

The geography of poverty

A political map of poverty under New Labour



DANNY DORLING
University of Leeds

LUDI SIMPSON
University of Manchester

The geography of poverty appears to have changed under New Labour's first term of office. Although the picture is far from complete, there appears to have been a widening gap between rich and poor areas during the first two years of Labour's term.

Measuring the geography of poverty in the UK is severely restricted by lack of data. Shortly after Labour came to power, the official geographical measure of poverty was the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation, which was based on 1996 data. This was replaced in 2000 by the new Indices of Deprivation based on 1998 data. Although comparisons between the two measures are difficult, because they rely on different methodologies and data, the main measure of deprivation – income – is available for both time periods.

But using this measure as an indicator of poverty is not ideal, as it is based on income support data and the government has direct control over income support claims. At the extreme, if government were to exclude a group from being able to claim income support, poverty rates would appear

to fall. However, at present no other comprehensive current geographical measure of poverty exists.

Poverty decreases by constituency

To deal with the problems of changing geographical boundaries of electoral wards, data has been aggregated to parliamentary constituencies. Overall and perhaps unsurprisingly, poverty rates were found to be highest in Labour constituencies, followed by Liberal Democrat constituencies. They were lowest in Conservative constituencies.

Table 1 shows how many people were in poverty, that is, claiming income support (in the summer of 1996) or income support or

Table 1 The changing geography of poverty

	<i>All claimants</i>		<i>% change</i>
	<i>96 (IS)</i>	<i>98 (IS+JSA)</i>	
Labour cabinet minister seats	251,026	223,803	-11%
Old Labour seats (won in 1992)	2,793,952	2,457,182	-12%
New Labour seats (won in 1997)	1,312,250	1,119,399	-15%
Other seats	398,529	341,431	-14%
Conservative seats	852,145	709,697	-17%
Shadow cabinet seats	94,449	79,092	-16%
Britain (total)	5,702,351	4,930,604	-14%

Table 2 The changing geography of child poverty

	Children		% change
	96 (IS)	98 (IS+JSA)	
Labour cabinet minister seats	147,680	131,008	-11%
Old Labour seats (won in 1992)	1,594,560	1,404,294	-12%
New Labour seats (won in 1997)	720,940	623,177	-14%
Other seats	184,237	156,591	-15%
Conservative seats	415,695	346,041	-17%
Shadow cabinet seats	48,202	39,720	-18%
Britain (total)	3,111,314	2,700,831	-13%

means-tested jobseeker's allowance (JSA) (summer 1998). This is the latest data released – data for 1999 is not expected until summer 2001 and there is no data available for 1997.

Nationally, using this measure, the number of people in poverty fell by almost half a million (14 per cent) between 1996 and 1998. Levels of poverty fell least in the constituencies of the incoming Labour Cabinet. There has been no 'pork-barrel' effect, as the Americans call it – evidence of preferential policies for the home areas of the most powerful members of the incoming administration.

Poverty also decreased by less than the national average in Old Labour seats or non-cabinet constituencies which Labour had won in 1992 as well as 1997. In New Labour seats, or those won by Labour for the first time in 1997, poverty fell faster; but poverty measured in this way fell fastest in the Conservative and shadow cabinet seats, by 17 and 16 per cent respectively – where it had been lowest to begin with. Things got better – but they got better most in areas where they were already best.

The numbers of children who were living in families claiming income support

or JSA fell by some 400,000 between 1996 and 1998 – a 13 per cent overall fall (Table 2). While child poverty has fallen faster than the overall poverty rate, the gap between Labour and Conservative constituencies in improvements in child poverty has been greater than for all other groups.

The number of lone parents claiming income support fell by 6 per cent nationally between 1996 and 1998 (Table 3), but by twice as much in the shadow cabinet seats as in the Labour cabinet seats. A similar, although slightly less pronounced, difference is evident in pensioner income support claims (data not shown here).

Part of the reason for the widening gap between parliamentary constituencies is shown in Table 4. The most dramatic fall in income support claims has been among those who were unemployed. The income support or means-tested jobseeker's allowance claims of the unemployed fell by around 0.5 million between 1996 and 1998.

