Living in the private rented sector: changing patterns of solo living?

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Abstract

The private rented sector (PRS) grew by nearly 1.5 million households in England between 2001 and 2011. It now provides homes for more households than the social housing sector. The largest group living in the PRS are single people under the age of 65. This paper critically examines what this means for them and how this varies spatially. It shows how the reliance on the PRS of single people has changed between 2001 and 2011 at district level in England and neighbourhood level in Greater Manchester. It explores the extent to which these changes have constrained the housing choices of single people and contributed to spatial polarisation.

Introduction

The growth in solo living, particularly in urban areas, is a relatively recent global phenomenon (Klinenberg, 2013). People living by themselves are diverse in terms of age, tenure and socio-economic status (Hall and Ogden, 2003; Pearce, 2013). The increase in single person households in Britain was identified as "one of the most important demographic shifts of recent decades" (Bennett and Dixon, 2006: 3). Using population projections they identified that the fastest growth is in people aged 25-44, particularly men.

The extent to which the 'housing crisis' determines the tenure of people living by themselves will reflect their socio-economic position. Policy, news and academic narratives suggest that the 'housing crisis' limits the ability of households to buy suitable accommodation. The

restricted availability of social housing means that many are 'forced' to live in the private rented sector (PRS) (Kemp, 2011; Wallace, 2010; Lister, 2006; Houston and Sissons, 2012). Younger people living by themselves are more likely to be in the private rented sector (PRS) reflecting higher levels of mobility and earlier moves to live independently (Klinenberg, 2013; Hall and Ogden, 2003). This leads to the first question addressed by the paper:

How has the reliance of single people on the PRS changed between 2001 and 2011 at local authority and neighbourhood level in England?

We expect the results to reflect increasing levels of solo living amongst people of working age in urban areas. The diversity of the PRS reflects its ability to meet the needs and aspirations of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups within society (Rugg and Rhodes, 2008). Solo living may be "*elective* single person households who have chosen solo living or *forced* single person households who have been constrained to this lifestyle by circumstances" (Bennett and Dixon, 2006: p3). Those forced into living alone in the PRS are more likely to be poor, to experience insecurity and poor quality accommodation, and to suffer ill health (Bennett and Dixon, 2006). As well as those working in low paid work this group might include people whose relationship has broken down, migrants, young adults leaving care, offenders leaving prison and people who misuse substances (Feijten and van Ham, 2013; Geddes and Scott, 2010; Spencer et al., 2007, Coyle and Pinkerton, 2012; Natalier and Johnson, 2012; Somerville, 1998). The regulations for housing benefit are likely to constrain the choices of where to live for households where the reference person is unemployed. Single people under 35 are only entitled to allowance for a room which in Manchester equated to a maximum rent of £60 per week in 2011 (DWP, 2011). The equivalent allowance for a two bedroomed house in Manchester is a maximum of £120 per week. The role of the PRS in meeting the accommodation needs of disadvantaged single people is likely to have increased to compensate for the shrinking social housing sector.

The emergence of neo-liberal orthodoxies in government policies in the UK and elsewhere are characterised by economic and social transformations in many spheres of life. In the UK the economy was radical restructured. Industrial areas across the Midlands and the

North were decimated and London was redefined as a global city of finance (Harvey, 2005; Bourdieu, 1999; Massey, 2007). The disruptive effects of the economic transformation helped to produce a post-industrial landscape characterised by increasing polarisation of wealth (Harvey, 2005; Dorling, 2011, 2014; Tunstall, 2012). The market position of housing is the context within which places and the people who live in them have been stigmatised (Hancock and Mooney, 2012; Wacquant, 2008; Robson et al., 2009). The subsequent transformation of 'dangerous places' through regeneration has been further reinforced by gentrification (Smith, 1984; 1996). Housing policies have been informed by market logic which creates a spatial hierarchy of residential places. The role of the PRS in relation to these changes is unclear. The second question addressed by the paper is:

Has England become increasingly spatially polarised by social class? How have people living by themselves been affected by this polarisation? Does tenure have a role in this polarisation?

