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In search of Britain's Muslim ghettos

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Abstract

The local media have recently carried a number of stories suggesting that Muslim ghettos are developing in British cities – a claim also been made about European cities more generally. Analysis of data from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses of England and Wales suggests that these representations are journalistic hyperbole: most British Muslims live in small city blocks where they form only a minority of the local population.

Keywords

Muslims, ghettos, demonisation, England and Wales

A survey of Muslims conducted for a recent UK television programme (Channel 4: *What British Muslims Really Think*, shown on 13 April¹) was accompanied by a long article in *The Sunday Times* newspaper by Trevor Phillips, former head of the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission ('An Inconvenient Truth'²). This generated much comment across the British media and – not for the first time – some scare-mongering regarding the residential segregation of Britain's ethnic minorities. On 11 April, for example, the *Daily Mail's* front page banner headline was WARNING ON 'UK MUSLIM GHETTOS'³.

But what is the reality; are Britain's ethnic minority groups – especially Muslims – living apart from the rest of the population; is the country, as Trevor Phillips expressed it a decade or so, again 'sleep-walking towards segregation'?⁴ Data from recent censuses suggest that perhaps the *Daily Mail's* headline writer was engaged in hyperbole.

The 2001 and 2011 censuses of England and Wales give data on the number of reported adherents of each religion at a variety of spatial scales, of which we use three: what we term the *District* scale, comprising areas (MSOAs in the technical parlance) with an average 2011 population of some 8,200 (there were 6,811 MSOAs in England and Wales in that census); the *Neighbourhood* scale, areas (LSOAs, of which there were 32,915 in 2011) with an average population then of 1,700; and the *Block* scale (OAs; 181,408 in 2011), where the average was just 309.

¹ <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/what-british-muslims-really-think/on-demand/62315-001>

² http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/Magazine/Features/article1685107.ece?CMP=OTH-gnws-standard-2016_04_09.

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3533041/Warning-UK-Muslim-ghettos-Nation-nation-developing-says-former-equalities-watchdog.html>

⁴ See, for example, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/19/race.socialexclusion>, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4270010.stm>, and also Finney and Simpson (2009), Johnston and Poulsen (2006).

We have analysed those data, identifying how many Muslims lived in areas where they either:

- Predominated, forming more than 90 per cent of the local population;
- Dominated, forming more than 75 per cent of the local population; or
- Were in the majority, forming more than 50 per cent of the local population.

We also identified how many of those areas there were, and where they were located.

The results are shown in Table 1. For each area type, this shows the number of places (local authorities; there were 348 separate authorities in England and Wales at the time of the 2011 census) where Muslims exceeded the stated percentage at the relevant scale, the number of separate areas within those places (e.g. the number of separate districts, neighbourhoods or blocks) and the percentage of all Muslims in England and Wales who lived there. Thus, for example, in 2001 there were 44 separate districts where Muslims were in the majority (i.e. formed more than 50 per cent of the local population); those 44 districts were spread across 12 different local authorities, and 14.7 per cent of all Muslims lived in them.

Three main points emerge from these data.

Firstly, the smaller the area, the greater the likelihood that Muslims either predominate, dominate or form the majority of the local population, and the larger the percentage of all Muslims who live in such areas. Thus in 2011 there were no *districts*, segments of a city with populations of 8,200 or so, where Muslims predominated; there were nine districts (out of a national total of 6,811), in just three places (six of them in Birmingham, two in Bradford, and one in Oldham), where they dominated; and 68, across seventeen different places, where they were in the majority. By way of contrast, there were 76 *blocks* (areas with populations of c.300) where they predominated, spread over eight different places (as well as Birmingham [8 blocks], Bradford [15], and Oldham [17], these were to be found in Blackburn and Darwen [16], Burnley [1], Kirklees [12], Luton [1] and Rochdale [6]). There were 599 where they dominated the local population (forming more than 75 per cent of the local population), and fully 2,151, spread over 60 different places – including local authorities such as Aylesbury Vale [2 blocks] and Windsor and Maidenhead [1] where they formed the majority as well as places with large Muslim populations (Birmingham had 446 such blocks, for example, and Bradford 277 – the next largest outside London was Leicester with 90).

