

Poverty and inequality. Is York typical?

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In *Poverty: a Study of Town Life* Seebohm Rowntree (1901) wrote ‘Having satisfied myself that the conditions of life obtaining in my native city of York were not exceptional, and that it might be taken as fairly representative of the conditions existing in many if not most of our provincial towns.....’² Page vi. This article explores the truth of that assertion in the present day. And in doing so highlights the problems faced by those trying to study poverty and inequality at a local level.

Seebohm Rowntree undertook three studies of poverty in York in 1899, 1936 and 1950. The first of these was arguably the most important. It pioneered new methods, particularly budget standards, advanced understanding of the causes of poverty, challenged conventional ideas and changed minds. It influenced the thinking of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill and the social reforms of the Liberal Government after 1906. The 1936 study influenced the level of the benefits proposed by Beveridge in his 1942 report. The 1950 study was less important but contributed to the myth that poverty had been abolished until its ‘rediscovery’ in the work of Peter Townsend³.

Since 1950 no sample survey of poverty has taken place in York⁴. In 1999, taking the opportunity of the Centenary, we tried to persuade the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to fund a new survey, but they were only prepared to fund a review of the evidence. This concluded “At the end of the 1990s, York might still be regarded as ‘fairly representative’ of a provincial town.” (p 1)⁵.

The 2010 Child Poverty Act imposes an obligation on local authorities to undertake an annual Child Poverty Needs Assessment⁶ and York like a number of other local authorities has recently had a Fairness Commission⁷. Both have made admirable attempts to assess poverty and inequality in the City of York, but in the end there is a limit to what can be done without a sample survey.

Review of available sources

Census

The Census is a useful source. The latest 2011 census tells us that the population of York has grown by 9.4% with the fastest growth is in numbers aged 20-24 and 85+. The growth in 20-

¹ This article is an edited version of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society Lecture, Radical Statistics Society Conference, York, 23 February 2013

² B. Seebohm Rowntree (2000) *Poverty: a study of Town Life, Centennial edition*, Policy Press: Bristol.

³ This has all been reviewed in more detail in Bradshaw, J. (2000) Preface B. Seebohm Rowntree (2000) *Poverty: a study of Town Life, Centennial edition*, Policy Press: Bristol

⁴ Though there have been follow up studies of the families interviewed in 1950. I did a survey in 1967 of 300 over 80s who must have been children in 1899. Though living mainly on the basic state retirement pension (then £4.50 per week) and many failing to claim national assistance/supplementary pension to which they were entitled, they said that they felt better off than they had ever been in their lives!

⁵ Huby, M., Bradshaw, J. and Corden, A. (1999) *A Study of Town Life: Living Standards in the City of York 100 Years After Rowntree*, York Publishing Services: York

⁶ <http://www.yor-ok.org.uk/Downloads/Child-Poverty/Child%20Poverty%20Needs%20Assessment%20Update%20November%202012.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.yorkfairnesscommission.org.uk/assets/files/PDF/Findings%20and%20recommendations.pdf>

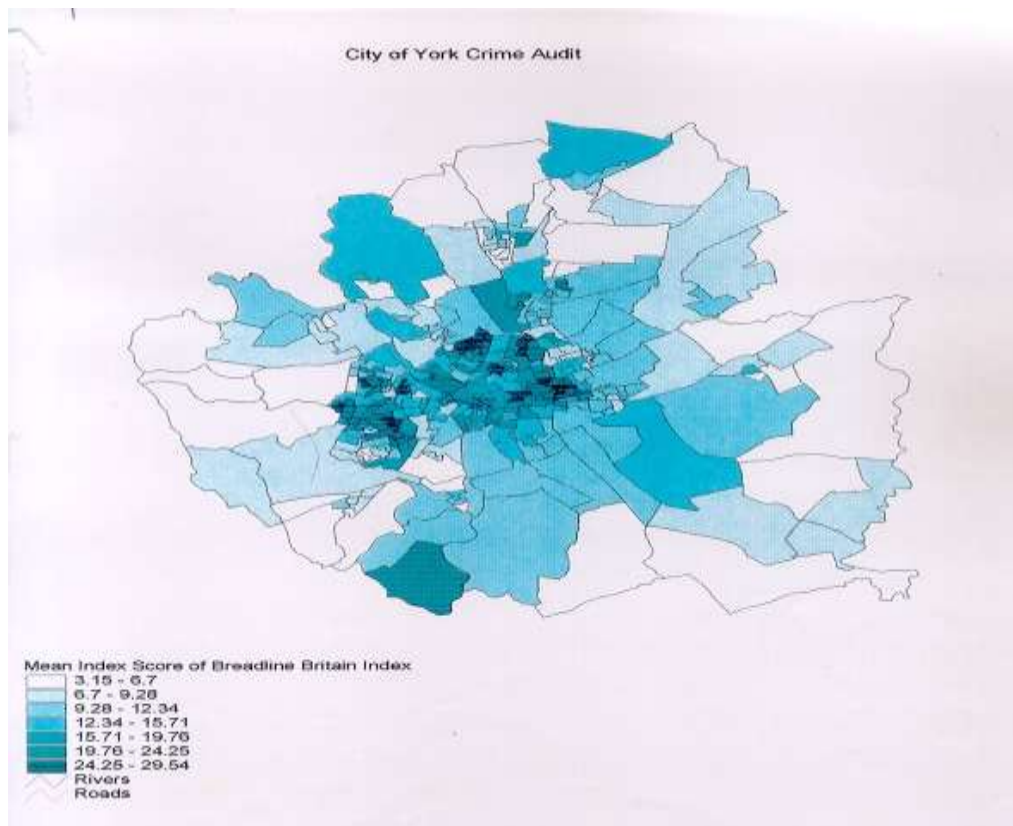
24 year old students explains why York has one of the lowest fertility rates of any local authority in England - they make up the denominator of fertility and are not having babies. York is highly qualified, 13th nationally but there were no other notable variations in terms of household composition, family structure etc.

