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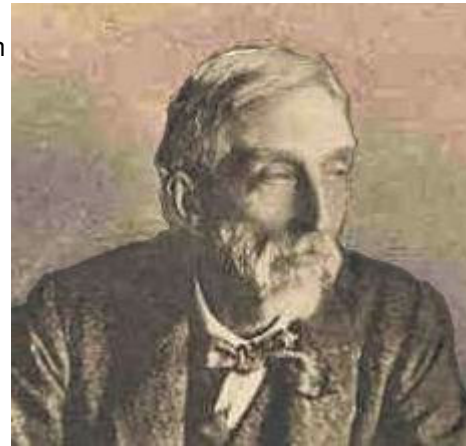
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Charles Booth: Mapping London's Poverty, 1885–1903 By David Fearon

Background

Between 1886 and 1903 Charles Booth produced a remarkable series of maps of London carefully coded for social class with data gathered by visiting, literally, every street in London. Equally remarkable, Booth devised, funded a research team, and conducted the study in his spare time while running a successful international leather trade and steamship company. In the 1880s, the question of increasing poverty in an increasingly wealthy Industrial-age Britain was becoming more central to citizens, politicians and philanthropists. A series of riots and sensational journalism sparked fears of social unrest. Booth encountered the squalid conditions of London neighborhoods while campaigning for an unsuccessful Parliamentary bid in 1865. His continuing involvement in social services left Booth dismayed, in particular, at the lack of basic knowledge about the extent and distribution of poverty in London. In 1885 Booth contested the results of a report on poverty by Henry Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation, who reported that 25% of Londoners lived in abject poverty. Booth thought the rate was lower, however, and decided to determine for himself the state of employment in London. This began a twelve year project of in which he and the research team he assembled systematically gathered and mapped living conditions of first, London's East End, and later the entire city. He concluded that the rate of extreme poverty was 31% which he revised a decade later to about 35%.



Booth also mapped types of employment by district, and religious orientations. His methods are described below. The results of his studies were first made

public in an 1889 publication of *Labour and Life of the People*, and the accompanying maps were also put on public display. The initial volume was received wide attention from the press and sparked debate fueled by the emerging socialist movements in British government, and contributed to the eventual establishment of the welfare state. By 1903 Booth had published seventeen volumes surveying all of London.

Innovation Charles Booth's work is a classic in several fields of social science, including sociology, urban studies, public administration, policy research, social surveys, demography and geography. His work has also been criticized, his methods and theory disparaged as undeveloped and *ad hoc*, his prodigious reports misunderstood and largely unread. Appreciation has grown, however, in recent years of Booth's unequalled attempt to address a social issue by relating empirical data with space, time, and social class.

Booth set out to answer how many people in London lived in poverty. He also wished to determine what caused and maintained their poverty, and what could alleviate it. Booth was not trained as a social scientist, but associated with academics, for example, during his presidency of the Royal Statistics Society. He was inspired by the "father of Sociology" August Comte and the search for social facts in addressing societies ills. Booth's methodology, however, reflected his experience as a businessman in meticulously gathering quantitative data, but also an interest in understanding the real lives of those he observed. Qualitative descriptions of the lives of Londoners in various districts, sometimes described house by house, were included in all of his published volumes.

Booth made innovative use of mapping for presenting and analyzing data, and coordinating research efforts of his team. His first set of poverty maps produced for the 1889 volumes of *Labour and Life of the People* were the results of three years of data compiled and analyzed by Booth and his team. He combined census data (which he found inaccurate) with interviews and extensive notes gathered by the London School Board, whose attendance officers visited all school age children. From these notes, a family's social class was determined, and each London street was hand colored on a large-scale survey map according to eight categories of social class. These categories were based on source of income, and included:

BLACK: Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal.

DARK BLUE: Very poor, casual. Chronic want.

LIGHT BLUE: Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family

PURPLE: Mixed. Some comfortable others poor

PINK: Fairly comfortable. Good ordinary earnings.

RED: Middle class. Well-to-do.

YELLOW: Upper-middle and Upper classes. Wealthy.

Booth consulted local experts on the accuracy of his coding, finally determining that 30.1 percent of Londoner's lived below the poverty line. Parenthetically, Booth coined the term "poverty line" but where subsequent researchers tied the term to a subsistence income level, Booth's use was more descriptive and tied to qualitative factors of food, clothing, shelter and relative deprivation. His assessments of class were based first on observation of lifestyle differences, rather than theory.