This paper describes the changing geography of people living by themselves in the PRS and explores the spatial polarisation of households by social class and tenure.

Data and methods

Standard census outputs are used to explore the geography of changes to people living by themselves in the PRS between 2001 and 2011.

Household type is broken down into a number of categories in the census. The 2011 census defined a household as

> "… one person living alone; or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room or sitting room or dining area" (ONS, 2009, p4).

The paper focusses on households where people under 65 live alone. The neighbourhood analysis covers lower level super output (LSOA) data for Greater Manchester. There are 326 local authority districts in England in 2011. Local government reorganisation in 2009 combined districts to form unitary authorities in Northumberland, Durham,

Cheshire East, Cheshire West, Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Shropshire, Wiltshire and Cornwall. Greater Manchester contained 1,673 lower level super output areas (LSOAs) in 2011. They are used as the basis for exploration of spatial variation of tenure and household type at a more local level. The LSOA geography in the 2011 census is based on maintaining similarity with the 2001 census. Thresholds for people and households were set for LSOAs at a minimum of 1,000 people and 400 households and a maximum of 3,000 people and 1,200 households. The boundaries were developed to produce relatively homogeneous areas on characteristics which include tenure and property type that are aligned to local authority boundaries. Alterations have been made where the resident population changed significantly. In Greater Manchester this meant that 6 pairs of LSOAs were merged and 21 LSOAs were split to form 54 new LSOAs. The counts for 2001 have been translated into the new geography of local authority districts and LSOAs. Where LSOAs were split the counts were divided evenly into the component 2011 areas.

The focus of this analysis is primarily on single people. The measure of social class is based on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). The analysis using NS-SEC is based on both eight and four categories – service class which covers senior managerial, higher professional and junior managerial roles, intermediate which covers intermediate, self-employed and lower supervisory roles, routine which covers semi-routine and routine roles, and unemployed covering people who have been long term unemployed or have never worked.

A descriptive analysis provides evidence of changes at district and neighbourhood level between 2001 and 2011 and how these affect single people by social class and age.

Indices of segregation, as described by Simpson (2007), are used to measure the extent of segregation of social class and household type.

The index of dissimilarity is used to measure the segregation of social classes at neighbourhood level.

$$ID = 0.5 \sum_i \left| N_{gi}/N_g. - N!_{gi} N!_g. \right|.$$

Ngi is the count of people in social class g in area i. $N!gi$ is the count of people not in social class g in area i. A dot symbol represents summation over the index.

The index of isolation is used to measure the extent to which particular household types are evenly spread across a neighbourhood in comparison to their proportion in the population of Greater Manchester.

$P* = i(Ngi/Ng.)/(Ngi/N.i.)$

Ngi is the count of household type g in area i. A dot symbol represents summation over the index.

The reciprocal diversity index is used to measure the extent to which social classes are mixed within neighbourhoods.

$RDI=1/g(NgiN.i)2$

Ngi is the count of people in social class g in area i. A dot symbol represents summation over the index.

Findings

Table 1 shows how tenure patterns have changed for people living by themselves at district level in England. The number of single person households under the age of 65 grew by 730,000 with 27% reliant on the PRS in 2011 compared to 21% in 2001.

Table 1 – change in tenure patterns for people living by themselves in England between 2001 and 2011

Households '000s (% by tenure)	2001	2011	Change (% change 2001 to 2011)
Single person	3,211	3,941	730 (23%)
Owned	1,794 (56%)	1,902 (48%)	108 (6%)
Social Rented	744 (23%)	956 (24%)	212 (28%)
Private Rented	673 (21%)	1,083 (27%)	410 (61%)

Source: Census 2001 theme table T08; Census standard table DC4101EW contains National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database right 2012

At district level the growth in the PRS shows wide variation. The number of single people in the PRS in England grew by 61% from 2001 to 1,080,000 in 2011. The largest proportion of households living in the PRS in the top 20 districts in 2011 was concentrated in fourteen London boroughs, the university cities of Brighton, Cambridge, Manchester and Oxford, and, the seaside towns of Bournemouth and Hastings. In contrast single people households were less concentrated in London boroughs. They were most likely to live in eleven seaside districts, three London boroughs and university cities of Brighton, Liverpool, Reading and Oxford (ONS, 2012: Table DC4101EW). Three atypical districts were excluded from this analysis, the City of London and the Scilly Isles because of low numbers of households, and Forest Heath because of the large American base and its impact on surrounding residential areas.

