

The influence of neighbourhood deprivation on people's attachment to places

Findings
Informing change

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This study considers the factors that cause people to become attached to deprived neighbourhoods in England, and the things that prevent attachment from developing. In particular, it examines how social mix and high population turnover affect attachment.

Key points

- Attachment to a place tends to be highest in areas with strong social networks or cohesion, and in places with lower perceptions of crime or insecurity. Older people and those who have lived in an area for longer also tend to have stronger attachment.
- People are less likely to be attached to deprived areas than to more affluent neighbourhoods. However, the factors that promote or impair attachment are the same in affluent and deprived areas.
- Where strong attachments are generated in deprived neighbourhoods because of good social networks, these can act as a defence against some of the worst problems in these areas. However, strong attachments to other neighbourhoods can stop attachments forming in new neighbourhoods.
- Population turnover indirectly affects attachment – it means there are fewer long-term residents in an area. Turnover in deprived areas can also undermine social networks, erode trust and increase feelings of insecurity.
- Higher levels of social mix are not generally associated with lower levels of attachment. Both Asian and white people had slightly higher attachment when their personal characteristics matched those of the neighbourhood, but higher and lower income groups both reported greater levels of attachment to more affluent neighbourhoods.
- People living in more socially mixed neighbourhoods tended to be either indifferent to mix or saw it as a positive factor, though rapid ethnic change can be problematic.

The research

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Background

‘Place attachment’ refers to the emotional bonds an individual feels to an area or place. This study examines the attachment that people feel to their current neighbourhood, particularly for those living in more deprived areas.

The study used quantitative data from a large national survey (the Citizenship Survey) together with qualitative interviews in four case study neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester, all of which were relatively deprived.

Place attachment may be important to deprived areas in two ways: it may encourage individuals to remain longer in an area, helping to stabilise the neighbourhood and promote the development of social networks or community ties; and it may encourage people to engage positively in the area in a number of informal and formal ways. The study considered what factors affected place attachment both in general and in deprived areas in particular.

One concern is that the high turnover of residents in a deprived neighbourhood may undermine attachment. While previous research has shown that turnover is no higher in deprived neighbourhoods than on average, it may have more adverse impacts in more deprived areas. The study therefore examined different ways in which turnover impacts on attachment.

Place attachment is also thought to be higher where people feel they have more in common with their neighbours, yet current policy is to promote more socially-mixed neighbourhoods. The study therefore examined how different aspects of social mix impacted on attachment. It also looked at the ‘fit’ between an individual’s personal characteristics and those of their neighbourhood, as well as how this affected attachment.

Place attachment and deprivation

The factors that are important for place attachment are the same in deprived areas as they are in others. Positive feelings about the social networks and the level of cohesion in their neighbourhood had the strongest impacts on people’s attachment, along with positive feelings about the levels of crime and personal safety or security. As people aged they were more likely to have stronger attachment. Independently of age, length of stay in an area was also important for attachment. These factors are just as important for place attachment in deprived areas as elsewhere.

Place attachment is generally lower in deprived areas. This is because people’s views of the social networks and the security in their neighbourhoods are less positive. Once these views have been accounted for, area deprivation has little additional impact on attachment.

Almost all individuals from the case study areas recognised their neighbourhoods as deprived and, given the choice, would have lived elsewhere, though most would not want to move out of the broader locality. A sense of attachment to a neighbourhood would not have been sufficient to prevent such a move. Networks of friends and family were the most important factor in people’s attachment to their neighbourhood. These networks can be an important source of support for individuals in getting by in their area.

How residents came to be living in the neighbourhood also had a bearing on levels of attachment. A number of respondents in social housing had strong attachments to neighbourhoods in which they had grown up and to which they wanted to return. These strong attachments acted as a barrier to forming new bonds to the areas in which they now found themselves. Social housing allocations had not taken these bonds or connections into account.

Neighbourhood instability and place attachment

The evidence from both the quantitative and qualitative data is that high turnover does have an impact on attachment. In the quantitative data, this impact is primarily indirect. Neighbourhoods with high turnover have fewer people who have lived there for long periods, so average levels of attachment tend to be lower. Once length of stay is accounted for, there appears to be very little direct impact of turnover on attachment.

The evidence from the qualitative research shows a slightly more complex picture. When levels of turnover are high, the migration of people out of a neighbourhood undermines local social networks and social cohesion, thereby reducing attachment. At the same time, in-migration reinforces the disruption on networks because residents have anxieties about who their new neighbours will be. In areas where there may already be problems with crime and antisocial behaviour, high levels of turnover serve to increase concerns over security and safety.

“Well the class of people that seem to be moving in, it just seems to get worse and worse. And it is as if they throw anybody on here, and it affects morale with people, especially the older end...”
Single mother with pre-school child, from an ‘unstable/low mix’ area

An individual’s ability to cope with the difficulties of living in a deprived area will depend on personal resources like previous experience, personality and social networks. There was some evidence from the case study areas that if strong connections to family and friends are disrupted, a person’s ability to live successfully in a deprived area is reduced. Disruption to these connections reduces the resources that people can call on to deal with any problems they encountered locally, which in turn affects their attachment.

