



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Acorn

1 Introduction

Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) is often used as a proxy measure for deprivation. Commentators have raised concerns regarding the robustness of using FSME in this way and have suggested area-based alternative measures (see [Paper 191/10: Free School Meal Entitlement as a measure of deprivation](#) for further information).

This briefing paper provides information on the area-based classification systems Acorn and Mosaic, and discusses some recent findings on the use of FSME as a measure for deprivation.

2 Acorn

Developed by CACI (a provider of marketing and information systems products), Acorn is a commercial geodemographic tool used to identify and understand the UK population and demand for products and services. The database includes Northern Ireland and is built on a mixture of government (including census) data and consumer research information.¹

Acorn classifies the UK population's general lifestyle and demographic behaviour in terms of small neighbourhoods, postcodes and households, using over 125 demographic statistics and 287 lifestyle variables.² It segments these into five categories, 17 groups and 56 types (Table 1).

Acorn is used in the Public Sector to target services and inform policy decisions, for example, in health, housing and regeneration.³

Table 1: Acorn categories, groups and types used to segment small neighbourhoods, postcodes or consumer households⁴

| Categories (5) | Groups (17) | Types (56) |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Wealthy Achievers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wealthy Executives Affluent Greys Flourishing Families | <p>1-4</p> <p>5-8</p> <p>9-12</p> |
| Urban Prosperity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prosperous Professionals Educated Urbanites Aspiring Singles | <p>13-14</p> <p>15-19</p> <p>20-23</p> |
| Comfortably Off | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting Out Secure Families Settled Suburbia Prudent Professionals | <p>24-25</p> <p>26-31</p> <p>32-34</p> <p>35-36</p> |

¹ Acorn, 2009, *The Smarter Consumer Classification*, <<http://www.caci.co.uk/acorn2009/CACI.htm>>

² Acorn, 2009, *The Smarter Consumer Classification*, <<http://www.caci.co.uk/acorn2009/CACI.htm>>

³ *Ibid* p.5 and CACI Public Sector, *Effectively Focusing Public Service Resources on Community Needs*, <<http://www.caci.co.uk/PublicSector.aspx>>

⁴ *Ibid*.

| Categories (5) | Groups (17) | Types (56) |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------|
| Moderate Means | • Asian Communities | 37-38 |
| | • Post-Industrial Families | 39-40 |
| | • Blue-Collar Roots | 41-43 |
| Hard Pressed | • Struggling Families | 44-49 |
| | • Burdened Singles | 50-52 |
| | • High-Rise Hardship | 53-54 |
| | • Inner City Adversity | 55-56 |

By way of example, 'Struggling Families' include low income families living on traditional low-rise estates where unemployment is high. Occupations reflect the low levels of educational qualifications, and children in these areas generally achieve poorer exam results and many leave school with no GCSEs.

'Flourishing Families' would include wealthy families with mortgages and high incomes, with many in managerial and professional occupations. Parents of such families would likely encourage school work and children tend to achieve better-than-average results in exams.

Area-based classification

Acorn's classifications relate to geographical areas rather than allowing identification of the individual children attending a school. The difficulty with this is that geographical areas do not necessarily refer to the socio-economic characteristics of the school in question. For example there may be large socio-economic differences within an area that do not reflect the situation of individual pupils.⁵

As such, area-based data is described as being useful only in cases where the school is situated in a fairly homogeneous area and taking a representative selection of pupils from the area in which it is situated.⁶

A further challenge with the use of classifications that rely on census data is the fact that the data become out of date as the decade progresses. This is both in terms of the characteristics of an area and in terms of where individuals lived then and now.⁷

⁵ Styles, B. (2008) 'Moving on from free school meals: national census data can describe the socio-economic background of the intake of each school in England' *Educational Research*, Vol. 50:1 pp. 41-53

⁶ DfES, 2006, *Indicators of Deprivation for Use in School Funding: September Draft of Notes for Authorities*, London: Department for Education and Skills.

⁷ Gorard, S. (2012) 'Who is eligible for free school meals? Characterising free school meals as a measure of disadvantage in England' *British Educational Research Journal* Vol.38, No. 6, pp. 1003-1017

3 Mosaic Public Sector

Mosaic Public Sector is a consumer classification based on demographic data that is designed specifically for use by the public sector and focuses on the needs of citizens in the UK. This classification provides information on:

- each citizen's location
- each citizen's demographics
- lifestyle of citizens; and
- behaviour of citizens.⁸

Information used to build Mosaic Public Sector is sourced from a combination of data including the Census and Experian's databases.⁹

Mosaic Public Sector classifies all UK citizens into 146 Mosaic person types, 69 household types and 15 groups using 440 data elements providing information on citizens and their needs. Groups include, for example, families in low-rise social housing with high levels of benefit need and lower income workers in urban terraces in often diverse areas.¹⁰

Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme comments

The Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme 2013 notes area-based measures such as Acorn and Mosaic as possible alternatives to FSME. The Review stated that the Department of Education in England has suggested that the measures of Acorn and Mosaic provide better discrimination for less severely deprived groups; for example, families who are entitled to free school meals but who are not in receipt of them.

In regards to this statement the Department of Education in NI noted that most input data was for areas much larger than postcode areas, with precise data inputs and statistical methods being protected by commercial confidentiality.¹¹

Recent research on Free School Meal Entitlement

The Review of the Common Funding Scheme noted that FSM entitlement data is updated annually, and is available at the pupil level. It concluded that FSME gives "*an indication of the relative concentration of potentially 'disadvantaged' pupils in a given school in a way that no other indicator currently seems to do*".¹²

However, the Review pointed to the different criteria for FSME at different phases of education, recommending that the eligibility criteria at primary (including families in

⁸ Experian, *Mosaic Public Sector*, <<http://publicsector.experian.co.uk/Products/Mosaic%20Public%20Sector.aspx> >

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Experian, 2009, *Mosaic Public Sector Brochure*, <[Mosaic Public Sector.pdf](#) > p.8

¹¹ Independent Review of Common Funding Scheme, 2013, <[independent-review-of-cfs.pdf](#)> p.95

¹² *Ibid.*, p.95

receipt of Working Tax Credit and an annual taxable income not exceeding a set amount) should be extended to post-primary.¹³

The Review also recommended consideration of an “Ever FSM” measure whereby children who have had FSME at any one time are classified as such for the remainder of their school education. In addition, it recommended that ongoing investigation into an alternative measure of deprivation should continue.¹⁴

Other research in 2012 also highlighted the advantages of FSME as an indicator of deprivation, including its regular collection, availability at the pupil level and strong association with educational and other outcomes. It found that while the measure is “imperfect”, it is better than current alternatives.¹⁵

¹³ Independent Review of Common Funding Scheme, 2013, < [independent-review-of-cfs.pdf](#) >

¹⁴ Independent Review of Common Funding Scheme, 2013, < [independent-review-of-cfs.pdf](#) >

¹⁵ Gorard, S. (2012) “Who is eligible for free school meals? Characterising free school meals as a measure of disadvantage in England” *British Educational Research Journal* Vol.38, No. 6, pp. 1003-1017