

TOP GEAR

Too few or too many cars?

Access to cars may be a better indication of wealth than is often assumed, given what is revealed by the 2001 Census. There is a geographical divide in Britain based on access to cars. Two groups of households are compared in this report: those who might need a car but do not have one, and those who may have more cars than they actually need. The report shows first that the number of households in these two situations in the UK is roughly equal (at about one million households in each group). It then shows that the two groups of households tend to live in very different places, but not perhaps where we would expect.

Access to a car

"Motoring used to be a pleasurable activity, but it wouldn't be considered that now", Susie Haywood, spokesperson for the RAC says. "It's a necessity. And the car is the most valuable household good."¹

Of course, not everyone would agree with the RAC that having a car is essential. The green lobby and public transport enthusiasts would strongly disagree. However, there can be few who would disagree that having a car can make life easier. Travel by car is, on average, quicker than by public transport, apart from in the most highly congested inner-city areas or on long distance journeys. A recent survey of London motorists revealed that 85% said they could not adjust to life without a car. While car ownership continues to rise, the proportion of households without cars in the UK has fallen steadily from 48% in 1970 to 27% in 2000².

Car ownership is strongly associated with income and wealth. Only 5% of households in the highest income group do not have a car but 52% have two or more



Life in Britain

The latest Census reveals that within the UK people live in very different worlds. For some, resources and amenities abound; for others life is characterised by deprivation and difficulties, especially when their need for support is great.

The 2001 Census marked the bi-centenary of census taking in the UK. It is the most comprehensive social record of life in this country now available. Since 1801 successive governments have asked the population to assist in the taking of a Census.

This report is one of a series of 10 showing key patterns and inequalities in life in the UK revealed by the 2001 Census. These reports focus on geographical inequalities, highlighting where services and opportunities appear not to be available or accessible to those people and places that need them most.

cars, while 65% of households in the bottom income group do not have a car. Statistics about what people who have cars actually do with them are revealing. In 1998/2000, people in households with cars made 28% more trips to visit family and friends, and 45% more trips for other leisure activities, than those without cars². Although these activities might themselves be associated with having more money and leisure time, it does seem that cars are useful for leisure and for social interaction and integration. These are things the government is particularly keen to encourage.

This report is not about the pros and cons of having a car, or whether it is environmentally acceptable to have one. Instead, it looks at differences between those who may need a car but have none, and those who have access to more cars than they might really need. In 2000, the proportion of households with two or more cars (28%) was higher than the proportion without a car for the first time. As a recent BBC report stated: "Not long ago the two-car household was the last word in suburban affluence. But changing lifestyles and a fall in car prices have given rise to what used to be seen as an American phenomenon: the three- and four-car family"³. The group without access to a car is shrinking and as such it increasingly contains some of the poorest people in society. As our society becomes ever more car-oriented, the relative disadvantage of those without a car continues to grow.

The 2001 Census asked the question:

How many cars or vans are owned, or available for use, by one or more members of your household? Include any company car or van if available for private use.

The report uses the answers to this question to compare the two groups of households. Of course, who 'really needs' a car and the number of cars a household needs are quite subjective issues. The report chooses to represent the group who need a car but do not have one as households which have dependent children but which do not have access to car. The focus on those with children reflects the fact that trying to bring them up without access to a car can be a real struggle. This is not to argue that car access is absolutely essential,

but as Dieleman et al observe with dry understatement, "travelling with young children by public transport, by bicycle or on foot is tiresome" (p 524)⁴. It is a reasonable assumption that families with children who do not have access to a car represent a group likely to need one.

The report chooses to represent the second group – those who have more cars than they might really need – as households that have three or more cars. In the UK four out of five households can walk to their nearest food store, three quarters of households can walk to their nearest Post Office and a third can walk to their nearest shopping centre within 13 minutes. A further three out of five households are within 26 minutes of their nearest shopping centre by bus⁵. Despite this proximity to the things we need, 'three or more cars' has been chosen as the cut off. This is because it is easy to see how the modern working family – with or without children – might need two cars to get to and from work, school and the shops. It is harder to see how three cars might be a real necessity. Of course, within this group there will be some households that have three or more adults who all have a legitimate claim on the use of a car. As will be seen later on, the report does explore this possibility.

