

Press release from the British Sociological Association

Largest class survey reveals polarised UK society and the rise of new groups

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The largest survey of the British class system ever carried out has revealed a new structure of seven social divisions, ranging from an “advantaged and privileged” elite to a large “precariat” of poor and deprived people.

The British Sociological Association’s annual conference in London heard today [Wednesday 3 April 2013] that the survey, of over 150,000 people, revealed a collapse in the number of traditional working class, and the rise of five new classes.

Professor Mike Savage, of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and Professor Fiona Devine, of the University of Manchester, told the conference that the survey had two parts: one in which 161,400 people responded to the BBC’s online Great British Class Survey, and also a face-to-face survey of 1,026 people carried out by the firm GfK.

Among the conclusions of the research they outlined were:

- The UK has an elite class, 6% of the population, with average savings of over £140,000, good social contacts, highbrow tastes and an education at the most prestigious universities
- 15% of people are in the ‘precariat’ class earning £8,000, usually renting their homes and with average savings of £800 and few social contacts
- The size of the traditional working class has fallen to 14% of the total population – “the traditional working class is fading from contemporary importance,” the researchers say.
- The established middle class is the largest class, and has good social contacts and a strong financial position
- The other classes are: ‘new affluent workers’ with a good financial situation; a ‘technical middle class’ which is well-off but isolated; and an ‘emergent service worker’ class which is young, poor, but socially well-linked.

In a joint presentation Professor Savage told the conference: “It is striking that we have been able to discern a distinctive elite, whose sheer economic advantage sets it apart from other classes. At the opposite extreme, we have discerned the existence of a sizeable group – 15% of the population – which is marked by the lack of any significant amount of economic, cultural, or social capital.

“The recognition of the existence of this group, along with the elite, is a powerful reminder that our conventional approaches to class have hindered our recognition of these two extremes, which occupy a very distinctive place in British society.

“Our new model of class offers a powerful way of comprehending both the persistence, yet also the remaking of social class divisions in contemporary Britain.”

(see below for full quotes)

The researchers analysed how much income and assets the respondents had, their social connections, and their social activities. By observing clusters of similar results they were able to establish statistically that the UK has seven main classes.

The results of the web survey are published in this month's issue of the journal *Sociology*, published by the BSA and SAGE.

In detail the seven classes are:

1. The Elite, comprising 6% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 57; 4% ethnic minorities; 50% female

Average household income, after tax: £89,000

Average value of house: £325,000

Average savings: £142,000

Social contacts: on average they know people in 17 different occupations, a high score

Locations: they live predominantly in London and SE England

Typical professions include: company directors, barristers and dentists

Education: 56% graduates, typically from the universities of: Oxford, City, Kings College London, LSE, Cambridge, Bristol, London South Bank, Imperial College and Trinity College Dublin

Cultural tastes: mainly highbrow (defined in the study as attending classical or jazz events, going to stately homes, museums, art galleries, the theatre or French restaurants) and also 'emergent' cultural activities (defined in the study as pop music, video games, social network sites, the internet and sport).

Background: The researchers noted that 52% had parents who had worked in professions or management.

The researchers describe the elite as: "The most advantaged and privileged group in the UK. Fundamentally, this is a wealthy class, set apart from the other six classes on the basis of their economic advantages. The elites have close to the highest number of social contacts. They have the lowest proportion of ethnic minorities, the highest proportion of graduates, and over half come from families where the main earner was in senior management or the professions. They are clearly a relatively exclusive grouping, with restricted upward mobility into its ranks. Graduates of elite universities are over-represented amongst their ranks. Our findings clearly demonstrate the power of a relatively small, socially and spatially exclusive group at the apex of British society whose economic wealth sets them apart from the great majority of the population."

2. The Established Middle Class, comprising 25% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 46; 13% ethnic minorities; 54% female

Average household income, after tax: £47,000

Average value of house: £177,000

Average savings: £26,000

Social contacts: on average they know people in different 17 occupations

Locations: they live predominantly outside SE England, in small towns or rural areas

Typical professions include: town planners, midwives, occupational therapists

Education: 43% graduates

Cultural tastes: tastes are mainly the 'pop music, video games, social network sites, the internet and sport' category, but also some highbrow

The researchers describe them as: "The comfortably off bulwark of British society, even though they do not share the extreme wealth of the elite. This therefore appears to be the most gregarious class, especially with other generally high-status people. They are also highly culturally engaged. This is a provincial formation, and is a sizeable bulwark of middle England: comfortably off, secure, and established."