England and Wales were divided into 181,408 separate blocks for the 2011 census, so only a very small number of them had Muslim majority populations. Nevertheless, there were clearly substantial segments of some local authorities, notably Birmingham and several in the former cotton and woollen industrial centres of Lancashire and Yorkshire, where such extreme Muslim concentrations were quite common. There were, on the other hand, relatively few in London – where 37 per cent of all of the country's Muslims lived in 2011. Only Tower Hamlets of London's boroughs had any neighbourhoods that were more than 50 per cent Muslim [there were 11 of them]. At the block scale, there were 168 there; there were also 83 in Newham, 27 in Redbridge, four in Waltham Forest, and one in Barking & Dagenham – all neighbouring boroughs in East London – plus 21 in Westminster, two in Ealing and one in Enfield.

Although these are substantial concentrations in some urban areas, however, they housed only a minority of the country's Muslims in 2011 – so the second main conclusion is that most Muslims lived outside those concentrations. Just over one-in-five lived in blocks with Muslim majorities; just under one-in-five in neighbourhoods that were majority Muslim; and

nearly one-in-seven in Muslim-majority districts. The great majority of Muslims in England and Wales lived in blocks, let alone neighbourhoods and districts, where they formed a minority of the population only, therefore: just over one-quarter of them lived in blocks where they formed less than 10 per cent of the total.

Finally, the third conclusion is that although the Muslim population increased by some 75 per cent between 2001 and 2011 (1.55 million identified as Muslims at the former census and 2.7 million at the latter), the degree of concentration changed very little. Only one percentage point more lived in Muslim-majority blocks in 2011 than 2001, for example. The substantial increase in the Muslim population over the decade was not associated with any greater residential segregation.

In his *Sunday Times* article discussing the survey's findings, Trevor Phillips wrote of the country's 'entrenched residential segregation', using the example of Muslims in one of the most segregated towns – Blackburn – who 'barely mixed with whites', and also claiming that over half of all 'ethnic minority children attend schools where white British children are in the minority'. He refers to the divisive consequences of such segregation, with Britain 'nurturing communities with a complete set of alternative values' as a result of the absence of contact between the two groups.

But is this necessarily a consequence of segregation – whether in residential areas or schools? He draws particular attention to Rotherham as an example of the 'deeply ingrained sexism that runs through Britain's Muslim communities'.⁵ Rotherham's Muslim population in 2011 was just 9,614 and only one of its 854 blocks had a majority of Muslims living there; they formed less than a quarter of the population in all but 33. (Rotherham's population was 257,000 then.) There are most certainly major problems in Rotherham and elsewhere, but associating them directly with residential segregation seems overly-simplistic. Different age structures of the Muslim and White British populations undoubtedly result in greater segregation in schools than in their surrounding neighbourhoods – segregation exacerbated by parental choices – but there is clearly a lot of inter-cultural mixture in neighbourhoods, even if the two groups do not also interact. Segregation is hardly the core of the problems – though it may accentuate them in some places.

And is it the same with members of Britain's other, relatively large, minority religions? The census recognises four others – Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Sikh. There is very little residential segregation of Buddhists: the only main concentration is in Rushmoor district (in Hampshire; it covers Aldershot and Farnborough), to which many ex-Gurkha soldiers have moved since the last Labour government allowed them to migrate to the UK.

Data for the other three religions in 2011, directly comparable with those for Muslims, are given in Table 2. These show that even at the block scale there is no comparison. Only those adhering to the Jewish faith have over five per cent of their total living in blocks where they form the majority. The great majority of Hindus and Sikhs lived in mixed residential areas.

