

Pauperism and the poverty line: Pauper household incomes in the 1850s.

Lewis Darwen

Research Report

While the union workhouse is the enduring symbol of welfare provision in Victorian England, the overwhelming majority of paupers received poor relief in their own homes throughout the nineteenth century.¹ Yet, while welfare historians have in recent decades increasingly turned their attention to the lives of the poor 'from below', exploring their experiences through sources such as relief application letters and pauper inventories, we still know very little about the household incomes of outdoor paupers (i.e. paupers in receipt of relief outside of the workhouse), nor how much poor relief contributed towards them.² It is the intention of this study to mitigate this lacuna. It draws upon a unique, heretofore unused, source to examine the relationship between wages and welfare in the manufacturing districts of northern England; the heartlands of the Industrial Revolution. The evidence facilitates exploration of a range of important questions, including: the impact of family size and structure on welfare dependency; how much individual members of a family (including women and children) contributed towards an aggregate household income; and the contribution of welfare to household incomes. It will also be possible to compare the incomes of pauper families against an estimated 'poverty-line', shedding light on the standards of living experienced by the poorest families in industrial communities. The study will, therefore, present new evidence on poverty, welfare, wages and standards of living during the 1850s, a time of rapid urban industrial expansion and change.

The source material used in this study was created following the introduction of the Outdoor Relief Regulation Order in 1852. The purpose of the order was, in short, to prohibit the provision of outdoor relief to able-bodied men unless they undertook a task of labour; menial, intensive tasks such as stone-breaking. The intention, based on the notion that many recipients of relief were disingenuous and could manage without such support, was to deter the able-bodied from applying. The Order was very strongly resisted in parts of the industrial north of England, where in many places there

¹ L. Darwen, *Implementing and administering the New Poor Law in the industrial north: a case study of Preston union in regional context, 1837-61* (2016), PhD, Nottingham Trent University, p.74.

² J. Harley, 'Material lives of the poor and their strategic use of the workhouse during the final decades of the English Old Poor Law, *Continuity and Change*, 30 (2015), pp.71-103; S. King, 'The English protoindustrial family: old and new perspectives', *History of the Family*, 8 (2003), pp.21-43; T. Sokoll, *Essex pauper letters, 1731-1837* (2001).

existed a practise of grating small sums of outdoor relief to poorly paid casual workers, particularly to hand loom weavers whose trade had been slowly destroyed by the ascendancy of the factory system.³ Poor Law guardians across the region held several large meetings during the weeks following the issuing of the Order, at which many expressed their reluctance to carry out the regulations, while others stated their intention to ignore them altogether. Considerable pressure was placed on the Poor Law Board, the London based central authority which issued the Order, to revoke it. Ultimately, a compromise, of sorts, was reached. The Poor Law Board amended the regulations slightly, adding a stipulation that Poor Law guardians *could* continue to provide outdoor relief to the able-bodied providing they (the Poor Law Board) were informed, in writing, of each case. It was this stipulation which led to the sources used in this study.

For many years following the introduction of the Outdoor Relief Regulation Order, Poor Law unions in the industrial north of England sent slips of paper to the Poor Law Board detailing the circumstances of each pauper family relieved contrary to it. These slips of paper, which survive in the MH/12 series of Poor Law correspondence held of the National Archives, usually included the following information: the name of each family member; their ages; their occupations (or lack thereof); how much each working member of the family was earning; and the amount of outdoor relief they were receiving. From this data an aggregate household income can be easily calculated. Frequently, additional information such as the cause of destitution is included.

Upon collecting this evidence, it soon became apparent that not all Poor Law unions sent these slips of paper to the Poor Law Board. There are two principal reasons for this. First, some unions, such as Manchester in south-east Lancashire, decided to comply fully with the Outdoor Relief Regulation Order, and stopped providing outdoor relief without a labour test as requested. Secondly, and conversely, other unions totally refused to comply, continuing to provide outdoor relief to able-bodied workers and failing to inform the Poor Law Board of exemption cases. The existence of different relief practices between unions in the same region is not surprising, and corresponds with what we know about Poor Law administration more

³ G. Timmins, *The last shift: the decline of handloom weaving in nineteenth century Lancashire* (1993).

generally at this time.⁴ To date, every slip sent from Poor Law unions in Lancashire between 1852 and 1860 has been collected, and some 40 per cent of the county's unions are represented in the sample. It is possible that more unions sent the relief slips than this suggests, but in some cases no MH12 volumes survive for a particular union in this period. Nonetheless, the information pertains to many hundreds of individual pauper families relieved over a socially and economically diverse region, providing a rich dataset.

The analysis is, at this point, still at an early stage, but some preliminary observations can be made. The overwhelming majority of these pauper families had young children in them, over 8 in 10 including a child under one-year-old. Relatively few had children in their early-teens who were earning wages, with the exception of very large families. It is immediately apparent that families with non-wage-earning children in them were particularly vulnerable to poverty, and this chimes with Joseph Rowntree's pioneering study of York during the early-twentieth century.⁵ It is also apparent that few of these families were solely reliant on welfare. In most cases, welfare made up only a small proportion of the aggregate household income. At a per capita level, poor relief amounted to just a few pence per week, sums which were clearly well below subsistence level. The evidence shown clearly that, not unlike today, people combined wages *and* welfare to make ends meet. Indeed, it is possible to view these small sums of outdoor relief as a form of in-work benefit, supplementing earned wages and ensuring people did not fall entirely onto the poor rates. Such provision could be essential in industrial areas, where so many were reliant on the casual labour market.

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⁴ D. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870* (2010); S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700-1850: a regional perspective* (2000).

⁵ B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: a study of town life* (1902), p.137.