LOCATING AND CHARACTERIZING POOR HOUSEHOLDS IN LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY BOLTON: SOURCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

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Debates

The revival of academic interest in the character and role of the Old Poor Law during the last 15 years has meant a renewed concern with thorny issues such as the way in which contemporaries defined ‘poverty’ and ‘pauperism’ and the living arrangements of the poor, the elderly poor especially. In terms of definition, it is widely believed that relief rolls changed from being dominated by women and the life-cycle poor in the late-seventeenth century to being dominated by men and structural and cyclical causes of poverty by the 1790s. By the early-nineteenth century it is possible to see very clearly in both the north and the south the development of a sub-group of the poor who were always poor and passed on the culture of being poor to their children. The relief rolls also grew in size as the eighteenth century progressed, with the poor law coming to support more people and to pay for more types of goods and services. Thus, whereas expensive medical treatment was rarely to be found in the seventeenth-century overseers’ figures, such treatment was commonplace by the opening decades of the nineteenth century. There is also an argument that the poor law increasingly came to recognize relative as well as absolute poverty, something that we can see reflected in the size and value of pauper inventories for Essex, Norfolk, Westmorland and Lancashire and in the fact that by 1803 it was not uncommon to find communities where over half of the population was directly dependent on poor relief (if we assume that receipt of relief by a household head implies family poverty). This ever-widening definition of need and deservingness (often not directly related to the underlying poverty conditions of individuals and communities) generated a steep rise in nominal poor relief expenditure in the late-eighteenth century which, in terms of the concern that it fostered among contemporary commentators, matched that in the late-seventeenth century.

For the eighteenth century, the size and complexity of the pauper family under the old poor law has also been subject to empirical investigation, at least in the south of England. Thomas Sokoll has shown that those who constructed local censuses of the poor usually listed poor people outside their household...
context. Using census data for two Essex communities he has been able to show that, in contrast to the orthodox views of Laslett and others, poor households were bigger than average and the most, rather than the least, complex. Poor people lived with their marriage partners, with children, with other kin, servants and other poor people, often shifting between household forms in an effort to make ends meet and retain their independence.5 Such conclusions have resonance with a further strand of poor law historiography which stresses that the agents of the communal welfare system were frequently eager to create a partnership between the poor law and family networks in the care of the old and other life-cycle poor.6

These reinterpretations, and the revitalisation of the historiography of the poor law that they signify, are welcome. Yet, they also leave many loose ends. Thus, while the eighteenth-century poor law has been subject to increasingly sophisticated analysis, the practical operation of the seventeenth-century poor law remains, for many areas, a closed book. In particular, welfare historians have inadequately explored three issues. First, the definitions of poverty used by urban and rural communities to underpin the piecemeal development of a national rate-based system of poor relief constrained by the central problem of equating limited supply of welfare with potentially unlimited demand. As Slack points out in his seminal work on the seventeenth-century poor law, resistance to raising rates and use of the language of reformation for the poor in the 1620s gave way by the 1670s and 1680s to an emerging national welfare system underpinned by the language of improvement and sentiments of genuine concern for the plight of the poor.7 Yet the issue of who was included and who was excluded from the classification of so called ‘deserving poor’ remains to be explored, despite the fact that Tom Arkell has offered us a theoretical framework for local empirical analysis.8 Were the poor defined according to their ability (or inability) to labour, as McIntosh suggests, or did seventeenth-century communities employ more sophisticated definitions revolving around income and moral suitability?9 Was recognition as deserving tied up with subtle notions of citizenship? Did seventeenth-century communities recognize the plight of those overburdened with children? And how far had regional peculiarities in the definition and treatment of poverty been ironed out by the end of the seventeenth century? These sorts of questions remain to be asked and answered for most seventeenth-century English regions.

A second issue also requires more analysis: the significance of the seventeenth-century (urban and rural) pauper censuses that occur frequently in some northern and Midland counties. Taken for a variety of reasons, but chiefly as a benchmark of need for what was in many places a nascent poor law system, these censuses provide an opportunity to look at definitions of poverty. Yet we need to ask searching questions about the provenance, coverage and reliability of such sources, duplicating the sophisticated discussions of the same documents at the end of the eighteenth century. Finally, the very existence of such pauper censuses highlights the fact that we still know little about the household arrangements of the poor. Did the
seventeenth-century poor live in large and complex households like those in the late eighteenth century? Or had there been a transition in the living arrangements of poor people as national legislation finally created the outlines of a welfare system by the second or third decade of the eighteenth century?