The census is particularly helpful in contributing data on ethnicity – 9.2% of York residents were not white British and 5.5% were born outside the EU. Professor Gary Craig (in correspondence) estimates that this may be missing about 350 refugees, 600 non documented workers, 600 migrant workers and 500 students who did not take part. Together these would add another 1%.

The census is also useful as a source of housing data – central heating, overcrowding-occupancy rating, shared accommodation, and even risk of homelessness using concealed families who are not the householder. These were all used for the housing domain in the index of child well-being⁸.

It is also possible to use the census to derive an index of poverty or deprivation and to map it at a spatial level. So for example the Breadline Britain index is a weighted sum of six variables: unemployment, lack of owner occupied accommodation, lack of car ownership, limiting long term illness, lone parent households, and low social class. We used this to produce the map in Figure 1 of York poverty based on the 2001 census results.

Figure 1: York Enumeration Districts Breadline Britain Index 2001 census



⁸ Bradshaw J, Noble M, Bloor K, Huby M, McLennan D, Rhodes D, Sinclair I, Wilkinson K. (2009) A Child Well-Being Index at Small Area Level in England, *J. Child Indicators Research* 2, 2, 201-219

Administrative data

The other main source is administrative data and in particular the Index of Deprivation (ID). Figure 2 based on the latest 2010 ID distributes the York Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the national distribution of IDs. The overall ID is a weighted product of the domains –income, employment, health, education, housing, crime and the environment. The IDACI index is the child poverty index based on the proportion of children in households receiving means-tested benefits or child tax credits with incomes less than 60% of the median. The IDOAP is the % of pensioner households receiving means-tested benefits. If York was typical, the distribution of LSOAs should be even across the quintiles. It is clear that York is not typical. On all but two domains York has fewer LSOAs in the poorest two quintiles and more in the upper quintile. York looks fairly affluent. The exceptions are crime and the environment. The latter result is perhaps expected because York is largely urban. The crime result may surprise York residents, who think they live in a low crime city.

