

Deprivation Measures of Users of WriteToThem.com in England

Sam Smith*

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1 Abstract

Where are the users of the WriteToThem.com MP email service from?

An MP has repeatedly told us that they would give less weight to a message from a constituent sent through WriteToThem because more deprived constituents will have less access to the Internet, and claimed that this is a legitimate and sensible thing to do.

Using the ODPM¹ Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and the postcodes of authors, we look at whether this is actually the case.

It isn't.

2 Background

All local libraries, and many other Government outreach services (not to mention private internet cafes and the rest of the private sector) provide internet access. While you need some internet skills (or your local librarian to help you) to find the site, you only need to know your own postcode to write to your MP, and not know your MP's name or postal address in advance. All for free. It's not a clear or simple tradeoff of who "has" internet access.

*sams@disruptiveproactivity.com and www.disruptiveproactivity.com

¹The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, as was

2.1 What is Neighbourhood Statistics?

Neighbourhood Statistics (NeSS) is the tool for communities to better use government statistics for their purposes. The ONS² Neighbourhood Statistics <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk> website has a front page description of:

This search allows you to find detailed statistics within specific geographic areas, for example in neighbourhood regeneration.

You can put in a postcode, and it will offer you a choice from a vast array of statistics about that area, and at different levels of area size (Local Authority, Parliamentary Constituency³, Health Authority, and may more) for whatever you need⁴.

2.2 What is IMD of Wards?

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) was commissioned by the (former) ODPM⁵ and is based on Wards in 2000.

From <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1128450>:

The Indices of Deprivation 2000 are measures of deprivation for every ward and local authority area in England. It combines a number of indicators which cover a range of domains (Income, Employment, Health Deprivation and Disability, Education, Skills and Training, Housing and Geographical Access to Services) into a single deprivation score for each area.

For each ward (as they were in 2000) in England, there is a ranking of wards by deprivation. A ranking of 1 being the most deprived, 8414 being the least deprived ward. Neighbourhood Statistics doesn't give the ranking of wards which have changed significantly (by the ONS definition of change and significant). For whether a specific postcode (or postcodes) were included, put them into the Neighbourhood Statistics and see what you get.

There are also versions of IMD for Scotland and Wales, but they are not comparable between nations - the least deprived ward in Wales and least deprived ward in England may bear little resemblance to each other.

There is no IMD ranking of Parliamentary Constituencies available, so we use the rankings of wards, which are used to make up Constituencies.

2.3 What is IMD of Super Output Areas?

Super Output Areas (SOAs) are a National Statistics geographic hierarchy designed for small area statistics. They have a minimum population of 1000, and a mean of 1500⁶. All SOAs fit within ward boundaries.

²the Office of National Statistics <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>

³IMD is not available at this level

⁴For a note on why I used NeSS for this rather than the published lookups, see appendix A

⁵Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

⁶For more details, see <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/soa.asp>

Lookups were done on IMD by 2004 SOAs through the Neighbourhood Statistics website, in the same way they were done for wards.

3 Methodology

In 2006, there were 69,440⁷ people in the UK who wrote to their MP using WriteToThem and we stored their postcodes⁸.

I created a script which put each postcode into Neighbourhood Statistics and stored the associated IMD ranking for England for the Ward and SOA. Of the 69,440, there were 25,469 where no ranking was returned for wards - mostly due to the postcode not being in England, leaving 43,971 letters for which we have postcodes. Any transient failures in the lookup process were detected and the lookup repeated until it worked. Running this process took about 7 days. The SOA process took about 3 days, and 60,838 rankings returned⁹

This gives us a list of Deprivation rankings for the ward of the writers, one ranking per letter, and an equivalent ranking by SOAs.

This list was then run through a process to put the deprivation ranks into quantiles of 5 (quintiles) and 20 (duo-deciles), and the number of letters in each quantile was counted.

⁷this number is different to the number of messages that WriteToThem actually sent, as we could not successfully send some messages due to bouncing email addresses (full mail boxes), changed fax numbers, etc

⁸the content isn't kept for more than a few weeks, but the postcode is

⁹We have no information on the disparity of results returned

4 Results

4.1 A Sample of authors

We first ran this process on a sample of the data containing 9146 letters sent to English MPs written between arbitrary (but convenient) dates. In all analyses, the sample provided equivalent results to the full set of authors.

While there were 9146 letters, and 8414 wards in England, letters were written from 3184 distinct wards - roughly one in 3, with the average number of letters from a ward to an MP being a little over 3.