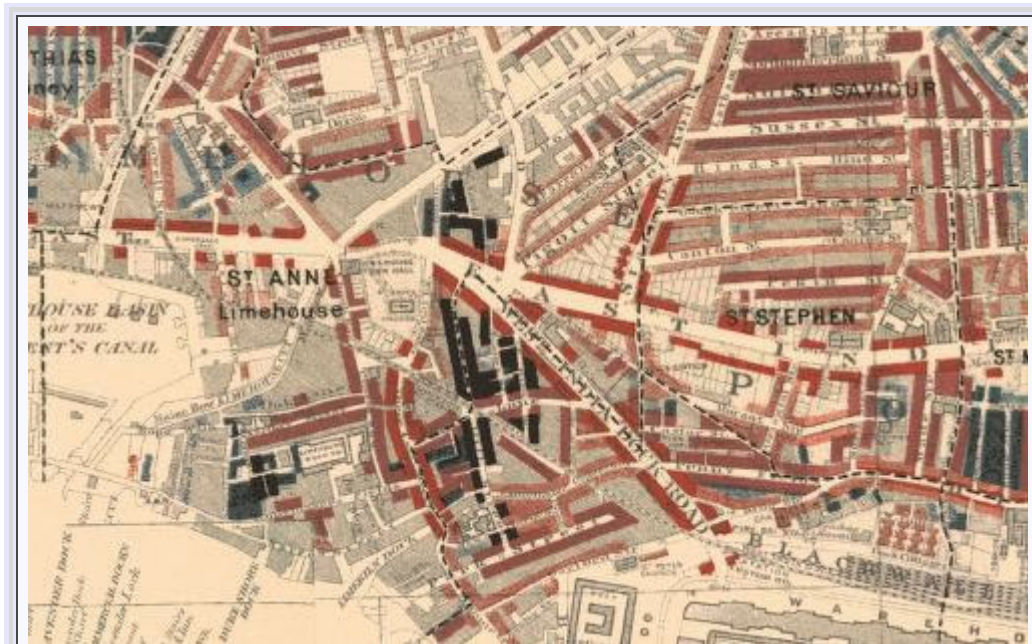
A second interest throughout Booth's research was the distribution of labor in London, including types of work, its stability and wages. This was the first such comprehensive labor survey to be linked, with meticulous detail, to the conditions that cause and maintain poverty in various regions of the city.

His second series of studies was conducted over six years, ending with publication in 1903 of the final 7 of 17 volumes. In it he updated his 1889 poverty map by systematically re-visiting every street in London. This time he and his team accompanied police on their beats to gain firsthand assessments of dwellings, and updated their data from the prior decade, assign the poverty level at 35%. As an early "ecology of the social class", Booth analyzed the shifts in social class with the demolition of certain slums and relocation of the poor, and the introduction of rail bringing a higher social class. He found that social isolation of neighborhoods was a factor in the highest concentration of "very poor."

In addition to the color coded poverty map, Booth compiled maps and data of religious institutions and their charity efforts by interviewing some 1800 church leaders. He found that such charity work was insufficient to meet the need, and that religion was most active in the upper middle class. Booth also mapped all bars, restaurants and stores that sold liquor to assess the spatial distribution of drinking and poverty rates. Overall, Booth's extensive index of social class and location in London addressed, at least implicitly, many issues central to current social science research including those employing spatial analytic methods. The insights, however, are often buried in fifteen years and volumes of published findings and unpublished notes. Booth admitted that his relentless pursuit of data did not lend itself to concise conclusions. However, his intention was from the beginning to offer a diagnosis before seeking remedy to the disease.

Booth's work had lasting influence demonstrating the importance of social surveys for governance, demographics, and sociology. While methods have

improved, the scope of Booth's work remains unequalled. All of the original field notes and other support material, which provide much richer qualitative details, were preserved by the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In 2001 access to Booth's work was greatly enhanced by the Library's digitizing of Booth's maps and many of the field notes and indexes, available through the Charles Booth Online Archive (<http://booth.lse.ac.uk>). Included is the ability to search maps by location and even some family names, and compare them to maps of modern London.



[Charles Booth Online Archive](http://booth.lse.ac.uk) at the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences

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Links

[Charles Booth Online Archive](#)

[Charles Booth's 1889 Descriptive Map of London Poverty](#)