SOCIAL SURVEYS AND SOCIAL ACTION

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Surveys of Old Age

Over the past hundred years there have been considerable improvements in the average standard of living, in public sanitation and in medical science. One consequence of these changes is the appearance of a new social problem—the emergence of a substantial and growing number of people who have passed the prime of life. In 1881 out of a total population of 29,700,000 in Great Britain only 1,375,000, or 4.6%, had reached or passed their 65th birthday; today, in a total population of approximately 50,000,000 they total over 5,000,000 or one-tenth of the population.

The anticipated problems of old people can be grouped under three main headings——economic, health, emotional. These are not watertight divisions; in fact, the interaction between them is usually great, but the departmentalisation is a research convenience.

Most men obtain an income by working as paid employees; most women depend on what they receive from their husbands. Today the great majority of male employees retire from paid work at 65 years of age and thus have to look elsewhere for their livelihood. And most women who have reached or passed 65 are either widows or the wives of men who have stopped earning. Some old people have private means and some enjoy pensions from their previous employment, but by and large the majority of old people have to be aided by the State. There is, therefore, for both old people and the State the economic problem of ascertaining their needs and the amount of aid necessary.

Again, with increasing years health deteriorates; there is a greater incidence of such ailments as rheumatism, arthritis, arteriosclerosis, hypertension, etc.; hearing

and eyesight are affected and even those who are free of the more obvious ailments have to take things more slowly and have to avoid physical strain. Thus, in this area, too, there is need for research—to measure the incidence and cost of various forms of ill-health and threats to good health, and to discover the most effective means by which sick old people can be looked after and restored to ordinary life.

Finally, there are the emotional problems of old age. For the normal person the prerequisites of happiness are affection, security, a sense of significance and some feeling of creative participation in the life of a group. These goals are reached in a variety of relationships —within the family, among friends who are contemporaries, in the workshop, the club, social organisations, the church, trade unions, informal cliques and so on. For women, and they constitute almost two-thirds of all old people, these paths to contentment are fewer than they are for men. But for both sexes, with old age the individual is increasingly deprived of them. Spouses die, children marry and leave home, one's contemporaries disappear, the factory and office bar their doors, younger people take over the responsibilities of running the club or the union, the civic committee or the school board. With advancing years there is a crumbling of the old ties and the individual has to try and make do somehow with what is left. The happy person is one who neither wants more from others then they are willing to give, nor wants to give them more than they are willing to accept. Unfortunately, present day society wants little from old people and is prepared to give them little; and many of the aged find it difficult to adjust to this emotional poverty. Old age often calls for personal adjustment on a considerable scale and one that may be beyond the resources of many people. In this field

then the research problem is to discover precisely what adjustments have to be made by society and by the individual and by what means they can be best achieved.

Research in all three areas—economic, physical health, and emotional—has already been launched through the use of social surveys. And in the history of this work we again come across the two men who sixty years ago first devised and applied the techniques of the social survey. One of the first proponents of old age pensions was Charles Booth. It was largely his facts and advocacy which led at the beginning of this century to the birth of the British system of State old age pensions.

Since the end of the Second World War, much of the research into the sociology of old age has been under the sponsorship and direction of Seebohm Rowntree. For example, in 1947 and 1948 the Rowntree Village Trust financed a census of all old people living in the city of York. The interviews with them were conducted on the basis of a questionnaire which yielded a precise statistical account of:—

The composition of households containing old persons (i.e., women aged 60 or over, men 65 or over);
Their housing accommodation;
The sources of income of old people;
Their leisure activities and interests;
Their domestics arrangements for cooking, shopping, housework, baths, room warming, etc.;
The incidence of physical immobility and of such handicaps as deafness and poor eyesight, and their more recent experiences of ill-health.
Their experiences of paid employment over recent years and their attitudes towards continued employment;

Their contact with friends and relatives both as hosts and as guests.

The survey report was completed in the summer of 1949 and provides in many ways a factual basis from which the community can deal with this new problem.

