



Geographies of exclusion: Seaside towns and Houses in Multiple Occupancy



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ABSTRACT

This paper has two intentions. The first is to focus on seaside towns as sites of social exclusion and to contribute to the development of a 'seaside scholarship', provoking scholars of poverty and exclusion to engage more critically with seaside locales beyond rural/urban binaries. As this paper demonstrates, many seaside towns face problems associated with both rural and urban areas and therefore a more place-based approach to geographical studies of poverty and exclusion is needed. The second intention of this paper is to explore further how problems associated with traditionally 'rural' areas such as remoteness, seasonal employment and a labour market which potentially reinforces gender divisions are often held in tension in seaside towns with traditionally more 'urban' concerns such as the quality of privately rented housing, or more specifically Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs). This paper argues that HMOs are a fundamental factor for the particular nuance of exclusion in many seaside towns due to their potential to attract individuals in receipt of Housing Benefit (HB). By attracting HB claimants into seaside towns HMOs indirectly affect those individuals' opportunities to find and sustain long-term employment and access services in ways which mimic those evidenced in rural areas. To support these claims a case study from the town of Ilfracombe, north Devon is used, drawing from a large qualitative data set which includes interviews with local authority officers, community workers and HMO residents.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the 'traditional' British seaside holiday has waned in popularity and many seaside towns have been caught in a spiral of economic decline. The nature of this decline has been documented in various academic and policy works, most notably research conducted within tourism studies (Argawal, 2004; Walton, 2000; Beatty and Fothergill, 2004). However, despite this documentation seaside towns have become an under-researched entity in geographical studies of poverty and social exclusion, where historically research has focused on 'urban' and, more recently, 'rural' locations. This paper alternatively takes seaside towns as its focus and makes two key contributions. First, this paper contributes to the development of a 'seaside scholarship', provoking poverty and exclusion scholars to engage more critically with seaside locales beyond rural/urban binaries. Second, this paper investigates how problems associated with traditionally 'rural'

areas such as remoteness, seasonal employment and a labour market which potentially reinforces gender divisions are often held in tension with traditionally more 'urban' concerns, namely Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs), to establish a unique inflection of social exclusion within seaside towns. More specifically, this paper examines the effects that living in a seaside HMO can have on an individual's experiences of social exclusion using individual case studies of HMO residents living in a seaside town in north Devon.

1.1. Government policy and the seaside

Whilst seaside towns have historically been subject to relative neglect in policy circles, the last decade has seen something of an awakening to the problems facing such places; whilst the Labour government of 1997–2010 had no specific policy or national strategy for so-called 'seaside communities', the 2006 Select Committee report on Seaside Towns generated greater political awareness regarding this issue and in particular identified a series of key 'problems' facing seaside towns (House of Commons Report, 2007). Perhaps most notably the Select Committee report identified

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Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs)¹ as a key factor in the concentration and marginalisation of the ‘single poor’ into some seaside areas. An HMO is defined as being home to three or more tenants who form more than one household, with more than one of these households sharing a toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities with other tenants (House of Commons Library, 2013). In seaside towns HMOs are often fashioned from old run-down hotels or large Victorian houses, a high percentage of which are in poor condition (HCR, 2007:19). Nationally, 50% of all seaside HMOs are categorised as non-decent to live in compared to a figure of 37% for all HMOs across England (ibid 2007:19). The Select Committee report suggests a very real link “between HMOs and a transient and vulnerable population” concentrated in seaside towns across England (ibid 2007:19). The report defines ‘vulnerable populations’ as people “who are unable to meet their own everyday needs owing to a physical or mental health condition or who are vulnerable because of their situation, such as homelessness” (HCR, 2007:8). In short, the report suggests that the increasing concentration of cheap HMOs attracts disadvantaged social groups to seaside towns, transforming places into what they term seaside ‘slums’ (ibid:18).

In 2009, the then opposition Conservative Party released their own plan for seaside towns entitled *No Longer the End of the Line* (Simmonds, 2009). Within this plan the issue of housing, specifically HMOs, was acknowledged as a seaside challenge that needed to be tackled:

“Housing in seaside towns has long been the source of many challenges. As overnight visitors decline, many former guest-houses and B&Bs are transformed into low-quality bed-sits or Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs). These attract migrant workers and those dependent on benefits, with low rents and often short tenancies.”

However, when the Coalition government announced the Seaside Communities Fund (CCF) in 2011 designed to support the economic growth of seaside communities, the issue of HMOs was made conspicuous by its absence (DCLG, 2012). So whilst this new (if small) focus on seaside towns has been a welcome resource for the economic development of some seaside communities, the CCF does not address one of the fundamental elements of seaside poverty and exclusion as identified by the Select Committee report: Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs). This is the key point in the migration of ‘vulnerable individuals’ into seaside towns according to the Select Committee report.

