

UK poverty report draws attention to widening inequalities

Harvey Thompson
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A recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found widening inequalities in all areas of life in Britain. The study, “Life in Britain: Using Millennial Census Data to Understand Poverty, Inequality and Place,” was released at the annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society and used data selected from the 2001 UK Census.

“Life in Britain” covers five major areas of social concern: health, education, housing, employment and poverty. The study provides an illustration through 10 short reports, 2 for each of the five areas, of the overall picture of the social inequalities in 142 geographic areas across the UK.

Some of the key findings are:

- * Areas with the highest levels of poor health also tend to have the lowest numbers of doctors, dentists and other health professionals (excluding nurses).

- * Areas with high levels of poor health tend also to have high numbers of their population providing informal care for family and friend—as opposed to professional care.

- * Areas with the highest proportions of unqualified young people tend to have the lowest number of teachers per head of population.

- * In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, young people are more likely to obtain good qualifications if their area already has a well-qualified older population.

- * The Census recorded 185,000 unoccupied second homes and holiday residences. In areas where these are prevalent—particularly remote rural areas—more local people are still renting their homes at ages when they would traditionally be expected to have entered the housing market.

- * The best-paid jobs are very unevenly distributed across the UK, with most in London and the South East. Someone’s location can be more important than their qualifications in determining what kind of job they find.

- * The UK appears to be divided between “work-rich”

and “work-poor” areas: in low-unemployment areas, there tend to be many people working long hours; in high-unemployment areas, there tend to be few people working long hours.

- * Approximately a million households have three or more cars. About the same number of households that might need a car (those with dependent children, etc.) have none. The two groups of households tend to live in very different localities.

Around 4.5 million people in the UK reported that they suffered poor health and had a limiting long-term illness in 2001. About 5.9 million people said they provide care and support to family and friends on an informal basis. The amount of this informal care is provided in areas of poor health across the UK. However, higher numbers of practicing, qualified medical practitioners tend to live and work in areas where the rates of illness are lower. This is an example of what has been called the “inverse care law.”

The poorest neighbourhoods with high proportions of families where no one is in paid work also tend to have the highest proportion of children and young people providing informal care for relatives or friends. The Census found 175,000 “young carers” aged 5 to 17 years of age, including 30,000 who provided 20 or more hours of care a week. Fully 1.2 million of the people providing care to family and friends spent 50 hours or more a week engaged in this support.

Areas with the highest proportions of young people with no qualifications tend to have the fewest teachers. The proportion of 16- to 17-year-olds with GCSE-level (general school-leaving exams) qualifications varies widely across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Areas with a higher proportion of qualified young people tend to have many adults (around the age of these young people’s parents) with degree-level qualifications, showing the social bias in education.

The areas faring the best have four times the density of teachers and one third the rate of unqualified young people.

Overcrowding (including London, parts of the South East, cities in the Midlands and the North, and Glasgow) and underoccupancy vary widely across the UK. The areas with the highest levels of underoccupied property tend to be found around the Home Counties and in parts of the South West, North Yorkshire and Wales.

The 185,000 unoccupied second homes and holiday residences are prevalent in particularly remote rural where an unusually high proportion of local people who are renting their homes from a private landlord.

The financial hub of the City of London and the South East accounted for the overwhelming majority of “high-paid jobs.” In most other areas of the country, people with very good qualifications are more likely to be employed in lower-paid work. In areas of higher unemployment, those with jobs are less likely to work long hours, but unemployment itself is associated with physical and mental health problems.

A graph illustrating the percentage of people in “top-level professional and managerial occupations” depicted a map of the UK with areas shaded in progressively darker colours according to how many top-salaried people they contain. The picture of Britain presents itself as the odd darker spot in an otherwise lightly shaded island, while a big dark stain spreads out in all directions from the river Thames.

Areas where many families have no parents in paid employment tend also to have many young people providing care on an informal basis. Children living in poverty also tend to be more likely to be acting as carers for their families.

Not owning a car can often be a good marker of material deprivation in modern Britain. The areas with the most families without cars are not only found in poor urban areas, but also in some rural areas. Nearly two thirds of households that have three or more cars contain just two or fewer employed people and one in five consists of just one person or a couple—an indication of family wealth.

The study was carried out by Professor Danny Dorling and Dr. Ben Wheeler from the University of Sheffield, Dr. Mary Shaw from the University of Bristol and Dr. Richard Mitchell from the University of Edinburgh. Its five areas—health, education, housing, employment and poverty—mirror the five “Giant Evils” identified by William Beveridge (architect of the UK welfare state) in

1942: disease, ignorance, squalor, idleness and want.

Dorling commented, “From that point of view, it is acutely disappointing to discover that so many opportunities and resources still depend on where people live. Wide and persisting inequality is reflected in big differences between ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ areas in terms of housing, education and health care as well as economic wealth. Perversely, people living in the poorest neighbourhoods with the greatest needs are often the least likely to have access to the services and support that would help them improve their lives and life chances.”

Dorling attributes this failure to successive Conservative and Labour governments. He comments, “This is a new low for New Labour.... It is sad to think that Margaret Thatcher signed up to targets in 1985 to reduce health inequality by 25 percent by the year 2000, yet look where we are. The areas with the highest life expectancy 10 years ago are the places that have seen the biggest increase in life expectancy since. Wealth lets you get health.... I think this will become New Labour’s Black Report.” (The Black Report was a damning study on health inequalities that was covertly released by the then Conservative government on an August bank holiday in 1980.)

Ben Wheeler added, “The Census data show quite clearly that although living standards have increased in 60 years, the rich and the poor in Britain continue to live in two different worlds.”

The authors of the report have shown Britain as a severely divided society—between those with the greatest need for good health care, education, jobs, housing and transport who continue to have the worst access to opportunities and services 60 years after the founding of the welfare state, and a powerfully rich elite that continues to amass wealth and privilege. All indications are that this divide is widening.

“Life in Britain: Using millennial Census data to understand poverty, inequality and place” by Ben Wheeler, Mary Shaw, Richard Mitchell and Danny Dorling is published by The Policy Press and can be purchased online at www.policypress.org.uk.



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