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Britain - split and divided by inequality

Danny Dorling

Next time you are talking to someone from the other side of town don't assume they know what you are talking about – what is normal in Britain is slowly being split in two.

Much about life in Britain is getting better. We are slowly and surely becoming more tolerant of others for instance although we still harbour great racism. We may not be becoming happier on aggregate but for those most distressed, rates of suicide have been falling in recent years. And again at the extremes, our youngest children are safer no than they have ever been, from disease and from violence from us. However, at the heart of British society something is slowly pulling us apart. This pressure has different effects at different stages in our lives and it is not a pressure that will well revealed by government statistics.

Indices of multiple deprivation really don't say much about a place. They are inhuman things, not unlike most social statistics. The map shown here comes from an atlas which is a little different. In it, for over one thousand areas, we have tried to work out what is normal in each place.

In many large neighbourhoods it is normal for the parents of children aged under five not to have a car. Most under fives live in homes with no access to a car in these areas. Their mums or dads walk everywhere with them, carry the shopping and take it on the bus. And that is normal.

Elsewhere in a huge number of neighbourhoods most under fives live in households with access to two or more cars. When they are taken to the shops the issue is whether to go in mum's or dad's car, or the people carrier. Not how many bags can be carried under the buggy. We have more than enough cars to give some up and, simultaneously, for every family with children that need one to have one. Instead, in those places that had most cars to begin with more have appeared in the last decade. Some children in Britain still die young despite falls in deliberate forms of violence and disease afflicting them. Car drivers are the most effective killers of our children in Britain. More cars driven by parents who need a car - and far fewer driven by most other groups - would make us all safer.

In childhood lives are now so split by neighbourhood that inequalities in the wealth children can expect to inherit simply by being born where they were now dwarf those compared to any time since the upper classes began to loose their country estates over a century ago. Older children's and young adults' chances of going to a university now divide areas between places where that is almost inconceivable, to those neighbourhoods where soon to not go will be an achievement. For people of my age, growing up in the late 1960s and 1970s in Britain we lived in far more comparable places than today; more drab, worse material circumstances; more overt everyday violent racism for some; but a much more common experience of childhood than any child can experience today. There are no longer normal places.

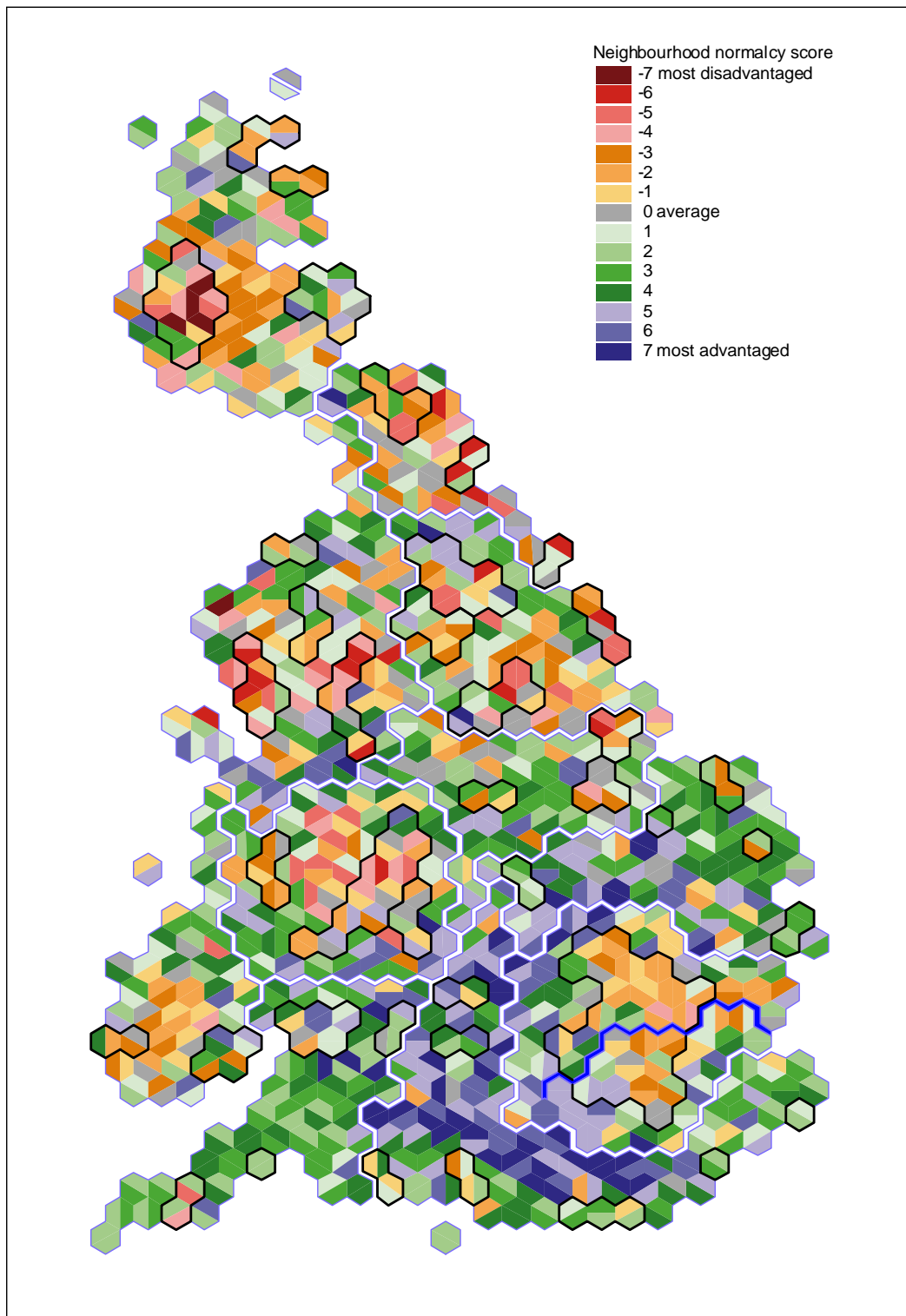
For adults of working age the country is now split into suburbs, villages and estates by the housing that folk can afford more so than at any time we have data for. Monies you may or may not inherit and the social grade of your occupation determines your place of residence. Access to millions of cars has allowed people to live much further from where many work and further from those they fear. Location location location is all about the neighbours, not about the views. In some places a majority of adults will always rent, or have a mortgage but never own. In others the second largest group, even by ages 40 to 59 (after mortgagees) now own property outright. The numbers owning multiple homes are rising, while there has been no fall in those households who own no property.