Notoriously sparse and ambiguous seventeenth-century sources make these sorts of questions difficult to answer on a systematic basis. For certain places, though, some very good late-seventeenth century sources survive and this article uses censuses of the poor from the town of Bolton in Lancashire, together with supporting data, to make a contribution to the debate over seventeenth-century definitions of the poor and their household context. It will suggest that, at least for Bolton, seventh-century pauper censuses can, when used carefully, provide as much information about the poor as their more familiar late-eighteenth century counterparts. The censuses suggest that Lancashire communities were late to implement a poor law system funded from local property taxes and that, at least in Bolton, churchwardens and overseers adopted a nuanced definition of deservingness which was intricately tied up with both a willingness and ability to seek work and the degree of connection one managed to maintain with occupational, neighbourhood and kinship networks. Bolton pauper households will be shown to have been small and relatively simple, and it is concluded that there may have been a watershed in poor law policy and the experience of being poor in the very late seventeenth century.

**Place and sources**

Little work has been conducted on the seventeenth-century Lancashire poor, the poor law and its administrators. To some extent this is not surprising: while the county had a well established sub-regional industrial structure by 1660, its population was sparse, levels of urbanisation were low and wealth was limited. In some ways, then, the county is not very interesting if we want to understand the socio-economic structure of seventeenth-century England, and in particular the nature of poverty. Nor are the sources on the poor and the poor law particularly good. Most Lancashire communities enforced the terms of the 1601 poor law only slowly, and the sources for studying the lowest strata of society are limited. There is also the problem of interpreting the records that do survive, not least because the sources were constructed by contemporaries with limited education and experience. In addition, the fact that the formal writing of records was frequently done by someone other than the official nominally responsible for the task, probably does not help. Thus, Roger Lowe, an apprentice to a general merchant in late-seventeenth century Ashton-in-Makerfield, was a scribe for the illiterate overseers and the parish officers of the parish – testimony to a degree of doubt over the provenance and content of manuscript records.

The situation in the town of Bolton (Figure 1) is different. The town figures heavily in Quarter Sessions records for late-seventeenth century Lancashire and its officials took regular censuses of the poor, both those recognized by
Figure 1  Map of Lancashire
the poor law and community and those not. This must have involved a considerable amount of work, for the absolute scale of grinding poverty in seventeenth-century Bolton is not to be doubted. Despite the fact that the town was a key area in the hardening sub-regional geography of the woollen and fustian industries from the mid-seventeenth century, the area had a limited rate base. At the time of the 1664 Hearth Tax over 80 per cent of all households had only a single hearth, broadly in line with the average for east Lancashire but substantially higher than on the Lancashire plain, in what were later to become coal mining communities. This said, there were important divisions between the experiences of the two parts of the town. Some 53 per cent of household heads in Little Bolton were non-chargeable in 1664 compared with 77 per cent in Great Bolton. In other words, if we assume in the broadest terms that non-chargeability equated to poverty (absolute or relative), then the very poorest people were crowded into distinct areas of the town either by accident or design. There is evidence that the latter was the more likely. In common with other seventeenth-century towns, the Bolton vestry had been left numerous houses in the wills of prominent citizens to be deployed in aid of the poor. It bolstered its housing stock in the later seventeenth century by seizing houses that could not be kept in repair, or which had been abandoned, by their occupants and above all by purchasing small units. Almost all purchases of this sort were in the Great Bolton area.

The general message, though, is that Bolton had a significant poverty and marginality problem. This article uses three of the Bolton censuses (those from 1674, 1686 and 1699) in order to understand the character of that poverty. The reasons behind the taking of these censuses and the questions that were asked of people are not clear. We know from the records of the churchwardens that they, rather than the overseers, were charged with constructing the 1674 census. Indeed, the Bolton vestry did not elect its first overseer of the poor until 1681, and it was not until 1686 that the town was taking poor law legislation seriously. An entry in the vestry minutes of August 1686 states:

It is ordered by the said justices of the Assizes that the poor of the said township and parish of Bolton henceforward shall be sufficiently relieved and provided for from tyme to tyme by a tax equally to be raised and assessed upon all the inhabitants of the whole parish of Bolton.

It seems likely, then, that the 1686 census was conducted by the overseers, in response to the need to establish a baseline record of poverty in the town and parish. The 1699 census was certainly taken by the overseers, whose names are recorded both on the census and in the vestry books. This census may have been a reflection of the spiralling cost of relief in the town and throughout Lancashire given the poor weather and epidemics of the 1690s, and in consequence it is sensible to be slightly wary about some of the conclusions which emerge from a reading of the document. How the churchwardens and overseers conducted their surveys is not at once obvious. Paul Slack suggests that there was extant guidance on how such censuses should be taken, but no
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Number</th>
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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Widow Snyder</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ann Barber</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>William Snyder</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Peter Barber</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lancashire Record Office DDKe 2/62, 'Census of the poor'.