1.2. The neglected seaside: looking beyond the rural/urban divide

Though the Coalition government may have overlooked HMOs in their modest bid to regenerate the seaside, the seaside has been almost entirely neglected by geographers. In particular, geographic studies of poverty and social exclusion have been disproportionately concerned with ‘the city’, although most recently there has also been an abundance of academic work on social exclusion in rural areas (Shucksmith and Chapman, 1998; Cloke and Milbourne, 2001; Cloke et al 2002; Commins, 2004; Gray et al., 2006; Milbourne and Doheny, 2012). As Milbourne (2004) notes in reference to the latter, “*locating case studies in the most visible places of poverty runs the risk of down-playing the significance of poverty in other types of space, most notably rural areas*” (Milbourne, 2004:563). Indeed rural poverty, as examined by researchers such as Milbourne, Cloke and others (see Cloke

and Milbourne, 2001; Milbourne and Hughes, 2005 for examples), provides a more detailed place-based approach to poverty and in doing so becomes concerned with the multiple rather than the uni-dimensional indicators of disadvantage. However, academics have carried out substantial research on poverty and exclusion at ‘urban’ locations taking into account economic decline/regeneration, housing and deprivation (for examples see Lee and Murie, 1997; Raco and Imrie, 2003; MacLeavy, 2008) as well as comprehensive studies of housing, deprivation and economic decline in ‘rural’ locations. This place-based approach has disregarded seaside towns as a set of places that are becoming of increasing significance to research in poverty and exclusion which perhaps goes beyond the rural/urban divide. This paper aims to make a modest contribution to filling this gap and examines the role that HMOs play in unique inflections of social exclusion in seaside towns.

1.3. The neglected seaside: complex and diverse places

Scholars of poverty and exclusion have perhaps neglected the seaside as a site of research due to the absence of an ‘off the peg’ definition for seaside towns until relatively recently. This definition appeared in 2003 in Beatty and Fothergill’s seminal report ‘The Seaside Economy’, part of a research project which developed a bespoke definition for British seaside towns (Beatty and Fothergill, 2003, see also Beatty and Fothergill, 2004). Using a pragmatic approach to defining ‘seaside towns’ Beatty and Fothergill excluded ports and industrial towns ‘by the sea’, only including seaside towns which were resort-led. In this sense ‘seaside towns’ and ‘seaside resorts’ are somewhat interchangeable terms. Key to this distinction is that ‘resort-led’ seaside towns possess a history of tourism which furnishes them with distinguishing features in comparison to other places along the coast.² In addition to the resort-led identifiers above this bespoke definition distinguishes seaside towns which stand ‘in their own right’, and not those which were suburbs of other larger urban areas by the sea (2003:13) (for a more detailed discussion of the development of this ‘off the peg’ definition of seaside towns, see Beatty and Fothergill, 2003, 2004).

In addition to the hybrid nature of seaside towns this relative neglect from academics could also be a symptom of the diversity in geography, size and socio-economic profile of seaside towns, which means they do not offer a convenient or consistent geography (see Table 1 for examples). This inconsistency requires a bespoke user-defined geography as exemplified by Beatty and Fothergill (2003, 2004). It is this breadth of diversity among seaside towns which could perhaps have made them awkward spaces for both academics and policy makers to tackle. Following the 2007 Select Committee report however, two large scale benchmarking studies were conducted which sought to focus on seaside towns specifically. Table 1 draws on these studies to highlight the diversity of England’s seaside towns and the range of circumstances present. The table presents data from England’s five largest seaside towns and five smallest seaside towns concerning; population, employment rate, benefit claimant rate, percentage of households in the private rental sector, deprivation ranking and ranking of barriers to access to housing and services (using the IMD, 2007). Though not an exhaustive list Table 1 draws attention to the variety in size, geography and socio-economic status of England’s seaside towns.

¹ The 2004 Housing Act identifies an HMO as a house which (may) have been converted into entirely self-contained flats or bedsits and rented to three or more tenants, forming two or more households (Housing Act 2004).

² These features include “a specialist tourist infrastructure (promenades, piers, parks etc), holiday accommodation (hotels, boarding houses, caravan sites) and a distinctive resort character that is often reflected in the built environment. Moreover, while some resorts have fared better than others, they have all to a greater or lesser extent faced challenges arising from the changing structure of the UK holiday trade” (2008: 11).

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