Table 2 shows how tenure patterns have changed for people living by themselves at LSOA level in Greater Manchester. The number of single people has increased by 28% to 229,000 and their reliance on the PRS has increased from 18% to 25% between 2001 and 2011.

**Table 2 – change in tenure patterns for people living by themselves in Greater Manchester between 2001 and 2011**

Households (% by tenure)	2001	2011	Change (% change 2001 to 2011)
Single person	*178,736*	*229,283*	*50,547 (28%)*
Owned	88,922 (50%)	98,596 (43%)	9,674 (11%)
Social Rented	56,902 (32%)	73,262 (32%)	16,360 (29%)
Private Rented	32,912 (18%)	57,425 (25%)	24,513 (74%)

Source: Census 2001 theme table T08; Census standard table DC4101EW contains National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database right 2012

The number of single people has increased as has their reliance on the PRS. The district and neighbourhood level analysis show that there is significant spatial variation of single people living in the PRS.

Social class and age are associated with the tenure households live in Greater Manchester. A similar pattern is evident in England. Figure 1 shows that higher social classes are more likely to own their home, younger households are more likely to live in the PRS and that the unemployed are more likely to live in social housing. For people aged 65 and over the role of social housing is more important than the PRS.

Figure 1 – age by NS-SEC by tenure for Household Reference Person in Greater Manchester
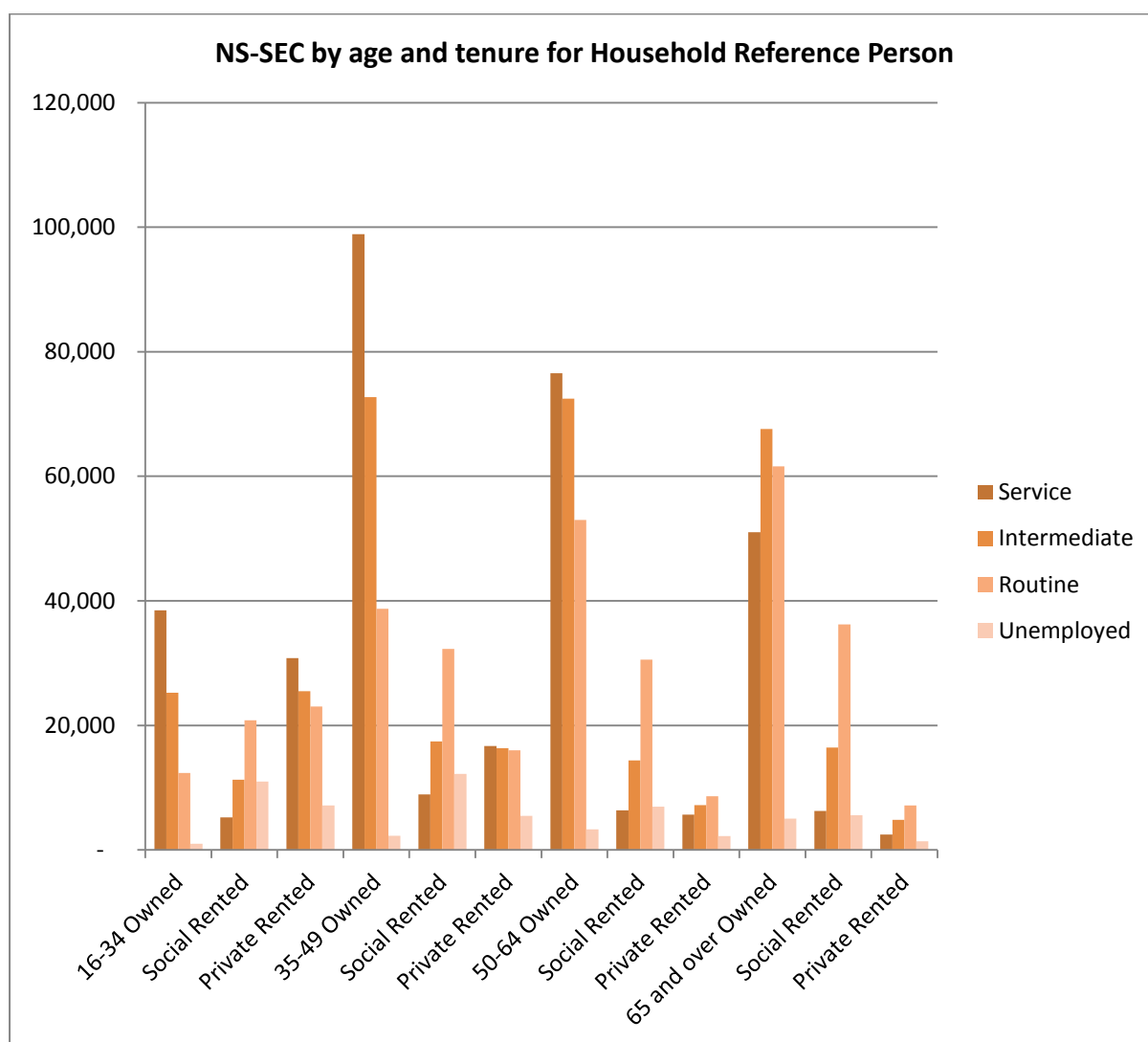
Spatial residential segregation of single people by social class in Greater Manchester is explored using the Index of Dissimilarity. Table 3 shows the change in the Index of Dissimilarity of social class in Greater Manchester between 2001 and 2011 for all households and