Percentage of a sample of Authors by quintiles of deprivation:

most deprived	26.4%
2	22.6 %
3	16.8 %
4	16.9 %
least deprived	17.5 %

4.2 All 2006 Authors at Super Output Areas

When looking at the lower level geography of SOA, there is no impact from deprivation on authorship.

Percentage of Authors by quintiles of Deprivation of SOA:

most deprived	19%
2	20 %
3	20 %
4	20 %
least deprived	21 %

4.3 All 2006 Authors by Wards

On this set of data, there were letters from 5200 of the 8414 English wards and there were 71% more writers in the 50 most deprived wards than the 50 least deprived (counts 401 vs 237).

The most deprived 20% of wards write 27.5% of the letters. The least deprived 20% of wards write 16.7%. While some of this effect may be due to differing population sizes for wards, the trend is clear. In quintiles:

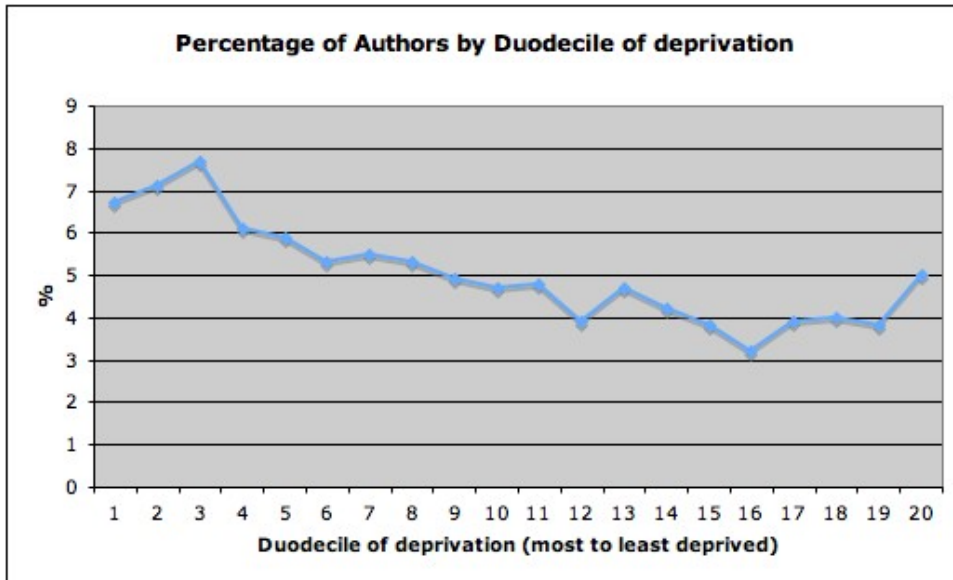
Percentage of Authors by quintiles of Deprivation of Wards:

most deprived	27.5%
2	22.0 %
3	18.3 %
4	15.5 %
least deprived	16.7 %

Looking at duodeciles for a more detailed picture:

Percentage of Authors by duo-deciles of Deprivation of Wards:

most deprived	6.7%	6	5.3%	11	4.8%	16	3.2%
2	7.1%	7	5.5%	12	3.9%	17	3.9%
3	7.7%	8	5.3%	13	4.7%	18	4.0%
4	6.1%	9	4.9%	14	4.2%	19	3.8%
5	5.9%	10	4.7%	15	3.8%	least deprived	5.0%



5 Summary

MPs who ignore letters they receive through WriteToThem.com based on the ward in which they live are doing their more deprived constituents more of a disservice.

MPs who ignore letters because they come through the internet are doing all types of constituents a disservice, irrespective of deprivation measures.

5.1 Other work

WriteToThem.com is designed to be extremely easy to use, and designed for those with low levels of computer literacy which may well account for some of those benefits.

There is no evidence here of where people were when they wrote to their MP and may be a ripe area for future studies on internet use to look at.

It may also be interesting to compare the above usage figures with equivalents from government internet services used by a very large cross section of the population. Although if this is done badly it would be very easy to draw simple but fundamentally flawed conclusions.

6 Acknowledgements

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¹⁰www.mysociety.org

¹¹www.tea.co.uk, possibly too much tea, it must be said

7 Appendix A: Why use Neighbourhood Statistics?

The Neighbourhood Statistics service, rather than a published table, was used for this despite the drawbacks. While using the published tables would have been somewhat easier, the table was published once and then reused, whereas NeSS has the extremely strong advantage that the IMD score is what the ONS says about that postcode in April 2007 when we asked it.

There is no question of us using erroneous data, or it not being easily checkable for a specific postcode. If you wish to see what information we used for a postcode of your choosing, just put the postcode into <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/>