

SOCIAL SURVEYS
AND
SOCIAL ACTION

by

MARK ABRAMS



WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
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CHAPTER II

PORTRAIT OF A SURVEY

ONE way of explaining the nature and purposes of social surveys is to describe in detail the planning and execution of a specific enquiry. This chapter therefore is devoted to an account of the survey of working and living conditions in Birmingham carried out in 1937 and 1938 by the Bournville Village Trust¹.

The history of Birmingham during the 19th century is in many ways an epitome of the social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution throughout the cities of Great Britain. At the Census of 1801 Birmingham's population was a mere 73,000; by modern standards its dimensions were those of a placid county centre such as Worcester. It was, however, already growing rapidly. The city lacked a charter (and the accompanying restrictions), and had long attracted the enterprising free-lance craftsman. On all sides were to be found one-man workshops and small forges producing nails, firearms, jewellery, brass and copperware, keys, pumps, steam engines. As industry everywhere shifted its power base from water to coal and its tool material from wood to iron, Birmingham, with both coal and iron at its doorsteps, added to the diversity and prosperity of its trades. The population multiplied. By 1831 it had grown to 146,000—a doubling in thirty years. This, however, was but a

1. As reported in *When We Build Again*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1941.

beginning; between 1831 and the end of the century the city grew at a rate which, on the average, added nearly 100,000 to the population every ten years. Admittedly during these years Birmingham's boundaries had expanded a little, but even after allowance has been made for this we can express the change by saying that in 1901 seven people were living and working in the space occupied by one person in 1801. The significance of these figures was made clear when in 1913 the City Council decided to "investigate the present housing conditions of the poor."

At that time the population of Birmingham was approximately 860,000 and the total number of dwellings roughly 175,000. The Committee reported that 50,000 of these houses were structurally unfit for human habitation. "Some 200,000 people were housed in 43,366 dwellings of the back-to-back type . . . 42,020 houses had no separate water supply, no sinks and no drains, and 58,028 houses had no separate water closets, the closets being communal and exposed in courts." Most of these dwellings were concentrated in the seven Central Wards and had been built in the first half of the 19th century; many of the hovels were already almost one hundred years old by 1913.

Besides being dilapidated and unsanitary, Birmingham's slums were also frequently overcrowded. When originally built they had been intended for the use of a single family, and generally consisted of only three rooms. The enquiry showed that many "were being sublet to two and even three separate families."

The Central Wards had one other distinction. They were not a uniform expanse of decaying working class homes. "Scattered among the dwelling houses, and often almost entirely hemming them in from the outside world, were numerous factories, workshops and ware-

houses. . . . These were of every size and type, ranging from large factories to single rooms in the dwelling houses themselves, let off as workshops to sub-contractors in the small metal-ware trades. Sometimes dwelling houses and workshops were not even structurally separate, and in many a court the huddled buildings, half-dwelling house, half-factory, sprawled in squalor."

The Central Wards, however, were not the whole of Birmingham. Surrounding this core of approximately 250,000 slum dwellers there was another series of wards generally described as the Middle Ring. Here in 1913 were to be found 400,000 people housed for the most part in dwellings built by the speculative builder in the second half of the 19th century. The pressure on space was not as crushing as in the Central Wards; there were occasional open spaces; the houses, strung together in straight, grim terraces at least had sinks with running water and each had its own lavatory. The wage-earners living in the Middle Ring, however, were still dependent for work on the factories of the Central Wards and the long rows of villas merely represented a new sort of chaos where every day of the week hundreds of thousands of workers scrambled into the Central Wards in the early morning and then scrambled out again at night.

The remaining 210,000 citizens of Birmingham lived in the Outer Ring. For the most part this was made up of adjacent townships which had been swallowed up by the city in its great expansion of 1911. Here alone was there to be found spaciousness, fresh air and reasonable housing conditions. To the 1913 Commissioners there seemed no problems here and their report focussed naturally enough on improving the lot of the quarter of a million slum dwellers in the centre of the city.

The outbreak of war in 1914, however, meant that al

plans and recommendations had to be shelved. For the next four years Birmingham was the hub of Britain's armaments and munitions output. All house building was suspended and meanwhile thousands of migrants moved into the city. The Census of 1921 recorded a population of 920,000—or 80,000 more than in 1911.

The report of the prewar Committee, however, was not forgotten. With peace Birmingham started on a building boom which led the country. Between 1920 and 1938, 94,000 houses were built (half by the municipal authorities, half by private enterprise). In 1938 Birmingham could boast that one-third of its population lived in houses built within the preceding eighteen years. At the same time the rate of population growth had slackened and whereas in 1913 the average number of people per dwelling was 4.9, by 1938 it had fallen to 3.6.