single people. Values below 40 have quite low segregation, 40-59 is moderately high, 60-69 is high and more than 70 is very high (Simpson, 2007).

Table 3 – index of dissimilarity for social class in Greater Manchester in 2001 and 2011

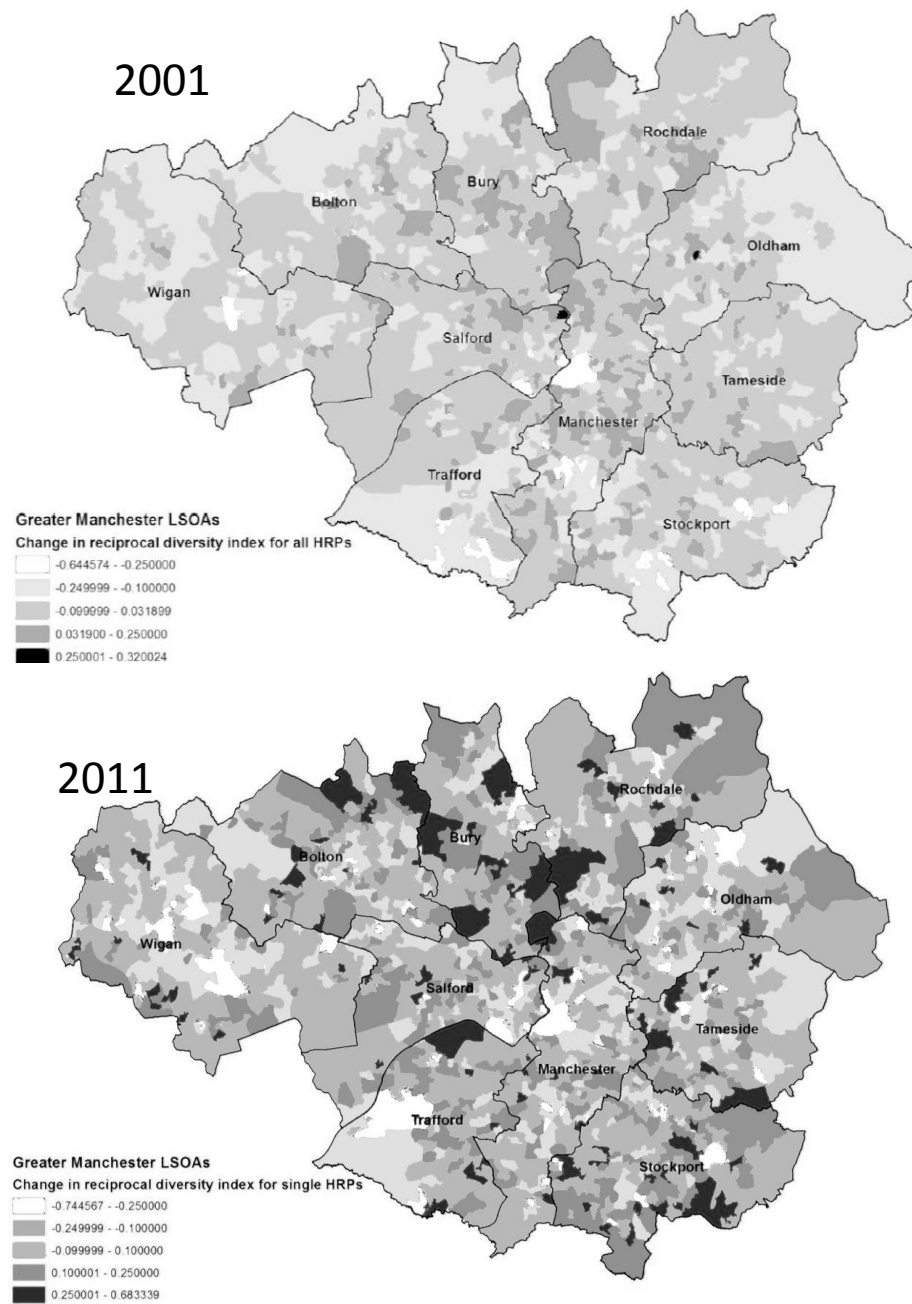|	All households		Single person households	
	2001	**2011**	**2001**	**2011**
Service	61%	56%	64%	54%
Intermediate	38%	23%	39%	25%
Intermediate	38%	31%	40%	33%
Self employed	24%	39%	38%	29%
Lower supervisory	30%	37%	48%	31%
Routine	35%	47%	36%	43%
Semi-routine	30%	37%	42%	28%
Routine	39%	50%	41%	45%
Unemployed	49%	80%	51%	55%

Source: Census 2001 census statistics CS044; Census standard table LC6115EW contains National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database right 2012

The segregation of service class households has fallen slightly between 2001 and 2011 to moderately high. The segregation of routine class households has increased to moderately high. The most significant change for all households is the very high segregation of the unemployed. In contrast the segregation for single people is slightly less for service and routine class households and only moderately high for the unemployed.

The reciprocal diversity index provides a neighbourhood measure of the extent of mixing of social classes. Figure 2 shows the change to the reciprocal diversity index for all households and for single people. Figure 2 shows the change to the reciprocal diversity index for all households and for single people. Neighbourhoods shaded lightest have become less socially mixed between 2001 and 2011 whilst darker areas have become more socially mixed.

Figure 2 – change in the reciprocal diversity index for social classes between 2001 and 2011 in Greater Manchester

Social class mixing for all households has fallen in city centre Manchester and some other neighbourhoods while it has increased in North and East Manchester and in other neighbourhoods across the districts. The change for single people is more marked with many neighbourhoods seeing increasing residential social class mixing. City centre Manchester and parts of Salford, Wigan, Trafford and Oldham are less mixed.

The index of isolation allows the analysis to focus on the extent to which a particular group is more or less likely to live in a particular neighbourhood. Figure 3 shows the change in the index for all households where the reference person is unemployed between 2001 and 2011. Neighbourhoods shaded lightest are where a household with an unemployed reference person is as likely, slightly darker, less likely and darkest most likely to live.

