

Rowntree, Poverty in York 1901

Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, a British sociologist, investigated poverty in the city of York in 1899 and published his findings in 1901 in a book entitled, *Poverty, A Study of Town Life*. He published further studies on poverty in the city in 1936 and 1951.

Text Having made an estimate, based upon carefully ascertained facts, of the earnings of practically every working-class family in York, the next step was to show the proportion of the total population living in poverty. Families regarded as living in poverty were grouped under two heads:

- a) Families whose total earnings were insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency. Poverty falling under this head was described as "primary" poverty.
- b) Families whose total earnings would have been sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency, were it not that some portion of it was absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful. Poverty falling under this head was described as "secondary" poverty. To ascertain the total number living in primary poverty it was necessary to ascertain the minimum cost upon which families of various sizes could be maintained in a state of physical efficiency. This question was discussed under three heads, namely, the necessary expenditure for (1) food, (2) rent, and (3) all else, and it was shown that for a family of father, mother, and three children, the minimum weekly expenditure upon which physical efficiency can be maintained in York is 21s. 8d. This estimate was based upon the assumption that the diet is selected with careful regard to the nutritive value of various food stuffs, and that these are all purchased at the lowest current prices. It only allows for a diet less generous as regards variety than that supplied to able-bodied paupers in workhouses. It further assumes that no clothing is purchased which is not absolutely necessary for health, and assumes, too, that it is of the plainest and most economical description. No expenditure of any kind is allowed beyond that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency.

The number of persons whose earnings are so low that they cannot meet the expenditure necessary for the above standard of living, stringent to severity though it is, and bare of all creature comforts, was shown to be no less than 7230, or almost exactly 10 per cent of the total population of the city. [The investigators from a house-to-house investigation reported] 20,302 persons, or 27.84 per cent of the total population, as living in poverty. Subtracting those whose poverty is "primary," we arrive at the number living in "secondary" poverty, namely, 13,072, or 17.93 Per cent of the total population.

Source James Harvey Robinson, Charles Austin Beard, (eds.). *Readings in Modern European History: A Collection of Extracts from the Sources Chosen with the Purpose of Illustrating some of the Chief Phases of the Development of Europe during the Last Two Hundred Years* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1909). pp. 487-488.