

Charles Booth: Housing and poverty in Victorian London

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It is a hundred years since the first volume appeared of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London*. It was the beginning of a series of seventeen volumes completed only in 1903. The study began with a close examination of poverty in London; it developed with detailed examinations of every type of occupation, religious influences and municipal effort. It was probably the first major social survey of the way that people lived, undertaken with a daunting comprehensiveness. Although Booth presented his work as a kind of census, it is much more; it involves a range of methods which are used to bring the study to life. He described his work as a sort of 'photography' - a striking metaphor for 1889. The observations are at times stark, sentimental, provocative, and moralistic; Booth was very much a man of his time. The work was to have a major impact, for it provided the basis of the arguments for the introduction of old age pensions, and directly influenced the subsequent analysis of poverty.

Booth began by obtaining reports from School Board visitors about the condition of poor families. Initially, he and his investigators avoided going into the houses themselves, considering that it would be an 'unwarrantable impertinence' to 'meddle' with people's lives, but as the survey progressed, he wrote, "we gained confidence, and made it a rule to see each street ourselves at the time we received the visitors' account of it". The picture that eventually emerged was a thorough analysis of London street by street, with an assessment of the poverty and social class of the inhabitants. A brief scan can do little justice to the breadth of detail. Volume 2 of the Poverty series, for example, contains notes on over seventy streets, household by household.

The types of housing are graded mainly according to the degree of poverty of the people who live in them, rather than the quality of the housing itself. The areas were graded by colour, so that their distribution could be plotted on a map. The worst areas are coloured black on the maps. They were overcrowded and insanitary. "In little rooms no more than 8 ft. square, would be found living father, mother and several children. ... Not a room would be free from vermin, and in many life at night was unbearable. ... Most of the doors stood open at night as well as all day, and the passage and the stairs gave shelter to many who were altogether homeless." The notes on households in black streets are given in the greatest detail. One example, somewhat abridged, will have to suffice:

"The story of the first floor in this house is one of the utmost horror. A man whose name I will not even pretend to give, by trade a sweep, having three grown-up sons, lived with and abused a woman to her death. She was an orphan brought up in an industrial school and had lived with him at least eleven years, having one child by him. She was good to the other children, as well as to her own child, and kind to the man. Wife and mother in every sense, except legally. But he so knocked her about that she was never free from bruises. ... The man had regular pay - 25s a week - and would spend nearly all in drink. He would swear at her, and kicks and blows would follow. ... She was got into a refuge, but he coaxed her back with fair words, with what result? ... A few weeks later the poor woman lay on her bed unconscious, with blackened eye and face all bruised. She was dying. ... There was no prosecution, the neighbours shielded the man, and he too is now dead."

The next class of houses were dark blue with black lines; the houses bore "the look of great poverty".

"No. 7 Rydal Street: upper. 3 rooms, 4 persons. Man, wife and 2 children. Labourer (nominal). A family of professional beggars. Always moving to escape rent. Lazy and filthy.

No. 6 Cleveland Terraces. 4 rooms, 7 persons. Man, wife and 5 children. Was in gasworks. Met with an accident and now cannot work. Clean respectable people. Great poverty."

Dark blue houses had a poor environment, with large houses often sub-divided into many smaller units. Of one street, Booth comments: "The people who dwell here look as poverty-stricken as the houses".

"No 1 Latin Place South. Cottage. Rooms 2, Persons 8. Man, wife and 6 young children. Gardener, out of work. Wife lately confined. Semi-starvation. Is helped by charity.

No. 2 Latin Place South. Cottage. Rooms 2, Persons 5. Man, wife and 3 young children. Paralysed. Wife does mangling. Dreadful poverty."

The better grades of property where poor people lived were light blue, purple and pink. A light blue street could still be judged 'rough and untidy', the houses 'ill cared for and shabby'.

"No. 4 Little Merton St. 2 rooms, 4 people. Man, wife and 2 daughters. Cabwasher. A drunkard. Beats his wife and was in prison for it. Wife out late. Daughter wild. 14 Bradford St, first. 2 rooms, 4 persons. Man, wife and 2 children. Boot clicker. Children are 4 and 2 years respectively. Comfortable."

Purple streets contained a mixture of poverty and adequate housing.

"No. 38 Gordon Rd. 6 rooms, 2 persons. Old man and wife. Tailor, but crippled and paralysed. The wife was a school mistress. Are fairly well to do. Take a lodger sometimes.

No. 6 Turner Rd. 1 room, 4 persons. Man, wife and 2 children. Was working at saw mills, but has been out of work for 2 months. Unthrifty wife. Dirty people."

Pink streets were adequate, but they were not without their problems. Many old people, and families where there was unemployment, disability or widows, still appear as poor.

"No. 43 Martin St. 3 rooms, 4 persons. Man, wife and 2 children. Blind. Has pension. Wife washes but is getting too old for it. Just manage. Poor.

No. 23 Chesterfield St. is occupied in two rooms by a seaman and sailmaker, with wife and three children. He works at his trade half the year, and goes to sea the other half. Is sometimes badly off. Two of the children go to school, and the other is partially paralysed."

The conclusions from the study were clear. Poverty was much more prevalent than it had been believed to be - nearly a third of the population of London was poor - and, although Booth was ready to blame many poor people for their poverty, there was also much poverty that arose without fault.

For Booth, housing conditions and poverty were closely linked. He defined poverty as a condition in which people had resources which were barely sufficient "for a decent independent life". Housing conditions were the clearest indication of people's material resources, because it showed what they were able to afford. Labourers whose income

seemed to be sufficient to have adequate housing, for example, lived in worse conditions than might be expected because their incomes were not secure, and they could not afford a more expensive commitment. Booth put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of overcrowding as an indicator of poverty; as the research went on, he began to dismiss other evidence that people were poor if they were not overcrowded, although there were major problems evident in the early part of the survey through sickness, disability and old age.

The maps revealed a distinct pattern of the incidence of poverty in particular areas. It was clear to Booth that poor people lived, not just in bad housing conditions, but in poor areas. He refers, for example, to one area as "a district where poverty is almost solid". Some part of this was attributable to the social reputation of the area:

"a row of houses falls into bad repute, due merely to a few undesirable tenants who, if they are not ejected, render the neighbourhood too hot for anyone with a taste for decency."

The judgment suggests that the tenants were 'bringing down' the area. But Booth did not, despite the received opinion of his time, and his own substantial prejudices, blame bad areas exclusively on the habits of the poor. Rather, he saw it as a combination of factors. One explanation which he favoured for the concentration of poverty was simple; people with adequate incomes were able to move out and improve their circumstances, and poor people were not. But there are many other comments contained in *Life and Labour*, particularly in the later volumes, about different influences on the spatial pattern of particular areas. For example, he notes at one point the effect of the layout and design of estates:

"In Battersea poverty is caught and held in successive railway loops south of the Battersea Park Road. ... This is one of the best object-lessons in 'poverty-traps' in London."

It would be going too far to suggest that Booth had a clearly worked out model of the city, or of the processes through which such problems emerged. Booth's skill was as an observer; he recorded what he saw, believing that 'the facts' would speak for themselves. The importance of his study was that it revealed so much about the conditions people lived in.

The comprehensive approach of the survey means that there is a great deal within it about the specific problems of housing, though this was not the central focus. Booth's work was unusual, for example, in trying to make an adequate assessment of the circumstances of single homeless people. He began with a study of common lodging houses - hostels, as we would now call them - though he argued that homelessness in such cases was an issue of lifestyle: "From the luxury of the West End residential club to the 'fourpenny doss' of Bangor Street or Short's Gardens is but a matter of degree". In Booth's day, there were over thirty thousand people in this type of accommodation in Central London; although there was a wide range of incomes, it disproportionately housed the poorest. Homeless people tended to move between lodging houses and sleeping rough. Unable to take a complete census, he took two samples from night shelters, including details of their age, employment, marital status and ethnic origin. Booth puts special emphasis on a count taken after a long frost, when few people would be sleeping rough, but he was dissatisfied with the quality of the information, and he regrets that he cannot supply more.

The main area in which the survey directly considers housing is in a discussion of blocks of flats, which were graded in relation to light, air and sanitation. Of one building, a four-storey block graded 'very bad', there is the following comment:

"... Everything is filthy, and the stench very bad. A few more steps lead to a dark

passage with two 2-roomed or four 1-roomed tenements. The floors above are similar. A notice outside tells passers that there are 'rooms to let, painted and papered, and in good repair'; and that 'none but quiet respectable people need apply'."

Much of the material on blocks of flats was contributed by Octavia Hill, who wrote a section about their 'influence on character'. Hill tended to dismiss the importance of facilities and sanitation in favour of improving people's characters; to some extent, this runs counter to the survey's strong emphasis on poor physical conditions. However, her criticisms of flats as an environment for families were picked up by Booth in the final volume, and many of the reservations about this form of living still ring true.

When, at the end of the survey, Booth reviewed his material, he felt able to make some more general statements about bad housing. He described twelve classes of bad housing. They included

- old housing in bad condition
- new housing that was badly built
- property which was neglected by the owners
- property which was abused by the current occupiers
- housing with insufficient space
- housing on damp or rubbish-filled ground
- "houses occupied by families of a class for which they are not designed and are not suited"
- insanitary houses
- badly arranged block dwellings
- badly managed blocks
- housing with excessive rents, and
- crowded homes.

Booth showed in this that he was aware, in a way that later commentators were not, that bad housing was not a simple issue. It was, rather, a combination of condition, design, management, social factors, and the use of the property. His analysis might have provided the basis for reconsideration of housing policy for poor people. Sadly, unlike the material on poverty, it was to have virtually no discernible influence at all. Much of the current debate on poor council estates is going over the same ground - to the point where Booth's analysis seems relatively sophisticated.

It is difficult to say whether there is much to learn now from Booth's work. No-one would want to take on what he said uncritically, and many of the important points he made have been made again since. However, there are a number of valuable insights. Some are historical. Booth's survey reminds us of the vices of an unregulated private market - why public housing was necessary, and why private renting started to die off. There are object lessons in the experience of life without an adequate system of social security benefits or health services. The study shows, too, that the link between poverty and poor areas is long standing, and that it applied in a very different housing market from that which we have now. Local authorities have been blamed for creating 'ghettoes'; but the ghettoes existed long before the local authorities started to build.

There are, besides, a number of observations in the study about poverty which seem in retrospect well-founded. First, poverty, for many people, is all-embracing; problems of one type are strongly associated with problems of other types. Second, although poverty tends to be concentrated in poor areas, it is not confined to them; it is found in many places. Third, poor areas develop for a variety of reasons, including the pattern of industry, the type of housing, the reputation of an area, and the power of the residents to choose.

The power the study has stems not from its judgments or arguments, but the weight of material it accumulated. The evidence in Booth's study reinforces and in many ways anticipates an understanding of poverty which it has taken a century to develop.

Further reading

Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Macmillan 1902-1903. Those interested in housing should concentrate mainly on the Poverty Series, vols 1-3, and the Final Volume.

There are two selections from Booth's writings:

H Pfautz (ed) *Charles Booth on the City*, University of Chicago Press 1967
A Fried, R Elman (eds) *Charles Booth's London*, Penguin 1971.