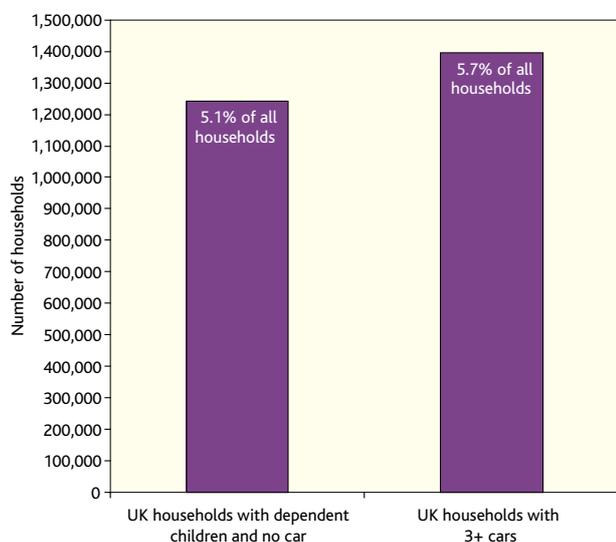
The report finds out how many households there are in these two groups across the UK, and for each of 142 areas: counties, unitary authorities and former metropolitan authorities. It addresses the question:

Do areas with many households that may need a car tend to also have many households that have more cars than they might really need?

Findings

There were 24.5 million households in the UK at the time of the 2001 Census. Figure 1 shows the numbers of households in each of the two groups. It shows that overall, about 5% of households (1 in 20) have dependent children and no access to a car. The number of households with more than three cars is about the same.

Figure 1: UK households that might need a car and households that might have more cars than needed (2001)



The Census gives a lot of information about these two groups of households. Of the 1.2 million households with dependent children and no car, nearly two out of three are lone-parent households. Other research has shown that working women are more likely to need a car, both in order to get to work and to be able to combine work with childcare and other household commitments. It would be hard to argue that having a car and the means to run it would not be helpful to a lone parent – whether in employment or not.

The Census also tells us that nearly two thirds of households that have three or more cars contain just two or fewer employed people. Furthermore, one in five of the households with three or more cars consists of just one person or a couple; not even enough people to drive all their cars at the same time. Only around a third (about half a million) has dependent children. One popular argument for multiple car ownership is that people who live in rural areas are totally reliant on a car to get around and that therefore most adults in these areas need access to a car. So it is important to look at where these two contrasting groups of households tend to live.

Comparing areas

Figure 2 shows that areas with a high percentage of households with three or more cars tend also to have a low percentage of households with dependent children and no car. This is an 'inverse' relationship; when one group of households decreases, the other increases.

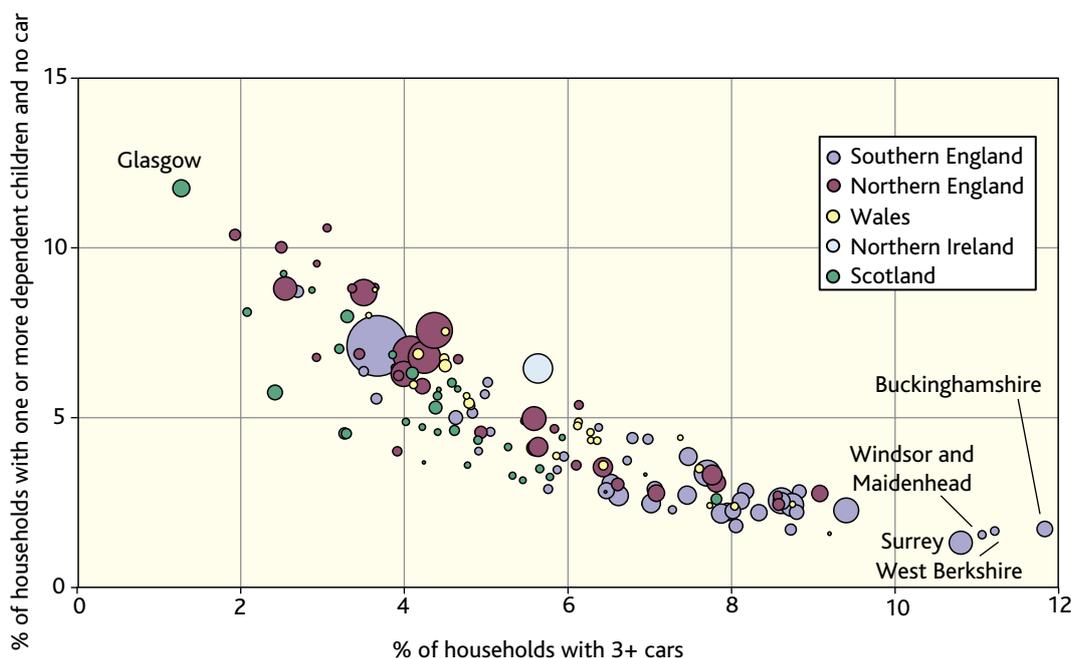
Figures 3 and 4 illustrate where these types of households tend to live. The most striking thing about these maps is that they show just how many households without access to a car *and* who have dependent children live in the rural parts of the UK, most especially in the North of England and in Scotland. The rural South and West of England seem to have the lowest proportions of households that might need a car but do not have one. Figure 3 maps households with more cars than they might really need and the pattern is largely the 'inverse' of Figure 2. Perhaps the most striking thing about Figure 3 is that the areas with the highest ownership of three

