

HOUSEHOLD RESOURCES AND SOCIAL  
PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Commentary on Project and Questionnaire

October 1967

Beginning with the notable work of Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree and A.L. Bowley at the turn of the century, the investigation of living standards and of poverty has always had an important place in the social sciences in Britain. But a comprehensive national survey has never been carried out. Such a survey is now to be carried out by a team of research workers based on the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex and the Department of Social Administration at The London School of Economics. The work is financed by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust and is guided by an Advisory Committee consisting of representatives of the Trust, senior personnel of Government departments and academic experts in nutrition, statistics and social science, under the chairmanship of Professor Richard M. Titmuss, Professor A. Stuart and Professor J. Durbin have given considerable help with the special problems of sampling.

Objects of the Survey

The first object of the survey is to estimate the numbers in the population living at different levels of living, particularly the numbers living in or on the margins of poverty. The second object is to find what are the characteristics and problems of families and persons with low levels of living and thus begin to explain why they are poor.

Method of Approach

Our own pilot work and other research studies have shown that families living on low incomes are far less homogeneous than has been supposed hitherto. Fatherless families, families dependent on low earnings, families with a chronically sick or disabled adult and families with an unemployed head have problems which are very different from each other as well as problems which are very similar to each other. Even within these groups there are big differences, as between widows and separated wives, for example. We have come to the conclusion that in establishing people's needs in modern society and finding how particularly low standards of living might begin to be measured and explained, five steps are necessary.

- (i) Living standards among families of each type need to be compared. We want to be able to distinguish problems which are attributable to poverty rather than family circumstance or social status. In judging at what point families have resources which are adequate for purchases of food and activities which are customary in society we must have

good information for families of the same type with relatively high incomes.

- (ii) Living standards of families with relatively low incomes of each type need to be compared with the living standards of families of average composition and income.
- (iii) Variations in living standards over time have to be assessed. A distinction must be drawn between short-term or occasional and chronic poverty, whether due to some combination of family size, rent and low earnings or to absence of earnings (fatherlessness, unemployment, sickness or disability) or to irregular employment.
- (iv) Variations in people's access to the social services and in their environmental facilities and facilities at work also have to be assessed as aspects of living standards. A distinction has to be drawn between partial and total poverty. A family with a very low income may be found living in a modern council house, the father working in good factory conditions and the children of the family attending a newly built school. Paradoxes in living conditions of this kind are increasingly characteristic of societies in which the big corporation and a highly developed "Welfare State" are found.
- (v) The effectiveness of the social services which aim at helping the poor has to be established. We have to check on the extent to which some families apply for certain benefits, for example, free school meals and welfare milk.

In addition to trying to measure and explain low levels of living as found at present, we will study the use of those services which might help to prevent certain types of poverty now and in the future - particularly longer term poverty. Thus we are interested in which occupations are low paid, in the effectiveness of education, apprenticeship, job placement, training, re-training and rehabilitation services; in savings, fringe benefits and private insurance; in housing and rent policies, and in health, welfare and family planning services.

#### Survey Design and Procedure

A random sample of about 4,500 dwellings from 51 sample constituencies throughout the United Kingdom will be drawn and the households living in these dwellings will be approached for an interview. In many instances a subsequent call may have to be made to interview a husband or another earner so that full information for the household may be collected. Since information is required not only about the household but also about each individual member of the household, the length of the interview will tend to vary even

more widely than is usual in surveys. Many of the interviewers will assist in drawing addresses from rating and other lists for inclusion in the sample, following a procedure which has been carefully laid down. The interviews will be spread over 12 months from the end of November 1967 to the same date in 1968.

#### The Questionnaire: General

The Importance of Minorities The purpose of many surveys is to obtain information from "ordinary" families. If the questions are found not to fit unusual or uncommon households or if there are difficulties in undertaking an interview no special measures are taken by those in charge of the work and by the interviewers. In this survey, however, we are particularly concerned to obtain information from representatives of every minority in the country. People who are poor have very assorted circumstances: some are disabled and others are old, have large numbers of children, have been unable to learn to read and write, are immigrants, and so on. The more unusual the person the harder the interviewer should endeavour to obtain reliable information. We have tried to allow, therefore, in the design of the questionnaire for diverse circumstances, and we have adopted a form of lay-out which records answers which apply to each individual living in the household as well as to the household as a whole. But the interviewer should use discretion in making notes to elucidate certain answers and also to collect any information not covered by the questionnaire which seems to be important in arriving at a reliable picture of the individual's or the household's resources.

