

## **"Explain how your work with the data set(s) illuminates the debate about living standards in Britain from c1900 to c1955"**

In an attempt to discover what types of people lived in council housing in the 1950s in Wolverhampton, I made use of the data sets from the Family Expenditure surveys which were carried out in 1953-4 by the Minister of Labour. These data sets illuminate a great deal regarding the debate about living standards in Britain in the 1950s. They inform us about whether poverty had been eradicated after the Second World War, contribute to the debate as to how reliable social surveys are for finding about how living standards and look at the motives of the government and social scientists at the time. Most significantly, in terms of the enquiry I developed for the classroom, the data sets have been used to allow pupils to examine the living standards of council housing tenants in Wolverhampton in the 1950s and make comparisons with people who did not live in council houses.

In 1950 Rowntree carried out a third social survey in York and argued that poverty had been eradicated due to the introduction of the welfare state. However, as Gazeley argues 'Rowntree seriously miscalculated the extent of poverty in York after the Second World War.'<sup>1</sup> A book that was written in 1965 is seen as one of the first challenges to the idea that poverty had been eliminated by the welfare state after the Second World War. The book called *The Poor and the Poorest* by Abel-Smith and Townsend was based on two Family Expenditure surveys, one of which was the 1953-4 survey. Townsend argued that poverty had increased during the 1950s and that maybe Harold Macmillan's 'Never Had it so Good' speech was inaccurate. Local newspaper articles from Wolverhampton in 1955 show the extent of the poverty that still existed as many people still lived in appalling conditions. The Express and Star on June 14 1955 reported that 'Two Bradley councillors faced 60 very angry residents' at a protest meeting about Bradley residents.<sup>2</sup> The early 1960s is therefore seen as a time when 'poverty was rediscovered' and led to a large number of slum clearances in Wolverhampton and the surrounding areas.

It was not just Rowntree who had carried out research on poverty as there had been various surveys carried out previously, such as the 1904 and 1937-8 living standard surveys. Yet the 1953/4 survey was the most detailed as it gave a sample of the whole nation, surveyed people who were out of work, provided detailed information about the incomes and surveyed people over the whole year so that seasonal variations could be taken into consideration.

Although the Family Expenditure surveys have been useful in trying to find out about living standards, and in particular the types of people who lived in council housing in the 1950s, there are also some problems in using these surveys. In 1953, the population of Britain was 50 million<sup>3</sup> but only 20,000 people responded to the survey and of those 20,000 people 13,000 kept detailed budgets,<sup>4</sup> a response rate of 65%. In 1951 the population of Wolverhampton was 162,000<sup>5</sup> but only 48 people

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<sup>1</sup> I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain* (Palgrave 2003) page 185

<sup>2</sup> Express and Star, Tuesday 14 1955

<sup>3</sup> Social Trends 41 - *Population* - Office for National Statistics

<sup>4</sup> I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain* (Palgrave 2003) page 179

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.localhistories.org/wolverhampton.html>

responded to the survey and only 14 of the respondents lived in council housing. This therefore raises the question of how reliable the 1953/4 Family Expenditure survey is for finding out about the types of people who lived in council housing in Wolverhampton in the 1950s and their standard of living. Other problems with the surveys which need to be considered are self-employment, informal economic activities, and a perhaps understandable reluctance to disclose information on income to survey enumerators.<sup>6</sup> If the public were concerned about giving away information about their income, then they might also have been reluctant to provide information on what they spent their wages on. Therefore can we truly rely on any of the information in the expenditure surveys?