The changing numbers of people claiming all other benefits (excluding pensions) is seen in Table 5. Those claiming permanent sickness and disability benefits constitute a large part

Table 3 The changing geography of lone parent poverty

	Lone parents		% change
	96 (IS)	98 (IS+JSA)	
Labour cabinet minister seats	47,355	44,942	-5%
Old Labour seats (won in 1992)	513,799	485,591	-5%
New Labour seats (won in 1997)	242,614	227,381	-6%
Other seats	64,718	59,377	-8%
Conservative seats	145,072	133,329	-8%
Shadow cabinet seats	17,051	15,387	-10%
Britain (total)	1,030,609	966,007	-6%

Table 4 The changing geography of unemployment

	<i>Unemployed</i>		<i>% change</i>
	<i>96 (IS)</i>	<i>98 (IS+JSA)</i>	
Labour cabinet minister seats	69,796	53,267	-24%
Old Labour seats (won in 1992)	758,460	552,544	-27%
New Labour seats (won in 1997)	360,881	231,778	-36%
Other seats	107,852	68,831	-36%
Conservative seats	211,434	117,088	-45%
Shadow cabinet seats	22,606	12,600	-44%
Britain (total)	1,531,029	1,036,108	-32%

of this group. Here the overall picture is different. These claims have fallen, and they have fallen most in the constituencies of Old Labour and the Cabinet. It is not clear why the pattern should be different here, although the changes in incapacity benefit and other disability benefits (which can be claimed alongside income support), combined with rising employment levels, may have had a stronger impact in Labour constituencies. After a period of rapid growth in incapacity benefit claims during the 1980s, particularly in areas of high unemployment, the number of claimants has fallen from the mid 1990s onwards.

The north/south divide

As the map shows, the smallest improvements in poverty levels under New Labour have taken place in Scotland, South Wales and the North and North East of England. Income support claims only increase in a few constituencies – all north of the infamous line between the Severn and the Wash, and the majority in Scotland. The fastest improvement has been where rates were already lowest, in the home counties to the west of London. While the picture is

perhaps not quite as simple as it appears here, these trends have evidently contributed to a widening north/south divide.

What does this changing geography indicate?

The full impact of New Labour on the geography of poverty can not yet be assessed because the data is

not yet available. New data is expected during the course of 2001, but the picture is still incomplete as, for roughly a third of the period under consideration, summer 1996 to spring 1997, John Major's government held sway.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there has been a general improvement in living standards across Britain since Labour came to power. This is shown here in terms of the decline in income support claims. It is also evident in terms of the increases in various income support rates, the introduction of the working families tax credit, a number of minimum income guarantees, increased child maintenance payments and the introduction of the minimum wage. The government's neighbourhood renewal strategy is also seeking to put in place long-term regeneration programmes for deprived areas,

Table 5 The changing geography of other benefits

	<i>Disabled & other</i>		<i>% change</i>
	<i>96 (IS)</i>	<i>98 (IS+JSA)</i>	
Labour cabinet minister seats	65,568	60,276	-8%
Old Labour seats (won in 1992)	716,626	653,576	-9%
New Labour seats (won in 1997)	289,676	268,312	-7%
Other seats	82,246	79,357	-4%
Conservative seats	166,886	157,751	-5%
Shadow cabinet seats	18,241	17,469	-4%
Britain (total)	1,339,243	1,236,741	-8%

The changing geography of want under New Labour

- best improvement (15% or more lower)
- ▒ next best improvement (10-14% lower)
- ▓ average improvement (5-9% lower)
- least improvement (0-5% lower)
- worsening



Figures in parentheses are changes in income support claims for data used in the 1998 and 2000 deprivation indexes.

Map design: Philip Green *The Sunday Telegraph*

hopefully drawing lessons from the failure of past regeneration schemes.

The results presented here suggest that things have improved, but they have improved least where they needed to improve most in order to 'bring Britain back together again' as the Government wishes. Politically this presents a particular challenge for New Labour since the benefits of the economic boom in the late 1990s appear to have been felt most keenly in Conservative areas. It is here that the greatest proportion of new jobs have been created and hence where the steepest falls in reliance on benefits are found. As a consequence, the poverty divide in Britain has continued to widen.

New neighbourhood statistics will become

available in 2001 and these will enable us to develop a more detailed analysis of the geography of poverty in the UK. The capacity to hold government to account has been greatly increased as a result of government's willingness to be monitored in its progress towards eradicating poverty. But the existing data signals a warning that, in the early years of New Labour's first term at least, economic prosperity did not bring about an increase in cohesion across Britain.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Michael Noble for advice on the data used in this article and to Lisa Harker for useful comments on an earlier draft ●