Figure 2 A page from the 1674 pauper census
record of such guidelines has been found in an otherwise remarkably well preserved archive. This said, where we cross reference the censuses with surviving rate lists for the town, it is plain that both the churchwardens and overseers made their record by going from street to street rather than simply relying on extant tax lists. It seems unlikely that poor people would have been missed by accident. We can, then, have some faith in the reliability of these late-seventeenth century sources.

The least detailed census is that of 1674, which records the size and structure of the poor person’s household, some ages, some physical conditions and sometimes the occupations of those deemed poor. Figure 2 reproduces a page of the 1674 return. Thereafter, the censuses become more informative and the information more complete. That for 1686 records the names and ages of all people deemed poor, including children in nuclear families, their ‘condition’, their employment (if any), their income from sources other than the poor law (their ‘weekly get’) and their monthly poor law allowance, if any. The 1699 survey goes even further, distinguishing between those who were poor and lived in their own household, those who were ‘tabled’ in the households of others at poor law expense, and those, ‘sojourners’, who were lodged with others at their own expense but still considered poor. Figure 3 reproduces a page of this document.

Considered together, these illuminating sources can help us to pin down how exactly ‘poverty’ was defined by contemporaries in a seventeenth-century urban area and the household characteristics of those defined as poor in these terms.

**Defining poor households**

Tom Arkell has suggested that late-seventeenth century society employed overlapping and sometimes competing definitions of the term ‘poverty’. One definition related to those considered too poor to pay local taxes, another to those considered too poor to pay national taxes. Further definitions were employed by the overseer or the vestry, by those who administered endowed charities and by the clergy in deciding who was too poor to pay taxes on baptisms, burials and marriages. All of these ‘definitions’ were tied up with wider regional and national trends in sentiment towards the poor. Such differences in definition, Arkell argues, were inevitable in a seventeenth-century society where different degrees of need could hit almost anyone for at least one phase of the life-cycle. As Steve Hindle argues of Frampton, in Lincolnshire, ‘a myriad of uncertainties and insecurities ... could temporarily or permanently undermine the precarious viability of ... household economies’. It was perfectly possible for a once prosperous ratepayer to find his or her income constrained in old age, and thus to be unable to pay rates even if not receiving poor relief. A bout of sickness could drag an otherwise marginal family to the brink of the poor relief system but they might find themselves prevented from falling into the breach by charities designed for those not in receipt of poor relief. By the same token, it was also possible for
Figure 3  A page from the 1699 pauper census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Smith</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Doe</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Sick</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Johnson</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bolton Record Office PBO 1/1-2, 'Census List, 1699'.
those too poor to pay rates at an early stage of the life-cycle to graduate to the ratepayer list later in life. The grey area between sustained economic independence and life-threatening poverty provides plenty of leeway for defining need.

The situation was no different in Bolton. As we have seen, Hearth Tax exemption figures suggest that on average at least 62 per cent of Bolton households were deemed to be in no position to pay. For the Poll Tax of May 1678, an even larger proportion of the population was deemed ‘poor’. Some 124 families were assessed for the tax, or just under one-third of all families present in the 1670s. Some indication of the reasons for non-payment can be found in the entry for Roger Leigh and his wife, who were exempted because they did not pay the church or poor rate and had previously received a charitable contribution for more than a month. Such criteria highlight a further definition of poverty in Bolton: those deemed too poor to pay local taxes. In 1686, 148 people were assessed to pay the poor rate in Great and Little Bolton, including approximately 50 people who were also named as poor in the poor census of that year. By 1699, the assessment list had grown to 159 individuals or occupiers, including approximately 65 of those who were also named as poor in the poor census of that year. Being named and paying, however, were two different things, and in both cases it appears that under 100 individuals financed poor relief in Great and Little Bolton. Not all of those who went unassessed for local taxes, or who failed to pay them, were included in the censuses of the poor, however. The 1674 census numbers 513 people, or roughly 31 per cent of the likely population at that date if we use a multiplier of 4.5 on the Hearth Tax. By 1686 the number listed had fallen to 232 people, while by 1699 the total number of poor people was 341. In other words, there was a substantial proportion of the population (over 60 per cent in some years) who neither paid local taxes nor appeared as poor (whether or not they received relief) in the censuses of the poor. This is not a particularly surprising observation: Steve Hindle has highlighted the problem of ‘shallow poverty’ in Lincolnshire. Indeed, this is precisely the sort of overlapping and conflicting definition that we might expect from the work of Arkell. It does, however, raise the important question of what criteria were employed by the churchwardens and the overseers in deciding who should appear in the three census documents used here. Shallow poverty also begs the question of what significance poor people themselves attached to appearing or not appearing in the census lists.