One also has to question the reliability of the social scientists who made use of the 1953/4 surveys in their work. Townsend set out to prove that Rowntree was wrong in his claim that poverty had been eliminated. He criticised Rowntree for not being able to clearly define what we mean by a necessity for life but then struggled himself to define absolute and relative poverty.<sup>7</sup> As Dr Shave suggests when looking at any kind of research undertaken one always has to be critical of social surveys that are carried out as there are always issues to do with bias, the methods used and hidden agendas, such as the demand for a change in policy.<sup>8</sup>

Although the survey reliability could be questioned, it would appear that at least the government had started to be concerned about poverty levels and the standard of living of the British population after the Second World War, with the introduction of the welfare state. Richard Titmuss argues that 'by the end of the Second World the government had assumed and developed a measure of direct concern for the health and well being of the population.'<sup>9</sup> Yet there were other motives behind the survey of 1953/4. The initial purpose of the surveys was to estimate the weights for the cost of living index<sup>10</sup> and it was only later that social scientists decided to use the surveys to find out about levels of poverty. The government also wanted to make estimates for the appropriate direct and indirect taxation and the benefits that gained from the social welfare services.<sup>11</sup> The survey was also used as Cold War propaganda as affluence became a major issue and, in comparison to other countries, Britain had a low standard of living, lower than it had been before the Second World War. The Express and Star newspaper on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1955 reported of the Housing Minister, Mr Duncan Sandys visiting Bilston to look at the housing redevelopment and slum clearance. In the Bilston and Willenhall Times the article states that 'Mr Duncan Sandys went away with a 'ready appreciation of the town's housing problems.'<sup>12</sup> Yet does this prove that the Housing Minister was really concerned about the terrible conditions that the poor were living in as the day mainly seems to have been spent with the Mayor and

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<sup>6</sup> Measuring living standards from budget surveys lecture by Andrew Newell, University of Sussex

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/publications/affluence-in-the-making-the-1953-54-household-expenditures-enquiry-and-visualization-of-taste>

<sup>8</sup> Surveys and social information-a lecture by Dr Samantha Shave

<sup>9</sup> I. Gazeley, Poverty in Britain (Palgrave 2003) page 158

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/publications/affluence-in-the-making-the-1953-54-household-expenditures-enquiry-and-visualization-of-taste>

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<sup>12</sup> Bilston and Willenhall Times 14<sup>th</sup> January 1955

other officials, rather than meeting the people who were living in these terrible conditions. Dr Edith Summerskill from Warrington comments on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1956 that the fact that charges were going to go up to one shilling per item for NHS prescriptions proves how 'utterly remote the lives of the sick and poor are from the minds of the Conservative Cabinet.'<sup>13</sup>

Clearly there are problems in using the 1953/4 expenditure surveys, in terms of their reliability due to the motives of the social scientists and the government and the accuracy of the data collected, but the surveys have been very useful in designing an enquiry surrounding the sort of people that lived in council houses in the in Wolverhampton in the 1950s. This is due to the information provided on occupation levels and incomes, the types of housing the people in Wolverhampton lived in and the detailed information on their expenditure. Through the use of the data sets I have been able to help pupils decide if there are correlations between living in a council house, income and expenditure. Did whether you lived in a council house depend on your occupation or income? Were council house tenants more likely to drink more alcohol and smoke more tobacco than people who lived in or owned their own houses? Were council house owners less likely to have a healthy diet? Of course, if time was not an issue, then many other correlations could be made between the types of housing that people lived in and the amount they spent on household goods and leisure activities.

In conclusion, although I have focused on a relatively small area and with only a few respondents from the survey, I do think that through the use of the 1953/4 surveys, further research and my development of an enquiry question on council housing in Wolverhampton in the 1950s a number of national and even international concerns have been highlighted. R Searle suggests that 'the intensive study of the small tells us a lot about the wider world.'<sup>14</sup> The effects of the Second World War can be seen, the reasons why Britain needed new housing have been shown and the motives behind why council housing was built have been highlighted. The data sets have also shown us more about the everyday lives of the people living at the time, in both council and other rented accommodation and privately owned houses. This all contributes to the crucial debate as to how far living standards rose and how far did they increase for all people from 1900 to 1960.

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<sup>13</sup> The National Archives Extract from Hansard, 29th November 1956 (PREM 11/1493)

<sup>14</sup> Local Case Studies and Everyday Life-a lecture by Rebecca Searle