In some places it is now normal to be in poor health between the ages of 60 and 74. A majority of the age group living there are. In other places the majority of people of these ages are in good health. The number of neighbourhoods where people are average, for instance being of fair health at these ages, is almost certainly still falling. Life expectancies are already rising fastest where they were highest to begin with and most slowly where they were lowest a decade ago. More people are well off. But more are also poor. Fewer live in areas where a majority are neither rich nor poor.

The map shown here takes what is normal at each of seven ages of life and gives a score of -1 to it if people are disadvantaged, +1 if they are advantaged, and 0 in between. The seven scores are summed to then shade the map.

At the one extreme of normalcy in Britain is where it is normal to be advantaged no matter who you are or how hard you try (or don't try). Live in that part of Britain are unlikely to appreciate you are advantaged because, after all, doesn't almost *everyone* have cars, money, go to college, get a good job, get to own their home, enjoy a healthy retirement, and die old? If you lived in any of these neighbourhoods you would find it quite difficult to appreciate just how advantaged you mostly are, because you don't differ that much from your neighbours.

At the other extreme of normalcy are the areas where most children here will have recourse to *no* wealth; almost no young adults will go to university; many will not work and almost all who do work are in the worst paid jobs; average age of death will be much lower than 80; and so on – *and all of this in these neighbourhoods is normal.*



Most people think they are average when asked. In most things most are not. Most say they are normal, but what is normal changes rapidly as you travel across Britain, from the a crescent west of London of advantage, where to succeed is to do nothing out of the ordinary, to the peaks of despair, where to just get by is extraordinary.

In the poorest parts rates of violence are rising, especially for young men and the murder rates nationally have only rising over the last two decades because of the huge rise in deaths due to killing in these areas. Across most of Britain your changes of being killed due to such violence have fallen and continue to fall. But murder is still incredibly rare in this country, if not as rare as in most of our more equitable neighbours. Instead it is the low level everyday violence of being seen as surplus to requirements in a country made rich by international banking that causes the most damage to young people in Britain today. Half the poor are now in work. Employment is not freedom. And the rich are increasingly constrained in where they feel it is safe to live and much more spatially more segregated than they were a decade or two or even three ago.

There is much more to achieve than being the richest of small islands in the world. Economic growth coupled with rising inequalities does not make a good society. Neither do government policies designed simply to alleviate some of the worse miseries of the worse off. These are akin to charity.

The dominant reaction to the slow splitting of society by government is to deny it is happening. The opposition fall on the symptoms of the divide as supposed evidence that their ‘no such thing as society party’ has something positive to offer. Minor political parties whistle in the wind. As a country we’ve spent so long trying to get rich that now we (at least on average) are, we are finding it hard to work out what to do next. The richest countries in the work no longer need to get richer, but they desperately need to become fairer.

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Partly Adapted from “Identity in Britain: a cradle-to-grave atlas” by Bethan Thomas and Daniel Dorling published by the Policy Press... For further details see www.shef.ac.uk/sasi