At first blush, the preamble to the 1674 census provides us with a simple answer to the question of definition. This ‘particular survey of the poor in the township of Bolton’ defines the poor as follows:

that is to say, of the aged decreped, blynde lunatick and diseased beinge past labor, as also the fatherless motherless and infant not able to labour, and poor familys overcharged with children together with such sums of money as we consider must of necessitie be paid yearly to them to keep them from starving.
Later in the same survey the churchwardens added a further sublist of people not in the book but assisted with money and kind at our doors and such also as are in great necessitie, being overcharged.

In other words, this was a survey of those who (it was thought) needed formal and informal charitable relief because of their inability to labour, their having too many children compared to their income, or their being sick or orphaned. Whether such a preamble was merely a form of words or accurately represented the criteria employed in taking the census (and whether need fed through to actual relief) is uncertain, but the question gets to the heart of the discussion in this section. As early as the 1620s Essex ratepayers were interpreting poor law legislation to mean they were only liable to help ‘the lame, impotent, old, blind and such other as being poor are not able to work’. The same was true in Norwich in the 1570s. In both cases the similarity in the language used for the preamble compared to Bolton is striking, and should perhaps incline us to view such preambles as merely a form of words.29 This said, the 1686 and 1699 surveys provide us with no similar preamble, perhaps suggesting that a definition of deservingness in the eyes of local officials had become well-entrenched as they became more familiar with the operation of a formalized and rate-funded poor law system.

What was the nature of this definition? Similar criteria seem to have been employed at all three dates. Thus, sickness and incapacity were two of the most important variables attached to inclusion in the census. Figure 4 shows the variety of terminology to be found under the column heading
‘condition’. While we must be wary of the exact meaning of any of these terms, the fact that the general category ‘lame’ diminishes in importance over the three censuses should give us some confidence that diagnosis of precise problems was becoming more common. More precise or not, it is clear that physical disability was a significant variable in determining whether a person ended up recorded in the poor census at any of the three dates. We should, however, note the entry for Thomas Wade in 1674, which says that he is ‘so simple as not fitt to work or to begg’. The inability to work or to exploit other unseen areas of the economy of makeshifts, rather than a simple mental disability, was what weighed heavily in the minds of the churchwardens.

Old age and the inability to work weighed equally heavily in 1674. Figures 5 and 6, showing the age distribution of male and female adults recorded as poor at each census date respectively, reveal that in 1674, the majority of those with recorded ages were aged over 60, and they usually carried a signifier that they were past garnering significant income through labour.30 This focus on the old was to become more sensitive over time. In common with census takers in Salisbury, the overseers of Bolton came to recognize different degrees of inability to work on the part of older people. Phrases such as ‘almost past work’, ‘short of right work’ or ‘unable to work at present’ become normal after 1674 and coincide with a fall in the proportion of those with stated ages who were recorded as old in the censuses. On average, only 43 per cent of adults listed in 1686 and 1699 were aged 60 or over, though the figures are more impressive if we accept that the onset of old age in the seventeenth century was in the age group 50–59.31 Even so, it is clear that there was a subtle shift in the definition of poverty over time, to include more families with children.32

Sources: See Figure 4.
The number of children in these poor families was by no means large. In 1674 the average number of children in families recognized as poor was 2.56. By 1686 the mean had climbed slightly to 2.59, and by 1699 it had climbed further to 3.0. Of course, these mean figures mask considerable complexity. The 1674 figures are kept low by the presence of large numbers of one-child units, in turn reflecting a higher number of widows and old couples with a single disabled child in 1674 than in subsequent censuses. In turn, the 1699 figures are slightly inflated by the development of a formal policy on apprenticeship, which was imposed from 1696, and which may have removed some single child units that would otherwise have counted in the figures. Yet, these caveats notwithstanding, it is probable that we do see a real change in the size of families classified as poor over time. This may reflect generally higher fertility, more ill-health amongst parents, or it may reflect a conscious effort to target limited resources in a more effectual manner as relief bills spiralled in the 1690s. The latter is an interesting idea, and it should be noted that the churchwardens and overseers were less concerned with the number of children than their relative ages. Those families with high fertility and short birth spacing were most likely to be recognized as poor, a fact which we see reflected in the extraordinary numbers of people aged 15–39 who are recorded. The 1674 entry for John Davidson ‘overcharged with a wife and 4 small children’ sets the tone for definition of family poverty right up until 1699.