⁵ Rotherham – a town in South Yorkshire – has been much in the headlines in recent years because of a horrendous case involving sexual exploitation of young white girls by Muslim males: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotherham_child_sexual_exploitation_scandal

Trevor Phillips ended his commentary on the Muslim survey by calling for much more work promoting inter-cultural understanding – and few would disagree with that prescription. But the association of that need with residential segregation, with – as the *Daily Mail* expressed it – a ghettoization of Britain’s Muslims is, to say the least, journalistic hyperbole with little factual basis. There are substantial concentrations of Muslims in parts of some British towns and cities, but the great majority of the country’s Muslims live in neighbourhoods and blocks – let alone large intra-city districts – where they form a minority of the local population only.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that such ‘ghettoization’ is increasing, that we are ‘sleep-walking towards segregation’. Between 2001 and 2011 Britain’s minority religious populations doubled in size, but there is no evidence that they – and especially the largest group, Muslims – are increasingly concentrated into a relatively-exclusive residential enclaves. Quite the opposite. As the *Sunday Times* reported on 10 April 2016 with regard to Hindus, they are all spreading out across a wider range of neighbourhoods⁶ – although of course, as Lees (2008) argued, such residential mixing need not imply inter-group interaction; the separate lives that Phillips referred to could occur despite residential proximity and it may well be that even where ethnic groups share residential areas they are segregated to a greater extent in other contexts – such as schools – where much social learning takes place.

Britain undoubtedly has major problems creating a viable multi-cultural society, but blame for those problems should not be placed on residential segregation: the data tell us otherwise.

Until the early twentieth century, as Looker (2015, 146) points out in his essay on ‘A place apart’, the term ghetto was largely used as a positive term, as, quoting Park, ‘the space where a group could “maintain its own cultural tradition untouched and unspotted from the world”’; ghettos were presented as ‘the very prototype of neighbourhood health’ (p.143). Since the mass movement of Blacks to American cities, and especially since the 1960s, it has taken on a largely negative conception, as a closed space, a ‘zone of pathology, anonymity, and alienation’.

Such representations continue, not least in political rhetoric, and not only by right-wingers, as Muhamed (2015) argues in his *New York Times* review of Duneier’s (2015) recent book on *Ghetto: the Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea*.⁷ Thus Donald Trump, a Republican candidate for his party’s Presidential nomination in 2016, used such ‘demonising’ language focused on the place, for example, when he stated that ‘African Americans are very lazy. The best they can do is gallivanting around ghettos lamenting how they are discriminated. These are the people America doesn’t need. They are the enemies of progress’,⁸ and his opponent, Ted Cruz, claimed that racist attacks in Brussels in March 2016 happened because the European Union had ‘allowed vast numbers of radical Islamic terrorists to come to Europe and they have been ghetto-ized in neighborhoods that have become isolated, that have

⁶ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hindus-spread-out-in-a-quest-for-better-schools-xt3g6bsd7>

⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/books/review/ghetto-by-mitchell-duneier.html?_r=1

⁸ <http://www.nairaland.com/2823463/africans-lazy-ghetto-gallivants-donald>.

become separate, and they have become incubators for radical Islamic terrorism'.⁹ Bernie Sanders, too, a Democrat candidate for the nomination, also linked ghettoisation to poverty in a debate with Hillary Clinton, a link that he later sought to distance himself from.¹⁰

The media reproduce those representations. Thus after the Brussels attacks the *New York Post* reported that 'experts say' that:

Muslim ghettos in Paris and Brussels are incubators of Islamic extremism where police fear to tread, crime and unemployment are rampant and radical imams aggressively recruit young men to wage jihad against the West ... poor neighborhoods ... act as breeding grounds for terrorism because many of these people feel they have no other options or hope.

"These ghettos are called 'no-go zones', very deprived areas in many northern European cities. I call them stateless, they're not accepted in France and Belgium. I think it's the despair, and their radical preachers take advantage of that. They draw them into the mosques, and that's how radicalization happens", [according to] Soeren Kern, a senior fellow at the Gatestone Institute, a New York-based think tank.¹¹

And although the term ghetto isn't used, European commentators say similar things – Rod Liddle on *The Spectator* blog, for example, said on Brussels: 'part of the city – especially Molenbeek – is a cesspit of Islamic extremism. ... One assumes it will be London next'.¹² The BBC has carried an article on its website headed 'Ghettos shackle French Muslims';¹³ a leading British politician has said that ghettos in French cities have become no-go areas for non-Muslims;¹⁴ and, citing 'Malmo in Sweden, Luton in England, Highfields in Leicester in England, the outskirts of Paris...', a blogger claims – following Donald Trump¹⁵ – that Europeans are 'now living in countries that have muslim ghettos in which non-muslims either cannot enter or risk serious harm on entering'.¹⁶