Figure 3 – index of isolation for unemployed household reference person in all households in 2001 and 2011 in Greater Manchester
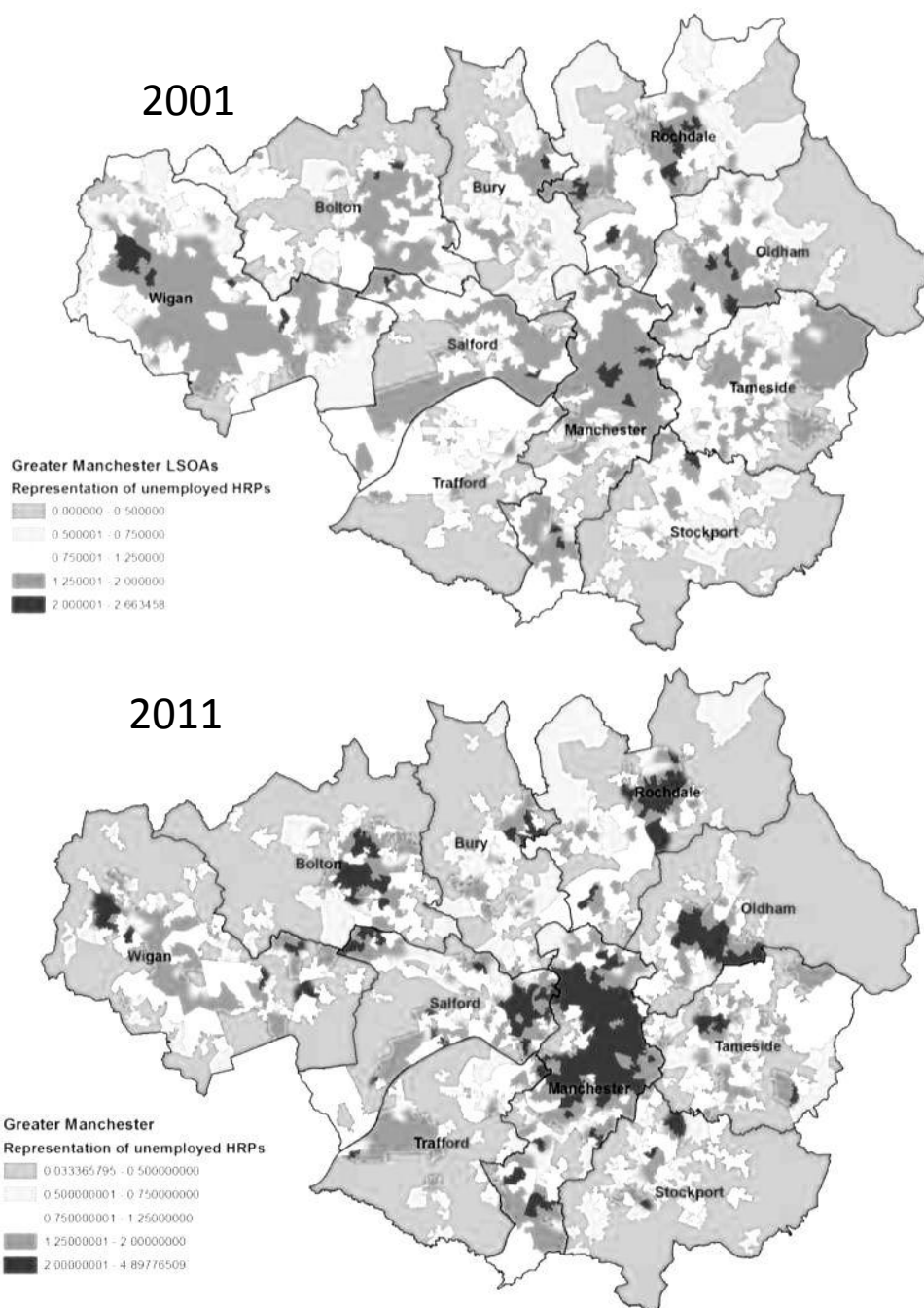
Households where the reference person is unemployed are more likely to live in Manchester and the central areas of most districts and least likely to live in city centre Manchester, Stockport, Trafford and outer areas of the conurbation.   Figure 4 provides the same analysis for single people. Whilst there are similar spatial patterns, the effects are less marked.