In general, there is little that is surprising here. Other commentators have also found that sickness, old age and (less commonly) large family size were criteria for being seen as deserving in seventeenth-century England. Yet,
even a cursory look at the figures and other supporting evidence suggests that
the criteria employed by the census takers are more complex than they
initially seem. While there are no exact figures for the incidence of sickness or
old age in the wider late-seventeenth century Bolton population, we can be
clear that the proportion of old people recognized as poor by the 1680s and
1690s is small, and the figures can have reached nowhere near the
representation of old people in the wider population by the 1690s. Similarly,
the schedules of assessment and non-assessment for the late-seventeenth
century Poll Taxes imply that large numbers of families with considerable
numbers of small children were not regarded as poor enough to be included
in the censuses of the poor. And when we look at petitions to the Lancashire
Quarter Sessions, evidence abounds of people with claims similar to those
eventually recorded who were turned down for relief. Alexander Bradshaw
petitioned the justices in 1686 stating:

whereas your peticioner being borne and brought uppe in the habitell of
Bradshaw aforesaid in the said parish of Boulton and an inhabitant there
all his lyfe tyme hitherto, Hath heretofore till now of late within the
space of one year now last past by his Industry mentayned himselfe and
family in such sorte as hee hath not beene charegable or burdensome to
any. But now it hath pleased God to visit him and his wife with
lameness and infirmities that they are noe longer able to mentayne
themselves and their children ... they are now destitute of Habitacion
and are likely to starve ... unless your good worships will be pleased to
take the premises into your Serious Consideration.

Bradshaw uses all of the key words that we see in the censuses of the poor,
including infirmity and lameness, and stresses his settlement in Bolton, but he
has been refused relief by the churchwardens. Being sick and unable to work
was not, then, a passport to an appearance in the censuses of the poor. Oliver
Seddon ‘his wifje and seaven smale children’ also had a case with many
parallels to those recorded as poor in the censuses. His petition stated:

your peticioners are grown extreame poore in soe much thet they neither
have houseroome to inhabite in nor subsistance to be releeved with
which att the last Sessions was made knowne to your Worships ... they
and their ancestors being bredd and borne in the said towne of Boulton
att which said Sessions it was ordered that your peticioners should bee
releeved ... your peticioners ... beinge still unreleeved humbly make
bould to supplicate unto your worships for confirmacion of the same
Order ...

While the 1686 census records nobody with seven children, those with four or
five appear regularly, but Seddon does not. Such examples are common
throughout the 1650–1699 period, and the fact that substantial numbers of
petitions contain references to support for the case from other township
residents might be read as suggesting that being needy and being effectively
tied into the community in networks of friendship, occupation or
neighbourhood was the key conjunction of circumstances that lead to
inclusion in the censuses of the poor. As Thane reminds us when talking of the treatment of the old in the seventeenth century, “‘community’ was no romantic abstraction. It was a tangible mesh of support and exchange made up of complex interactions and reciprocities, rights and obligations, created out of need and a fear of need ... care for the poor was among its essential features’.39 This said, we should beware of linking inclusion in the censuses with any simplistic notions of citizenship or settlement. While settlement and thereby citizenship were key criteria in some areas in determining whether a poor person was relieved and how generously, the detailed 1699 Bolton survey includes many people who were recorded as ‘sojourners’, lodgers and other transients. The 1674 survey, as was seen earlier, also included a separate list of the itinerant poor. Both groups are recorded, whereas people like the petitioner Bradshaw, living all his life in a place, are not included. Such observations might provide support for the idea that it was practical connections within the community that really mattered.

There are, however, competing explanations of the criteria employed by the Bolton census takers. In common with Slack, Broad has argued that the seventeenth-century poor law was a court of last resort and that it rarely provided permanent support.40 Faced with expanding demand but constrained supply of welfare (we should remember that the Bolton poor law had been introduced unwillingly and had been under-funded right from the start) the town may have sought to recognize as deserving only those who looked like they might be shorter-term recipients of some combination of charity and rate-based relief. In other words, the census schedules might represent the outcome of a pragmatic consideration of current and future supply of, and demand for, welfare in a poor seventeenth-century urban community. Clearly, a man with seven children, like Oliver Seddon, was not a good bet in this respect. Nor was he morally upstanding. The constable had apprehended both Seddon and Bradshaw for fighting and causing a nuisance several times before they petitioned for relief, suggesting that the overseers may have been employing some moral criteria in their consideration of deservingness.

