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The measurement of interwar poverty: notes on a sample from the second survey of York[1]

Seebohm Rowntree's surveys of poverty, as recent historians have emphasized, 'need little introduction'.[2] Carried out in 1899, 1936 and 1950 respectively, they represent significant milestones in the history of social research in modern Britain. It is widely known that the 1936 survey introduced new methods of investigation, including a new poverty line, the 'human needs' (HN) standard, incorporating a more 'generous' set of allowances than the 1899 primary poverty line, which had been based on the minimum resources necessary to maintain 'merely physical efficiency'.[3] Below we explore the methods of poverty measurement employed by Rowntree and his collaborators in 1936, based on a dataset we have created of a sample of the surviving household schedules from the investigation. In particular, we identify one issue of Rowntree's methodology that has been emphasized by this dataset and which may warrant further investigation: the estimation of available family income, on which the poverty calculations in the survey were based. This practice differed significantly from that adopted in the 1899 survey, and was carried over into the 1950 study.[4]

Whereas the 1950 survey was a sample survey of the entire working-class population of York – Rowntree and his collaborator G. R. Lavers investigated one household in nine[5] – the 1936 survey involved the visitation of every working-class household in the city.[6] Of the 2,054 schedules from 1950, 1,363 (66.36 per cent) have survived,[7] whereas of the 16,362 from 1936, 1,361 have survived, a rate of 8.32 per cent.[8] While the pattern of survival for the 1950 schedules appears to have been sufficiently random to enable them to be used as a proxy for the complete set, the pattern of survival of the 1936 schedules is rather more complex. The surviving schedules all relate to households containing one or more individuals aged 60 or over. Their survival is probably linked to the research Rowntree carried out for the Nuffield Foundation after the second world war. As chairman of the Foundation's survey

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[2] Timothy J. Hatton and Roy E. Bailey, 'Seebohm Rowntree and the post-war poverty puzzle', *Economic History Review*, 53 (2000), 517-43. Cited here at 519.
[3] B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and progress: a second social survey of York* (London, 1941); B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: a study of town life* (London, 1901).
[4] B. Seebohm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers, *Poverty and the welfare state: a third social survey of York dealing only with economic questions* (London, 1951), 3, 26.
[5] Rowntree and Lavers, *Poverty and the welfare state*, 2.
[6] Rowntree explained his choice of which households to investigate thus: 'My aim was to investigate every family in the city whose chief wage-earner was earning not more than £250 a year, and the inquiry covered all the streets where such people were likely to be living.' (Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 11.)
[7] Hatton and Bailey, 'Seebohm Rowntree', 526.
[8] Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York (hereafter BIHR), Rowntree papers, PP/23. The handlist of the Rowntree papers at the BIHR says that 1366 schedules survive: there are 1366 separate schedules, but they refer only to 1361 households, as some households' information was too extensive to fit onto one schedule.

committee on the problems of ageing that reported in 1947,[9] Rowntree was involved in research into old age, and in the course of this work his 1936 schedules were used. The committee carried out its own investigations into old age in several urban centres – Wolverhampton, Oldham, Mid-Rhondda and the London boroughs of Wandsworth and St Pancras[10] – and this information was compared with information obtained from the earlier York survey.[11] However, although all the schedules relating to men aged 65 and over and women aged 60 and over appear to have been used in the Nuffield survey, the schedules contain information on less than a half of these individuals, and, to complicate matters further, they record some males aged between 60 and 64.[12] Moreover, it is not clear how representative the surviving schedules are of the total body of data relating to persons aged 60 and over and their families. We concentrate here, therefore, on the light cast by the schedules on the methods adopted by Rowntree and his investigators in 1936.

Our sample of 73 schedules represents 5.36 per cent of the total of 1,361.[13] These households contained 254 individuals, an average of 3.48 per household. The information recorded is similar in many ways to the information available from the contemporaneous London, Merseyside and Bristol surveys.[14] Rowntree's team of seven investigators sought information on the number of occupants in each house, the number of rooms and the number of bedrooms, whether there was a bathroom, and the amount of rent (or mortgage repayments) and rates. In the case of rent and rates, Rowntree subsequently standardized the figure by calculating the weekly sum payable: this was later used in determining the HN line for each household. For each individual living in the house, their name, their relationship to the head, their age, sex and occupation were recorded; and, as in Rowntree's first survey, the wages were either ascertained from employers, or were estimated. Income from lodgers, and from unemployment insurance, public assistance, health insurance, sick clubs, war pensions, widows' pensions, and old age pensions was all recorded; and in the case of allotment and garden produce, the value was estimated. It was also noted whether children had free school meals and/or milk. The total income of the household was entered, being the sum of all the sources of income.

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[9] *Old people: report of a survey committee on the problems of ageing and the care of old people under the chairmanship of B. Seebohm Rowntree* (London, 1947).