Town Planning Surveys

The inter-war years saw a tremendous boom in house-building in Britain; by 1939 one-third of all British families were living in dwellings built since 1919. Almost 2,000,000 houses were put up in the last five years of peace. The greater part of this building followed a simple locational rule—it was tacked on, in an endless sprawl of semi-detached villas, to the periphery of any available prosperous city. Most of these houses were for sale to the lower middle class, but some of the new dwellings were for the less favoured sections of the working class, and here the planning was equally disastrous. For the most part it led to the creation of vast, municipally owned isolated housing estates where the tenants were limited to a handful of family types. Practically nowhere was the new housing directed by an understanding that people are social animals; that for a complete personal and family life there must be to hand a wide range of social and economic facilities, and that houses form a town only when their addition constitutes a self-contained and balanced community both for work and for living.

The survey of Birmingham carried out by the Bournville Village Trust showed how the social survey technique could be applied in dealing with the problem of suburban sprawl. At much the same time Ruth Durant in her report *Watling: A Survey* delineated

the social defects that had been built in to a typical working class municipal housing estate in outer London.

Even before 1940 there was a rapidly growing interest in town planning. The war greatly stimulated this concern. In many of Britain's largest cities the Luftwaffe destroyed or irreparably damaged hundreds of thousands of houses; either by accident or design many of these dwellings were the homes of working class slum dwellers and the overnight clearance of these highly valuable real estate sites in city centres removed many of the pre-war obstacles to replanning.

Towards the end of the war the Government set up under Lord Reith a New Towns Committee. Its task was "to suggest guiding principles on which such (new) towns should be established and developed as self-contained and balanced communities for work and living." In its interim report published in 1946 the Committee declared that "a new town must provide shopping, recreation and other business and social facilities, not only for its own citizens but for people from the surrounding area. . . . There is a minimum size for a new town below which it ceases to be a practical proposition as a balanced industrial unit. As its size increases the social facilities can be enlarged proportionately, in particular the facilities for education. But beyond a certain point the appropriate balance between industry and housing is hard to maintain, the internal distances become too great, the open country is too remote from the centre, and the sense of corporate living and responsibility is lost. . . . Taking all these factors into account, a preliminary study indicates as a general guide a range from 20,000 to 60,000 of population."

In their subsequent reports the Committee expounded what they considered to be the appropriate administrative machinery for such towns. They set no limit to the

number of new communities which should be created, but they pointed out that they were called for in two distinct sets of circumstances. First, there was the task of syphoning off population from the old gargantuan metropolitan centres such as Greater London and here the Committee envisaged a ring of satellite, but not dormitory, towns built at points some 25 to 40 miles from the centre of the original metropolis. In some cases the development would be superimposed on existing villages and small towns and the additional population drawn from overcrowded or badly sited parts of the metropolis.

The second type of new town would be those created to drain off population from some of the pre-war depressed areas; the "emigrants" would move only short distances away from their old dwellings and the new towns would provide them with both new homes and new jobs.

It was not enough, however, merely to provide "guiding principles." Each projected new town had its peculiar social and economic difficulties. Moreover, some of the communities faced with contraction felt the need for more facts before the adjustments could be made. Once more the administrators decided to obtain their facts by using the social survey tool. Here we need describe only two typical examples.

The borough of Holborn is almost in the heart of the County of London. Its boundaries contain the University of London, the Inns of Court, the squares of Bloomsbury, and many of London's famous theatres and restaurants. They also contain, or did until recently, some of the foulest slums in Britain. A post war survey in the working class half of Holborn showed that 62% of families had no bathroom, 38% no separate water closets, and 24% were in dwellings which had no separate water

supply; nearly one-third of the people were living under conditions of gross overcrowding. At the same time, land values were extremely high. At a first glance one would have said that here was a population whose problems could have been solved easily enough by transference to one of the projected new towns. In the summer of 1948, however, the Borough Council decided to conduct a survey among the working class half of the Holborn population. Informants were selected by choosing every fifth household listed on the Electoral Registers. Interviews with this sample of 1,000 families showed that, of all Holborn wage-earners:

Four-fifths worked in Holborn itself or an adjoining borough;
Three-quarters spent less than 3d. a day on fares;
Half went home daily for their mid-day dinner;
Half worked in occupations which, because of unusual hours, made it especially desirable to live near their work (e.g., theatre and hotel employees, newspaper printers, terminal railway porters);
Nearly half of them worked in trades which could not be moved out to small new towns; and
Less than one-fifth were willing to move to a new town.