A superficial examination of the record would have suggested that the evils of 1913 must surely have disappeared, that Birmingham had shaken off its foul inheritance from the 19th century and had built a cleaner and saner community.

There were, however, grounds for doubt. In 1935 when the Birmingham Medical Officer of Health carried out the Overcrowding Survey required by the 1935 Housing Act he found that the slums of 1913 were still standing practically untouched and were still overcrowded. People were still living in 39,000 back-to-back houses, in 52,000 houses which had no water closets and 14,000 which had no internal water supply. The dilapidated small workshops and ramshackle warehouses were intact and the centre of the city was still a jungle of crowded houses, factories and business premises.

Nor was this the only disappointment. The task of moving around Birmingham had become exhausting

and nerve racking. Each morning thousands of sheds and garages unleashed an avalanche of heavily loaded trains, buses, trams, motor bicycles, automobiles and bicycles to fight their way into and across the city centre. To anyone with an historical eye the results were ludicrous. The buses and trams barely averaged the speed of a trotting cart horse, while, on occasion, the automobile capable of 80 miles an hour could be outpaced by a brisk middle aged pedestrian. It was not surprising that twenty-five years after the 1913 report and after an investment of over a hundred million pounds the people of Birmingham were still preoccupied with housing problems and still arguing about possible solutions.

It was at this point that the Bournville Village Trust decided that a social survey was necessary. The Trust had been founded in 1900 and was itself the product of one attempt to improve Birmingham housing conditions. In 1879 George Cadbury had decided to move his chocolate and cocoa factory away from the centre of the city. He selected a site beside the River Bourn, but within the city's boundaries, and from 1893 to 1899 he bought the land on which Bournville now stands. His purpose was to create a community of cheap but good houses near the factory but not tied to it. By 1900 the village covered an estate of 330 acres containing 800 houses; each had its own garden and the houses were built in pairs or small groups. At that point he created the Bournville Village Trust in which he vested the ownership and management of the village. The objects of the Trust included "the amelioration of the conditions of the working class and labouring population in and around Birmingham and elsewhere in Great Britain."

It was in virtue of this responsibility that the Trust in the 1930's turned to consider the problems of the larger community of which it formed a part.

It started by posing three questions:—

- a. "What are the present housing conditions of the city?"
- b. What has been the effect of the policy of suburban development pursued with such energy since 1919?
- c. What indications are there of the lines along which the future local policy should be directed, as indicated by the logic of ascertained facts?"

To a limited extent some of these questions could be answered by available information, but the gaps were so large that clearly some sort of fact-finding census was necessary. It was decided to collect this information by direct interview with the inhabitants of Birmingham. This decision immediately raised two queries—who should be interviewed, and what questions should they be asked.

The "who" query was settled by deciding, first that the survey should be limited to working class Birmingham and secondly that only a sample of all working class families should be interviewed. The first decision meant that information would be obtained bearing not on the total 1,048,000 inhabitants, but on the 901,300 working class people in Birmingham. This 86% of the total could be identified comparatively easily since in 1935 the Medical Officer of Health had prepared for the Overcrowding Survey a list of all working class dwellings in the city; to this list were added those which had been built since 1935.

In all, there were 250,000 working class households in Birmingham in 1937. To have collected information from every one of them would have required an enormous staff of interviewers and would have taken a great many years. It was therefore decided to interview every thirty-fifth family on the list and to use the results from this sample of 7,161 households as a reliable picture of the whole 250,000.

There are excellent grounds in the mathematics of probability to justify this procedure. The layman, however, is likely to find more reassurance about sampling in this demonstration from real life. In 1936 Seebohm Rowntree in carrying out a survey of York interviewed every one of the 16,362 working class families in that city. Afterwards he took samples from this total to see what differences would have emerged in his findings if he had interviewed only a sample.

All the completed forms were first arranged in street order; and then various samples were selected, e.g., a sample made up of every tenth household, every thirtieth household, every fiftieth. The figures obtained from these samples were very similar to those obtained from the whole 16,362 forms. The following example is typical; it deals with the proportion of working class persons in various income groups.¹

Income class.	Complete Survey.	SAMPLE SURVEYS.		
		1 in 10.	1 in 30.	1 in 50.
	%	%	%	%
AB	31.1	30.9	30.1	31.7
C	18.9	17.7	20.3	18.2
D	13.9	13.7	15.0	12.3
E	36.1	37.7	34.6	37.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Total families.</i>	16,362	1,636	545	327

1. It is very unlikely that the results obtained from a sample will be *exactly* the same as those obtained by interviewing the whole population. However, one great merit of random sampling—the procedure described here—is that it is possible to state precisely the chances that the sample results hold true of the total population;

Thus far, then, the Bournville Village Trust had decided *who* to interview. The next problem was what questions should be put to them. These emerged for the most part from the original terms of reference.

The first reference was: "What are the present housing conditions of the city?" From this it followed that each householder should be asked for the composition of his family and the accommodation it occupied.

The second reference was: "What has been the effect of the policy of suburban development?" This could have opened up a very wide range of questions, but, in fact, the Trust limited itself to two main topics—the effect on the journey to work and the effect on children's leisure activities. It was therefore decided to record for every wage-earner in the 7,161 families his or her occupation, the name and address of the employer, the distance between home and work place, the time spent getting to work each day, the form of transport used and the weekly cost of fares to work. As far as the children were concerned it seemed essential to find out the type of place where they spent their leisure and, if it was outside the home, the distance they had to travel.

All these points were assembled and put together on a questionnaire. In its final form this consisted of two pages for the recording of answers dealing with family size, housing accommodation, rents, work place, trans-

the sampling error—as it is called—can be expressed within quite clear limits. If, for example, we have found from a sample of 1,000 households that 20% of dwellings are without a garden then we can say that the chances are 2 to 1 that a survey of the total population would reveal a figure somewhere between 18.7% and 21.3%. For an account of the mathematics behind this cf. F. YATES, *Sampling Methods for Censuses and Surveys*, Charles Griffin & Co., London, 1949. It should be remembered that all results based on samples should be considered as being valid within certain limits and should in fact be expressed as $x\%$ plus or minus $y\%$.

portation to work, and leisure activities of children. This was supplemented by a card containing possible reasons determining choice of living quarters and on this card informants were to record the reasons which had affected them.¹

The next problem was to assemble a team of people to do the interviewing. Most of these were women, some were social workers and others were professional interviewers who made their living by working on such surveys all the year round. The interviewers were brought together at the central office where they received detailed instructions as to how the work was to be done. When these instructions were completely mastered then each interviewer went off armed with a list of names and addresses of the people she was to interview and with a supply of questionnaires. Twice a week she brought her completed forms into the office where they were checked for omissions or apparent anomalies. Supervisors called back on a sample of informants to ensure that the interviewers' work was reliable.

Thorough interviewing is a slow job—the best workers were not able to interview more than twelve householders a day—and therefore, although field work started in September, 1937, it was not completed until August, 1938. This span, however, had considerable advantages in that it enabled the survey to record travel and leisure behaviour at all seasons of the year and under varying weather conditions. When all the 7,161 selected working class householders had been questioned, it was then possible to turn the replies into figures and tables. Some of the findings are given here to illustrate how questions lead to facts and facts lead to “indications of future policy.” The survey showed that:—

1. See Appendix for copies of questionnaires.

1. Of the 901,000 working class people in Birmingham in 1937-38, over half (53%) lived in the Outer Ring and only 19% lived in the Central Wards.
2. In the Central Wards one-third of the households consisted of only 1, or 2 people—usually old people whose sons and daughters had married and moved to the Outer Ring. At the same time, more than one-quarter of the families in the Central Wards contained at least 5 people and were pretty near the limits of overcrowding.
3. In the Central Wards half the houses had 3 rooms or less; in the Outer Ring, on the other hand, nearly 70% of the houses were of 5 rooms or more and were much too large for small families.
4. Except in the Outer Ring, extremely few workers owned the houses in which they lived; home-ownership, therefore, would not constitute one of the barriers to replanning the rest of the city.
5. At the same time, 71% of tenants in the Central Wards paid less than 10s. a week in rent; rehousing them elsewhere might well involve either heavy rent subsidies or else a cut in their expenditure on food and clothes, etc.
6. Although only 18% of Birmingham's wage-earners lived in the Central Wards, yet 36% of the city's wage-earners had their jobs there. This was all the more remarkable when put alongside the fact that nearly half the wage-earners who lived inside the Central Wards went elsewhere for their jobs. Some parts of the Outer Ring were little more than dormitories for the workers.
7. In the Outer Ring, where 90% of the post-1920 houses had been located, one-third of all wage

- earners had to travel more than 3 miles to get to work and another 3 miles in the evening to get home.
8. In the Outer Ring, the cost of travelling to and from work added at least 3s. a week to the cost of living of the average working class family. (As compared with families in the Central Wards, they were already paying 5s. a week more in rent).
 9. In the Central Wards, on fine days approximately two-thirds of the children were turned out to play either in the street or in the courtyard. In the Outer Ring two-thirds of the children either played indoors (where there was ample room for them) or else in the gardens attached to their homes.
 10. Almost 28% of those living in the Outer Ring said they would like to move, and 38% of these gave as their reason that they wished to be nearer the principal wage-earner's place of work.