Of course, the exact criteria for inclusion and non-inclusion in the different poor censuses of Bolton will always remain closed to us in definitive terms. The key point, however, is that there was a detailed process of assessment of deservingness being undertaken in the nascent Lancashire poor law system. This process of creating rules on deservingness was to set the tone for the whole county during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Lancashire, and south-east Lancashire in particular, was one of the last places to see any transition in the composition of relief lists away from women, the elderly and other ‘traditional’ relief recipients, and to men. The county was home to some of the harshest poor law régimes in England, and rarely provided enough to live on. Poor law régimes here also excluded large numbers who felt poor enough to apply for relief, and Lancashire, along with Cumberland and Westmorland, saw charity making a substantial contribution to welfare funds until well into the nineteenth century.41 This framework was set in the seventeenth century and, arguably, census-taking of the sort that we see in Bolton was a vital part of this framework-setting.
Table 1  Size of poor households in Bolton: 1674, 1686 and 1699

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
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<tr>
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<td>513</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1686</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>341</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sources: See Figure 4.

Household characteristics of ‘the poor’

One of the criteria for census inclusion that we have yet to consider is the presence or absence of kin, and the related question of the household and family structures of poor people. Potentially this issue is an important one, since, in common with west Yorkshire, it can be shown that throughout the eighteenth century the poor law in Lancashire disproportionately saw to the welfare of those who were ‘kin-poor’. The issue is complicated, of course, by the related question of whether these seventeenth-century censuses really record poor households and families, or whether, as in the eighteenth century, poor people are abstracted from their household context by the record keepers. This is not an easy question to answer.

Table 1 suggests that in each of the three censuses, mean family size (none of the three censuses record servants) is below the 4.0–4.2 people suggested as normal by Laslett for the later seventeenth century, and substantially below the levels recorded in the late-eighteenth century. On the face of it, this should give us cause for concern that poor people have been abstracted from their household context.

Yet, we should not overplay concerns about the quality of the sources when it comes to family size. Even in the least detailed of the censuses (1674) the churchwardens appear to have been very precise in their recording of household composition. For instance, Robert Crompton and his wife, aged 66 and 60 respectively, were recorded in 1674 as living with the bastard child of their daughter. Elizabeth Lonro, aged 56, was recorded as living with her widowed daughter and her three small grandchildren. Similar observations might be made about recording in the other two documents. In 1686, for instance, Deborah Walmsley (aged 74) was recorded as living with her grandchild (aged 9), while Christopher Spackman (aged 80 and almost past labour) was recorded as living with his grandchild (aged 7). Recording, then, seems to have been painstaking. This was particularly true of the 1699 survey, which consciously distinguished between householders, tablers (lodgers paid for by the poor law) and lodgers. Even in this survey, however, mean family size was only of the order of 3.3, adding weight to the idea that family sizes amongst the late-seventeenth-century Bolton poor were small.
Some idea of how we should interpret Table 1 is perhaps to be seen when we consider the proximity of surnames in the census schedules. In 1674, Ralph Boxwirth is listed as poor along with his wife and three small children. Recorded in a separate household, but listed immediately after Ralph, is the widow Margaret Boxwirth, aged 80. We know from rating lists of 1664 that Ralph and Margaret Boxwirth were charged for different properties and it seems highly likely that they lived next to each other but in different houses. Assuming that there was a kinship relationship here, it may have been that proximity substituted for household complexity and larger family size. Pat Thane believes that it was usual for kin to move nearer to aged relatives at times of need. This idea would also be consistent with Hearth Tax data, which show an overwhelming preponderance of the very small single-hearth properties that one still finds in Bolton today and which might have restricted co-residence. Certainly, other examples of ostensibly proximate residence abound in this and the other censuses. Thus, in 1674, William Brook and his wife, together with three children, are listed next to John Brook, his wife and one child, and in turn next to Widow Brook, aged 60. The rating list of 1672 suggests that widow Brook was living on her own at this date, again implying proximate residence. Similarly, Thomas Tildsley, his wife and three children, are listed next to Roger Tildsley and his wife, and in turn next to Ralph Tildsley (aged 60) and his wife. If such proximity does reflect dense kinship patterns, then the contrast with the eighteenth century (where those recognized as poor by their communities were disproportionately likely to be those without kin) is notable and suggests that the early-eighteenth century may have marked a turning point in underlying poor law policy which involved a careful targeting of limited welfare supplies.

This idea requires more empirical investigation. In the meantime, we must also interpret the lessons of Table 1 in the light of the possibility that the overall family and household size in Bolton may not have been large. We can use Poll Tax data to obtain at least a crude indication of such background family sizes. Thus, in 1678 (and making allowances for those who were recorded as two households when they clearly were not) the average unit size was 2.8. This included several large gentry households, 13 apprentices and 40 servants; even if we were to add a notional extra 1 or 1.5 people to reflect the particular criteria of the Poll Tax, the mean family sizes suggested by the three poor censuses would hardly look out of place. In short, it seems likely that the families of poor people as defined in Bolton were relatively small.

