



Bailey, N., Gannon, M., Kearns, A., Livingston, M., and Leyland, A.H. (2013) The Impact of Neighbourhood Context on Welfare Attitudes: Summary of Findings. Project Report. University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK.

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Deposited on: 31 May 2013

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The impact of neighbourhood context on welfare attitudes: Summary of findings

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April 2013

This short note summarises the findings from a recent research project which looked at welfare attitudes, and how these were shaped by where people live.

Aim

The central question for this project was whether the neighbourhoods in which people live shape their attitudes to welfare. In particular, we looked at two sets of attitudes:

- **support for redistribution:** whether people are concerned about inequality and support greater redistribution by Government; and
- **support for welfare recipients:** whether people are more likely to view those on welfare benefits as deserving help or as being honest.

These attitudes form part of what is sometimes described as ‘social solidarity’ or ‘social cohesion’ – our collective willingness to help others within our society.

What do we mean by ‘neighbourhood’?

We look at neighbourhood using units which have a population between 1000 and 2000 (an area called the ‘Lower Super Output Area’ or LSOA). For each neighbourhood, we measured a range of characteristics but focussed in particular on **deprivation** (or levels of low income households) and **density**. The latter is seen as important as an indicator of urban location – more dense neighbourhoods tend to be found in larger towns and cities. In later stages, we also looked at the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood.

Theory: why do we think neighbourhood may influence attitudes?

We believe that neighbourhoods may influence attitudes in two ways in particular. First, the neighbourhood can be a source of attitudes directly. Where we live has some influence on the people we meet and interact with – people who live together, talk together. We know from previous research that people on lower incomes are much more likely to support redistribution. If we live in a lower income neighbourhood, it follows that we are more likely to meet people who support redistribution and this may lead us to become more supportive in turn. The opposite might occur if we live in a more affluent neighbourhood.

Second, even without social interaction, the neighbourhood can be a source of knowledge through daily observations and encounters. For most people, our social networks and interactions are mostly with people like ourselves. As a result, we tend to have quite a limited understanding of how rich or poor we are compared to society as a whole. We might therefore expect that, where richer people live in a poorer neighbourhood, they would become more aware of levels of poverty and more likely to support redistribution as a result. The same would occur where poorer individuals live in a richer neighbourhood.

Findings: does neighbourhood influence attitudes?

Overall, the findings suggest that the neighbourhood may be an important influence on attitudes but that this influence varies between groups and also between different kinds of attitudes.

Neighbourhood and support for redistribution

Our findings show that living in a more **deprived neighbourhood** appears to bring about a convergence in views about redistribution – people who are less likely to support redistribution in general tend to express greater support when they live in more deprived neighbourhoods. So we find that living in a deprived neighbourhood has little or no impact for people who are themselves on a low income but, for those on higher incomes, living in a more deprived neighbourhood significantly increases their support for redistribution. This fits well with our theory about the effect of neighbourhoods on our opportunities to accumulate knowledge.

We also find that **neighbourhood density** plays a similar role. We find that less altruistic people tend to express lower support for redistribution but this rises when they live in a denser neighbourhood. People who are more altruistic express greater support for redistribution wherever they live; they don't need to live in a deprived neighbourhood to be aware of or concerned about the situation of those on lower incomes. Our explanation for this relationship with neighbourhood density is that, because denser neighbourhoods tend to be found in larger towns and cities, what we are seeing here is the effect of spending more time in places with a greater range or diversity of people.

Finally our research also looked at whether **ethnic differences** matter: does support for redistribution increase when we live next to any deprived neighbourhood – or does it have to be a deprived neighbourhood composed mainly of people from our own ethnic group? In other words, does our sense of solidarity extend across ethnic divisions? The answer is that

it depends on who we are. For people from minority ethnic groups, it appears that any kind of deprived neighbourhood increases support for redistribution. For people from the 'White' majority, however, support for redistribution only increases when they live next to a deprived neighbourhood composed mainly of 'White' residents.

Neighbourhood and support for welfare recipients

The neighbourhood appears to have much less impact on our views about welfare recipients, and we think there are two main reasons for this. First, there is much less variation between neighbourhoods in average attitudes to welfare recipients. Unlike support for redistribution, people on lower incomes do not tend to be more supportive of welfare recipients. As a result, average support for those groups is no higher in more deprived neighbourhoods than anywhere else. Someone living in a more deprived neighbourhood is likely to encounter the same kinds of attitudes as anywhere else.

Second, the media have given a high profile to the number of people claiming welfare benefits and the total cost of welfare payments. Some sections of the media have focussed on allegations about fraud or cheating the system. Given this level of "information", it is less clear that the neighbourhood can be a source of new knowledge, even for the most affluent groups.

In addition, neighbourhood appears to have the opposite impact on support for welfare recipient than it had on support for redistribution. Where living in a more deprived or denser neighbourhood tended to produce a convergence in support for redistribution, it appears to produce divergence in support for welfare recipients. Less altruistic people tend to express lower support for welfare recipients, and this support falls when they live in more deprived or denser neighbourhoods. That gap between them and more altruistic people widens. Our explanation for this is that the less altruistic people pay more attention to the negative stories about welfare recipients when they live in more deprived neighbourhoods.

Conclusions: what are the implications for public policy?

In terms of support for redistribution, the implications of this study are quite clear. A country which allows rich and poor to increasingly divide or segregate into separate neighbourhoods will tend to see concern about inequality decline, along with support for redistribution. Similarly, a country which allows or encourages the development of housing in lower density suburbs or in smaller settlements in rural areas would see the same trend. Segregation and sprawl appear to undermine social solidarity. Efforts to promote 'mixed communities' and more 'compact cities' may therefore have important political impacts, in addition to social or environmental ones.

The findings in relation to support for welfare recipients appear to suggest the opposite. They indicate that support for welfare recipients falls in denser or more deprived neighbourhoods, at least for those who are less altruistic. However, we need to remember that this finding occurs at a time when the major media outlets are dominated by negative stereotypes of those on welfare benefits. Without that relentless negative coverage, there is no reason to expect the same result. Our results do not suggest that 'mixed communities' and 'compact cities' in themselves provoke negative attitudes towards welfare recipients.

Methods

The project involved analysing data collected as part of the British Social Attitudes Survey 2009. Data on each individual's neighbourhood was attached to the survey data. Full details on the methods are provided in the publications and papers from the project.

Publications

The following paper describes the main findings from the project as well as the technical details. It is available free of charge from the journal's website:

Bailey, N., Gannon, M., Kearns, A., Livingston, M., and Leyland, A. H. (2013) [Living apart, losing sympathy? How neighbourhood context affects attitudes to redistribution and to welfare recipients](#), *Environment and Planning A*. [Free access]

The [project webpage](#) provides details of other publications arising from this work:

Further information

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Acknowledgements

The research on which this paper was based was funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council, "The impact of neighbourhood context on attitudes to inequality and redistribution" (RES-000-22-4192). The data for the analysis were taken from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2009, originally created by the National Centre for Social Research and were accessed via the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex (<http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6695-1>). The study also used Census data which is Crown Copyright and which was reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO. None of these organisations has any responsibility for the design or conduct of this study, nor for any views expressed in this note.

Footnotes

1. Based in [Urban Studies](#), School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow.
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