3. Technical Middle Class, comprising 6% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 52; 9% ethnic minorities; 59% female

Average household income, after tax: £37,000

Average value of house: £163,000

Average savings: £66,000

Social contacts: they know people in four occupations

Locations: predominantly in the suburbs in SE England

Typical professions include: radiographers, pharmacists, scientists and social scientists

Education: 26% graduates, often from prestigious science universities

Cultural tastes: limited tastes in highbrow and in the 'pop music, video games, social network sites, the internet and sport' category

The researchers say: "This is clearly a prosperous group with a secure economic position in British society. Socially and culturally, however, it is much more restricted than the established middle class. It reports the lowest number of social contacts of any of the classes, though these do tend to be high status. Its social circle is much more restricted than other social classes, and it presumably socialises nearly exclusively with other professional experts. This is an interesting riposte to those who think it is the poor or disadvantaged whose social networks are the most restricted. In fact, it is this comfortably off technical middle class who are by far the most limited here. It appears to be relatively culturally disengaged and is distinguished by its relative social isolation as well as its cultural apathy."

4. New Affluent Workers, comprising 15% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 44; 11% ethnic minorities; 43% female

Average household income, after tax: £29,000

Average value of house: £129,000

Average savings: £5,000

Social contacts: they know people in 17 occupations

Locations: predominantly in old manufacturing centres outside of SE England

Typical professions include: plumbers, sales assistants, electricians, housing officers

Education: 11% graduates, often from new universities

Cultural tastes: the 'pop music, video games, social network sites, the internet and sport' category, and more much more limited highbrow tastes.

The researchers say: "They are a socially and culturally active class. They tend to come from non-middle class families, and few have been to university. This is a group whose members have not benefitted from conventional routes through education to middle class positions, but have nonetheless achieved relatively secure economic positions and are also relatively socially and culturally engaged. They actually form a significant part of the population, at 15%, but cannot easily be identified as either middle or working class."

5. Traditional Working Class, comprising 14% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 66; 9% ethnic minorities; 62% female

Average household income, after tax: £13,000

Average value of house: £127,000

Average savings: £9,000

Social contacts: they know people in 10 occupations

Locations: predominantly living in industrial areas outside SE England, especially in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Typical professions include: care workers, van drivers, cleaners, legal and medical secretaries

Education: 11% graduates, often after part-time or home study

Cultural tastes: A limited taste in highbrow, and much more limited tastes in the 'pop music, video games, social network sites, the internet and sport' category

The researchers say: "We might see this class as a residue of earlier historical periods, and embodies characteristics of the traditional working class. We might see it as a continuation of an earlier phase in Britain's social history, as part of an older generational formation."

6. Emergent Service Workers, comprising 19% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 34; 21% ethnic minorities; 55% female

Average household income, after tax: £21,000

Average value of house: likely to rent

Average savings: £1,000

Social contacts: they know people in 15 occupations

Locations: predominantly living in large cities and university towns

Typical professions include: bar staff, chefs, customer services operatives, call centre workers

Education: 19% graduates, often from universities specialising in arts and humanities

Cultural tastes: the ‘pop music, video games, social network sites, the internet and sport’ category, with a more limited taste in highbrow

The researchers say: “This class does have a significant number of social contacts, who tend to be moderate in their status scores. There is a high degree of cultural engagement in youthful musical, sporting and internet activities, but highbrow cultural capital is low. This is therefore a marginal class in terms of its economic capital, but its social and cultural capital is high. This class is relatively young, with a mean age of 34. There is an unusually high proportion of ethnic minorities within it. People in this class work in a variety of occupations, usually in the service sector, such as bar work, chefs, customer service occupations and call centre workers. This appears therefore to be a class of people who are making their way in a range of relatively insecure occupations.”

7. Precariat, comprising 15% of the population:

Demographics: average age of 50; 13% ethnic minorities; 57% female

Average household income, after tax: £8,000

Average value of house: likely to rent

Average savings: £800

Social contacts: they know people in seven occupations

Locations: predominantly living in old industrial towns outside SE England

Typical professions include: cleaners, caretakers, shopkeepers, cashiers or unemployed

Education: 3% graduates

Cultural tastes: Limited cultural tastes

The researchers say: “This is clearly the most deprived of the classes that we have identified, on all measures, yet they form a relatively large social class, with 15% of the population. Its members are unlikely to have attended university. We use the term ‘precariat’ as a reflection on the existence of a significant group characterised by high amounts of insecurity on all of our measures of capital.”

The study as a whole

About the study as a whole, the researchers said: “Over the past decade, there has been a striking renewal of interest in the analysis of social class inequality, driven by accumulating evidence of escalating social inequalities, notably with respect to wealth and income, but also around numerous social and cultural indicators, such as mortality rates, educational attainment, housing conditions and forms of leisure participation.