Information about non-respondents is also more important to collect than in many other surveys. Relatively more of the sick, the aged and those with large numbers of children are likely to have difficulty in granting an interview. Yet, relatively more of them are likely to be poor. We must ensure that our estimates of the incidence of poverty are not weakened by lack of information about non-respondents in the sample. We are, therefore, instructing interviewers to do all that is humanly possible to record vital information about the composition of the household, housing amenities and other matters.

The Importance of the Distinction Between Total and Partial Poverty. For reasons given earlier we must find to what extent families with low monetary incomes also have poor resources in other respects - housing and living facilities, capital assets, fringe benefits and occupational facilities and access to the social services. Groups of questions have to be asked about each of these aspects of living standards and some attempts made to estimate their total value to the individual and to the household.

### The Importance of the Distinction Between Short-Term and Long-Term Poverty

At the time of interview some families may have very low incomes through recent adversity - such as sickness or bereavement. They will not have been "poor" for very long and some of them will not be "poor" for much longer. In giving estimates of the incidence of poverty we must be able to specify how many people have been poor for long and short periods. It is, of course, difficult to collect information about income at any date in the past, so we confine ourselves to groups of questions designed to establish the current income (i.e. last week), the average income (i.e. during the last year), together with information about certain abrupt changes in recent years in employment status.

Three Measures of Poverty. In the survey we envisage applying three measures of poverty:

- (i) Comparisons with supplementary benefit levels as used by the Government in its own survey;
- (ii) Comparisons with average levels of living (median, for example, and mean income of different types of household and mean disposable personal income);
- (iii) An attempt to identify deprivation on the basis of both
  - (a) the levels normally found to be necessary for the standard percentage on food to be spent;
  - (b) inability to participate in even a substantial number of the activities and customs followed by the majority of the population of the United Kingdom (see Section IX)

### Questionnaire: Section I Housing and Living Facilities

The first aim in this section is to establish more carefully than is usual the exact composition of the household, taking particular account of visitors and members of the household who may be temporarily or indefinitely away, such as men working at sea or in the transport services.

The second aim is to obtain an accurate figure of housing costs (and house value), so that household income, less rent and other costs of housing, can be compared with supplementary benefit levels.

The third aim is to obtain various measures of poor housing:

- (i) adequacy of basic facilities of dwelling,
- (ii) degree of overcrowding,
- (iii) deficiency of bedrooms,
- (iv) overall facilities of household, and
- (v) degree of satisfaction with living facilities and environment.

Overcrowding will be measured first by applying the Census definition. The total number of rooms is divided by the total number of persons in the household and the resulting ratio will be coded. We will also use a slight modification of the bedroom deficiency index devised by P.G. Gray of the Government Social Survey and used in a survey for the Plowden Committee. This index is calculated by comparing the number of bedrooms in the household with the following standard:-

- (i) each married couple must have one bedroom
- (ii) any other person over 21 must have a bedroom
- (iii) any two persons of the same sex aged 10-20 must have a bedroom.  
If any remaining person aged 10-20 cannot be paired with a child of under 10 of the same sex then he or she must have a bedroom;
- (iv) any two remaining children under 10 must have a bedroom. Any child remaining must be given an additional room.

We have introduced the following small modifications: (a) if an infant of under one year is left after the standard is applied he or she is not assumed to require an additional room; (b) households comprising more than four persons and any other households with three or more children are assumed to require a minimum of two living rooms, including the kitchen only if it is big enough for the household to eat in, before calculating how many rooms are left for sleeping in.

In developing a "household amenities index" we have simply listed 12 items which are now widely available in British homes. Ideally we would have wished to have taken more account of furnishings, wall coverings and curtaining but these vary so widely in substance and quality that it is difficult to be both objective and meaningful.