[10] Investigations were also made into Lutterworth (Leicestershire), Midhurst (Sussex) and some rural districts in Cambridgeshire, but no direct comparison was made between these centres of inquiry and York.

[11] *Old people*, 44-5.

[12] One other possibility is that the schedules were used in connection with a study of old age in York carried out in 1949 by Research Services Limited on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust: a report of this research has survived, but it gives no indication that earlier survey material was used (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, BSR93/XI/6). We are grateful to Elizabeth Jackson for drawing our attention to this unpublished report.

[13] We entered all those referring to households where the head of household's surname began with an A or a J.

[14] See Peter Wardley and Matthew Woollard, 'Retrieving the past: a reclamation and reconstruction of the social survey of Bristol, 1937', *History and Computing*, 6 (1994), 85-108. A table at 87 summarises the information obtained in these three surveys.

These were all the pieces of information originally recorded on the schedules; however, a number of later additions were made during the course of the inquiry. They illustrate, in more detail than was given in the published account of the survey, the processes of investigation and the methods Rowntree used to calculate the percentage of the population in poverty according to the HN standard. Once the total family income had been ascertained or (to a greater or lesser extent) estimated, Rowntee estimated the *available* family income, which was the figure against which he compared his poverty lines. This procedure is explained in part in *Poverty and Progress*. Families were classified 'according to the income available to the housewife *after paying rent and rates*, taking the size of the family into account'.[15] The 1899 survey had incorporated within the primary poverty line a sum for rent and rates, and in this important respect the 1936 survey differed from the earlier study. What fewer historians seem to have noticed is the change whereby, instead of simply recording total family income as the sum of all the earnings of family members, as had been the case in 1899, Rowntree estimated the contribution to family income made by supplementary earners. He explained that the available income included the value of allotment produce, unemployment benefit, old age pensions, and so on, but mostly comprised:

> Total earnings of father and mother.
> Total earnings of any children earning not more than 15s. less the sums allowed for pocket money.
> Estimated payments for board and lodgings given to their parents by older children and lodgers.[16]

The last line is the most important. Rowntree appended two footnotes to it, the second noting that in most cases the actual amount received from lodgers were ascertained, and that in other cases a reasonable estimate was easy to make. The first footnote explained the rationale behind the estimation of the contribution made by older children:

> It is the general custom for older children to pay to their parents such portion of their wages as they would have to pay for board and lodgings if not living at home. The sums vary according to the age and sex of the child, and also according to the class of house. Thus a lad or girl would pay from 12s. to 15s. weekly, a woman from 15s. to 20s., and a man from 18s. to 25s. Anything they earn above these sums they usually keep for themselves, and it is out of this surplus that young people are able to save money for furnishing their own houses when they marry. In the case of young children earning under, say, 15s. weekly, it is customary for the child to hand over the whole of its earnings to the parents, receiving back a shilling or so for pocket money.[17]

On the schedules, therefore, many individuals have two sums recorded under their income: their actual earnings, and the amount that they made available to the household. Rowntree assumed that the incomes of male heads of households were all made available to the housewife, whereas for other earners an amount was estimated:

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[15] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 26-7. Original emphasis.
[16] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 27.
[17] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 27 n. 1.

it is clear that these *were* estimates, because in virtually all cases the sums were added to the schedules *after* they had been filled out. This contrasts with Rowntree and Lavers's claim in 1950 that this information was obtained from householders 'in almost all cases'.[18] The 1936 estimates were made within the ranges specified in Rowntree's footnote, but within this range they seem somewhat arbitrary. In our sample, of 14 sons of the head of household aged 15-30 inclusive who worked for wages,[19] 8 were estimated to have contributed exactly 20s. to the available family income: their earnings ranged from 27s. to 56s. a week. In one case, a 21-year-old son earning 52s. was recorded as contributing 25s. a week; it is not clear why this estimate was higher than those made for some individuals who earned less.

As a result of the difference between the incomes and contributions of supplementary earners, for many families two figures for family income were given on the schedules: total family income (TFI) and available family income (AFI). Although in many cases TFI and AFI were the same, in our sample, of the 73 families for whom a calculation is possible,[20] in 55 cases (75.34 per cent) AFI was less than TFI. For all 73 families, average AFI was 73.98 per cent of TFI; if we examine only those families where the figures differed, average AFI was 69.90 per cent of TFI. In two cases AFI was less than 40 per cent of TFI. As far as individual household members are concerned, in our sample, 82 individuals earned money from employment.[21] Of these, it was assumed that 36 (43.90 per cent) made their entire income available to the household, and 46 (56.10 per cent) did not. The 82 individuals earned a total of £191. 18s. 6d. a week, of which an estimated £134. 5s. 7d. (69.96 per cent) was contributed to the resources of their households. If we examine only the 46 who, as Rowntree assumed, did not contribute their entire earnings to the household, we find that these people earned a total of £98. 17s. 4d., of which just £41. 4s. 0d., or 41.67 per cent, was made available to the household. These significant differences illustrate the importance of Rowntree's decision to base his poverty calculations on AFI rather than TFI. Returning to our example of the 21-year-old son earning 52s. a week, if we deduct the 25s. he was assumed to have contributed to the AFI of his family, he was left with an 'independent' income of 27s., sufficient on its own to raise him above Rowntree's HN line for a single man in employment (25s. 10d exclusive of rent). This man lived in a family of six, comprising the head of household, his wife, two sons, a daughter and a granddaughter: according to Rowntree's calculations, this family was below the HN line.