Figure 4 – index of isolation for unemployed single person in 2001 and 2011 in Greater Manchester
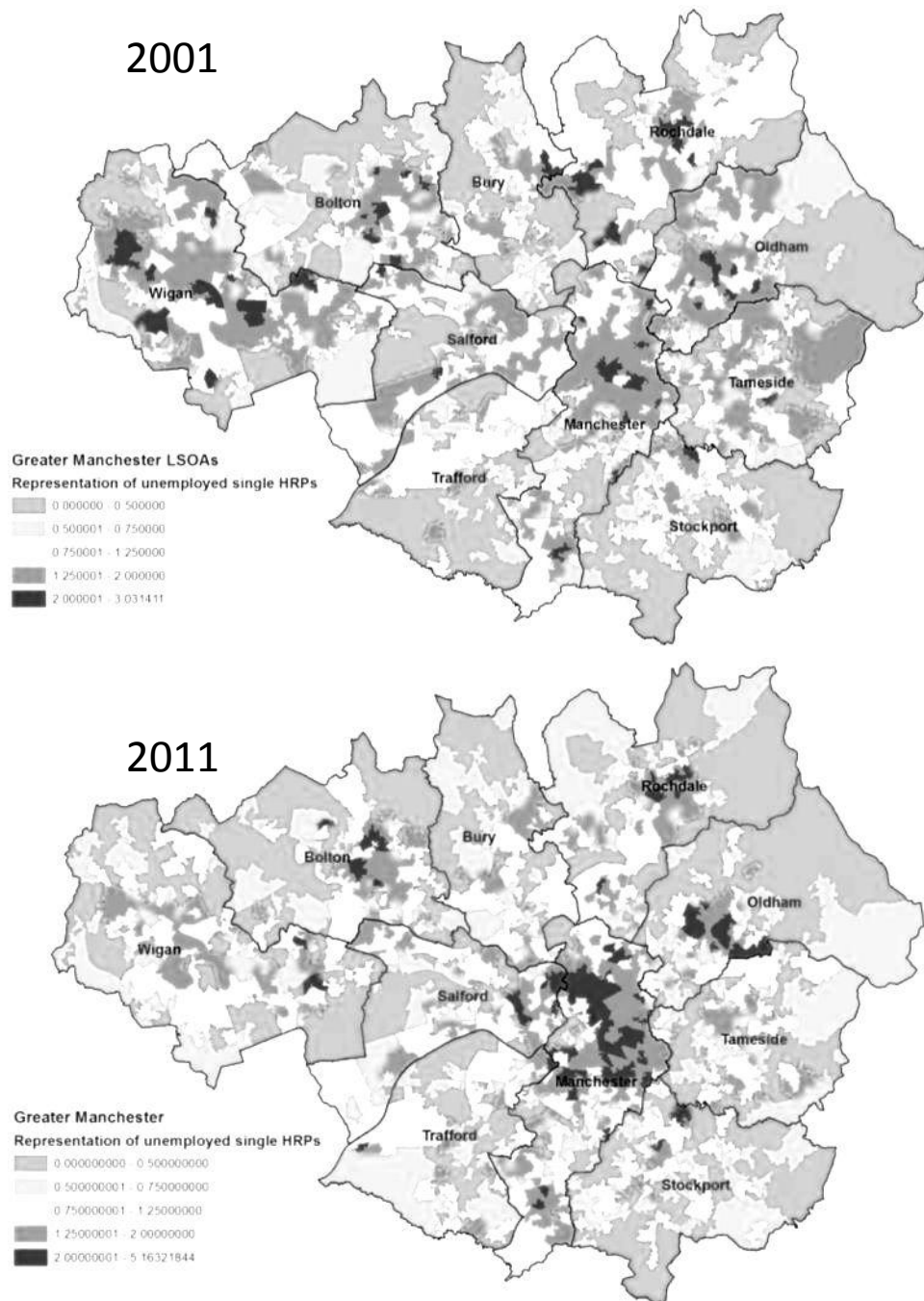
Discussion and conclusions