## Section II Employment

This section has two special aims. One is to build up a picture of each individual's "work-record" over the previous 12 months. Low standards of living are often caused by intermittent sickness or unemployment or by spells of casual employment, for example. The situation at the time of the interview may not be representative of the pattern of work during the year and that is primarily why we are seeking information about the latter.

The second is to find what educational qualifications people have, so that we may analyse better the relation between education and standards of

We employ two methods which are based on extensive pilot work. One is to ask whether anyone in the household is suffering from a known disabling condition. A flash-card giving a list of conditions is shown to the informant. The other is to ask whether the individuals in the household (aged 10 and over) can undertake certain specific activities without difficulty, including washing down, tying a knot in string, negotiating stairs and going shopping. The coding is arranged so that a "score" (of 0-18) can be given for each individual which will crudely reflect his capacity to undertake ordinary personal and household activities.

The two methods used in combination will allow us to make estimates of the numbers and kinds of person in the population who are disabled and, in conjunction with income, will make it possible to generalise about the standards of living of households in which one or more of the members are disabled.

#### Section IV Occupational Facilities and Fringe Benefits

This is an experimental section designed to indicate the nature and adequacy of people's working environment and whether the individual benefits provided by the employer are a substantial supplement to earnings. Since a large part of adult life is passed at places of employment we are concerned to explore whether there are people who experience squalor at work as well as at home. And poverty at work can be real even when poverty is unknown at home.

We aim first to find what facilities are provided for indoor and outdoor employment, beyond those which are necessary for the particular type of employment (e.g. machines, vehicles, blackboards). We appreciate that some of the questions may be inappropriate for people working in certain types of employment and the codes in the first question should be supplemented by interviewer's notes.

We aim second to provide statistical information about the number and characteristics of people who are eligible and ineligible for different fringe benefits. Some people may not have had any sick pay in the past year and yet they are entitled to it. Again, many people are expecting eventually to receive an occupational pension. Such matters as these can make a big difference to the "security" of people's living standards, particularly in middle age. The problem is that individuals are often hazy about the exact benefits they expect to receive, particularly when they are young. The questions are designed to elicit minimum information.

The third aim is to give exact information about fringe benefits, and the value of fringe benefits, which have actually been received during the year. This will allow us to calculate how important these benefits are to certain kinds of people, including the poor. (It should be noted that



questions about fringe benefits in the form of income in kind are included in this section but that questions about fringe benefits in the form of money income are included, for convenience, in the subsequent Section V.

#### Section <sup>IV</sup> V Current Monetary Income

This series of questions forms a centrepiece to the questionnaire and aims to establish what was the total cash income in the previous week and previous 12 months from any source of each individual in the household. There are five groups of questions - on earnings, income of self-employed, Government benefits, miscellaneous sources of income and capital "gains". More than in any other section of the questionnaire the questions are derived from previous surveys - particularly the income schedule of the Ministry of Labour's Family Expenditure Survey, but also the cross-national survey on old people and The Ministry of Social Security's survey of families. The questions break new ground in the sense of (a) making searching inquiries of each member of the household and not only the head of household; (b) widening the definition of cash income to include capital gains and receipts; (c) paying particular attention to earnings from second jobs, and (d) establishing forms of income for any part of the previous 12 months so that we can give figures for income "last year" as well as "last week". Income in kind is left to section VIII of the questionnaire. Broadly, the definition of income elaborated by Simons, Kaldor and the Minority of the Royal Commission on Taxation (Kaldor, Woodcock and Bullock) is favoured.<sup>(1)</sup>

Income of a household does not include payments received by one member of a household from another, e.g. housekeeping, wages of domestic servant. Some of these exchanges are explored in Section IX. Amounts of income should not be entered more than once in different places or in different columns. Providing income is listed under the individual income recipient it will then be possible both to add up a total income for the household as a whole and a total income for each income unit (i.e. a married couple or an adult over the age of 18 who is an independent income "recipient"). It will sometimes be necessary to extract the personal income of an income unit (e.g. retirement pensioners, young persons at work) from the information about the household as a whole in order to analyse the adequacy, say, of social security benefits or compare information from the sample with data collected by the Board of Inland Revenue.

