

Ward-level statistics can hide the existence of poverty

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As part of research for the Open Society Foundation's comparative study across six European cities, "Understanding Europe's White Working Class Communities", we have spent 18 months conducting research with people in Higher Blackley, Manchester, to be able to understand and give voice to the lived experiences of white working class communities. An issue that came up was how statistics can actually serve to hide some of the realities within local areas and undermine attempts to address local residents' poverty.

There was a perception amongst some local residents that the allocation of resources were neglecting Blackley compared to wards in the city that were deemed as more deprived: "I've lived around this area for a long time and we've always been a lost community, we never get any funding... we're not the best and we're not the worst so there's no money... because you have to be the worst. It's because we behave ourselves, we don't get anything."

This was echoed in a focus group with fathers in the area, who felt that despite many people in Higher Blackley financially struggling to the same extent as other neighbouring and more deprived wards, the concentration of poverty meant that they were not seen as a priority area for the city council. This creates a perception articulated by Alan, a 32 year old joiner, who said that:

"Harpurhey gets, Moston gets...what does Blackley get? No disrespect, we've got you two [researchers] talking about it."

This perception of a lack of investment was challenged by Sir Richard Leese, the leader of Manchester City Council. He explained that there had been millions of pounds worth of investment in Higher Blackley including the brand-new library, investment in schools and in the local housing stock. It is difficult to challenge the evidence provided by Sir Richard Leese that can be physically seen, but the perceptions of the community are important, and raise the issue of how resources are distributed according to need and how it is directed to communities.

Ward level-statistics can serve to represent entrenched social problems of low-income, poor health and lower levels of educational achievement as issues of a particular place rather than of social inequality that affects individuals within communities. This can lead to mis-recognition of the challenges for social justice that our study has revealed, which in turn then leads to policy that does not always focus on issues that it should do. As noted by one of the participants, Higher Blackley is neither the most deprived, nor the most affluent area in Manchester, which can result in it not being classed as priority in terms of reducing poverty. Despite this, there were 1405 children living in poverty in Higher Blackley according to figures from 2010. While the distribution across the city reveals Higher Blackley to be below the median in terms of child poverty at a ward level (although still much higher than the national average), the data at a Lower Super Output area reveals a different picture - some areas within the ward would figure much higher in the distribution with as many as 55% of children living in poverty.

This is concentrated in those areas of Higher Blackley that are predominantly made up of social housing that have a higher level of deprivation and poverty. These areas consistently show up on all indicators of disadvantage, such as high numbers of unemployment, high numbers of people on benefits, poorer health and low levels of average pay.

There is concentrated neighbourhood-based poverty, but not at the level of the ward. Ward-based approaches are absolutely central to the governance of Manchester and provide the basis of service-delivery arrangements. While place -based strategies can be an essential means of being able to identify and tackle particular areas that require additional support, a purely ward-based analysis can fail to provide the support needed for particular neighbourhoods and estates, and people can fall between the cracks.

As Anderson and Musterd argue: "we should keep in mind that problems in the neighbourhood are seldom problems of the neighbourhood....an area focus cannot by itself tackle the broader structural problems, such as unemployment, that underlie the problems of small areas."¹

Higher Blackley provides evidence of how the use of aggregate statistics can serve to obscure complex differences within areas,

¹ Andersson, R. and S. Musterd (2005) "Area-based policies: a critical appraisal", *Tijdschrift voor Economisch en Sociale Geografie* 96 (4), p.386

especially in terms of neighborhood level deprivation, worklessness and child poverty. This can then affect any interventions that are deemed necessary. For instance – despite these clear levels of need and low income concentrated within pockets in Higher Blackley, there are currently no advice services or food banks that are located directly in the ward.

Higher Blackley also provides an interesting case study to explore whether poverty is created by the places that people live. It is often argued that a particular place and the people in it create the conditions of marginalization for the people that live there within a so-called ‘culture of poverty’ which becomes a self re-enforcing dynamic. This can be seen through an assertion by the Director of the influential Centre for Social Justice, who stated that there are “communities beached on welfare. Neighbourhoods where people’s lives have become seemingly purposeless and their aspirations obliterated,”²

In many instances a place can have clear connections with poverty, as a range of social amenities, decent play areas, high-performing schools and good transport links all playing a significant part in our ability to build and sustain family and community strengths, creating more opportunities to be able to create more protective factors to be able to deal with difficult social conditions. Indeed, negative physical characteristics and poor local services and institutions are strongly correlated to concentrated poverty. Despite this, there is no convincing explanation on which particular characteristics affect which outcomes, which types of households might be most affected by neighbourhood or about the causal mechanisms involved.³

The idea of ‘neighbourhood affects’ does not explain how Higher Blackley has high concentrations of people living in poverty sharing the same amenities as those who are not as badly off. Our research supports the argument by Tom Slater which challenges the assumption that it is a particular place that creates poverty. Slater argues that it is poverty that creates a place, as the concentration of cheaper and affordable housing means that people who are living in poverty live in areas that are available to them. In other words, the

² Christian Guy, (2013), Why church leaders are wrong to attack welfare cuts [Spectator online] Available from:
<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/03/a-church-for-the-poor/>

³ Ellen, I. and Turner, M (1997) ‘Does Neighbourhood Matter? Assessing Recent Evidence’. *Housing Policy Debate*, 8(4): p.833

concentrations of people living in poverty are a result of residential sorting – where cheaper land and available houses are to be found.

Policies that focus exclusively on regenerating places can essentially mean that people in poverty will simply be moved elsewhere, potentially disrupting the social networks that can provide a level of security and support that people need in order to survive. When assessing the high levels of deprivation in particular parts of Higher Blackley, there is a need to question structural issues that influence people's outcomes and how life chances become shaped not just by where people live, but to include the wider social inequalities that affect their lives.⁴ Whilst place-based strategies can provide targeted interventions to areas in which there are higher concentrations of people in poverty, this needs to be complemented by addressing structural inequalities such as unemployment, low-pay, gender inequalities and lone-parent disadvantage.

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⁴ Slater, Tom. Your Life Chances Affect Where You Live: A Critique of the 'Cottage Industry of Neighbourhood Effects Research. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. 2013