

The
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Poverty

Down-wind and out

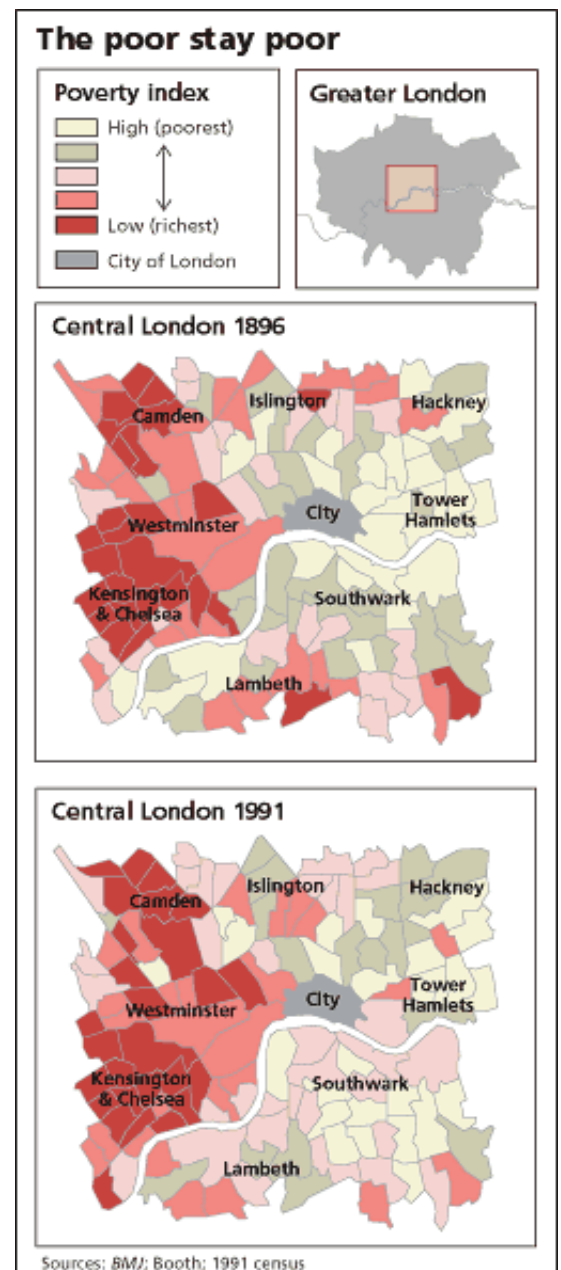
Poverty has clung to some parts of London for at least a hundred years. Why?

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THE socio-economic classifications used by Charles Booth, a researcher in 19th-century London, were much more colourful than the bland gradations preferred by modern sociologists: the bottom class in Booth's hierarchy is labelled "vicious, semi-criminal". But according to research recently published in the *British Medical Journal*, whilst the nomenclature may have changed, the simple geography of poverty in inner London has not.

Booth's team created minutely detailed maps of the capital, assigning individual dwellings to the various social classes. The new research compares Booth's findings of 1896 with the results of the 1991 census (see maps). Today's poor are wealthy by the standards of destitution that Booth encountered: poverty (the European variety, at least) has been continually redefined throughout the century. But the stability of London's social geography is remarkable. Some parts of south-west London have gone up in the world and some south-eastern parts gone down, but large areas of the capital, especially in the east, are, relatively speaking, as poor as they were a hundred years ago.

All cities, by their nature, require some inequality. They need relatively poor people—often immigrants—to supply cheap labour, and they need down-at-heel areas for them to



live in and for new businesses to take root in. Some of the poorest areas on the maps have provided the first addresses for successive waves of (initially) poor immigrants. Tower Hamlets has welcomed diasporas of Huguenots, Jews and, most recently, Bangladeshis. When their lot improves, immigrants tend to move out to leafier suburbs.

Poverty and affluence are much more intermixed within individual districts of London than is the case in comparable cities—a nuance that the maps fail to capture. Even so, this entrenched pattern of poverty seems to contradict the circulatory principles of the market: over the course of a century, the poor areas of Booth's London ought to have attracted investment and gentrification, by virtue of cheap property. Why has that not happened?

Some of the reasons for East London's poverty are geographical, and have produced similar east-west divides in other European cities, such as Glasgow and Paris. The River Thames is widest in the east, so nasty, stinking industries and their workers have always clustered there; the prevailing wind comes from the west, and the rich like to live up-wind of the poor. The advent of heavy industry worsened the pollution; in the 19th century the East End became known as “the abyss”. Heavy bombing during the second world war didn't help.

But since most of London's heavy industry has long since gone, there must be other explanations too. One of these might be the east's poor transport infrastructure (a problem which London's mayor, Ken Livingstone, says he will address). Nevertheless, the maps inescapably suggest a failure on the part of philanthropists and government. Tony Travers, a professor at the London School of Economics, describes the research as a “desperate commentary on 100 years of social policy”.

Some argue that social policy has not just failed to change London's social geography, but may have helped to fossilise it. Anne Power, also of the LSE, identifies the replacement of slum housing with council estates as a policy which has backfired, by helping to paralyse poverty. Mr Travers points out that areas which have attracted gentrification (such as once-reviled Brixton) tend to have retained their old housing stock, in which well-heeled yuppies now want to live, rather than replacing them with the vast, brutal council estates that put people off moving to areas such as Tower Hamlets. This helps to explain the upward mobility of much-mocked Islington, which combines the right sort of gentrifiable housing with the benefits of a tube station.

Perhaps better housing policy could disrupt the pattern. But Danny Dorling, of Leeds University, one of the authors of the new research, thinks that the reputations of poor areas are becoming harder to dispel. Government initiatives such as the publication of school exam results and, no doubt, research such as Mr Dorling's and articles like this one, only make the well-off more

determined to steer clear of the abyss.

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