Family structure amongst those recognized as poor in the three census documents looks less out of place when compared to the historiographical literature. Figure 7 suggests that nuclear families formed the core of family units among the poor in 1674, whereas by 1686 single adults with children almost exactly balanced nuclear families. The majority of these single adults were widows, but single men like Roger Hardman, who lived with a widowed
daughter aged 50, were also common. By 1699 there had been a significant increase in the importance of lone individuals, even after we control for tablers and sojourners who were recorded as single units but lived elsewhere. In both 1686 and 1699, the overseers made a subtle distinction between those who lived alone and paid rent, those (sometimes but not always labelled ‘sojourners’) who were recorded as paying for house room and those who were tablers. Elizabeth Aynon was a spinner and ‘pays for house at 3d. per week’, whereas Ellen Wade was a spinner but paid 2d. for ‘room’. Being a ‘tabler’ implied a closer relationship with the host family than simply paying for room. Most ‘tablers’ were young children (though they were not always orphans) such as ‘Henry Walker, a tabler aged 10 who winds but has lost his faculties’. However, they could also be old people such as Widdow Bradshaw (aged 80) and Thomas Dobson (aged 62). In all three censuses complex units make up less than ten per cent of the whole, broadly in line with the figures suggested by Laslett from a much wider sample of seventeenth-century census documents.45 How far do these trends reflect the inadequate recording of the churchwardens and overseers, and how far do they reflect real trends in the household structure of poor people in Bolton?

Some the lessons of Figure 7 make sense when set against our wider understanding of the operation of the seventeenth-century socio-demographic system and the nature of Bolton society. It is perfectly plausible that high death rates in the late-seventeenth century North West generated the increase in the number of single parent families seen between 1686 and 1699.
1674 and 1686. The persistent rise in the proportion of lone individuals is also entirely plausible because the later censuses are detailed enough to allow us to make a distinction between lodgers and those who really were alone. A considerable (and rising) proportion of these lone paupers were old (defined as anyone aged 50 or more) and while this might look suspicious in the eighteenth century, in the seventeenth century – with a ‘new’ poor law, resistance to rates and limited resources – it may have made infinitely good sense for overseers and churchwardens to do everything they could to keep old paupers independent and active in their communities. Certainly, this is Thane’s interpretation of the general operation of the seventeenth-century poor law. She also suggests that the opportunities for the formation of complex households may have been lower in the later seventeenth century than before or after, with over half of those reaching old age having no living kin to form complex households with. In fact, we see some of the force of this argument played out in the Poll Tax schedules of Bolton from 1678, in which single individuals with servants, apprentices or lodgers vastly outnumber those listed with various degrees of non-nuclear kin. In short, it may well be correct to see poor people as becoming more isolated in the household context at the same time as they were linked into a variety of other community and kinship networks and thus to merit inclusion in the censuses of the poor. For the eighteenth century, the trend was almost certainly reversed.

Conclusion

The Bolton census documents discussed here are to be understood in the context of the infancy of the seventeenth-century north-western poor law. As Quarter Sessions material suggests, communities were feeling their way (very often unwillingly) to a familiarity with national legislation and its manifest nuances, contradictions and failings. This was the nascent Old Poor Law, and churchwardens and overseers in Bolton and elsewhere had to deal with the problem of balancing the supply of welfare with the demand against the backdrop of significant changes in the socio-demographic context, something that we see played out in the household context of the poor in Bolton as recorded in census documents. While we might want to question the usefulness of these sorts of sources in the eighteenth century, for the seventeenth century we can have more confidence in them, and the 1699 census of Bolton seems unquestionably to be an accurate document. What all the censuses show is that in order to balance supply and demand, the churchwardens and overseers were employing complex notions of deservingness which probably left some old and sick people, with a decent moral character and good connections to their neighbours, occupational and other networks, listed as poor and other people in the same situation not listed. What the significance of being listed was in terms of the experience of being poor is a topic that requires much more empirical work.

Of course, this has been a partial study of one late-seventeenth century urban community, and in that sense it is dangerous to generalize or to speculate. What the Bolton census documents do seem to show, when compared with
eighteenth century overseer lists or vestry minutes, is that there was probably a subtle change in the perceived role of kinship in the welfare process from the early-eighteenth century, as the constellation of need, the supply of welfare and the richness of other elements of the economy of makeshifts changed. Such observations add weight to Paul Slack’s decision to make a division between the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Old Poor Law and that which came after.50

NOTES
3. A trend reported most recently in J. Broad, ‘Parish economies of welfare 1650–1834’, Historical Journal, 42 (1999), 985–1006, though for an attempt to draw out the regional aspects of this change see King, Poverty, 254–69.
12. One-off censuses were relatively common in the later seventeenth century, but a series of the sort found in Bolton and described in the text is much rarer.
15. This figure does not include paupers, who did not require exemption. Adding pauper totals from overseer and census records would thus bolster the conclusions drawn here about the intensity of poverty in Bolton. It should be stressed that this sort of spatial variation is common. For more on comparative figures and their underlying meaning, see the survey in N. Goose, 'Economic and social aspects of provincial towns: a comparative study of Cambridge, Colchester and Reading, 1500–1700', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1984). I should like to thank the editorial board for highlighting both of the points raised in this endnote.