“This project contributes to this current by elaborating a new model of social class which shows how measures of economic, cultural and social capital can be combined to provide a powerful way of mapping contemporary class divisions in the UK.

“It is striking that we have been able to discern a distinctive elite, whose sheer economic advantage sets it apart from other classes. Although this is not necessarily surprising, our analysis is the first time that this group has been elaborated within a wider analysis of the class structure in which they are

normally placed alongside a larger group of professionals and managers. The fact that this elite group is shown to have the most privileged backgrounds also is an important demonstration of the accentuation of social advantage at the top of British society.

“At the opposite extreme, we have discerned the existence of a sizeable group – 15% of the population – which is marked by the lack of any significant amount of economic, cultural, or social capital. We have identified these as the ‘precariat’. The recognition of the existence of this group, along with the elite, is a powerful reminder that our conventional approaches to class have hindered our recognition of these two extremes, which occupy a very distinctive place in British society.

“Only two of our seven classes conform to older sociological models of ‘middle’ and ‘working’ class. We might see this as some evidence of a blurring and fragmentation of conventional ‘middle’ and ‘working’ class boundaries.

“The stable middle class are indeed a large group in British society. It does come over as secure and established across all our measures of capital. The traditional working class might also appear to be its counterpart: the surviving rump of the working class – but they now only comprise 14% of the population, and are relatively old, with an average age of 65. To this extent, the traditional working class is fading from contemporary importance, and clearly is less prominent than the established middle class.

“Only 39% of the national population fall into these two classes that conform most closely to these middle and working class sociological stereotypes. Instead, the majority fall into classes which have not been registered by more conventional approaches to class, and require a more fluid understanding of the redrawing of social and cultural boundaries in recent years.

“The ‘new affluent workers’ and the ‘emergent service workers’ are an interesting focus. They seem, in many respects, to be the children of the ‘traditional working class’, and they might thus be said to exemplify the stark break in working class culture which has been evident as a result of de-industrialisation, mass unemployment, immigration and the restructuring of urban space. To this extent, new social formations appear to be emerging out of the tendrils of the traditional working class.

“In conclusion, our new model of class offers a powerful way of comprehending both the persistence, yet also the remaking of social class divisions in contemporary Britain. Our multidimensional analysis reveals the polarisation of social inequality, in the form of an elite and a precariat, and the fragmentation of traditional sociological middle and working class divisions into more segmented forms. We have been able to mine down into unusual detail about the educational and occupational profiles of these classes.”

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Notes:

The working methods

The BBC ran its Great British Class Survey on its website from January 2011. By July 2011 161,400 people had replied, and these responses were analysed by the researchers.

The group that replied were not representative of wider society, being better educated than average in the UK.

To counter this, the BBC also conducted a national face-to-face survey, using the firm GfK, of 1,026 people who were representative of the UK population.

The researchers then used both sets of data, weighted to maintain a representative focus, in their final analysis.

The researchers used a framework of class analysis set out by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that there are three different kinds of capital, each of which conveys certain advantages: economic capital (wealth and income); cultural capital (cultural activities and educational success); and social capital (contacts and connections with other people).

The researchers used data given on income, savings and house price value to establish the economic capital; they used the respondents' recording of their educational level and cultural activities to establish cultural capital; and they used the CAMSIS system to establish social capital. (CAMSIS assesses how many people a respondent knows and how many different work occupations these people belong to – the more of them, the higher the social capital score).

The researchers then used the latent class analysis technique to place respondents into social classes.

This was the first BBC mass survey on a sociological topic: previous ones have been oriented to psychology. It was carried out by BBC Lab UK with input from its Current Affairs Department.

About the researchers

Professor Mike Savage, of the Department of Sociology at the LSE, has carried out influential research on cultural class analysis, space and urban studies, and the history of social science methods.

Fiona Devine OBE, is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester and Head of its School of Social Sciences. She is one of the country's leading experts on social stratification and mobility, work and employment, and politics and participation in the US and UK.

Other researchers who worked on the project included Niall Cunningham, Professor Yaojun Li, and Dr Andrew Miles (Manchester University); Mark Taylor (University of York); Dr Sam Friedman (City University); Professor Johs Hjellbrekke (Bergen); and Professor Brigitte Le Roux (Paris Decartes).

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The 2013 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the Grand Connaught Rooms, Holborn, London, from 3-5 April. Over 400 social scientists will present their latest research, and 700 people will attend. The British Sociological Association's mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk