

Fat north, thin south

05 Mar 2004



Geography of 'traditional' diets of fish and chips: reflects regional inequalities or just personal choice? ©FreeFoto.com

A new survey highlights the disparity that still appears to exist between the quality of life experienced in northern and southern regions of the UK. Northern towns come off worst in a league table of local authorities that focuses upon levels of obesity. Topping the league is Kingston-upon-Hull, situated in northern England. In an interesting coincidence, the lowest levels of obesity were recorded in Kingston-upon-Thames, in southern England (leading *The Times* to report on a 'tale of two cities' while *The Daily Telegraph* examines the two sides of 'Kingston-upon-Health').

Of the ten districts at the bottom of the obesity league, all are found in the south. By contrast, the twenty districts ranked with the highest scores are all found in Wales, northern England and the Midlands. Knowsley (Liverpool) is second in the league, while Blackburn comes third. The source of the data used to measure inequalities consists of hospital admission records showing numbers of patients admitted with Type 2 diabetes (which is linked to poor diet and a lack of exercise).

The north-south divide

Popular concern with 'north-south' inequalities in the UK first began to really surface in the 1980s. During this decade, new investment and growth were overwhelmingly concentrated south of the 'Severn-Wash line' in East Anglia, the South-East and the South-West. Meanwhile, many northern cities were undergoing **deindustrialisation** as traditional industries such as steel-making in Sheffield were faltering in the face of competition from **Newly Industrialised Countries** (NICs) like South Korea. Lower wages in the NICs had begun to make it hard for British industries to be competitive. In Liverpool, for instance, 150,000 job losses in textiles and clothing occurred in the 1970s. After 1979, the recession hit even previously prosperous sectors such as engineering, electrics and car manufacture and 2000 plants closed in Merseyside between 1978 and 1982.

Although plenty of anomalies exist, such as Edinburgh and Chester, northern regions of the UK have consistently shown a lower quality of life than many of their southern counterparts in successive social surveys of life expectancy, diet and net migration figures since the late 1970s. Economic indicators such as unemployment levels, average incomes and house prices also support the same picture of uneven national growth and development. While the average house price in the southeast is now £260,000, the national figure is only £145,000 (*The Guardian*, 05 February 2004).

Why do **core and periphery** patterns develop?

Geographers recognise that all nations exhibit some level of uneven economic and social development. Following the theories of Gunnar Myrdal (1957) and Friedmann (1966), the terms *core and periphery* are usually used to describe and explain these disparities. Flows of investment and labour migration known as **backwash** are directed at core regions such as southern England, fuelling the process of **cumulative causation** ('snowballing' growth). As a result, peripheral regions potentially suffer from under-investment, resulting in poorer public services and high-levels of out-migration, especially of skilled workers.

All of this can result in an uneven distribution pattern of skills and wealth. The current study's authors follow this line of thinking by linking obesity levels to spatial variations in social class and levels of education. Marc Farr is quoted in *The Times* (02 March 2004) as saying that 'there are more working

class areas in the north... education levels about food are fairly poor and smoking levels are higher than elsewhere.' Referring to 'traditional' diets of fish and chips, he also points out that more information is available to people in a higher social class about diet and exercise, thereby offsetting the greater potential for obesity that high incomes can bring.

How dramatic are these inequalities?

LEDs such as Brazil tend to exhibit far more marked differences between their core and peripheral regions - the lifestyles of elite groups in Sao Paulo and Rio are utterly distinct from those of indigenous rainforest people (*National Geographic*, October 2003). In the UK, the differences are, of course, far more subtle and it would be totally incorrect to assert that 'all northerners' are unfit, in the light of this new report. Indeed, central areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh are actually ranked as the twelfth and sixteenth *least* obese areas by the survey.

All national regions contain areas of both affluence and deprivation. Some of the highest levels of poverty in the UK are to be found in inner London. A report last year showed that one in two children in inner London live in poverty, when defined as the level of households with a disposable income below 60% of the national average. With findings like this, it is evident that the 'north-south divide' is far from clear-cut.

However, the aggregate statistics for the new study do suggest that *on average* more people in northern regions suffer from poor diet.

A controversial way of defining social development?

- These findings – and the explanation offered – are sure to be controversial. During the 1980s, the conservative health minister Edwina Currey was severely reprimanded for making insensitive over-generalisations about 'northern diets.' Some people will always just choose to eat fatty food or smoke, irrespective of risk, due to their own personal preferences. In light of this, should levels of obesity be used as an indicator of inequalities?
- Recent studies have also suggested that Type 2 diabetes is a problem that increasingly affects people from all classes and backgrounds and is even beginning to be diagnosed in children for the first time (*The Observer*, 09 October 2003). There are now 1.4 million people nationally with the condition (*The Times*, 02 March 2004).
- In a related news item from the same day that the obesity report was released, McDonalds announced that it is to axe its 'super-size' meals in the face of mounting criticism that it is helping youngsters to eat unhealthily.