

## The Geography of Old Age in Late-Victorian England and Wales

Under the New Poor Law, a substantial number of those that were issued poor relief comprised older people under the ‘aged and infirm’ subcategory of the ‘non-able-bodied’ poor. Research has shown that, geographically, they were more likely to receive welfare in southern and eastern England, owing partly to regional wage differences in the industrial north.<sup>1</sup> However, this is at the expense of a wider outlook on historical elderly populations, where particular groups that were issued poor relief are compared with those that were not.

This paper is a nationwide study of the older-age population in 630 registration districts (RDs) in late-Victorian England and Wales using a combination of original poor relief data and transcribed Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) datasets recorded in 1891. We specifically investigate groups of older people that were more or less likely to receive help from the New Poor Law, by assessing the relationship between old age pauperism and socio-economic variables from the census enumerators’ books (CEBs). In turn, a geography of old age is considered, providing new opportunities to integrate pauperism in a comparatively wider regional context.

Poor relief data from the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers archive are extracted on the numbers of men and women described as ‘not-able-bodied’ (used as a proxy for older people, with adjustments) and receiving relief by 648 Poor Law Unions on 1 January 1891. These are subsequently linked with the overall numbers aged 60 years and over recorded in the transcribed 1891 CEBs for all 630 RDs (the boundaries of Poor Law Unions and RDs are roughly coterminous). Data from the 1891 CEBs derive from version 2 of I-CeM. With this, the numbers of older men and women on poor relief by Poor Law Union are divided by the raw CEB numbers of men and women aged 60 years and over by RD as the denominator. Variations in old age pauperism are thus visually presented as an estimate of the elderly population by RD and from raw CEB data.

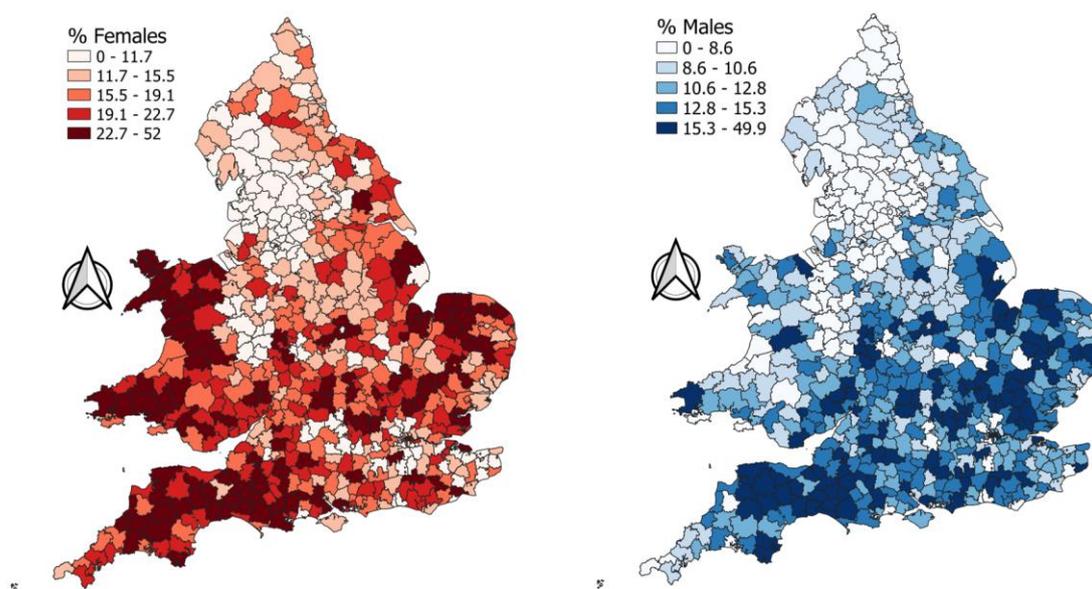
There are some interesting clusters in terms of the estimated proportion of older people on poor relief (Figure 1). Old age pauperism is mainly concentrated in south-western England, eastern England and mid-west Wales. Lower proportions of older men and women on poor relief are located in north-western England as well as on the Welsh borders. On the surface, there is a ‘north-south’ divide, although there are also interesting ‘west-east’ differences in Poor Law

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<sup>1</sup> G. Boyer and T.P. Schmidle, ‘Poverty among the Elderly in Late Victorian England’, *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009), pp. 249-78.

policy. Overall, it is estimated that 14 per cent of the population aged 60 years and over were issued poor relief on 1 January 1891, close to the figure used in the corresponding ‘Burt’s Returns’ of 1 August 1890, at 13.4 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Of the elderly male poor, 98.3 per cent had their relief granted indoors in Manchester RD. Clusters of indoor relief distribution are located in London, the south-east, and in western and northern England, precisely where there was a low incidence of general pauperism (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proportion of people aged 60 years and over on poor relief, England and Wales RDs, 1 January 1891



Sources: BPP, *Pauperism (England and Wales), Return (B.), Paupers Relieved on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1891, 1890-1891* (130B), LXVIII.393; K. Schürer and E. Higgs (2020), *Integrated Census Microdata, 1851-1911, version V. 2 (I-CeM.2)*. [data collection]. UK Data Service SN: 7481.

