Throughout the 1990s, The Open University has been developing its research capacity in economics. Economists at the OU comprise a lively and expanding group with a wide set of interests ranging from development policy to decision theory, from Marxist theories of profit to libertarian foundations of environmental policy and from econometric analysis of large data sets through institutional economics to the use of case-studies in policy formation. Nearly a 1000 students from around the world register each year to study economics courses and their needs, together with the multi-disciplinary nature of social science at the university, shape out research. Through a variety of personal and group research projects, our work makes a strong contribution to areas like business, public policy and even philosophy where sharply focused analysis can inform decision-making as well as contribute to scientific progress.

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The Origin of the Poverty Line

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The Origin of the Poverty Line

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Charles Booth never explained why he adopted the particular ‘line of poverty’ he said he used, in the late 1880s, to divide the people of London into those ‘in poverty’ and those ‘in comfort’. The incomes describing it, presented with the initial findings of his survey of London at the Royal Statistical Society’s meeting in May 1887, became well known:

By the word ‘poor’ I mean to describe those who have a fairly regular though bare income, such as 18s. to 21s. per week for a moderate family, and by ‘very poor’ those who fall below this standard, whether from chronic irregularity of work, sickness, or a large number of young children.

Those who rose above this standard were ‘above the line of poverty’. Other writers subsequently described the line separating the poor and the not-poor as the ‘poverty line’, a term not found in any of Booth’s publications, although it is used synonymously with ‘line of poverty’ in one of his notebooks compiled in 1887. The published use of ‘poverty line’ has been traced back to 1894, and in 1896, for example, Helen Bosanquet referred to ‘what is now called, from Mr Booth’s book, the “poverty line”’. In 1950, Seebohm Rowntree’s article on the poverty line in Chambers’s Encyclopaedia claimed that ‘the first attempt to fix a poverty line on scientific lines’ was his own estimate, published in 1901, of the income required (in York in 1899) to meet the minimum costs of adequate nutrition and other essential expenditure. Nevertheless, Rowntree’s article begins with a reference to Booth’s ‘line of poverty’, as do all other histories referring to the poverty line before 1899. With one apparent exception, these accounts are all consistent with, or explicitly state, the view that the poverty line was Booth’s invention. Simey and Simey, Booth’s biographers, claimed that ‘Booth invented the concept of the poverty line, perhaps his most striking single contribution to the social sciences’. They were not the first to make such a claim, although theirs seems to have been particularly influential. It is repeated in the work of economic historians, economists, and sociologists, in introductions to selections from Booth’s works, in

1 I thank Michael Drake and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.
5 Bosanquet, rich and poor, p. 79.
6 Rowntree, ‘Poverty line’.
7 Simey and Simey, Charles Booth, p. 88 (and see pp. 184 and 136). Their claim is unchallenged in later biographical works (Norman-Butler, Victorian aspirations; O’Day and Englander, Booth’s enquiry). ‘Booth invented the poverty line; Rowntree perfected it … is the received wisdom’ (Englander and O’Day, Retrieved riches, p. 35).
8 The ‘invention of the poverty line by Charles Booth’ appears in a passage in the 1949 (not the 1936) edition of Wickwar and Wickwar, Social services, p. 287, where it is described as ‘one of the greatest contributions of social sciences to social progress’.
9 Cullen writes of Booth’s ‘famous invention’ (‘Charles Booth’s poverty survey’, p. 161). Hagenaaars and van Praag discuss ‘poverty line definitions, starting with Booth’ (‘Synthesis’, p. 141). Bulmer et al. Highlight Booth’s ‘originality ... in the way he conceptualised poverty ... where hitherto there had been vagueness’ (Social survey, p. 20).
10 Pfautz refers to ‘Booth’s invention of the concept of the poverty line’ (Charles Booth, P. 29). Williams speaks of the ‘landmark’ represented by Booth’s ‘attempt to establish a “poverty line”’ (‘Foreword’, p. x),
academic histories of poverty covering the late nineteenth century, and in books directed to a wider audience, of which only a few examples can be cited here. The apparent exception to this scholarly consensus is Himmelfarb. She argues that the concept should be attributed to Rowntree, on the grounds that ‘the term [Poverty Line] gained currency and was retrospectively attributed to Booth’ only after the publication in 1901 of Rowntree’s Poverty, where the term was frequently used. However Bosanquet’s connection of the term to Booth in 1896 seems sufficient to refute this argument. So the consensus on Booth’s ‘famous invention’ remains undisturbed, and Himmelfarb herself concedes that Booth ‘did invent the quantitative measure that signified that line—the frequently cited 18 to 21 shillings’.