The number of single person households has grown between 2001 and 2011 and a larger proportion of this group live in the PRS than other households. This growth is associated with both social class and age. Younger people are more likely to live in the PRS, higher classes more likely to own their property and routine and unemployed classes more likely to live in social housing. The spatial distribution of single person households varies significantly at district level. The lower levels of PRS reliance in London and Manchester may reflect the relatively high costs of solo living and the use of alternative strategies such as sharing accommodation. The relatively high numbers of single people of working age living in seaside towns may reflect choices based on lifestyle or cost. For single people working in London the choice of better quality accommodation in seaside towns on the South East coast and commuting may be preferable to poorer quality accommodation nearer work. It may also reflect the provision of low cost, low quality accommodation to meet the needs of particular disadvantaged or vulnerable groups in some areas (Blackpool Fairness Commission, 2014). Whilst single people are most likely to live in the PRS, the spatial distribution suggests that these choices might be increasingly constrained by the availability and affordability of suitable accommodation in urban areas.

At neighbourhood level households where the reference person is unemployed have become highly segregated whilst routine and service classes are moderately segregated. Figure 1 showed that households where the reference person is unemployed and under the age of 50 are more likely to live in social or private rented accommodation. The high level of segregation suggests that these households are concentrated in particular social housing estates and neighbourhoods where landlords are prepared to rent their properties at rates that reflect the limitations set for housing benefit.

Households where the reference person is routine class are moderately segregated. Figure 1 shows that where the reference person is under 50 these households are more likely to live in social or private rented accommodation. Affordability is likely to constrain the choices this household type can make about where to live.

The moderately high level of segregation for households where the reference person is employed in service occupations suggests that this social class is choosing to live in particular neighbourhoods. The fall in the level of segregation between 2001 and 2011 might be caused by a booming housing market and its effect on residential choice. The increased range of choices being made by this group is leading to higher levels of integration. This may be a temporary phenomenon as investment in residential development and gentrification provides higher social classes with neighbourhoods developed for their needs.

Similar patterns are evident for single person households though the extent of spatial polarisation is much less than for all households. The unemployed and those in routine occupations are moderately segregated across Greater Manchester. There are more choices of where to live for unemployed single people than all households. These include neighbourhoods that people choose to live in such as the city centre. The slight reduction in the level of social class mixing among single people might be explained by the increased range of choices arising from residential development and gentrification. Given the limitations imposed on housing benefit for this group the relatively lower levels of segregation suggest that there are still affordable options in the PRS and/or social housing. This may reflect the limitations of using the LSOA as the basis for the analysis.

There is no conclusive evidence on the role of the PRS in changing spatial patterns of solo living. Whilst more single households are living in the PRS it is not possible to identify whether where people choose to live is elective or forced. Higher levels of integration of single person households at neighbourhood level suggest that this group have more choice about where to live than other households. The extent to which this choice is delivered by reduced housing quality in terms of space, conditions and security cannot be explored within the scope of this paper. The extent to which affording a more desirable place to live might contribute to single people living in less secure, more precarious circumstances merits further investigation. The availability of the census micro-data will enable further exploration of the role of the PRS in changing patterns of solo living.

Limitations

The census information used for this paper does not allow for a full analysis of tenure, household type, social class and age which means that the analysis of spatial polarisation is limited. The focus on single person households excludes those people living by themselves who choose to lodge with other households or live with other unrelated adults. There are a number of issues with the use of occupational classification as a measure of social class, particularly for younger single people who may be working in transitional roles. Greater Manchester and the city of Manchester particularly have experienced significant population growth between 2001 and 2011. This growth has included significant expansion of city centre living and higher education provision which affects the spatial concentrations of particular groups and may well distort some of the measures used. The use of LSOAs as the analytic framework may mask significant heterogeneity within areas.

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