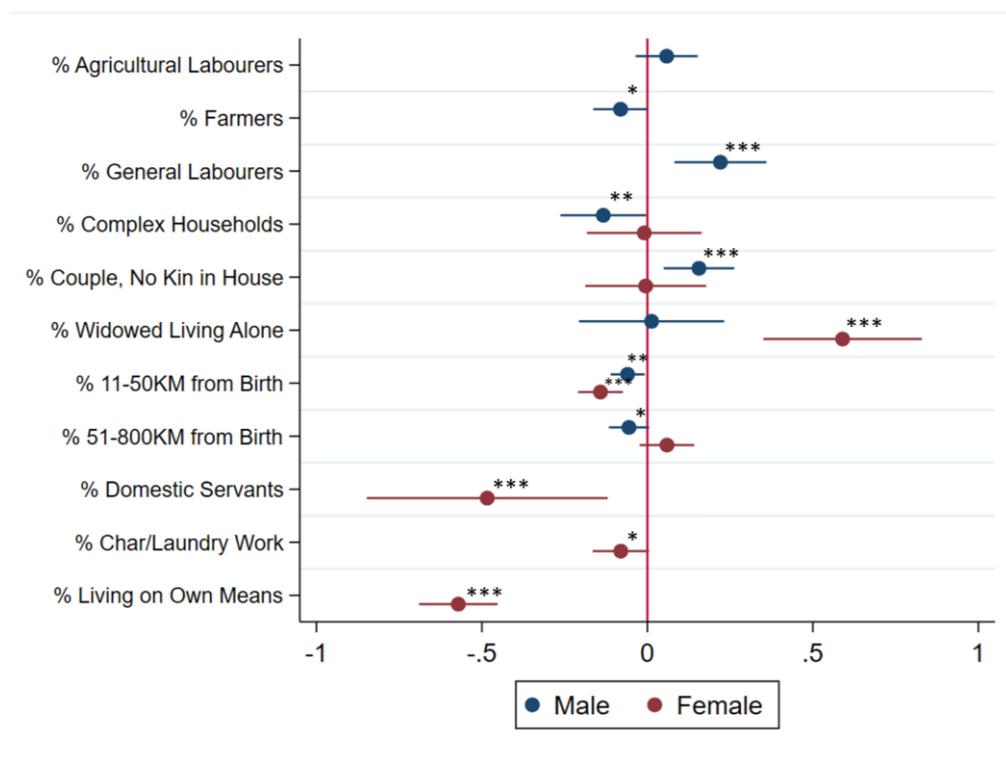
OLS regression models (presented as parallel figures for men and women) assess the likelihood of older men and women receiving poor relief through selected occupational, household and migratory variables recorded in the CEBs, all at the aggregated level of 629 RDs (excluding London City RD). Caution is needed in terms of ecological fallacy. However, the poor relief data do not identify individuals, hence the use of RDs (and thus the proportions of individuals within) as observations. For both models, we control for the proportion of men and women aged 60 years and over, population density data from Charles Booth, the proportion of men

<sup>2</sup> Boyer and Schmidle, ‘Poverty among the Elderly’, Table 1, p. 251.

aged 15-64 years in seven Registrar General groups, and the proportion of married and single women working.

For elderly men, pauperism was predicated on the type of occupation practiced in old age (Figure 2). Labouring occupations, both general and agricultural, increased dependency on the New Poor Law, while being a farmer decreased it. ‘Smallholding’ farmers were heavily concentrated in northern England, where lower proportions of older people received poor relief. They were thus not susceptible to the seasonal unemployment patterns and subsequent pauperism experienced by a proletarianized labour force to the east of England, especially in Norfolk. Also, there is a statistically significant relationship between the high proportion of older men in complex (or, extended and multiple) households and the lower percentages of male pauperism. Again, these were mainly concentrated in the RDs of Northumberland, Durham and Cumberland in northern England. For men in particular, the further one is from one’s birthplace, the less likely that they would receive welfare.

Figure 2. Old age pauperism and several socio-economic variables from the 1891 CEBs



Notes: All independent variables at aggregated registration district level. The dependent variables are the percentages of men and women on poor relief. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . No. of observations: 629. Male R-Squared 0.364; Female R-Squared 0.383.

Sources: See Figure 1.

For elderly women, domestic service was negatively associated with pauperism. Those ‘living on own means’ (defined as receiving dowries or annuities) are also significantly negatively associated with old age pauperism. A strong significant correlation is noted between widows living alone and elderly women’s reliance on the New Poor Law. Conclusively, strong geographical variations are identified not only in old age pauperism, but also in the occupational structures, household arrangements and migratory patterns of older people.

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