These sums of 18 to 21 shillings were, of course, very different from the highest out-relief payments made at the time by poor law guardians to relieve destitution, for the ‘line of poverty’ was meant to identify the poor, not the subset of the very poor who were destitute. As the Select Committee on poor law relief reiterated in 1888, ‘It is not the duty of guardians to [alleviate] the lot of those who are poor but not actually destitute’. Their duty was to relieve only those of the poor ‘who are unable without support from the rates to provide themselves with the absolute necessities of life, and who have no relatives who can be required to support them’ – and who would otherwise quickly starve to death. The committee took evidence on out-relief in London, and noted that the scales of payments made by different boards of guardians varied widely. The lowest scale allowed relief amounting to no more that 5s. 8d. a week to an able-bodied man with a wife and three children, in return for his work in a labour yard; the highest scale allowed a maximum of 11s.; the average, 9s. 4d. a week for this family of five. So these different scales provide little indication of the minimum needed merely to avoid destitution. A general inspector for the Local Government Board with 14 years’ experience in London told the select committee of out-relief recipients dying of starvation, and said that ‘outdoor relief, as at present given, is always inadequate to meet real destitution, and is always given in aid of other and unknown resources’. The difficulty of obtaining accurate information about the (perhaps non-existent) other resources of those relieved may help to explain the inadequacy of the relief. As to what

and Fried and Elman say that he ‘invented a quantitative standard of measurement—“a poverty line”’ (‘Introduction’, p.xxiii).

11 Treble refers to Booth’s ‘pioneering definition of the poverty line’ (Urban poverty, p. 186). Rose explains that ‘Booth’s importance [lay in] the method by which he approached and measured poverty. His concept of the “poverty line” … provided an objective measure of poverty’ (Relief of poverty, p. 28).

12 The concept of the poverty line is attributed to Booth in, for example, MacGregor, Politics, p. 62; Field, Freedom, p. 34; Marshall, Concise dictionary, p.140.

13 Himmelfarb, Poverty, p. 103, n. 3 cites other examples, stating that ‘there is hardly a reference to Booth that does not repeat this claim.’

14 Ibid., pp. 103-4.

15 Ibid., p. 103. Ironically, Himmelfarb suggests (p. 103, n.15) that Bosanquet’s 1903 paper, ‘The “poverty line”’, may have started the misattribution, apparently not noticing what she had published in 1896. Himmelfarb rightly dismisses the suggestion that a poverty line like Booth’s can be found in the work of Mayhew (see Yeo, “Mayhew” p.54); nor are income levels separating the poor and not-poor proposed in earlier works concerned with the poor (see Engels, Conditions; Eden, State; King, Observations and conclusions).


17 Ibid., pp. X, 693, 697. Booth’s ‘moderate family’ was of four or five persons: see below, section IV.

18 S.C. on poor law relief (P.P. 1888, xv), Q. 672.

19 It was suggested that the somewhat higher scales adopted by the Jewish Board of Guardians were partly explained by the greater knowledge they had of the circumstances of Jewish applicants for relief. They
income from all sources was adequate to avoid destitution, one of the committee’s witnesses suggested a scale for adults and for children. Although he did not say so, it corresponded to a minimum weekly income scale, ‘the sufficiency of which has been tested by experience’, published by the Charity Organisation Society in 1886. This scale would have allowed a family of two adults and three children under 12 up to 8s., plus rent. All these scales adopted for out-relief, or for charitable purposes, described income levels well below those defining Booth’s ‘line of poverty’.

While the poor law authorities’ duties concerned destitution, the 1870 Elementary Education Act, perhaps unwittingly, had invited school boards to develop a criterion of poverty, for Section 17 of the act provided that:

> Every child attending a school provided by any school board shall pay such weekly fee as may be prescribed by the school board, with the consent of the Education Department, but the school board may from time to time, for a renewable period not exceeding six months, remit the whole or any part of such fee in the case of any child when they are of opinion that the parent of such child in unable from poverty to pay the same, but such remission shall not be deemed to be parochial relief given to such parent.

Introducing the bill leading to this act, W. E. Forster emphasized the intention that these remissions should have ‘no stigma of pauperism attached to them’, and at the committee stage he dismissed the objection that power to remit fees would lower school boards to ‘the level of a second Board of Guardians’. Yet nowhere in the act, in the bills leading to it, or in the lengthy parliamentary debates on them, is there any indication of a criterion of ‘poverty’ justifying the remission of fees. This was a matter, like the introduction of compulsory school attendance itself, which the act empowered school boards to decide upon locally. School boards soon developed poverty lines. In some cases they were never widely known and they are all now apparently forgotten. Rediscovering them reveals the need to revise the currently accepted account, sketched above, of the origin of the poverty line concept. It was not invented by Booth. And, far from being an innovator in this respect, there are good reasons for supposing that he found his ‘line of poverty’ ready made, and took it, with the data he used for his survey of Tower Hamlets and elsewhere, from the London School Board.

Soon after their election the London School Board’s members appointed a committee to draft the by-laws they were empowered to make under the provisions of Section 74 of the Elementary Education Act. Parents were to be required to send children who were not less than five, or more than 13 years old, to school, and were to be fined if their child was absent without an acceptable excuse. Poverty was not one of the specified acceptable excuses; and in June 1871 the committee reported its decision, by a small majority, that some provision had to be made for the payment and remission of fees. Its members agreed unanimously that the power to pay and remit fees ‘should be most cautiously and

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20 Brooke Lambert in S.C. on poor law relief (P.P. 1888 xv), QQ. 4998, 4958.
21 Charity Organisation Society, Exceptional distress, p. xxv. The weekly scale (for food and fuel, excluding rent) was 3s. 6d. for an adult living alone, 2s. 6d. each for two adults living together, 6d. each for children under 4, 1s. each for those aged from 4 to 12, and 1s. 6d. each for those up to age 16. No family, however large, was to be given more than 10s. because, it was argued, large families generally had earnings and other non-charitable income. When apparently quoting this scale, Lambert did not mention rent.
22 Hansard, 17 Feb. 1870, col. 455; 1 July 1870, cols. 1314-5.
sparingly used’. There were several reasons for this reluctance. The payment of fees to denominational schools was opposed by secularists. Remission of fees for those attending board schools was also controversial, for some attempt was always made to set their fees, which could vary from 1d. to 9d. per week, according to perceptions of the ability to pay in a school’s neighbourhood. George Kekewich noted that ‘in every Board school the fee must be approved by the Education Department, which has always insisted that it shall be suitable to the locality, that is to say, within the means of the population for whom the school is intended’.

A difficulty associated with this ‘ability to pay’ approach was spelled out in 1887 by Edward Buxton, the London School Board’s former chairman, who pointed to the 400,000 children in the London Board’s schools, and argued that ‘No machinery that you could possibly invent would enable you to say what each parent is able to pay; and even if you could do so, the circumstances of the parents vary from week to week.’ This criticism was relevant in all districts, including the poorest, where the weekly fee for a child’s schooling was set at 1d., the lowest level permitted by the Education Department. But since schools had to charge fees, which could not be set to match every parent’s ability to pay, what criteria did school boards adopt in their attempts to determine particular parents’ ability or inability (‘from poverty’) to pay whatever fee was charged in their local schools?

In Birmingham, a prominent school board member argued in 1871 that ‘we shall certainly be obliged to give free tickets where, after paying rent, the weekly income is as low as 2s. per head. I should vote for a much higher figure than that.’ And in 1875 Joseph Chamberlain, then chairman of the Birmingham School Board, publicly divulged the poverty line it had secretly adopted:

They had laid down a rule ... that whenever the earnings of the family, were less than 3s. per week per head, the Board would pay for the free education of the children concerned. The Clerk to the School Board, in sending him this information on the previous night, at his request, said that this had hitherto been kept a profound secret for fear people would cheat the Board. He (the chairman) wanted it no longer to be a secret ... A limitation of this kind—was unfair to those who were above the line ... and to those below.

This report of what Chamberlain said does not make clear that the Birmingham Board’s poverty line (according to Dale in 1871 and, as we shall see, to Crosskey in 1887) was expressed in terms of income per head after the payment of rent.

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24 The power of school boards to pay fees of children not attending board schools was repealed by the 1876 Elementary Education Act, s. 10; they could continue to remit the fees of board school children.
25 Kekewich, ‘Free or assisted education’ (Oct. 1890), P.R.O., CAB 37/28/51, p. 3. Kekewich joined the department in 1868; he was permanent secretary in 1890.
26 R.C. on education (P.P. 1887, xxix), Q. 31,425 (16 Feb.). By 1887, Buxton was advocating the abolition of fees; see this ‘Case for free education’.
27 Dale, Payment, p. 17.
28 Chamberlain, Free schools, p.10. His speech supported the National Education League’s policy of abolishing fees. He argued that the line was unfair to those just above it (who had both to pay fees and to subsidize those below and to those below who were, he said, degraded and pauperized.
The use of after-rent incomes per head to assess the ability of families to pay school fees may have been quite common. Bingham provides an account of the circumstances of 400 Sheffield Families analysed in 1875 for the Sheffield School Board, and reproduces three tables showing those families classified according to family income, family size, and average income per head, after paying rent. He does not, however, reveal the ‘line’ below which school fees would have been remitted.\(^{29}\) Also in 1875 a Manchester School Board member complained that some applicants for remission took the opportunity ‘to profit by false statements as to income. The Board has adopted a hard and fast line of income per head (perhaps the only plan possible) above which they will not pay fees. But the scale is perfectly well known and it is too evident that the statements are adapted to the scale.’\(^{30}\) He did not say what the scale was.

In 1884 the clerk of the Birmingham School Board wrote to the London Board asking for details of its remissions scheme. The request was discussed at a meeting of the London by-laws committee, and the reply was that the London Board’s scale was confidential: it would not be revealed to the Birmingham Board.\(^{31}\) The concern with confidentiality was shown again in the evidence given to the Royal Commission on education in February 1887. When he was asked how ‘free orders’ were given in Birmingham, the Rev. Crosskey replied: ‘A certain sum per week is allowed for each member of the family. To this rent is added; and if the resulting amount comes to [more] than the wages earned by the parents, a free order is given’.\(^{32}\) Crosskey did not state what that ‘certain sum’ was. Nor was he asked, perhaps because the commission’s members recalled the evidence given the previous week by the chairman of the London School Board, the Rev. Diggle, when this exchange took place:

> Have you any fixed rule with regard to the incomes of the families to whose children you grant remission of fees?—Yes.
> Will you be good enough to tell us what that scale is?—We have a certain scale which is sent to the divisional members; it is not a public document, and it is not given to parents. All the divisional members know it, and if the Commission desire to have it I raise no objection. *(The witness read the scale)* Every other case where application is made, and where there is some exceptional circumstance, can be dealt with especially by the Bye-laws Committee; but anything within that scale passes as a matter of course.\(^{33}\)

The scale was not published. When it became history, after the abolition of fees in 1891, those who then wrote about the board’s work and achievements did not mention it; nor do modern historians who have examined in detail the problems raised by school fees in

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\(^{30}\) Hughes, *Notes*, p. 25. The after-rent incomes per head under which the remission of school fees could be obtained in Manchester in 1885 can be found in McDougall *(Drink, p. 3)*. They were 4s., 3s. 6d., and 3s. for families of two, three or four, and five or six persons respectively.


\(^{32}\) *R.C. on education* (P.P. 1887, xxix), Q. 30,977; and see Q. 31,213.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., QQ. 30,105-6.
London. What follows, therefore, brings to light what seems to have remained a secret for over a century.

II

The London School Board’s minutes for 9 October 1884 show that Helen Taylor proposed to ‘grant remission of fees in all cases where the income, after deducting rent, does not amount to more than 6d. a-day for each member of the family; and to grant remission in all cases where total income is below 16s. a-week’. Taylor’s motion was lost on the casting vote of the chairman. When the debate was resumed a week later, an amended motion accepted by Taylor was carried. This proposed that ‘in calculating the income for the purposes of remission, the Board shall have regard to the rent, and that the Bye-laws Committee be instructed to make their scheme for remission more favourable than at present’. Because the scheme was confidential, no further details of the income calculations before or after the adoption of this resolution are provided in the board’s published minutes.

Fortunately, although many of the board’s unpublished records no longer exist, the hitherto overlooked minutes of the relevant by-laws committee meetings survive. They show that two ‘poverty lines’ were adopted, specifying the circumstances allowing the remission of (i) any fees over 1d. per child, and (ii) all fees. For families with two parents present, they can be written, in shillings per week, as follows (where \( n \) = number of non-earning family members, excluding the parents; \( r \) = rent per week; \( y \) = parents’ income).

Fees over 1d. would be remitted if

\[
16 + 2n + \left[ \max \{0, r \left( \frac{R}{r} - 2 \right) \} \right] \geq y \leq 28
\]

and all fees would be remitted if

\[
14 + 2n + \left[ \max \{0, r \left( \frac{R}{r} - 2 \right) \} \right] \geq y \leq 26
\]

This summary of the essential features of the scheme for remissions is based on the minute of what was finally agreed at the by-laws committee meeting on 19 November 1884. There seems to have been a wearying series of proposals and counterproposals, and the unpolished statement of the final position contains an uneasy juxtaposition of features reflecting, no doubt, the incompletely reconciled views of the committee’s members:

The scheme as a whole is as follows:

1. Divisional Committees to recommend cases according to their discretion as heretofore.
2. The Bye-Laws committee, as heretofore, will deal with all cases on their merits, and will have regard, amongst other things, to the rent paid.

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34 See the official histories (Spalding, London School Board; School Board for London, Final Report and those of modern scholars (Rubinstein, school attendance; Sutherland, Policy making; Lewis, ‘Parents’; and others who rely on their work).
35 Taylor was elected to the board as a candidate of the Southwark Radical Association in 1876, 1879, and 1882; she retired, ill, in 1884.
36 School Board for London, Minutes, 16 Oct. 1884.
37 Section 17 of the 1870 act provided for the remission of ‘the whole or any part’ of the fee.
3 Subject as above, the Clerk of the Committee is to go through all the cases recommended, and lay before the Committee en bloc all the cases where the income does not exceed 14s. for two members of the family, with 2s. for each additional member of the family, not exceeding a total income of 26s. and, in cases of widows or deserted women where the husband cannot be found, 1s. above; also all cases where the income is not more than 2s. above these figures for remission of fees above one penny per week per child.

In calculating the income for the above purpose the Clerk is to deduct members of the family (other than the parents) earning income from the number in family; and to strike out their earnings from the weekly income; and when the rent paid exceeds 2s. per room, he is also to deduct the excess from the earnings.

4 All other cases to be specially submitted to the Committee and dealt with on their merits; and in so dealing with them the Committee will make special allowance, amongst other things, for illness in the family, large rent, and high School fees; and, where a man has been a long time out of work, that fact will be taken into account for the first two months after obtaining employment.\textsuperscript{38}

Taylor had sought to amend the scales finally adopted by the by-laws committee, so that 3s. 6d. (rather than 2s.) would be added for each of the additional non-earning members of the family. When that amendment was defeated, other members proposed 2s. 6d.; their amendment was defeated too. Unfortunately, the minutes of the by-laws committee do not record the arguments, advanced to support the different scales proposed either at this or at previous meetings.

