

Conceptual Note No.4

Measuring access to local services in the PSE UK Survey

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Introduction

Much public policy and political debate focuses on public services, with political parties competing to demonstrate that they can deliver services like health and education more effectively and meet ever-rising aspirations for quality of life, and expectations of universally available basic services, while keeping public spending and taxation within limits. There is a general perception that public services have an important role in combating social exclusion and poverty, and this is one of the reasons for this high level of public interest. Public service provision has become more controversial in the current British political context. On one hand, support for most local services, in the sense of seeing them as being essential, remains very high and has in some cases increased since 1999. This is despite several decades of the promotion of ideas about privatisation of services, or the use of a greater diversity of service providers. The currently promoted notion of the 'Big Society' is part of a perspective which seeks to reduce state involvement in services. The Coalition government's 'Big Society' drive has been accompanied by austerity measures which have resulted in major reductions in spending on local public services, which will have a significant impact on both the level and quality provision (Hastings, Bramley, Bailey, & Watkins, 2011).

Relationships between local services and poverty

A lot of anti-poverty strategies, particularly those relating to local government and the National Health Service (NHS), are carried out through public services. The belief that public services are important in countering poverty and exclusion partly rests on the idea that, as such services are typically provided free or at low costs, they must benefit all groups in society because the principal barrier to their use, cost, is minimised. There is a strong tradition of 'universalism' in the British post-WW2 welfare state, whereby services or benefits are available to all within the relevant demographic group without means-testing. However, not all services are provided free of charge, and even for those which are, other costs may be associated with them, such as travel costs (Lovett, Haynes, Sannenberg, & Gale, 2002).

In practice, although many local services are in theory "universal", both the quality and availability of services may be worse in poor areas (Gibson, Goodin, & Grand, 1985; Townsend & Davidson, 1982) as well as varying between geographical locations. For example, services are typically more prevalent in cities than in remote rural areas (Higgs & White, 1997). Moreover, families in poverty may face additional barriers accessing some services, such as lack of information about services, travel costs and lack of education.

Such barriers may be one of the reasons that the first phase of the PSE research found that poorer groups are found to be less likely to rate some services as 'essential', while often it is middle income groups who are most likely to support them. On the other hand, this finding may simply reflect the brute realities of poverty, where there is inevitably a focus on the most basic of needs, where the next meal is coming from and whether one has a roof over one's head.

Although poorer groups are less likely to value some services as essential, services do have a measurable direct impact on poverty. Free or heavily subsidized local services provide a form of 'social wage' or income in kind to households who may have little or no earnings from the labour market. Public services, particularly where universalistic in character, also provide an opportunity to participate in a wide range of activities alongside and on a common basis with the generality of the population, regardless of economic circumstances. This social participation may be valued in its own right, and for the wider civic and political benefits of the sense of solidarity which it promotes. It also contributes directly to the fundamental concept of poverty developed by (Townsend, 1962, 1979), namely the ability to participate in the normal life of the community. Such social and community participation may also contribute in a significant but indirect way to other key dimensions of wellbeing, physical and mental health and happiness (Nezlek, Richardson, Green, & Schatten-Jones, 2002; Pinguart & Sarensen, 2000).

Services may also contribute to the dynamics of poverty over time for individuals, and even over generations. Education has long been seen as the route out of poverty through the acquisition of skills and qualifications to enable access to job opportunities with better pay and prospects, and this can be true for adults engaging in 'lifelong learning' as well as for children and young people. Services like child care and public transport can make a critical difference to the ability of parents to participate in the labour market.

Certain groups may be particularly dependent upon public services, and hence potentially vulnerable to cutbacks and changes. Frail elderly people often depend on a range of social care and healthcare services as well as pension and benefit incomes. Lone parents may depend on education, pre-school and childcare services as well as basic income maintenance and Housing Benefits. Young people in transition from education into adulthood are another group potentially dependent on a range of services including further and higher education, student support, training, careers guidance and counselling, and those with low educational attainment and/or troubled family backgrounds may struggle particularly in this transition phase. One of the many diverse explanations for the severe riots that spread through Britain in August 2011 was the effects of budget cuts on local services and benefits relevant to young adults, especially for young people from more deprived backgrounds, at a time when the labour market for new entrants was particularly adverse. There is a range of circumstantial evidence consistent with this claim (Clarke, 2012; Hastings, et al., 2011).

It is important to include public services in the PSE survey as the level of access to services has significant effects on both standard of living and the quality of life of households. Moreover, public services represent a significant part of the real income of households on low incomes. The PSE survey presents a uniquely valuable opportunity to study the relationships between access to and use of public services and other dimensions of poverty and social exclusion, including low income, financial exclusion, physical and mental ill-health, poor housing and living environment, and social participation and support.

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