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(1) Simons, H., Personal Income Taxation, 1938, pp.49-50;  
Kaldor, N., An Expenditure Tax, 1955;  
Final Report of the Royal Commission on Taxation, Cmd.9474, London HMSO, 1955, pp.355-6.

## Section VI Savings and Assets

This short section aims to establish estimates of the total value of savings and assets owned by the household (the value of an owner-occupied house has already been estimated in Section I, where, for convenience, a question was added to other questions about rent, rates and amenities). This will allow us to calculate how many poor families have "reserves" of any kind. It will also allow us to "correct" information about income levels so that we get closer to a true picture of levels of living.

## Section VII Health and Disability

Our object here is to discover and measure the numbers of persons who are lightly or severely disabled so that we can assess their living standards.

estimates of the total subsidy (free money, etc.)  
the Government and the local authorities via the social services.

The answers will allow generalisations to be made about the numbers and kinds of eligible families not taking up certain kinds of welfare benefits, e.g. free school meals, welfare milk and educational maintenance allowances. In a minority of cases it may be very difficult to build up a reliable estimate, e.g. the number of consultations with a doctor in the previous 12 months, but such questions have been found in other research to produce fairly reliable results in general. Again, we are not attempting to get comprehensive data but only to get such data as we can about the costlier services.

## Section VIII Private Income in Kind

The aim of this section is first to obtain an estimate of the value of goods and services received in the previous twelve months from persons other than an employer, i.e. relatives and friends, as a contribution to the level of living. The second aim is to be able to describe the characteristics of individuals and of households receiving considerable income in kind. The third aim is to discover to what extent households are self-sufficient in the sense of (a) depending for a large proportion of their "income" upon their own produce, including poultry, (b) depending upon their own resources, i.e. income and services, and not upon goods and services supplied from outside the household.

All previous experience of asking questions about the receipt of income in kind shows that general questions produce gross under-estimates of such income. The more possible it is to ask about relationships and exchanges with specific persons or organisations the fuller the information that is likely to be supplied. Because of the wide variation in age, the kind of persons



likely to be providing gifts and help will also vary widely. All this explains the approach adopted in the early questions.

Questions are asked about services performed for others and by others for the household. This is unusual. Yet it is likely that some poor families with a good network of support from friends and relatives are able to maintain a comfortable standard of living. By contrast there are likely to be middle-income families who are rather isolated and therefore stretched to the limit in, say, rearing young children, either because there is little unpaid help available or because they have to pay to get the help they need. The value of unpaid services may be greater than of goods in kind to many families. And trying to give estimates of them will also to some extent reveal the "compensations" of the poor.

#### Section IX Style of Living

In this final section there are two main objects. The first is to find whether members of the household participate in ordinary cultural and spare-time activities (like going away on holiday, having an evening out regularly and going to sports meetings or club meetings) and have ordinary diets, including milk, butter and fresh meat. The second is to find what internal arrangements are made within the household for financial responsibility for the housekeeping and paying the rent and bills for fuel.

We hope the answers will allow us to justify drawing a "poverty line" at a particular level of income or of resources and so give objective precision to the major aim of the whole survey to define and measure the extent of poverty. Although there are wide variations in cultural pursuits within any society, we suspect that participation in those which are common tends, statistically, to diminish rapidly below a certain level of income, or of resources, for each type of household. It is, however, difficult in survey conditions to gain even an outline of some families' "style of living". Customs and activities are extraordinarily diverse. We cannot claim to be comprehensive, but only to be using some useful indicators.

We also hope that the answers will allow us to identify certain kinds of deprivation among families. Our pilot work has shown that some families and some persons, particularly housewives, go without meals or rarely or never have an evening out because of low income.

One problem with this type of sample is the fact that over-sampling will tend to occur in areas with many multi-household addresses, unless some measures are taken to correct it. A practical way out of this difficulty is to instruct interviewers, where they find an address with two households, (both housewives being interviewed) to delete the next address on their list at which a call has still to be made. Similarly, where they find an address with three households (all three housewives being interviewed) to delete the next two addresses on their list at which calls have still to be made. On the rare occasions that more than three households are found at an address then three should be selected for interview by some random process, and the next two on the list deleted as before.

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