III

To discover the incomes qualifying for the remission of some or all school fees in London we need information about rents, because the board’s scales took account of rents over 2s. per room. The results survive of two surveys attempting to discover rents (among other things) in 1884 and 1887. Two of Booth’s friends also published estimates of rents in 1886.

In April 1884 Marchant Williams, an inspector of schools for the London School Board, told the Royal Commission on the housing of the working classes that for about 18 months he had been investigating ‘the special difficulties of the teachers of schools in exceptionally low parts of my division’. In the course of his enquiry he had obtained information on rents for ‘about 923 dwellings … taken at random in Clerkenwell, St Luke’s and St Giles’.\textsuperscript{39} What he meant by ‘at random’ is unclear: ‘I sampled them here and there … It was a selected sample for the lowest districts in my division … they are the poorest people, I should think.’\textsuperscript{40} His findings on the rents of tenements of different sizes are shown in table 1. The part of the Commission’s Report concerned with rents gave prominence to Williams’s evidence, while noting that other witnesses, mainly

\textsuperscript{38} From October 1886 decisions on remissions were delegated to school managers; the board’s minutes (28 July 1887) show that their decisions throughout London were less uniform than some desired.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{R.C. on housing} (P.P. 1884-5, xxx), QQ. 5,813-4.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., QQ. 5,815, 5,849-50.
school board visitors, had provided examples of higher rents. From what Williams had been able to discover about the wages of those in his sample, he had calculated that '46 per cent pay from one fourth to one half of the wages earned as rent; 42 per cent pay from one fourth to one fifth; and the remaining 12 per cent pay less than one fifth'.

Table 1. Rents of 923 tenements in parts of London

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 room</th>
<th>2 rooms</th>
<th>3 rooms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimum rent</td>
<td>1s.</td>
<td>1s. 9d.</td>
<td>2s. 6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average rent</td>
<td>3s. 10½d.</td>
<td>6s.</td>
<td>7s. 5¼d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: see text.

The Local Government Board's March 1887 survey of 'the condition of the working classes' in parts of London included St George's in the East, where Booth had begun his 1886-7 survey of Tower Hamlets. William Ogle, superintendent of statistics at the General Register Office, supervised the board's survey and sought to discredit its findings. One of his arguments was that respondents would have overstated the rents they paid to exaggerate the difficulty of the circumstances they faced, in an effort to attract relief. He may have been too cynical; respondents disposed to make false claims about rent may have been deterred by the realization that they would be implausible, if they were unlike the rents reported by their neighbours. The rents they did report seem to have been somewhat lower than those referred to by Williams in 1884. Table 2 sets side-by-side information from two separate tables in Ogle's Tabulation, showing the sizes of accommodation and rents paid in St George's in the East.

Table 2. Accommodation and rent in St George's in the East, March 1887

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number living in accommodation with</th>
<th>Number paying a weekly rent of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part of 1 room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 room</td>
<td>2 rooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>567</td>
<td>2,398</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tabulation (P.P. 1887, LXXI), pp. 4-5. No information on size of accommodation was provided in 24 cases, and none one rent in 93 cases.

41 Ibid., P. 17.
42 Ibid., Q. 5.819.
43 Tabulation (P.P. 1887, LXXI), pp. iii, xv.
Rents in this relatively small district seem likely to have been roughly related to the number of rooms occupied. Such an assumption provides the only way to link the figures on the left and right of Table 2. They suggest that the rent for three rooms was likely to be 6s. or more, and that the distribution of rent for other sizes of accommodation was, approximately, as shown in Table 3. Ogle’s survey of St George’s in the East and three other districts in London found that, on average, those men in work classified as a ‘labourer, navvy, &c.’ said they had weekly earnings of 21s. 2d. and a rent of 5s. 4d. Ogle’s survey of St George’s in the East and three other districts in London found that, on average, those men in work classified as a ‘labourer, navvy, &c.’ said they had weekly earnings of 21s. 2d. and a rent of 5s. 4d.55

Table 3. Assumed distribution of rents in St George’s in the East

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rent paid per week</th>
<th>less than 3s.</th>
<th>3s. and less than 4s.</th>
<th>4s. and less than 6s.</th>
<th>6s. and more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part of one room</td>
<td>567</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One room</td>
<td>1,090</td>
<td>1,182</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two rooms</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: see text.

Finally, in an 1886 article considering the cost of living at that time, Henrietta Barnett claimed that ‘decent accommodation of two rooms in London cannot be had for less than 5s. 6d. or 6s. a week’. Samuel Barnett reckoned that the rent for two small rooms would be 5s., somewhat less than the rent his wife had said was required for ‘decent accommodation’, but perhaps her qualifying adjective suggests something a little better than the typical accommodation of low-income families. Certainly, the figure of 5s. for two rooms is a plausible estimate in the light of the findings for St George’s presented by Ogle.