Place attachment and social mix

The researchers analysed factors affecting attachment across all types of places. The survey analysis indicates that social mix has modest and varied effects upon place attachment. On the one hand, a mix of family types and of people with different levels of qualifications tends to have a positive influence on attachment, and lower levels of housing tenure mix have a positive effect (but negative effects at higher levels). On the other hand, ethnic mix has a slightly negative effect upon attachment overall, but not as much as diversity in dwelling types, suggesting that people like homes in their neighbourhood to look similar to their own. However, despite all this, the importance of social networks, security, age and length of stay remain the dominant factors for attachment.

How someone’s characteristics fit with those that predominate in the neighbourhood (also known as their ‘residential correspondence’) may be more important than simple measures of mix. The analysis of ‘fit’ rather than mix again shows that some types of mix may be more important than others. Ethnic correspondence seems to be important, with both white people and Asian people indicating slightly higher levels of attachment in areas where their correspondence is highest. When looking at measures of economic mix, however, all groups reported higher levels of attachment in more affluent neighbourhoods, regardless of their correspondence; for example, renters and owners both expressed higher attachment in areas dominated by owner occupation.

Two of the case study areas in the qualitative research were chosen for their high degree of social mix – one in terms of ethnicity, the other in terms of tenure. Policies to encourage mix tend to be directed at more deprived areas such as these. Interviewees from these two areas did not identify mix as problematic. Indeed, most interviewees had difficulty in even discussing ideas about social mix; they did not think about their area in these terms. Ethnicity was the one dimension of mix that people recognised without prompting, possibly because of its higher visibility, but ethnic mix was not generally identified as an issue and was even highlighted as being positive by some. These were relatively stable areas and people presumably had a fair idea of their make-up before moving in.

“So if it’s mixed about, then I think it’s better. And from my point of view, colour means nothing – it’s just not something that bothers me at all.”
White man, single, living with parents in a ‘stable/ethnic mix’ area

Another case study was chosen as an example of a neighbourhood with high turnover. Here, there had been a recent rise in the ethnic mix (since the Census). In this area, a number of respondents (but not all) highlighted these changes as being problematic for them. Their anxieties about the changing ethnic mix in the area were in part due to general anxieties about newcomers and feelings of insecurity that arose from the high turnover.

Policy discussion

The research has not examined specific interventions to promote place attachment, nor has it been possible to examine the impact on factors such as neighbourhood satisfaction, civic engagement or intention to remain in the area if attachment were to rise. Nevertheless, if increasing attachment is accepted as desirable, it is possible to draw some general conclusions about the kinds of intervention that are most likely to be beneficial.

Above all, policy needs to acknowledge the importance of social networks and social cohesion, and of feelings of security and safety. In this study, people expressed attachment to the communities in which they lived and to their networks of families and friends, rather than to the physical places. The qualitative research found that social and family networks and their feelings of safety were what helped to retain people in deprived areas. Policies that aid the development of social networks or of feelings of security are likely to aid attachment.

Average levels of attachment are directly affected by the age profile of an area. The age profile is also the major factor affecting turnover and this can have a further indirect impact on attachment through residents' average length of stay. Efforts to promote more 'balanced' or 'mixed' communities therefore need to consider the age profile as well as income or tenure. It is notable in this context that much of the policy discussion of 'mixed communities' has ignored or played down the need to ensure a mix of ages and household types.

For social mix, the overall message is a positive one. In general, high levels of mix of various sorts do not have much of a negative effect upon attachment. Indeed, some dimensions of mix (notably tenure and education) can be good for attachment. Where policy creates new communities, this research suggests that the most beneficial form of mix to consider is a mix of educational levels. A rapid change in mix may be potentially more problematic. Efforts to detect and respond to such changes would therefore seem to be beneficial.

The evidence also suggests that it might be useful to find ways of recognising or valuing local connections when assessing applications for social housing, since this may help to strengthen existing networks. Choice-based lettings may offer one way forward, although this priority will always need to be balanced against other goals for allocations systems (such as housing need or the desire to promote balanced communities). Selective support for new arrivals might also be helpful, and could be targeted at those with least existing support in an area before they arrived. As well as helping newcomers make connections in their new communities, this approach may be particularly relevant to areas with high turnover, by helping to alleviate unease that existing residents have about newcomers.

A range of neighbourhood-level interventions could also have a role to play in supporting social networks or cohesion, and in reducing crime or increasing feelings of safety. This study may add evidence to support the wide range of initiatives that already act in these areas.

About the project

The study, by Mark Livingston, Nick Bailey and Ade Kearns of the Department of Urban Studies at the University of Glasgow, combined qualitative and quantitative methods, and was based on analysis at a neighbourhood level. The project used data from the Citizenship Survey 2005 and linked this to neighbourhood data from the 2001 Census and the 2004 Indices of Deprivation. The research team carried out 39 interviews in four case study areas in Greater Manchester.

For further information

The full report, **People's attachment to place: The influence of neighbourhood deprivation** by Mark Livingston, Nick Bailey and Ade Kearns, is published for the Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (ISBN 978 1 905018 56 7, price £16.95). It is available from the Chartered Institute of Housing, Octavia House, Westwood Way, Coventry CV4 8JP, tel: 024 7685 1752/64, fax: 024 7642 2022, email: pubs@cih.org. (Please add £3 p&p.) You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

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