Figure 2: York index of deprivation quintile distribution of LSOAs 2010

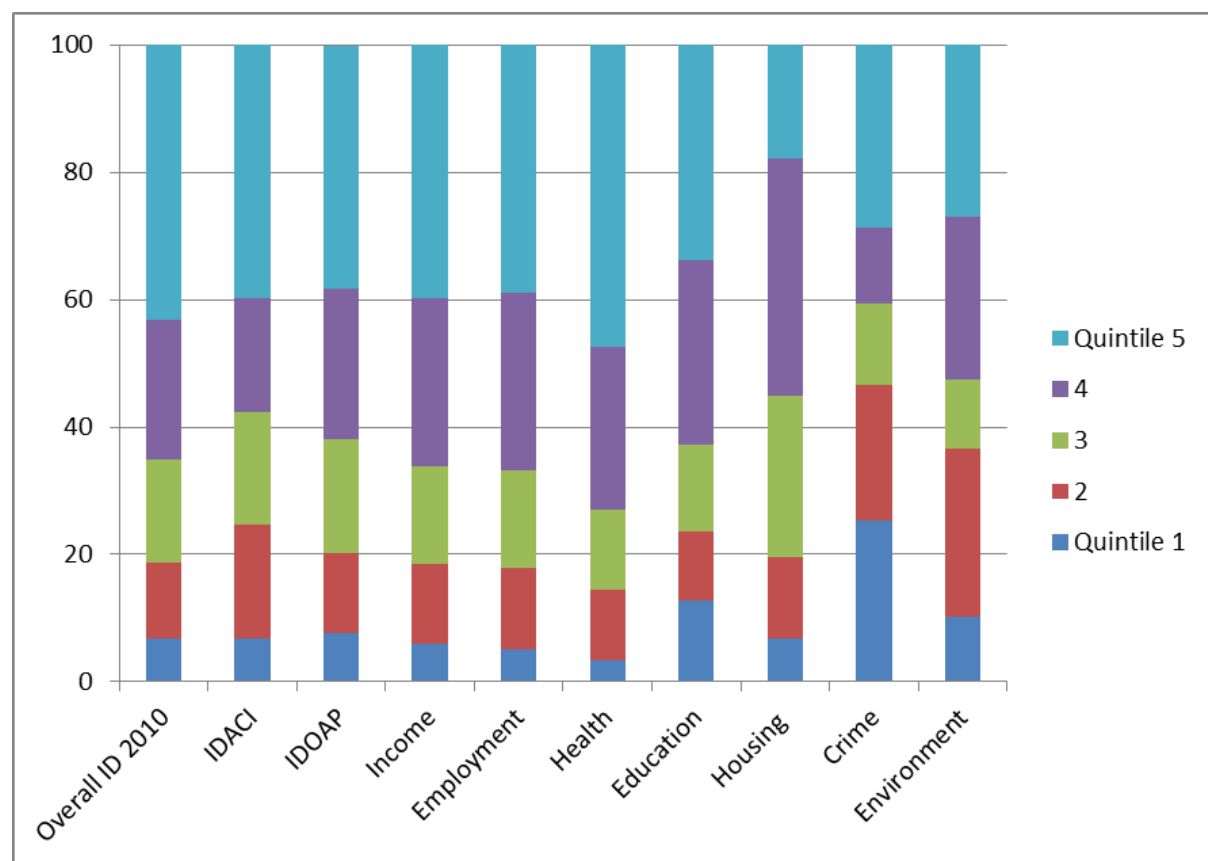
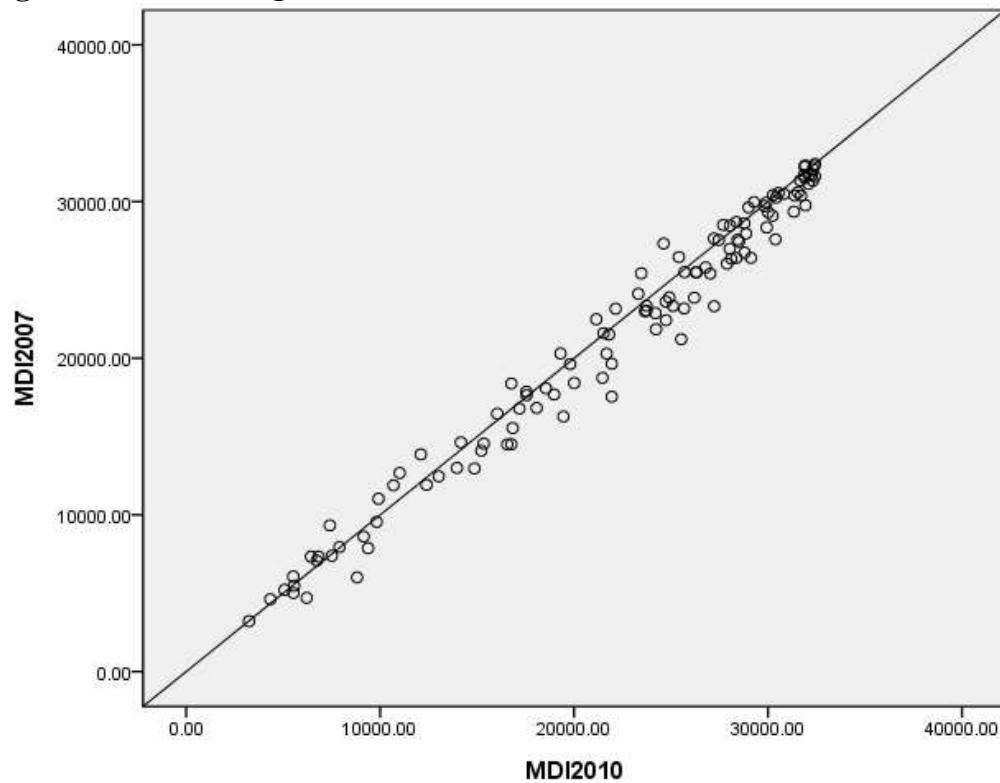