IV

The incomes below which the London School Board proposed to remit some or all school fees after 1884 can now be estimated, and compared with contemporary estimates of necessary household expenditure. We can also apply the scale for remissions to the kind of family Booth envisaged when he described his ‘line of poverty’.

In her article published in July 1886, Henrietta Barnett had drawn upon ‘such knowledge as dietetic science has given us’ to calculate the cost of providing the amounts of carbonaceous and nitrogenous foods necessary for health, as well as the cost of other necessary items of expenditure; and she had provided sample diets, comparisons with workhouse diets, and other relevant information about various family types. Samuel

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44 The 1,657 paying less than 3s. rent are assumed to include all those in part of a room, with the rest (1,657 – 567) in one room. The others having one room (2,398 – 1,090) are allocated to the next lowest rent categories consistent with the data in table 2, and so on. Thus the rows in table 3 sum respectively to the first three columns in table 2; the first three columns in table 3 sum to columns 5, 6, and 7 in table 2.
Barnett relied upon her investigations when he published, in November 1886, a table representing:

the necessary weekly expenditure of a family of eight persons, of whom six are children. It allows for each day no cheering luxuries, but only the bare amount of nitrogenous and carbonaceous foods which are absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the body.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>£.</th>
<th>s.</th>
<th>d.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food, i.e. oatmeal, 1¼ lbs. of meat a day between eight persons, cocoa and bread</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent for two small rooms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling for four children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firing and light</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If to this account 2s. a week be added for clothes ... then the necessary weekly expenditure of the family is £1 4s. 10d. Few fathers or mothers are able to resist, and ought not to resist the temptation of taking or giving some pleasure; so even where work is regular and paid at £1 5s. 0d. a week, there must be in the home want of food as well as of the luxuries which gladden life.49

How do these calculations of necessary expenditure compare with the London School Board’s scales? For the remission of all fees over 1d. per child in this case, both of the following weak inequalities from (I) above would have to hold50.

\[16 + 12 + 1 \geq y \leq 28\]

That is, no fees over 1d. would have been paid by the family described by Barnett if the income of the parent(s) had been less than 28s. All fees would have been remitted if the income had satisfied condition (2):

\[14 + 12 + 1 \geq y \leq 26\]

In this case, all fees would have been remitted if the income had been less than the upper limit of 26s. a week, a figure close to the necessary expenditure of 25s. calculated by Barnett, ‘Distress’, p. 682. Beatrice Potter noted a conversation she had with Samuel Barnett about Booth’s planned investigation on 18 April 1886 in her diary, kept with the Passfield Papers (hereafter Pass. P.) at the B.L.P.E.S. Henrietta’s article was published in July, when Booth first contacted Samuel Mather, superintendent of the School Board’s visitors in Tower Hamlets, to arrange a meeting to discuss the information visitors could provide (Pass. P., 2/1/2/8, Booth to Potter, 21 July 1886).

50 Since the ‘excess rent’ for each of the two rooms is 6d., 1s. is added to the left side of the first inequality.
Barnett. So we might say that an income between 26s. and 28s. would mean that this particular family of eight was 'poor' according to the London School Board's scale; whereas an income not more than 26s. would mean that the family was 'very poor'.

When Booth defined his 'line of poverty' he referred to a 'moderate' family, the size of which can be found in the reported discussion of his 1887 paper, when Leoni Levi noted that 'The author had stated that a certain number were very poor who had an income of 18s. or 20s. a week ... with four or five persons in a family.'\textsuperscript{51} The London School Board's scale would have allowed the remission of all fees for any family with only four members (two parents and two children not at work), however cheap their accommodation, if the parents' total income had been 18s. a week or less because, using (2) above

\[ 14 + 4 + 0 \geq 18 \leq 26 \]

Similarly, any family of five (two parents, three children not working) would have had all fees remitted if their weekly income had been 20s. or less.\textsuperscript{52} They were not just 'poor' and required to pay only 1d.; they were 'very poor' and required to pay nothing. These incomes are, of course, precisely those which Levi noted that Booth had stated.

Later, after he had adopted his social classification based on crowding or servants employed,\textsuperscript{53} Booth confirmed the size of family he had had in mind when describing his 'line of poverty'. (His 'line' was of course a range, the lower bound of which separated the 'poor' from the 'very poor', who might have been exemplified by the ill-nourished families discussed by the Barnettts.) He wrote:

The 'poor' [are] defined as those whose means are barely sufficient for decent independent life. Though not in actual 'want', they would be better for more of everything. Their lives are an unending struggle and lack comfort, but these people are neither ill-nourished nor ill-clad according to any standard that can reasonably be used ... I have suggested 18s. to 21s. for a moderate-sized family as the income I have had in my mind. The 'very poor', -who answer more or less to the very crowded, i.e. those living three or more to a room--are those who from any cause fall below this standard ... we reckon as living under crowded conditions those whose house accommodation is limited to one room for each of two or more persons, and that the number of persons so situated was found to agree