However, there were two separate HN lines, although Rowntree used only one in the published report of the survey. On many of the schedules, two HN figures appeared, HN(A) and HN(T). HN(A) was intended to be compared against AFI, and

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[18] Rowntree and Lavers, *Poverty and the welfare state*, 26.

[19] This excludes three who had an occupation listed but no income.

[20] We exclude 10 families for whom total income was zero or unrecorded. Our figures refer to families rather than households, as some schedules refer to more than one family. Rowntree and his investigators were by no means consistent in their policy of subdividing households into families. The family was the unit on which poverty measurement was based in all cases.

[21] Our calculations here exclude five individuals who had an occupation recorded but no income.

HN(T) against TFI.[22] Rowntree decided, presumably after having carried out the household survey, to use HN(A) in his calculations. HN(A) was lower than HN(T) where the two differed, because, as Rowntree explained, out of the sum retained by supplementary earners, they 'have to clothe themselves and pay all personal expenses'.[23] In other words, the elements of the poverty line consisting of clothing and 'personal sundries' for supplementary earners were excluded from HN(A), as it was assumed these would be covered by the amount retained. Although Rowntree recognised that supplementary earners' standard of living could be higher than that of other members of their families, he maintained in the published report of the survey that, as there were comparatively few supplementary earners in the families that fell below HN(A), had HN(T) been used instead, few of these families would have been raised above the HN standard.[24] He calculated that, in a total population of 55,206, there were approximately 8,315 supplementary earners, who retained 12.6 per cent of total working-class income.[25] Among the 17,185 people below the HN(A) standard, there were about 1,686 supplementary earners, who retained only about 7 per cent of the total earnings of this group.[26] However, our figures, quoted above, suggest that these average figures given by masked considerable variations between supplementary earners, and that while many such earners may have retained only a small proportion of TFI, others retained a considerable amount. Moreover, it must be reiterated that Rowntree's figures on supplementary earners were based only on estimates of what was retained, and not, in most cases, on direct questioning of householders. Indeed, Rowntree himself showed that, in cases where the head of household was *not* working for wages, the incomes of supplementary earners were often sufficient to raise a family above the poverty line.[27]

The importance of supplementary earners would have been emphasized even more had the HN(T) poverty line been used. In our sample, there were 34 families for whom both HN(A) and HN(T) were given on the schedules. For these families, average AFI was £2 5s. 1d., 61.55 per cent of TFI (average £3.13s. 3d.), whereas the average HN(A) figure was £1 19s. 6d, or 73.37 per cent of HN(T) (average £2 13s. 10d). It was, therefore, easier for a family with supplementary earners to fall below HN(A) than HN(T). We have used Rowntree's figures to re-calculate the number of families and individuals below the HN(A) line,[28] and have calculated separately the number falling below the HN(T) line. Of the 34 families, AFI fell below HN(A) in 8 cases, comprising 30 individuals; by contrast, had HN(T) been compared with TFI, only 5 families, comprising 16 individuals, would have fallen below the poverty

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[22] When Rowntree calculated the extent of *primary* poverty in 1936, he based his figures on a comparison with TFI. However, it should also be noted that even here a direct comparison with 1899 was not strictly possible, as the 1899 primary poverty line included a sum for rent, whereas the 1936 line excluded rent.

[23] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 36 n. 1, repeated at 37 n. 1.

[24] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 36 n. 1, repeated at 37 n. 1.

[25] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 125 n. 1.

[26] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 125 n. 1 (calculated from Rowntree's figures for income classes A and B).

[27] Rowntree, *Poverty and progress*, 153-4. Unsurprisingly, our sample contains a number of families where the head was not working.

[28] This is not always noted on the schedules, although some of the 'general observations' delivered an impressionistic judgement as to whether a household was in poverty.

standard. Taking all 34 families, the average surplus of AFI over HN(A) was 5s. 7d., whereas the average surplus of TFI over HN(T) was 19s. 5d. Given the survival pattern of the 1936 schedules, a larger proportion of the population in our sample were supplementary earners than was the case for the working-class population of York as a whole, but nevertheless these calculations suggest that the decision to use HN(A) and AFI rather than HN(T) and TFI as the basis for the poverty calculations was a significant one. Certainly the very large surpluses of TFI over HN(T) enjoyed by some families in our sample emphasize the importance of supplementary earnings to the resources of many working-class families, and underline the importance of Rowntree's other great conceptual innovation, the poverty cycle.