Figure 3 plots the LSOAs ranking on the overall ID in 2007 against 2010. It can be seen that the majority of York LSOAs have improved their position, with perhaps more improvement at the top (the less deprived end) of the distribution. This finding perhaps indicates a growing inequality, at least spatially.

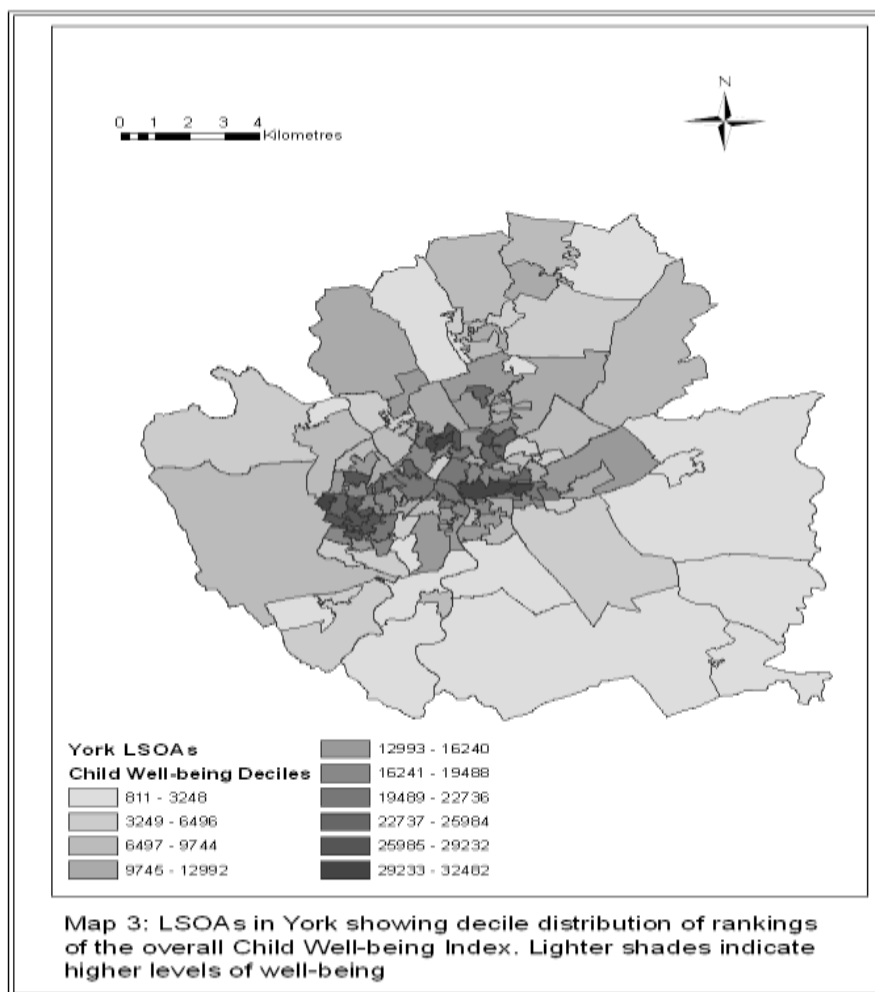
Figure 3: York Changes in LSOA ranks 2007-2010



We built an index of child well-being, drawing on the ID methods⁹ and this data has been used by many local authorities in their child poverty needs assessments. Figure 4 reproduces a map of the decile distribution of LSOAs in York using this index. There are a few LSOAs in the lowest decile but not many.