\textsuperscript{51} Quoted in Booth, 'Inhabitants', p. 394.
\textsuperscript{52} No assumption is made about rent when concluding that fees would be remitted entirely if the income of the family of four, for example, were not more than 18s. We could not say whether they would be remitted entirely at a higher level of income without knowing their rent per room. For a 'very poor' family this may not have been more than 2s., although the evidence mentioned above suggested that it would have been for a 'poor' family, who could afford to pay more than the 'very poor'.
\textsuperscript{53} This superseded his first classification with its associated 'line of poverty' after the 1891 census returns became available. Families without servants were classified according to their degree of crowding. All those living with one or more persons per room were in the lower class; those with two or more persons per room were 'crowded'. ('Life and labour, first results', pp. 559-66). As it happened, Booth's interviews with the School Board visitors for his earlier survey revealed very little direct evidence of the incomes of the families they had scheduled. Hence he explained 'As to the system of classification ... I have abandoned to some extent the division by earnings' (Pass P., 2/1/2/8, letter to Potter, 5 Sept. 1886).
very closely with the total accounted as ‘poor’ in the [earlier] classification of the populations ... namely, those whose earnings were supposed not to exceed 21s. a week for a small family ... A ‘small family’ is considered to consist of about four members and provides the best basis of comparison with the earnings of the head of the family only.54

Suppose the family of ‘about four members’ had two parents and two children not working, and paid 5s. rent to live in the two small rooms envisaged in 1886 by Samuel Barnett (so that they would be ‘crowded’ but not ‘very crowded’). They would have qualified for the remission of all fees over 1d. if their weekly income had been 21s. a week or less, because

\[16 + 4 + 1 \geq 21 \leq 28\]

Again, this is the income Booth selected when describing his ‘line of poverty’.

V

The London School Board willingly cooperated with Booth and allowed him to use the data collected by its visitors for his survey. There is no reason to suppose that he was unaware of the board’s scale for the remission of fees, and it would have been a fairly natural step for him to align his own definitions with the board’s, provided they were suitable for his purpose. The board’s concern for the confidentiality of its scale provided a sufficient explanation for Booth’s not mentioning it in connection with his own standard of poverty. The hypothesis that he took his ‘line of poverty’ from the London School Board clears up puzzling features of it, helping to explain why his ‘line of poverty’ was structured as it was (with two lines) and why he never explained his choice of incomes describing ‘poor’ and ‘very poor’. The hypothesis also resolves other problems, and thereby deflects some standard modern criticisms of Booth.55

One criticism is that Booth’s exemplification of his poverty standard for the case of a ‘moderate’ or ‘small’ family did not provide a fully account of it, and it is argued that he failed to define ‘the level of income which constituted poverty for any given household size composition’.56 However, application of the London Board’s scale required more information than that: the employment status of family members, the rent paid, and housing conditions as indicated by the number of rooms occupied, were also relevant. Booth did specify, later, a relatively simple equivalence scale based on family size and composition when he followed up a suggestion, made at the meeting where he first described his ‘line of poverty’, to ‘add as an appendix budgets of the income and expenditure of as large a proportion as possible of the classes with whom he dealt’.57 In the book he published in April 1889, Booth gave details of the recorded expenditure of 30 families over a five-week period. ‘To facilitate comparisons’, he explained, ‘every family has been reduced to an equivalent in “male adults” ... a male aged 20 or upwards counts

54 Booth, Life, IX, pp. 5, 14, 14n.
55 They were ably summarized recently, for example, by Linsley and Linsley (‘Booth’, pp. 89-90) which draws upon the influential interpretation presented by Simey and Simey (Charles Booth) and Hennock (‘Poverty’, ‘Measurement’, ‘Concepts’).
as 1 male adult; a female aged 15 or upwards as ¾; and children in proportion, according to
to their age. 58 An examination of the equivalization in Booth’s ‘Table of household
expenditure’ shows a weight of 20 for men and 20 or more, and weights for males under
20 and females under 15 equal to their ages in years. 59 These figures correspond to
Henrietta Barnett’s estimates that a man ‘requires 20 oz. of solid food per day’ and a
woman 15 oz. 60 In her article she did not specify the requirements of children at different
ages, saying only that eight children would probably require, on average, 10 oz. per head.
Booth’s more specific statement seems to be a fuller account of her scale deduced, she
said, from ‘dietetic science’.

