



Activity – Maps and Policy

Maps that show clear trends can be very useful for policy makers. It is quite common to see maps of economic and social indicators. The publication of the 2011 census, for example, was accompanied by a variety of maps (e.g. 'Census shows rise in foreign born', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20677515>).

- Why might it be useful for policy makers to see such trends at a glance?
- Can you think of any problems with this kind of representation?
- What about these? ('Census: Maps show migration trends' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20713380>)

Read this article, 'Map shows ill health persists in same area for 114 years' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-17062735>

Victorian statisticians mapped criminal statistics to reveal parts of Britain with apparently above average crime. It is interesting to think about some of the parallels. The researchers compare the prevalence of type 2 diabetes with other indicators of socio-economic deprivation and ethnic diversity. But in an interesting parallel they note that many of the areas marked by socio-economic deprivation were also so labelled by a team of social investigators over 100 hundred years ago in one of the pioneering surveys of poverty.

You can read more about Charles Booth and his survey of poverty by visiting a dedicated London School of Economics website, <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/>.

If you click on 'browse' poverty maps of London you will be able to explore Booth's assessment of poverty. Think about the classification of poverty. Can you think of any problems with their method? You can find some clues in the BBC article. Think about the way their data is collected and the way in which poverty is represented.

Researchers at University of College London have recently plotted life expectancy at birth along London's tube lines. Visit their website Lives on the Line <http://life.mappinglondon.co.uk/> and see for yourself, and look at these blog posts which explain how the map was put together and the rationale for presenting data in this way <http://mappinglondon.co.uk/2012/10/12/the-tube-map-a-tool-for-promoting-social-equality/>.

Conclusions:

Maps can do very important work, then. One of our jobs as geographers therefore, is to question what we see on maps. We should think very carefully about what is being represented, and ask questions about how a map has been produced, by whom and for what purpose. This suggestion that there may be a politics to the production of maps may not seem immediately relevant to modern maps such as road atlases. But we can still stop and think about the basic design decisions that have gone into their production: what towns or attractions should be labelled at what scales, what colours to use, what gets left as blank space and so on.

Beyond Geography...

Apart from obvious links to History, there are important connections to Government and Politics and Economics here. Are there any particularly innovative ways that Geographers might contribute to discussions of social inequality?