100 years ago

In the early part of the 20th century, modes of transport and the need for travel to access shops and services were vastly different. In 1904 there were only 23,000 cars on the roads in Britain. In 2001, the number of private and light goods vehicles registered was 26.4 million. In London in 1904 the average off-peak travel speed for motorised transport was 12 mph. In central London during the period 2000-03 the average was less than 10 mph at all times. A hundred years ago cars would have been perceived as a luxury rather than a necessity, and lack of ownership would not necessarily have led to impediments to accessing goods and services.

For more information see 'A century of change: trends in UK statistics since 1900' (www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp99/rp99-111.pdf); National Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk); Department for Transport (www.dft.gov.uk).

Figure 2: The association between the percentage of households with 3+ cars in each area (X-axis) and the percentage of households with one or more dependent children and no car (Y-axis)



Note: Each circle is a county, unitary or former metropolitan authority, drawn with the area in proportion to the total population in 2001 (the largest circle represents London, with a population of just over 7 million). Areas in northern England are those that lie west or north of the counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire (the Severn-Humber divide).

or more cars tend not to be deprived, remote agricultural areas where multiple vehicles may be vital. They are the wealthy areas to the west of London.

Tables 1 and 2 list the five areas with the highest percentage of households with dependent children and no car, and the five areas with the highest proportion of households with three or more cars. Table 1 suggests that those without a car but who might need one are often living in poorer urban areas. The places listed in Table 2 include some areas with rural populations, but certainly not those that could be thought of as at all remote.

Since 2001

Between 2001 and the end of 2003, the number of private and light goods vehicles (mostly cars) registered increased by 1.3 million to 27.7 million. There is no evidence for any change in the distribution of cars by household over this time, and the patterns observed here are unlikely to change quickly.

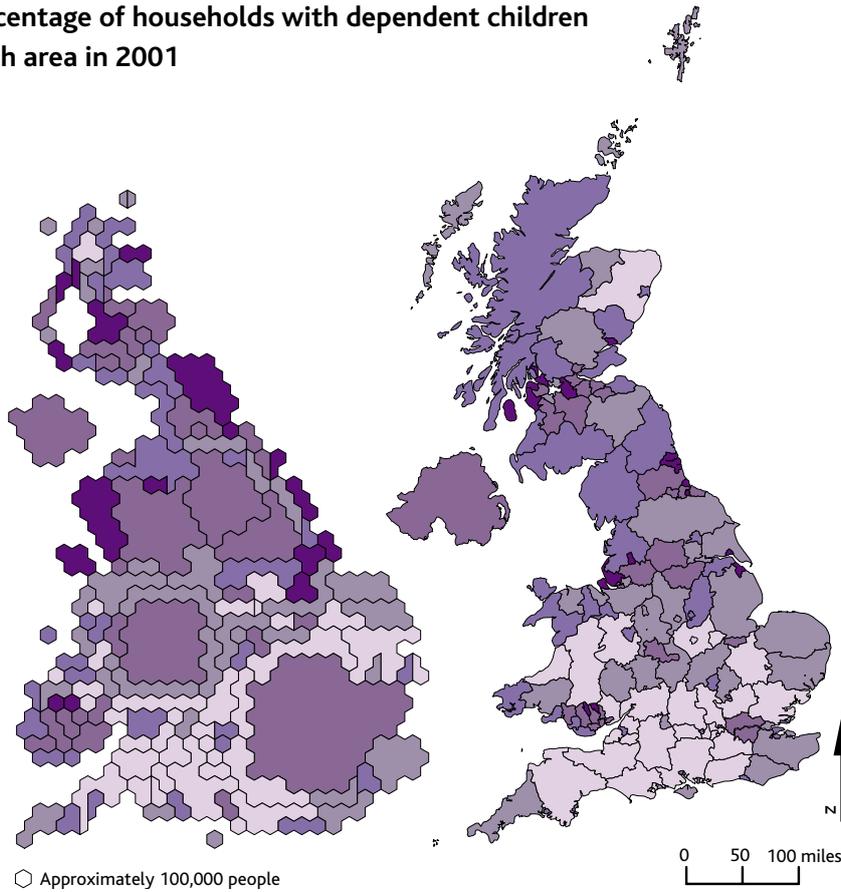
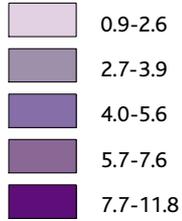
Discussion