Booth used the equivalence scale to provide estimates of average weekly expenditure in
the classes represented in his table: B (‘very poor’), C and D (‘poor’), and E (‘regular
standard earnings—above the line of poverty’) and to ‘show exactly what I mean by the
line of poverty with regard to which, as being below it, on it, or above it, I have attempted
to classify the people’. 61 The table also provided some information on the incomes of
households in the different categories (classes B, C and D, etc.), and a standard criticism
of Booth is based on the apparent differences between the incomes Booth had used to
illustrate his ‘line of poverty’ and the incomes shown in the table. However, the incomes
in the table do not generally correspond to the concept of income in the London School
Board’s remission scale: the incomes of parents and other family members are not
distinguished, and information on the number of rooms occupied by the families is
provided in only one case. 62 Since the measurements of different concepts of ‘income’
will not generally coincide, it is not clear that ‘the household budgets … did not really fit
the categories … to which the families had been assigned’. 63 Booth’s own conclusions
from these households’ budgets was that

we get roughly 5s., 7s. 6d., and 10s. for the average weekly expenditure per
‘male adult’ below, on and just above the line of poverty. Translated into
families of father, mother, and 3 children of, say, 11, 8, and 6, we get as the
average expenditure for such a family in each class 15s., 22s. 6d., and 30s.
per week; and this, or something very like this, is the truth. 64

Illustrating the average expenditure of such a family in each class did not require Booth to
state the precise level of expenditure, or income, at which the family would pass from one
class to another, nor did he suggest that these could be deduced from the small number of
families about which he gave details. So this illustration of his poverty standard should
not be described as ‘not convincing’. 65 It was quite consistent with the outcome of
applying the London School Board’s criteria (i) and (ii) to decide whether the income of
such a family made it very poor, poor, or not poor.

59 Ibid., pp. 136-7. Linley and Linley (‘Booth’, p. 90) note that ‘there appears to be no stated
justification’ for an equivalence scale they attribute to Booth which seems, however, to be a somewhat
inaccurate account of a version of Booth’s scale presented by Smith (New survey, 3, p. 433) rather than
Booth’s own.
61 Booth, Labour, 1, pp. 133-4.
62 Since Booth was particularly interested in this variable (see ‘Condition’, p. 302, and Labour, ii, p. 231 n.,
for example) we may surmise that he did not collect the information himself.
64 Booth, Labour, 1, p. 133.
65 Simey and Simey, Charles Booth, p. 186.
The hypothesis that Booth took his ‘line of poverty’ from the London School Board’s scale for the remission of school fees rests here on circumstantial evidence. No direct evidence of Booth’s dealings with the board, or of the extent of his knowledge of its remission scheme, seems to survive in the board’s archives or in the Booth archive. Arguments in favour of accepting the hypothesis are: a presumption of Booth’s knowledge of the board’s scale; the relationship between the income levels he used to describe his ‘line of poverty’ and those resulting from the application of the scale; and the resolution of puzzles and problems which remain if the hypothesis is rejected. These arguments may be stronger than those supporting the well-known alternative: ‘Booth’s poverty line ... was drawn arbitrarily in relation to ill defined and uncertain income groups and applied inconsistently’. However, the acceptance or rejection of this new hypothesis is less significant than the evidence it has revealed about the historical development of the poverty line. Booth did not invent it.

The concept can be traced back to the provision in the 1870 Elementary Education Act requiring school boards to develop criteria of poverty. The Manchester School Board’s criterion was used by Alexander McDougall as the poverty line in his estimate, reported in 1885, that at least 55,000 people in Manchester were in poverty. In May 1889 Frederick Scott, a member of the Manchester Statistical Society, noted that the poverty line used by McDougall was:

\[
\text{the limit under which the remission of school fees may be obtained, which as he says, ‘is much above any of the scales adopted by Poor Law Guardians for cases of out-relief’. I take it however, that the standard of qualification for Poor Law relief is not a fair test of poverty as distinct from destitution.}
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Scott explained his own understanding of poverty: ‘the inadequacy of income to supply the minimum of food necessary for the proper nourishment of the body and for the provision of other necessaries such as clothing and shelter’; and he made calculations of necessary expenditure. He thought that the poverty line derived from these calculations might seem too high, and so he compared it with the school board’s remissions scale. (The Manchester Board’s poverty line did not make the distinction between poor and very poor, which Scott took from Booth.) After adding rent, Scott reckoned that the board’s line was, depending on the size of the family, between 5s. 1¾d. and 5s. 8d. a week per adult equivalent. These incomes were within the range calculated by Scott, 4s. to 6s. 3d. a week per adult equivalent, by which he defined the poor, ‘those who have a hand-to-mouth existence’.

How school boards arrived at their criteria of poverty remains unknown. They seem likely to have been influenced by contemporary calculations of what was considered to be necessary expenditure. The results of such calculations, of a kind made more widely

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66 This is Englander’s summary of the orthodox view (‘Comparisons’, p. 124)
67 McDougall, Drink (n.d.; 1885 in B.L.P.E.S. catalogue), pp. 3-4. The scale is described above, n. 30. McDougall was vice chairman of the Manchester Board of Guardians.
69 Ibid., pp. 96-7.
known by Seebohm Rowntree after 1901, can be compared with the school boards' scales, and were published by Henrietta and Samuel Barnett in 1886, for example, and by Scott in 1889. They make it difficult to interpret Rowntree's claim that his was the first attempt to fix a poverty line on scientific lines. He received wisdom, that 'Booth invented the poverty line; Rowntree perfected it', has obscured the history of the concept they used so brilliantly.

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