This is the kind of factual material unearthed by the Survey of 1937-1938. From the mass of tables the Bournville Village Trust was able to put forward a new housing policy "as indicated by the logic of ascertained facts." Briefly, this suggested policy was that:—

- a. The City must cease its aimless sprawling expansion of the preceding twenty years into ever newer suburbs.
- b. At a distance of some 20 to 30 miles beyond the present city limits one or more new semi-autonomous satellite towns should be built; each would have a population of 30,000 to 50,000 and each would have its own factories and work people—both brought out from the Central Wards.

- c. The balance of the population in the Central Wards should be rehoused in flats.
- d. Even so, the centre of the city would be congested unless the present multiplicity of small manufacturers were also rehoused in new buildings composed of "flatted" workshops.
- e. The present suburbs in the Outer Ring should as far as possible be turned into more self-contained communities by introducing into them both factories and leisure institutions.

Here then is what is meant by a social survey. Essentially it is nothing more than a technique by which, once society has become aware of a social problem, the relevant facts as to the dimensions and origins of the problem are collected by interviewing the people involved in the problem.

At a first glance it seems as if nothing could be easier. There are, however, three technical difficulties in the design and execution of every social survey, and unless these are handled satisfactorily the information collected will be inaccurate and misleading and the policy built on it may be disastrous.

The first technical difficulty is that of drafting the questionnaire. This can only be started when the sponsors and directors of the survey have set out clearly the nature of the problem under study and have agreed on what hypothetical causal relationships are to be tested by the survey. It is then necessary to turn these "terms of reference" into a list of questions to be put to each informant. Irrelevant questions must be excluded and those included must be simple and unambiguous and yet capable of eliciting all the information sought. This drafting of the questionnaire is no easy task. The language of ordinary intercourse is often a limp and

confusing medium and in most surveys it is usually found necessary to try out and modify the questionnaire several times before a satisfactory form is established.

The next technical problem turns on selecting the appropriate informants. First there is the problem of the type of informants. This must be determined by the original statement in which the purposes of the survey are set out along with the hypotheses which are to be tested. If, for example, we were concerned with a study of the effects of television on family life we would take our informants from the two main groups of families—those with television sets and those without sets. (The latter would constitute a control group—provided, of course, that they matched the television households in all respects except the one item of television ownership.) Within the two groups we would collect information from all the individuals in the two types of household. To decide who are the relevant informants, however, is only half the job. Usually it is necessary on grounds of time and cost to collect information from only some of the people in whom we are interested. There then arises the problem of choosing a sample whose informants can be accepted as being true of the whole group. To do this we must pick a random or, as it is sometimes called, a probability sample. This is a sample where selection is entirely mechanical and neutral, where every member of the group has an equal chance of being selected as one of the sample. If we have a list of the names and addresses of all the people in the group then it is comparatively easy to make such a selection; we can number them all and then pick out names at a fixed interval—e.g. every 20th name. Frequently, however, such a list does not exist and then the statistician must either devise some means by which it can be compiled or else he must think of some other way of picking a random sample.

Once the statistician has drawn up a list containing the names and addresses of the people who constitute, for the purposes in hand, a random sample of the population, then it is essential that all these and only these people should be interviewed.

In calling on her assigned informants the interviewer may find that some of them are "out." These people may well differ in important characteristics from those who are "in" when the interviewer calls. They may, for example, be housewives who have no dependent children and are therefore out at work augmenting the family income. If, because of their comparative inaccessibility, they are dropped from the sample, then the original "randomness" of the sample is impaired and some misleading bias introduced into the results.

The third problem in all surveys is that of ensuring that, in conducting their interviews, the interviewers are completely objective—both in the manner in which they question the informant and in the mood in which they hear what is said to them. Interviewing is a skilled and exhausting job and the best drafted questionnaire and the most carefully selected sample will be jeopardised unless the research team contains technical experts capable of selecting, training and supervising good interviewers.