These and similar findings helped the Borough Council to decide that approximately two-thirds of Holborn's working class families would have to be housed in Holborn; only 18% could be counted upon to make a fresh start in a new town, and perhaps another 18% could be satisfied with homes in boroughs adjacent to Holborn.[1]

A second typical town planning social survey was that

1. This account taken from *Holborn Council News* (The Borough's Quaterly Newsletter), Winter 1948.

carried out in 1948 by the Peterlee Development Corporation in East Durham. Peterlee is one of the projected new towns to be built in the North.[1] Ultimately it will house compactly some 30,000 of the 80,000 people who now live in the Easington Rural District—a string of scattered coal mining villages in the triangle formed by West Hartlepool, Durham City, and Seaham Harbour. When the Easington District Council considered its area in 1946 it found that it had a two-fold problem. First, there was housing; in many of the villages living conditions were hideously squalid; there were long rows of single story houses with no gardens, the streets were often unmade, underground subsidence had cracked and slanted walls and floors, complete villages huddled in the shadows of colliery spoil heaps and within a stone's throw of the pithead; many homes were without tapped water supplies. The second problem was economic. The people of the Easington Rural District depend for their livelihood on coal mining. In 1929, out of a total of 23,562 insured workers in the area, 20,897 (almost 90%) were in mining. Even in 1939 after ten years of heavy unemployment the proportion of miners had fallen only a little—to 76%. What was even more disturbing was that the long-term prospects for the local mines seemed less than bright. The Council estimated that from the middle 1950's an appreciable number of local miners would become redundant partly because of worked out seams and partly as a result of the mechanisation of coal mining. In the past these developments had meant unemployment, poverty and, finally emigration of the young men and women of the villages.

It was against this background that the Government

1. It takes its name from Peter Lee, a Durham miner who became President of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.

set up the Peterlee Development Corporation. Its job was to build new homes in a new city for some of the people of Easington and to reduce the community's almost exclusive dependence upon a not too healthy mining industry.

The Corporation quickly got to work on the physical plans for the new town, but soon found that the data for the "human" plans were lacking. They might well have adapted the questions which Booth put to himself sixty years earlier. "Who are the people of Easington? How do they really live? What do they really want? Do they want what is good? And, if so, how is it to be given to them?"

Indeed, it was in this spirit that the Corporation decided in 1948 to launch a social survey of the Easington Rural District. From its total of 20,000 families a sample of 2,000 was selected by choosing every tenth household. The questions put to them provided from the answers a record of:—

The frequency of families of various sizes and patterns;
The types of accommodation occupied, the rents paid and the form of tenure;
The occupations of the employed population, and their working hours;
The relation between home and work place—journey time and method of travel;
The industrial experience, if any, of those adults not employed; and
The number of families with recent emigrants, who they were, their present whereabouts and occupations and likelihood of returning.

The survey found, among other things, that the average Easington household was small—few contained more than four people; that men outnumbered women—

the result of interwar emigration by young girls for whom the district offered neither jobs nor husbands with jobs; that over 70% of the men were miners working at pits adjacent to their homes; that extremely few women went out to work—presumably in part because in a miner's home where a husband and son may be on different shifts the household duties for both wife and daughter are heavy; that many of the men who had left Easington had not seized the opportunity to change their jobs, but had remained miners; that over half the workers in the district were on jobs where shift-working was in operation; that while there was little overcrowding, living conditions were often poor—only one-quarter of families had an indoor lavatory and half had no bathroom; that many workers had invested their savings in home ownership—22% owned the dwellings in which they lived; that rents were remarkably low and that many miners lived in colliery houses at nominal rents.

The survey thus revealed the social limitations within which the planners of Peterlee had to work.

Government and Surveys

In recent years the government has made a substantial incursion into the survey field. Before the war certain Departments had on occasion made use of survey methods. For example, during 1937-38 the Ministry of Labour in order to collect the data for a new cost of living index carried out a large budget survey among working class families. The Post Office had conducted surveys of the potential telephone market in connection with its publicity campaign and the Ministry of Agriculture had, through surveys, studied public reaction to the National Mark schemes.