Cars are so much a part of our society that not having access to one is generally taken to indicate not having enough money, as opposed to having made an ideological choice, especially for the parents of dependent children. Of course some people may have made that choice and others, especially older people, do not have a car because they no longer drive. However, as our society becomes ever more oriented to the car user, with out-of-town shops and supermarkets, the consequences of not having one grow larger.

As stated at the outset, this report is not about the pros and cons of having a car or whether it is right to have one (or two, or three...). Its aim is to contrast people at the opposite ends of a socio-economic spectrum to focus on the relationship between relative poverty, relative affluence, and geography. This report and the others in the series demonstrate that people from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum tend to be geographically separate as well as financially separate. They are

Figure 3: The percentage of households with dependent children and no car in each area in 2001

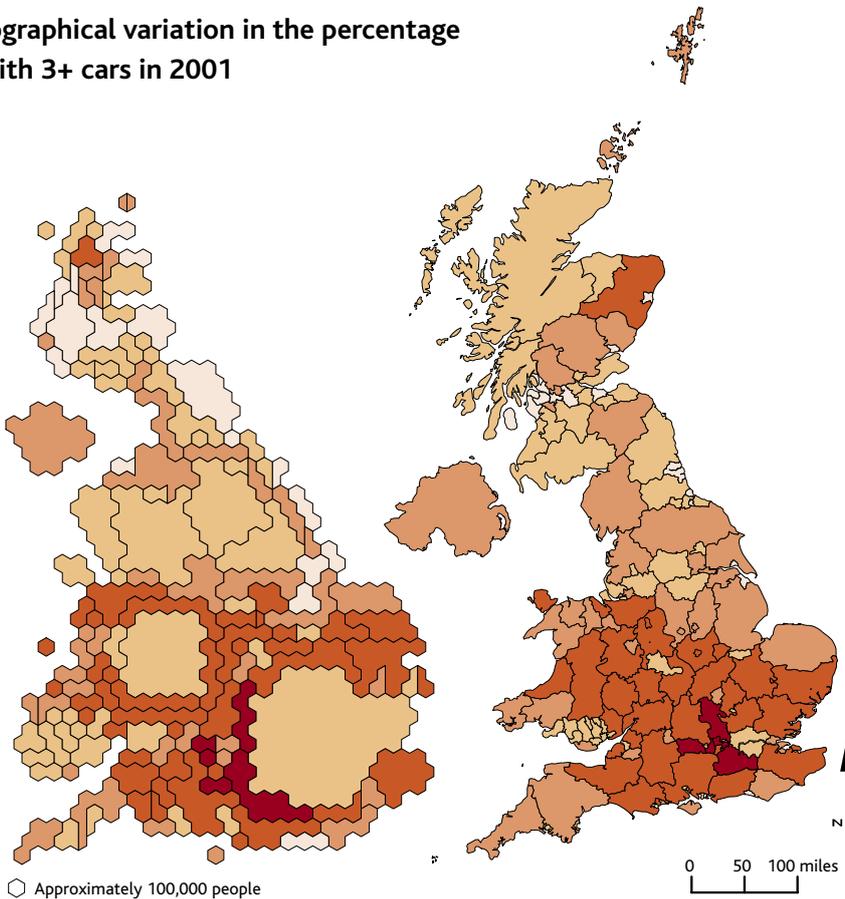
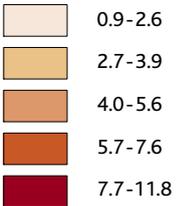
% of households with dependent children and no car



Note: Both maps in each figure represent the same places, shaded identically. The map on the left is a cartogram – each area is shown in proportion to the size of its population in 2001. The largest area is London, since it has the highest population of any of the places^{TR}. The map on the right shows the actual boundaries of the areas.