16. See Lancashire Record Office (hereafter LRO) DDKe 2/6/2, 'Census of the poor' and BRO PBO 1/1–2, 'Census list, 1686' and 'Census list, 1699'. There are six further pauper censuses between 1674 and 1701.

17. BRO PBO 2/1, 'Vestry minutes 1655–1744'.

18. BRO PBO 2/1, 'Vestry minutes 1655–1744'.

19. Slack, From reformation, 68.

20. Other census documents of a similar or even earlier date are more detailed. For details of other censuses and for guidance on how to interpret such documents, see P. Thane, Old age, 48–56.


22. Arkell, Poverty.


24. As the Constable Accounts for Bolton make clear, administration of the town was (notwithstanding its relatively small size) organized on the basis of 'ends' – lower, higher, middle, west, east, north and south – with different people serving the same office for the different ends. The scope for widely divergent definitions of need was strong in this sort of administrative confusion. See BRO PLB 6/1, 'Constable accounts 1683–1715'.

25. BRO ZZ 39/7, 'Poll tax, 1678'.

26. The assessment lists are appended to the back of the censuses in each year, as they are for other census years not considered here.

27. Hindle, 'Power'.

28. LRO DDKe/2/6/2, 'Bolton survey, 1674'.

29. See Wrightson, Earthly necessities; and Slack, From reformation, 48. For more detailed guidance on language, see Thane, Old age.

30. Those with unstated ages are excluded from these charts. For women in 1686 and 1699, the likely impact of such exclusions on the distribution is negligible. At both dates less than five per cent of all women had unstated ages. In 1674, the 'unknown' figure among women is 30 per cent and we must thus regard this particular section of the chart with suitable caution. For men, the 1686 and 1699 figures, at eight and four per cent respectively, are also insignificant. However, in 1674, 59 per cent of men had no age statement, and we must thus regard this part of Figure 5 as, at best, indicative.

31. Pat Thane argues that by the later seventeenth century people had a more sensitive appreciation of what constituted ageing. For a discussion of this and the age at which being old was usually seen to start, see Thane, Old age.

32. Broad, Parish economies, suggests that in the 1790s the poor law moved the relief focus away from substantial benefits to the most needy, and towards shallower benefits to a larger number of people. There may be a counterpart in the late-seventeenth century, speculation that is bolstered by the fact that other seventeenth-century censuses in the North West come increasingly to recognize the problem of families with too many children and not enough income. See Cumbria Record Office, Kendal (hereafter CRO) WD/Ry/32/1–4, 'List of inhabitants of Kendal town'; CRO WD/Tr/F/176, 'List of poor householders in Troutbeck'; CRO WD/Ry/35/1, 'Poor households in Grassmere, Rydal, Troutbeck and Ambleside, 1684 and 1686'.

33. On apprenticeship, see BRO PGB 7, 'Apprenticeship indentures, C17–C19'.


35. Pat Thane, Old age, 236, argues that in 1672, nine per cent of the population was aged 60 or over.
and that the figure was rising. See Thane,
36. See BRO ZZ 39/7, 'Poll tax schedules, 1678' and ZZ 29/11, 'Tax schedules'.
37. LRO QSP 176/6, 'Petition'. 'Hablett' is a dialect term for habitation.
38. LRO QSP 32/8, 'Petition'.
40. Broad, 'Parish economies', 986.
41. On these issues, see King, Poverty, 217-18.
42. King, Poverty, 214-18.
43. What I have not considered in the context of Table 1 is the likely impact of economic conditions
   in Bolton on who was included in these census documents. The position of Bolton in the
   hardening sub-regional economy of Lancashire, and its relatively diversified economic base,
   means that it is incredibly difficult to obtain a sense of whether the 1686 figures in particular
   reflect the onset of 'better times' or not. My thanks to the editorial board for raising this point.
44. Thane, Old age, 132.
46. Thane, Old age, 108.
47. Thane, Old age, 136.
48. BRO ZZ 39/7, 'Poll tax schedule, 1678'.
49. The pauper census material offers many possibilities for exploring this question, and others such
   as the nature of inherited poverty in the seventeenth century.
50. Slack, From Reformation.

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