On the outbreak of war, various official bodies set out through survey methods to investigate morale and to assess the impact of governmental propaganda on various sections of the public. After an initial and uneasy period of unco-ordinated experiment, the Ministry of Information, through its Home Intelligence Division, organised the Wartime Social Survey. After a series of press and parliamentary outbursts about "snoopers" this organisation steered clear of what were called "morale" surveys and concentrated on the more factual type of enquiry. Thus they maintained a check on housewives' success or failure to obtain in the shops various household goods, they studied the clothing needs of different occupational groups and shortages of crockery, hollow-ware, utility furniture, and corsets. Towards the end of the war the Ministry of Health commissioned the Wartime Social Survey to provide a monthly national index of morbidity, i.e., all ill-health. Housing and town planning surveys have since been carried out for the Department of Health (Scotland), for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and for the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. The organisation has now dropped the word "Wartime" from its title and as the Social Survey attached to the Central Office of Information carries out a wide range of enquiries for various government departments.[1]

The value of a social survey unit in government administration is now appreciated by most civil servants and since the end of the war the unit's work has become an integral part of governmental administrative and social

1. An account of the scope of their work for government departments and public corporations is to be found in P. G. GRAY and T. CORLETT: *Sampling for the Social Survey*, in the Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Part II, 1950.

planning. Each survey is planned in response to a request from a government department, but is put into operation only after Treasury approval has been given. When the survey is finished, a report describing the methods used and the results is submitted by the Social Survey to the department concerned where the findings are interpreted. In each of the past four years the unit has completed an average of 35 surveys and is now among the largest social research organisations in Britain.

From the technician's point of view, perhaps the most important contribution made by the Social Survey is in the field of sampling methods. In the year 1946 the unit was basing its work both on quota samples (as normally used in much market research work) and on "probability" or random samples as developed by Professor Bowley. Since then, however, it has abandoned quota sampling entirely and its statisticians have developed methods of probability sampling to a point where they have begun to influence the techniques of their commercial colleagues. The difference in cost is still substantial —a sample based on probability methods costs at least twice as much as one designed on a quota basis. For many purposes, however, the gain in reliability is worth at least this differential.

Social Surveys Specialists

One noteworthy development in Britain since 1945 has been the emergence of organisations which, as commercial bodies, have specialised in the planning and execution of social surveys on behalf of anyone who wished to use this research method in tackling his problems.

The work of these specialist commercial research bodies has played a large part in British post-war social research and no report on social surveys today would be complete without some account of their work. The present author is most familiar with the activities of the private company known as Research Services Ltd., and will, therefore, confine himself to a description of its work. It was incorporated in 1946 and since then has conducted social surveys on a wide variety of subjects. Some of the surveys already described and mentioned have been executed by this company—the York survey of old age, the Holborn housing survey, and the Peterlee town planning survey. Other typical examples of their work are:

Membership of voluntary associations

As part of the material used by Lord Beveridge in his 1948 study *Voluntary Associations* a nation-wide sample of 3,000 adults was interviewed for information concerning their participation in such bodies as Friendly Societies, the Red Cross, British Legion, Hospital Savings Association, etc.

Use of public transport in London

This survey, on behalf of the London Transport Executive, obtained from a random sample of 3,000 households a day-by-day record of the use made of various forms of transport—buses, trams, trains, tubes—for various purposes—getting to and from work and school, shopping, entertainment, casual visiting, etc. The Executive thus obtained a picture of each of the groups which provides its revenue.

Effects of television on leisure habits

During the late autumn of 1948 the adult members of a sample of households—constituted by drawing the name and address of every 60th television license holder—were asked to keep a detailed log of how they spent their time from 6 p.m. onwards each evening for a whole week. Similar information was obtained from a matching sample of households who were the neighbours of the first group but lacked a television set. A comparison of the habits of the two groups of adults helped to indicate how the ownership of a television set changed peoples' domestic, social and leisure behaviour.