Figure 4: The geographical variation in the percentage of households with 3+ cars in 2001

% of households with 3+ cars



increasingly from 'different worlds'. Curiously, the number of households 'in need of a car' is roughly equal to the number of households 'with more cars than they need'; indeed, it could be said that the number of people who have more than they need is about equal to those who need more. If we permit society to get ever more car-oriented, yet still want the number of cars to stay equal or even to fall, the issue of their distribution could be addressed. Policies which make it easier for a household with a real need for a car to get one, but which make it much more difficult for a household to move from two

to three, or even three to four cars might contribute to holding the overall number of cars at a steady rate, while addressing the growing divide between 'car-haves' and 'car-have-nots' in the UK. Of course, reducing reliance on cars altogether might be the better solution.

Society as a whole does not lack the resources to allow everyone a more equal chance of a happier, easier and healthier life but the distribution of those resources is unequal. That inequality is etched into the geography of the UK.

Table 1: The five areas of the UK with the highest percentage of households that have dependent children and no car (2001)

| Area | % of households with 3+ cars | % of households with dependent children and no car |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Glasgow City | 1.3 | 11.8 |
| Middlesbrough UA | 3.1 | 10.6 |
| City of Kingston-upon-Hull UA | 1.9 | 10.4 |
| Nottingham UA | 2.5 | 10.0 |
| Hartlepool UA | 2.9 | 9.5 |
| UK average | 5.7 | 5.1 |

Table 2: The five areas of the UK with the highest percentage of households that have 3+ cars (2001)

| Area | % of households with 3+ cars | % of households with dependent children and no car |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Wokingham UA | 12.2 | 0.9 |
| Buckinghamshire County | 11.8 | 1.7 |
| West Berkshire UA | 11.2 | 1.7 |
| Windsor and Maidenhead UA | 11.1 | 1.5 |
| Surrey | 10.8 | 1.3 |
| UK average | 5.7 | 5.1 |

Note: UA = unitary authority.

Notes

- ¹ 'Public transport "can ease jams"' (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, accessed 13 April 2004).
 - ² Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001) *Focus on personal travel: 2001 edition*, London: The Stationery Office, December.
 - ³ 'Rise of the four-car family' (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, accessed 5 November 2004).
 - ⁴ Dieleman, F.M., Dijst, M. and Burghouwt, G. (2002) 'Urban form and travel behaviour: micro-level household attributes and residential context', *Urban Studies*, vol 39, no 3, pp 507-27.
 - ⁵ *Social Trends 31* (2001) London: The Stationery Office.
- TR Further information on this point is available in the accompanying technical report.



What do we know?

- ▶ Car access is generally increasing in the UK and in 2000, for the first time, the proportion of households with two or more cars (28%) was higher than the proportion without a car.
- ▶ Some consider car access 'essential' for modern life, especially for those with dependent children and for those living in rural areas.



What have we found?

- ▶ About 5% of UK households have dependent children, but no access to a car.
- ▶ About 5% of UK households have three or more cars (but just one third of this group have dependent children).
- ▶ The number of UK households without a car, but arguably in need of one, is therefore about the same as the number of households in the UK with access to more cars than they might really need.
- ▶ The geography of these two groups means that they are largely physically separated from each other. They live, literally, in different worlds.

Other reports in the series

The companion report to this, *Home front*, looks at whether areas that have lots of families with no working parents tend to also have lots of young carers.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Doctors and nurses</i> | 6. <i>A place in the sun</i> |
| 2. <i>In sickness and in health</i> | 7. <i>The office</i> |
| 3. <i>Teachers</i> | 8. <i>Open all hours</i> |
| 4. <i>Sons and daughters</i> | 9. <i>Top gear</i> |
| 5. <i>Changing rooms</i> | 10. <i>Home front</i> |

Contact details

The reports were prepared by Ben Wheeler, Mary Shaw, Richard Mitchell and Danny Dorling. The authors can be contacted via:
 Professor Danny Dorling • Department of Geography • University of Sheffield • Winter Street • Sheffield S10 2TN
 e-mail: danny.dorling@sheffield.ac.uk • www.sheffield.ac.uk/sasi

Text © University of Sheffield

Photographs © Mary Shaw

Design © The Policy Press

Project funder: Joseph Rowntree Foundation