of age.

Since the 1980s the region has suffered an accelerating decline:

- Over 177,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost and South Yorkshire has the poorest record in England of generating new jobs.
- Unemployment is 11 percentage points above the national average.
- Earnings have fallen to 12 percent below the national average.
- One third of the population receives housing

benefits.

- Some 72,000 people in Sheffield live in areas suffering from poverty, where at least 30 percent of residents are dependent on Income Support.

- 24 poverty areas have 40 percent or more of families with children and no wage earner.

- 18 poverty areas have 17 percent or more households with no access to a car.

- 22 areas have 25 percent unemployment. Two areas have levels approaching 50 percent.

- Acute areas of poverty have levels of preventable deaths 55 percent above the national average.

- The city is in the throes of an epidemic of drug-related deaths, mainly due to heroin overdose. One user is dying per week.

Over the last 20 years the incomes of the poorest have fallen, while those at the top of the social hierarchy have risen steadily. In impoverished Burngreave 44.1 percent of residents rely on Income Support, compared with 4.1 percent in affluent Ecclesall. This is due in part to soaring unemployment levels, but employment has also changed radically. Low paid, part-time, temporary and casual labour has replaced skilled work in industry. Women working in the service sector now make up the majority of the work force for the first time in the city's history.

Sheffield Health Authority recently published their annual Public Health Report. It highlighted the deep cleavages in health rates across the city. Those in deprived areas have poorer facilities and are most likely to be ill at an earlier age. They suffer higher rates of heart disease, mental health and certain cancers.

Babies are six times more likely to die in their first year of life. Southey Green, an area close to where *The Full Monty's* striptease finale was filmed, has the city's worst illness rate. One in five residents suffer a long-term illness and the area has Sheffield's highest hospital admission rate for malignant cancer. More than one third of the estate's population rely on Income Support.



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