Sociological aspects of children's cinema clubs

This survey was carried out in a typical small provincial town (population approximately 65,000). A random sample of all children aged 8 to 13 (inclusive) was interviewed as to their membership and patronage of children's cinema clubs; the same children completed a general knowledge test and answered a series of questions which called on them to project their interests and values (e.g., "How would you spend a free afternoon?" "How would you like to alter your city?"). At the same time the parents of these children were interviewed to obtain the children's familial and material environment. Finally, the teachers of the children assessed each child in terms of its social behaviour, class achievement, and personality traits.

In the analysis of all this information the children were sorted into three groups—those who were members of cinema clubs, those who had been members but had left, and those who had never belonged to such a club. The analysis showed that certain social conditions were

closely associated with club membership. Thus, both present and past members were children of large families, often the mother went out to paid employment, the amount of room space occupied by the parents was well below the average, the parents were frequently readers of such "fantasy" magazines as *Red Letter* and *Miracle*, the parents were themselves often movie fans, the homes had few books. When it came to the children's personal characteristics, present club members (but not ex-members) showed a more than average participation in street games, a more than average reading of comics, a lower level of imaginative capacity, lower scores on the general knowledge tests, lower scores on social behaviour and class performance, and a lower contribution to household tasks. The implications seem to be that certain environmental handicaps encourage children to join cinema clubs; most of these socially handicapped children, however (those who do not suffer from various personality defects) outgrow the clubs in the course of their natural development and turn in normal and satisfactory performances when judged as social animals and as students by their teachers.

Mass communications research

In a great many contexts the average person's awareness of the rest of the world is second-hand, something acquired from a newspaper, the radio or the films. At least in Britain comparatively little research has been carried out into the part played by these means of mass communication in shaping our lives. The research problems involved have been summarised as "finding out who says what to whom and with what effect." From the Royal Commission on the Press and other reports we have a fair idea about the nature of "who"

and from the Hulton Readership Survey we have detailed knowledge about the "whom." This survey is carried out annually and its purpose is to provide a detailed description of the people who read each of the nation's principal newspapers and magazines. For example, it is possible to describe the readers of *Lilliput* in terms of their age, sex, marital status, occupation, domestic accommodation, their consumption of beer and cigarettes, their interest in gambling and gardening, their use of cosmetics and bicycles, and so on. The research methods used are those of the conventional social survey—a representative sample of the total population is interviewed and questioned through a formal questionnaire.

Public opinion research

Since the beginning of 1948, there has been carried out for *Picture Post* a quarterly survey of the political opinions of the British adult population. These have normally been geared to the prediction of the outcome of a General Election; at the beginning of February 1950 this survey, after interviewing a sample of 2,000 electors, indicated that 87% of the electorate intended to vote (in fact, the percentage turned out to be 86%). The voting intentions of this sample and the actual results were remarkably close:—

	Intentions (Picture Post survey).	*Polling day behaviour.*
	%	%
Labour	46.6	46.4
Conservative	43.0	43.2
Liberals and others	10.4	10.4
	100.0	100.0

The journalistic interest of such surveys is obvious, but their scientific value is slight unless they also provide some predictive insight into the general field of political behaviour. This has in fact been attempted in the *Picture Post* surveys. In addition to asking people about their voting intentions, they were at the same time asked for their views on various political issues. Thus, the pre-election enquiry of February 1950 showed that socialists and conservatives held almost identical views on Britain's foreign policy, and that the rank and file of both parties appreciated the benefits of the socialistic Welfare State. They differed very sharply, however, on the subject of liberty. Most conservatives felt that the benefits of social security had involved an intolerable interference with the individual's freedom to spend his money and time and to use his property and talents as he wished; most socialists took the view that the loss of such liberties was outweighed by the new liberty that was acquired with material security and full employment. The majority of electors apparently feel that these two forms of liberty are incompatible and, therefore, according to their condition, some will inevitably align themselves with the Labour Party, and others, equally inevitably, with the conservatives.

It is this sort of expansion of the public opinion study which transforms it from counting heads into research.

The advantages of such specialised research organisations are obvious. It is possible to bring together a group of experts continuously concerned with methodological problems and building a wide range of experience for the benefit of each new survey.