Most – if not all – of these rhetorical claims have little basis in fact about the detailed geography of British and American cities, and probably of most European cities too, on which we have undertaken no comparable research. They are segregated, to a greater or lesser extent, largely as a consequence of the disadvantages (and sometimes discrimination) that religious and other minority groups experience in labour and housing markets and in public housing systems, but, with few exceptions and most of them in the United States, there is little evidence of ghettoization. As we have shown here in the British case, most British Muslims do not live in areas where they form even a majority of the population, let alone predominate there. To present the situation there – and elsewhere – as otherwise is to stimulate a culture of fear based on falsely-portrayed geography of fear.

⁹ <http://blogs.mprnews.org/newscut/2016/03/muslims-in-america-school-ted-cruz-on-life-in-a-muslim-neighborhood/>

¹⁰

http://www.salon.com/2016/03/07/bernie_sanders_defends_ghetto_remark_that_sparked_outrage_during_debate_with_hillary_clinton_in_flint_michigan/

¹¹ <http://nypost.com/2016/03/22/muslim-ghettos-in-europe-are-hotbeds-for-terror/>

¹² <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/03/brussels-has-become-a-hotbed-of-islamic-extremism/>

¹³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4375910.stm>

¹⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/nigel-farage/11343498/Nigel-Farage-Ghettos-in-French-cities-have-become-no-go-zones-for-non-Muslims.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/625545/Donald-Trump-Muslims-speech-British-police-ISIS-radicalisation-London>

¹⁶ <http://muslimghettos.blogspot.co.uk/>

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Table 1. The number of areas – at three separate spatial scales – where Muslims formed 90%<, 75%<, and 50%< of the local population at the 2001 and 2011 censuses of England and Wales. The column headed Places indicates the number of separate local authorities in which those areas were located; that headed Areas indicates the number of separate areas (Districts, Neighbourhoods and Blocks respectively) in those places; that headed % Total gives the percentage of all Muslims in England and Wales living in those areas.

		2001			2011		
		Places	Areas	% Total	Places	Areas	% Total
District	90%<	0	0	0	0	0	0
	75%<	1	2	0.8	3	9	2.7
	50%<	12	44	13.7	17	68	15.1
Neighbourhood	90%<	0	0	0	3	5	0.04
	75%<	9	43	4.4	13	101	6.7
	50%<	26	264	18.3	36	407	19.5
Block	90%<	5	11	0.4	8	76	1.1
	75%<	20	278	6.9	22	599	8.2
	50%<	47	1,199	21.7	60	2,151	22.7

Table 2. The number of areas – at three separate spatial scales – where Muslims, Hindus, Jewish and Sikhs formed 90%<, 75%<, and 50%< of the local population at the 2011 census of England and Wales. The column headed Places indicates the number of separate local authorities in which those areas were located; that headed Areas indicates the number of separate areas (Districts, Neighbourhoods and Blocks respectively) in those places; that headed %T gives the percentage of all Muslims in England and Wales living in those areas.

		District			N'hood			Block		
		Places	Areas	%T	Places	Areas	%T	Places	Areas	%T
Muslim	90%<	0	0	0	3	5	0.04	8	76	1.1
	75%<	3	9	2.7	13	101	6.7	22	599	8.2
	50%<	17	68	15.1	36	407	19.5	60	2,151	22.7
Hindu	90%<	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.01
	75%<	0	0	0	1	4	0.6	1	15	0.5
	50%<	2	4	2.5	3	28	3.5	6	134	4.0
Jewish	90%<	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	75%<	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	13	1.5
	50%<	2	2	3.7	5	20	7.8	10	137	12.9
Sikh	90%<	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	75%<	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	50%<	0	0	0	1	1	0.2	7	33	1.9