⁹ Bradshaw J, Noble M, Bloor K, Huby M, McLennan D, Rhodes D, Sinclair I, Wilkinson K. (2009) A Child Well-Being Index at Small Area Level in England, *J. Child Indicators Research* 2, 2, 201-219

Figure 4: York: Child well-being decile distribution LSOAs

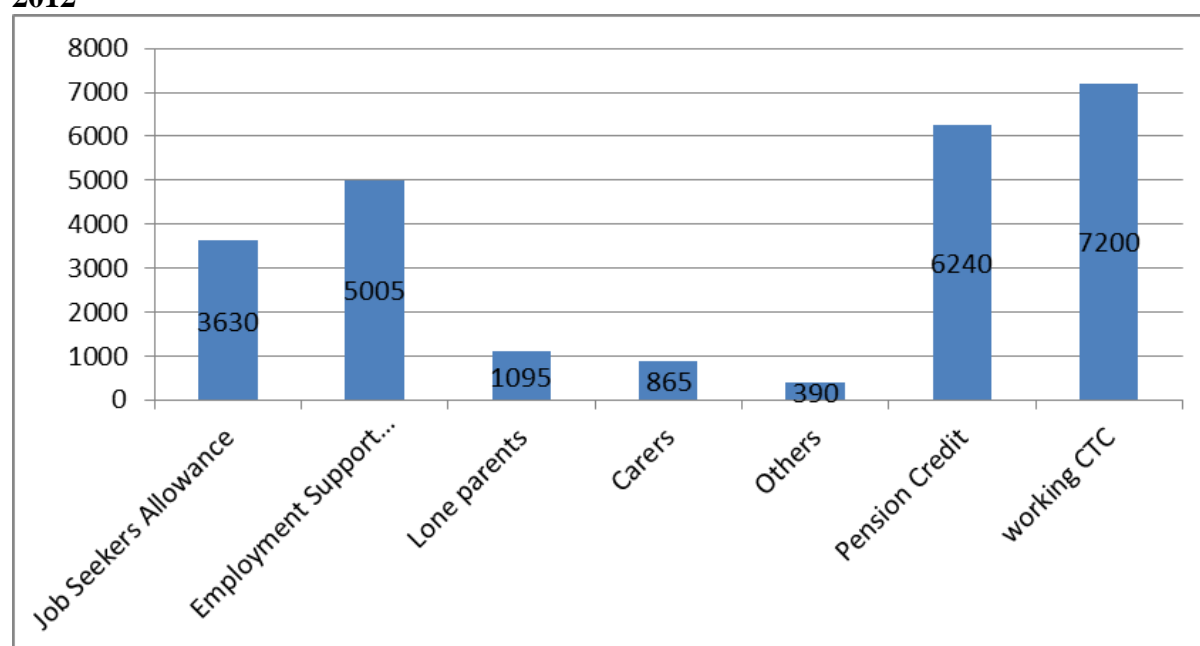


So York is not typical but it still has plenty of poverty. To illustrate:

- The Credit Union has recently closed and a Food Bank has recently opened.
- Every loan shark has a presence in the City.
- ATOS Employment Support Allowance re-assessments are being administered as cruelly and incompetently as elsewhere. The Welfare Benefits Unit appeals representation project has won £1million in five years. It has also won £330,000 in unclaimed Disabled Living Allowance for children in a year.
- York is still a low wage city – thousands of employees are on the Minimum Wage and hundreds will benefit when the Living Wage is introduced by some large employers.
- In early 2012 17,600 (only 4,800 out of work) children were on child tax credits excluding the Family Element.
- 24,400 (29%) of households were receiving means-tested benefits/tax credits in early 2012.
- Most of the non-pensioners among them will have to start paying 20% Council Tax in April 2013.
- House prices are high.

Figure 5 gives a summary of the number of households receiving means-tested benefits in the City. Of course there are many others who are eligible and not claiming.

Figure 5: York households (benefit units) receiving means-tested benefits February 2012



Conclusion

Census and administrative data provide some evidence on poverty and inequality. They are especially useful for summarising the poverty situation at City level and for spatial analysis by small area. But this only takes us so far. At a local level we lack the capacity to undertake the kind of analysis possible at the national level using the Family Resources Survey, the Understanding Society survey or the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey. We need a local sample survey. We need another Rowntree study.

Of course neither the census nor sample surveys are entirely satisfactory sources of data on poverty. As Professor Roy Carr-Hill pointed out at the Radstats conference and in a paper forthcoming¹⁰, they tend to miss particular groups who are likely to be poor including people in nursing and residential care homes, hospices and hospitals, hostels for the homeless, gypsies and travellers, barracks residents abroad and local prisons, most of whom are likely to be poor.

Indeed one justification for a new York poverty survey would be to pilot ways of tackling these under-enumeration problems. It should be possible to trace these missing poor in a local survey.

¹⁰ Roy Carr-Hill (2013) Missing Millions and Measuring Development Progress, World Development Online publication complete: 9-MAR-2013 DOI information: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.12.017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.12.017>